

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Jan '01

Center for the Study of The Great Ideas

116

[Stephen] Hawking could have avoided the error of supposing that time had a beginning with the Big Bang if he had distinguished time as it is measured by physicists from time that is not measurable by physicists.

—Mortimer Adler



NATURAL THEOLOGY, CHANCE, AND GOD *

by Mortimer Adler

Part I of II

1. Introduction

The preceding excellent essay [Kepler's Anguish and Hawking's Queries] by Professor Owen Gingerich was delivered at the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton. Its title refers to Kepler, a sixteenth-century astronomer, and Stephen Hawking, a twentieth-century cosmologist, both of whom make copious references to God, but only one of whom was a person of Christian religious faith.

In the title Professor Gingerich gave his essay, he added: "Reflections on Natural Theology." In that essay, he set forth scientific reasons for supporting the arguments of certain Christian natural theologians against chance and in favor of design in the natural processes of cosmological development and in biological evolution.

I mention all these things because in the *first* place, I think natural theology, as it has been developed in the nineteenth century, following Bishop William Paley in modern times, is not sound philosophically. It should be regarded as Christian apologetics, which is the use of reason to defend the truths of the Christian religion and to reconcile Christian faith with scientific knowledge. The truths of Christian faith are much more clearly and competently presented in dogmatic or sacred theology, as that was formulated in the great Summas of the Middle Ages.

Philosophical theology, which must never be

confused, as it so often is, with natural theology, is strictly a branch of philosophy, and totally apart from any religious faith. As I have made clear in my recently republished book, entitled *How to Think About God*, it is theology written by pagans for pagans who are similarly deprived; that is, by and for persons without any religious faith. The theology in Book Lambda of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is philosophical theology as thus defined; it is defective in its conception of God, as will be pointed out presently. [The *Summa contra Gentiles* by Aquinas does not replicate the *Summa Theologica*, nor is it a work in philosophical theology. It is, strictly speaking, a work of Christian apologetics, written to persuade the Jews and Moors in Spain of the truth of the Christian religion.]

In the *second* place, I think that the argument for design that is presented by Aquinas in his fifth argument for the existence of the God in whom Christians believe is an unsound teleological argument, unsound because it is based on Aristotle's error of attributing the operation of final causes to the processes of natural motions or actions, whereas they properly belong only in the production of human works of art. This erroneous argument is later presented in Paley's *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1816), in which the watchmaker's design of the time-piece he makes is proposed as the model in terms of which we should think of God's relation to the universe he creates. The creator is not an artist making an artifact; the created universe is not a work of art.

In the *third* place, as I have shown in *How to Think About God*, the presence of chance in the universe, both in cosmological developments and in biological evolution, lies at the heart of an indispensable premise in the only sound philosophical argument for the existence of God.

That argument, occurring in philosophical theology,

not in Christian apologetics, does not prove the existence of the God in whom Christians believe, whom they worship, and to whom they pray; but most, though not all, of the properties attributed to the God that Pascal calls the God of the philosophers are identical with the properties attributed to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the God of the Christian religion, as well as of Islam.

This, as I pointed out above, cannot be said of the God of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, who is a prime mover and a final cause, but not the sole creative cause, or "exnihlator" of a universe that did not come into existence with the Big Bang, but preexisted the Big Bang.

In the *fourth* place, it is necessary to point out that according to sacred, dogmatic Christian theologians, there is no incompatibility between the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient God, eternally (that is, timelessly) existing, and the presence of chance occurrences in natural process and human acts of free choice, acts which those physicists, who are both materialists and determinists, deny because they cannot explain them in terms of their understanding of the causal and statistical laws of their science.

In the *fifth* place, what has just been said requires me to call attention to Hawking's serious errors in his *A Brief History of Time*, which Professor Gingerich fails to criticize. The Lucasian professor of physics at Cambridge University, holding Newton's chair, is undoubtedly a great physicist and cosmologist, but his understanding of God and creation is woefully deficient. He is philosophically naive and theologically ignorant, both with respect to sacred theology and with respect to philosophical theology, while at the same time referring to God and to God's mind frequently in his book, a book in which, for reasons I will point out, his own principles should prevent him from ever mentioning God.

Furthermore, if the Big Bang were the exnihilation of the cosmos studied by physicists, there would be no need for proof of the existence of God. On the contrary, any philosophically sound argument for the existence of God, in order to avoid begging the question, must assume that the physical cosmos had no beginning.

Both Aquinas and Kant give philosophically sound arguments showing that neither of these two assumptions—a beginning for the cosmos and of time, on the one hand, and an everlasting cosmos without a beginning or end in time, on the other hand—can be proved. Unless we accept the second hypothesis we cannot avoid begging the question. Hence, any sound philosophical argument for the existence of God must include the assumption that time and the cosmos are everlasting, i.e., have no beginning or end.

Hawking could have avoided the error of supposing that time had a beginning with the Big Bang if he had distinguished time as it is measured by physicists from time that is not measurable by physicists.

Here let me call attention to the error made in quantum mechanics of thinking that its uncertainties with respect to subatomic motions indicate an indeterminacy in nature or reality rather than indeterminability by us, caused by the intrusive action of our measurements. This is combined with the error made by some theoretical physicists, such as Arthur Holly Compton at the University of Chicago, the error of thinking that quantum indeterminacy in reality may help to explain human free choice. This is philosophical nonsense, no worse of course than the philosophical nonsense in Hawking's popular book.

In the sections to follow, I will amplify—and in the course of doing so, undoubtedly repeat—what I have just briefly outlined: *first*, with respect to sacred theology,

philosophical theology, and natural theology, or Christian apologetics; *second*, with respect to the philosophical unsoundness of the teleological argument for God's existence, and the misconception of God as an artist like the watchmaker; *third*, with respect to the reason why I say that chance in cosmological developments and in biological evolution lies at the heart of the one sound philosophical argument for the existence of God; and here also why that argument must assume everlasting time and a cosmos without beginning or end; *fourth*, why there is no incompatibility between the eternal existence of an omnipotent and omniscient God and the occurrence of chance events and human free choice in time; and *fifth*, with respect to the central error to be found in Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, an error shared by many other great physicists in the twentieth century, the error of saying that what cannot be measured by physicists does not exist in reality.

2. The domain of theology

Theology began in Greek antiquity, in Book X of Plato's *Laws* and in Book Lambda of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Both Plato and Aristotle were pagan philosophers without any faith in the Olympian polytheism of Greek mythology and, of course, unenlightened by the divine revelation in which the Jews believed, and later the Christians and the Muslims.

Aristotle regarded theology as the highest grade of human knowledge, the highest level of abstraction reached by metaphysics, or what later came to be called *philosophia prima*. Let us call this discipline "**philosophical theology**" to avoid its confusion with what in modern times came to be miscalled "natural theology."

Aristotle's cosmology viewed the physical cosmos as a universe eternally (i.e., everlastingly) in motion. For him, the word eternal as applied to the world did not refer to the timeless and the immutable but to the

everlasting and forever in time.

Aristotle never asked the existential question: What caused the everlasting cosmos in motion to exist? He asked instead: What caused the everlasting cosmos to be forever in motion? His answer to that question was: God, the prime mover, but not as the prime efficient cause from which the motion in the world first sprang as an effect, rather as the ultimate final cause, the object of desire which everlastingly motivated the observed changes in the cosmos.

Aristotle's philosophical theology contains an error that is also present in his physics; i.e., the error of attributing final causes to natural change or motions. This error improperly attributes to natural processes the same teleology that is properly attributed to works of human art.

There is no doubt at all that final causes operate in human artistic production. The carpenter who makes a chair is not only its efficient cause, as the wood out of which it is made is its material cause, but the carpenter also has in his mind a formal cause (the design of the chair to be made) and a final cause—the purpose for which the chair, when made, will be used. In natural processes, there are only three causes—material, formal, and efficient—but no final cause. Teleology is not present in nature as it is in art.

The other work of purely philosophical theology in antiquity is to be found in the *Enneads* of Plotinus. It represents the flowering of neo-Platonic philosophy in the Hellenistic period. In the centuries of the Middle Ages there is one other work, written by a Christian—Anselm the archbishop of Canterbury. The first three chapters of the *Proslogium*, (TGIT 1969, 316-43), containing an argument that has been called “the ontological argument for God's existence,” does not employ any article of Christian faith. It could have been

written by a pagan and it was intended for pagans—the fools that Anselm is trying to argue against when they deny God’s existence. Anselm wrote other works, such a *Cur Deus homo?*, which could only have been written by a person of profound Christian faith.

I shall explain later why the so-called ontological argument fails as proof of God’s existence. It was dismissed by Aquinas and later by Kant as a flawed proof. I will give better reasons than they gave for dismissing it. But the reasoning in those first three chapters of the *Proslogium*, must be retained in any well-constructed philosophical theology as an explanation of how we must think about God as the one supernatural Supreme Being, who should be thought of as necessarily existing, i.e., as a being incapable of not existing.

With this one exception in the Christian Middle Ages, a new type of theological writing emerged with authors in the Patristic period, notably Augustine and Chrysostom, who were Platonists; and in the later Middle Ages with Albert the Great, Aquinas, and Duns Scotus, who were Aristotelians. [For the sake of brevity, I will deal only with Christian authors in this period. An expanded account would, of course, include Jewish authors, such as Maimonides, and Muslim authors, such as Avicenna.] These were all persons of religious faith—Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. Their theology should be called “sacred dogmatic theology” because its first principles were articles of religious faith, based on interpretations of Sacred Scripture.

Strictly speaking, with the one exception aforementioned of Anselm’s *Proslogium*, there was no purely philosophical theology in the centuries from the first to the seventeenth. As I have already pointed out, the *Summa contra Gentiles* written by Aquinas was not a work in sacred dogmatic theology. It reveals itself to us plainly as a work in Christian apologetics, written by Aquinas for the purpose of persuading the Jews and

Moors in Spain of the truth of the Christian religion.

Purely philosophical theology does not appear in early modern times with the *Meditations* of Descartes and the *Theodicy* of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. They wrote philosophically as apologists for their Christian faith. The exception is the *Ethics* of Spinoza. That is a work in purely philosophical theology. Its pantheism and its denial of a God who created the cosmos were so obviously contradictory of the Jewish faith that it was condemned by the rabbis of Amsterdam as heretical, and Spinoza himself was excommunicated.

Other works of Christian apologetics should be mentioned here. In antiquity there was a work by Boethius entitled *On the Catholic Faith*. In early modern times there were Pascal's *Pensees* and Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. In the nineteenth century there was Cardinal John Henry Newman's *Grammar of Assent*. None of these authors would have mistakenly thought of their works as being in the category of "natural theology."

So far as I know, that mistaken denomination of a work in Christian apologetics begins in the nineteenth century with Bishop Paley's book entitled *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1816). Clearly, this was not a work in philosophical theology, written by a pagan. Clearly, it was a work in Christian apologetics, and a poor one at that, as I will point out later.

Works written by Christians for Christians or for nonbelievers are clearly not works in philosophical theology, and just as clearly they are not works in sacred dogmatic theology. They do not represent faith seeking understanding. Instead they represent faith offering reasons for the truth of its beliefs.

I have already suggested the epithet "Christian

apologetics” as the correct denomination of such works to replace “natural theology,” term which came into use only in the nineteenth century. A very recent book written by John Polkinghorne, chaplain of Trinity Hall Cambridge University, and entitled *Science and Creation* (1989) has an opening chapter entitled “Natural Theology.” While still retaining that denomination, Polkinghorne’s book is a fine work in Christian apologetics, not a work in philosophical theology. It is of great interest to us because of its explicit repudiation of the erroneous denials of chance and contingency in Bishop Paley’s *Natural Theology*. I will quote the relevant passages from Polkinghorne’s book in a later section of this essay.

=====

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Dr. Weismann,

Thank you for your kind reply e-mail. I feel like somewhat rewarded in knowing that you have received that BOOK and even like it. Situations (related with this BOOK) in China is so severe and anti-humanity. Regardless of millions of people are being benefited both physically and spiritually for practicing this ancient cultivation system, the government is still wrongly and brutally determined to exterminate it. Thousands of people are suffering badly from its sinister decision. Books have been burned and people are forbidden to practice their faith, being beaten (even to death), being sentenced to jail, home being searched, and penalties to be fined.....

However, people around the world are able to enjoy the precious freedom to choose their beliefs and more and more people are advocating this grand cultivation system since they’re all personally benefiting from the practice. Regardless of one government’s viewpoint, people have their own perspectives and just like the

ancient saying goes: viciousness can never win over righteousness. This is the LAW of God's universe. I know that recently this BOOK / Falun Dafa has enjoyed prestigious fame in the States. Many of the State's Governor have awarded Certificate of Merit to Mr. Li for the great benefits that his teaching has brought people and society.

Personally on my way of living/being, I've been searching for a ultimate meaning of life. I had once buried myself into religions, philosophies, psychology and teaching and finally teaching is the destiny of a meaningful life on earth. And I feel so lucky to get know our Center, where I found all these elements together in one system. Maybe it's because that I was born in this special land, the idea of "cultivation" has such a dynamic power over my head. While learning those human knowledge, I was searching the real meaning of "cultivation" through Chinese ancient culture and the book which led me onto the way of cultivation is the Dao De Jing by Lao Zi.

After years of studying, there came the greatest occurrence that I had a chance to know Zhuan Falun. With the help of year's searching, it becomes so easy for me to recognize that THIS is the WAY that I'm longing for. As for me, this is the WORDS of GOD (somewhat like the Bible of Christianity). The CREATOR of this UNIVERSE has so deep a benevolence over humankind that GOD is willing to descend onto our earth to extricate human from its lowest level/status of being to our original/graceful way of being by HIS SERMON of GOD'S PRINCIPLES.....

Well, believe that I'm kind of talking too much. Sorry for my verbosity and thank you for taking your patience to read. For more and detailed information, please kindly go to minghui.ca or falundafa.org

Being a mother has taught me that everything has got

its own way, my personal, ideal thoughts are only a wish. I am a helping hand only instead of being a dominator. The baby will grow by her own way. ^_^

The Chinese Lunar New Year is coming (Jan. 24th). My sincere and best wishes to you, Dr. Mortimer and our Center for a most prosperous and bright new year in our grand new millennium!

Annie Zhu, China

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS:

Anthony Buckley - Brisbane, Australia

Alfred Carlson, MD

As always, we welcome your comments.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE is published
by the Center for the Study of The Great Ideas
Founded by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com
Homepage: TheGreatIdeas.org
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.