4 STUDY UNIT 3: MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY [AUGUSTINE, ANSELM AND AQUINAS]

Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this study unit, you should be able to:

- indicate how the various aspects of Augustine's theory of knowledge are linked
- explain and critically evaluate Augustine's synthesis of Platonic and Biblical doctrine
- explain and critically evaluate Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God
- explain and critically evaluate Aquinas's five proofs for the existence of God
- compare and contrast Anselm's ontological argument with any of Aquinas's proofs for the existence of God
- indicate how Aquinas's conception of the workings of nature reflect his understanding of the role of theology

4.1 Introduction

Having completed the previous study unit by exploring the epistemological and metaphysical positions of the ancient Greek philosophers, we now turn to an important phase in Western philosophy known as "medieval philosophy" (philosophy in the Middle Ages from about 400 CE until about 1400 CE). There were significant post-Aristotelian philosophers in both Greece and in Rome, but if we were to consider their thought, even briefly, this study guide would become rather unmanageable in terms of volume and scope. We shall therefore now jump forward and consider the impact of Christianity on the Western philosophical tradition by examining some of the epistemological and metaphysical ideas of the two greatest of the medieval philosophers: St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas.

The historical circumstances of the 4th century CE were largely responsible for Augustine's attempt to harmonise certain ideas of Plato with certain biblical notions in such a way that it exerted considerable influence upon the western mind for centuries afterwards. Likewise, the preoccupation with rational proofs for the existence of God, such as we find in St Anselm, reflects the re-emergence of belief in the human powers of reasoning after centuries of turmoil (the "Dark Ages") in Western Europe. This confidence reached its peak after the rediscovery of the classical works of Aristotle, in the great synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology worked out by Thomas Aquinas.

4.2 The Historical Background

St Augustine's life (354-430) spanned a period which included the most dramatic phases of the "decline of the Roman Empire". By the time Augustine died, the classical era had come to an end and the middle Ages were just beginning. Augustine witnessed the Christianisation of the ancient world and the sacking of Rome by a group of invaders called the Goths. So, in an important sense, his life may be said to coincide with the historical transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages.

During its many centuries of pre-eminence, Roman civilisation had colonised many parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Augustine was an African who spoke Latin and who lived in what is present-day Algeria. Just as today many educated Africans often spend a few years in London or in Paris (depending on their colonial heritage), so Augustine lived for periods of his life in Rome and Milan before returning to his native country. On his return he began writing the works for which he was to become famous.
These were not philosophical in the sense in which you have become familiar with from your study of ancient philosophy. Instead, they were intended to help resolve disputes which had arisen within the Christian church during its spread among the peoples of the world, especially those who lived within the Roman Empire.

4.3 AUGUSTINE's Approach to Human Knowledge and the Nature of Reality

1. If you think of something, for example a man, that thing you are thinking of must exist at a bare minimum in your understanding because you cannot think about what is not in your mind.
2. If you think of the greatest possible being that exists (God), this being cannot only be contained in your mind but must also exist in reality external to your mind.
3. Therefore God as the greatest possible being must exist.

Augustine interprets philosophy as love of wisdom which, for him, means love of God. He resolves to achieve wisdom by following the teaching of Christ "with the greatest subtlety of reason". There could be no such thing as a purely natural human creature without some ultimate spiritual destiny. In order to understand the concrete condition of the human being, she must be considered from the perspective of the Christian faith. So, for Augustine, reason and revelation are both needed if true philosophy is to be achieved. There could be no distinction between theology and philosophy. Clear thinking, for Augustine, is only possible under the influence of God's grace. In his first "philosophical" writings, he proclaims his position that all knowledge upon all subjects must take into account the revealed truth of Scripture along with the insights of philosophy. It is, in particular, Plato's philosophy that Augustine seeks to harmonise with Christian doctrine as he understands it. As Aquinas (quoted in Stumpf 1966:144) said about Augustine later:

> Whenever Augustine, who was imbued with the doctrine of the Platonists, found in their writings anything consistent with the faith, he adopted it; and whatever he found contrary to the faith, he amended.

Augustine begins his philosophical argument by trying to show that the sceptical position on knowledge is mistaken. He argues that even sceptics have to concede that the act of doubting is itself a form of certainty, for a person who doubts is certain that he doubts. Here, then, is another certainty the certainty that I exist, for if I doubt, I must exist. Whatever else one can doubt, she cannot doubt that she doubts, or in Augustine's words *si fallor, sum* (if I am deceived, I am). To object as the sceptics did that a person could be asleep and only dreaming that he sees things or is aware of himself, does not seem to Augustine to be a good argument, for in reply he wrote: "whether he be asleep or awake he lives".

It is sometimes held that Augustine anticipated the Enlightenment philosopher, Descartes, in his arguments against scepticism. But, unlike Descartes, who formulates a similar argument which he uses as a foundation for his system of philosophy, Augustine is content merely to derive from the fact of doubt a refutation of the sceptic's basic premise that no knowledge is possible. Instead of proving the existence of external objects, Augustine refers to these objects chiefly in order to describe in some detail how the mind achieves knowledge in relation to things.

4.3.1 Knowledge and Sensation

When a person senses objects, he derives some knowledge from his act of sensation. But, according to Augustine, such sensory knowledge is at the lowest level of knowing. Still, the senses do give us a kind of knowledge. What puts sense knowledge at the lowest level is that it gives us the least amount of certainty.
What reduces the certainty of sense knowledge is two things: first that the objects of sense are always changing, and, second, that the organs of sense, change. For these two reasons, sensation varies from time to time and between persons. Something can taste sweet to one person and bitter to another, warm to one and cold to another. Still, Augustine believes that the senses are always accurate as such. It is unjust, he says, to expect or demand more from the senses than they can provide. For example, there is nothing wrong with the senses when the oar in the water appears bent to us. On the contrary, there would be something wrong if the oar appeared straight, since under these circumstances the oar ought to seem bent. The problem arises when we have to make a judgment about the actual condition of the oar. One would be deceived if she gives assent to the notion that the oar is in fact bent. To avoid this error, says Augustine, “Don't give assent to more than the fact of appearance, and you won't be deceived.'' Just how the senses give us knowledge Augustine indicates by analysing the nature of the mechanics of sensation.

In order to answer the question concerning what happens when we sense an object, Augustine turns to Plato's interpretation of the human being. A person is a union of body and soul. However, in describing how the soul attains knowledge, Augustine departs from the Platonic theory of recollection (see study unit 3.9.2). Knowledge is not an act of remembering, but an act of thinking guided by divine illumination (see 4.3.2 below). When we see an object, the soul (mind) fashions out of its own substance an image of the object. The object cannot make a physical “impression'' upon the mind the way a signet ring makes its mark on wax because the soul is spiritual, not material. Accordingly, it is the mind itself that produces the image. Moreover, when we sense an object, we not only see an image: we also make a judgment. We look at a person and say that she is beautiful. This act of judgment indicates that we not only see the person with our senses, but that we also compare her with a standard to which our minds have access in some realm other than the sensory realm.

Sensation, then, gives us some knowledge, but its chief characteristic is that it necessarily points beyond its objects. From the sensation of an oar we are moved to think about straightness and bentness and from the person we are led to think about beauty. Here the description of the human being becomes decisive again, since the description of the mechanics of sensation leads to a distinction between body and soul. Sensation requires the body insofar as some physical organ is required to sense things but, unlike animals, human beings not only sense things, they have some rational knowledge of them and make rational judgments about them. When a rational person makes such judgments, she is no longer dependent solely upon the senses, but has directed her mind to other objects such as Beauty and the truths of mathematics. A careful analysis shows, therefore, that the act of human sensation involves at least four elements, namely (i) the object sensed;(ii) the bodily organ upon which sensation depends; (iii) the activity of the mind in formulating an image of the object; and (iv) the immaterial object (for example, Beauty) which the mind uses in making a judgment about the sensed object. What emerges from this analysis is that there are two different kinds of objects that human beings encounter: the objects of the bodily senses and the objects of the mind. These different objects account for the different degrees of intellectual certainty, because a person will obtain a less reliable truth when her changeable sense organs are directed toward changing physical objects than when her mind contemplates eternal truths independently of her senses.

Knowledge moves from the level of sensed things to the higher level of general truth. The highest level of knowledge is, for Augustine, the knowledge of God. Sensation plays its part in attaining this knowledge in that it directs the mind upward.

4.3.2 The Doctrine of Illumination

In his account of the relation between sensation and knowledge, Augustine is left with the problem of how the mind could make judgments involving eternal and necessary truths. Since the mind itself is a creature and is therefore finite and not perfect, how does it attain ultimate truth? Plato answered this question by his doctrine that knowledge is recollection, whereby the soul is made to remember what it once knew before it entered the body. Aristotle, on the other hand, argued that the eternal universal ideas (Forms) were abstracted by the intellect from particular things. Augustine accepted neither one of these solutions.

Augustine is not so much concerned with the origin as with our awareness of the certitude of some of our ideas. In a famous passage, he proclaims

I do not know in order to believe; I believe in order to know.

Rejecting recollection and some version of innate Forms, Augustine comes closer to Aristotle's notion of abstraction. He says that the human being is made in such a way that when the eye of his body sees an object, the mind can form an image of it provided the object is bathed in light. Similarly, the mind is capable of ``seeing'' eternal objects provided that they, too, are bathed in their own appropriate light. The nature of the intellectual mind was so made that, by being naturally subject to intelligible realities, according to the arrangement of God, it sees these truths such as mathematical truth in a certain light, just as the eye of the body sees the things all around it. In short, the human mind requires illumination if it is to “see” eternal and necessary truths.

If this analogy (comparison) or metaphor is to be taken seriously, the divine light must illuminate something that is already there! For if the divine light performs a function analogous to the function performed by sunlight, it must illuminate our imperfect ideas. This divine light is not so much the source of our ideas as much as it is the condition under which we recognise the quality of truth and eternity in our ideas. It is through divine illumination that we are able to recognise that certain ideas contain necessary and eternal truth. In so far as our human intellect operates under the influence of God's eternal ideas, it is possible for it to overcome the limitations of knowledge caused by the changeability of physical objects and the finitude of our minds.

4.3.3 God

Many great thinkers in the history of Western philosophy have held that the existence of God need not be a matter of faith. They have insisted, instead, that we can prove that there must be a Supreme Being. Anyone with a philosophical mind, even one who is deeply religious, is primarily interested in the nature of reality. Augustine belongs, in this respect at least, to the same traditions as Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, but with the important difference that whereas their interest in the nature of reality is mainly secular, his is primarily religious. It is not a desire to solve the problem of knowledge that leads him to investigate the nature of reality, nor is it the hope of providing a firm basis for social ethics. Augustine's motive is to find a satisfactory object of religious faith. What he finds, then, is a different kind of reality from his predecessors.

Whereas Plato and Aristotle employ either a relatively neutral term like ``form'' or ``matter'' or an ethically coloured term like “the Good'' to refer to what they hold to be ultimate reality, Augustine uses a purely religious term, “God”.

Augustine is not interested in mere speculations about the existence of God. Since knowledge of the eternal ideas cannot originate in his limited or finite mind, Augustine concludes that unchangeable truth has its source in God. What leads to this conclusion is the similarity between the characteristics of some of his knowledge and the attributes of God for instance, that both is eternal and true. The existence of eternal truth means for Augustine the existence of the Eternal Truth, which is God. Augustine thus moves through various levels of personal experience and spiritual quest to what amounts to a “proof'' of the existence of God.

Since God is Truth, God is in some sense within humankind, but since God is eternal, He also transcends humankind. But what else can we say by way of describing God? Taking the scriptural name for God given to Moses, namely “I Am That I Am'', Augustine takes this to mean that God is being itself. As such He is the highest being, the “something than which nothing more excellent or sublime exists'', a phrase that influenced Anselm to formulate his famous ontological argument (see study unit 4.4.1). As the highest being, God is perfect being which means that He is self- existent and unchangeable. His knowledge, wisdom, goodness, and power are all one and constitute His essence (nature). Moreover, Augustine thinks that the world of everyday things reflects the being and activity of God. Although the things we see are changeable in that they gradually cease to be, nevertheless in so far as they exist, they have a definite form, and this form is eternal and a reflection of God the source of all beings.

God as the source of being and truth and the one eternal reality becomes for Augustine the legitimate object both of thought and affection. From God there comes both enlightenment for the mind and strength for the will. Moreover, all other knowledge is possible because God is the standard for truth. All things are finite reflections of God's eternal thought even though God is not identical with, but transcends, the world. Because there exists this relation between God and the world, to know one is to know something of the other. That is why Augustine maintains that the person who knows most about God can understand most deeply the true nature of the world and, especially, the true nature and destiny of humankind.

These views represent Augustine's attempt to explain not only the possibility of knowledge, but also the nature of the world. If the world is God's creation, it must be something it cannot merely be appearance or illusion. On this point it may be helpful briefly to compare Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine. Both Augustine and Aristotle agree that Plato goes too far in denying reality to the world of sensation. But whereas Aristotle was impressed by the actuality of the sensory world, Augustine is impressed by the creativity of God. Hence, whereas Aristotle ended up with a unified world, conceived of as a group of individual substances, each an amalgam of form and matter (see study unit 3.10.3.1), Augustine is left with a divided world an active God confronting a passive creature.

One may conclude that Augustine does not so much solve Plato's problem of the relation between universal and particular as substitute another, and more difficult, one. Instead of the old puzzle of the relationship between appearance and reality, we now have a new one: the puzzle of the relationship between the creature and the creator.

4.3.4 The created world

Even though Augustine concludes that God is the most appropriate object of thought and affection, and that the physical, changeable world cannot provide humankind with true knowledge or spiritual peace, Augustine nevertheless pays considerable attention to the material world. After all, human life must be lived in the physical world, and one needs to know how to understand this world in order to relate oneself appropriately to it. Just how God is related to the world is explained by Augustine in his unique theory of creation.

4.3.4.1 Creatio ex nihilo (creation from nothing)

Augustine's distinctive doctrine is that God created all things ex nihilo, that is, out of nothing. This is in contrast to Plato's account of the world which is not “created", but is an extension of the Forms. In contrast, Augustine claims that the world is the product of God's free act, whereby He brings into being, out of nothing, all the things that make up the world. So, although all things owe their existence to God, there is a sharp distinction between God and the things He creates. Even though all things originate from God, He has created them to be changeable. Augustine needs to make this claim otherwise he would be suggesting, by implication, a limitation on God's free activity.

4.3.4.2 Rationes seminales (seminal principles)

Augustine is struck by the fact that the various species of things never produce new species. Horses produce horses, and flowers produce more flowers; at the human level, parents produce more children. What fascinates Augustine about all this was its relevance to the general question about *causality*. Although, in a sense, parents are the cause of children and flowers the cause of new flowers, still none of these things are able to introduce new forms into nature. In the created order, existing things can only help in the transformation of existing forms into completed beings. Augustine concludes from this fact that the causality behind the formation of all things is God's intelligence. In order to explain how things, animals and humankind produce anything, Augustine suggests that, in the act of creation, God implants seminal principles (*rationes seminales)* into matter, thereby setting into nature the potentiality for all species to emerge. These *rationes seminales* are the germs of things; they are invisible and have causal power. For instance, a rosebud is not yet actually a rose, but will develop into a rose given the presence of the necessary positive factors and the absence of negative or preventive conditions. Thus all species bear the invisible, potential power to become something they are not yet. Originally, God, in a single act of complete creation, furnished the germinating principles of all species.

4.3.5 Critical observations

From our perspective at the beginning of the 21st century, Augustine's views may appear to be such an intertwining of theology with philosophy that we may be puzzled as how to respond. If we see philosophy as a way of salvation, as legitimately dealing with such themes as the meaning of human existence, a Christian thinker can hardly be expected to suspend her convictions when reflecting on such themes. Thus, even if we are not ourselves Christians, we might find value in examining the ways in which epistemological and metaphysical positions are inspired by Christian beliefs and the desire to harmonise existing theories with these beliefs.

As noted earlier (4.3), Augustine's theories of knowledge and reality were not constructed as systems of thought so much as they were attempts to help Christian believers at a particularly difficult historical period. Augustine's own deepest needs and those of his culture were a desire for peace. By seeking peace in God, Augustine shows how difficult it is for serious thinkers to construct theories based upon the material conditions of the time. If the “peace of God" did not dominate Plato's account of reality, it was because Plato was more interested in social and epistemological problems and felt more secure in his environment. In contrast, the imminent collapse of the Roman Empire and the conflicts within the early Christian church undoubtedly contributed towards the development of Augustine's philosophical theory. But there are certain positions within this theory that are in conflict with one another.

In his metaphysical analysis of God's nature, Augustine employs terms similar to, and in some cases derived from, those of Greek philosophy. But he also wishes to remain faithful to the biblical image of God as the divine Person (Father) in active contact with humankind. There are elements of overlap between these different conceptions of divine qualities. For example, the notion of goodness is shared by both the ultimate reality of metaphysics (at least, in Plato's thought) and the God of religion. Another notion which they hold in common is that final end at which all things consciously and unconsciously aim. But there remains a huge difference between the abstractions of metaphysics, reached by rational analysis, and the Person imaged by religious piety or discovered in religious intuition. What is an infinite personality? For instance, all the people we know interact socially with other people and social interaction, by its very nature, entails the idea of some sort of restriction or limitation of each of these people; in other words, the people we know are finite and have a “beginning and end” (otherwise, they would be unable to interact with each other). But an infinite person would act, not interact. The difficulty lies in trying to discover what God is like by extrapolating, from some finite and limited quality of which we do have experience, to the infinite version of this quality (of which we have no experience). Unfortunately, since the “infinite version" of a finite quality would not be a version of that quality, but something utterly different from it, this does not help us understand God's nature at all. We can only conclude, therefore, that Augustine's attempt to connect the personal God of Christianity with the ultimate reality of Greek metaphysics fails.

Point to ponder
What value (if any) do you think there is in Augustine's concept of divine illumination?

Feedback: You might consider Augustine's problem of trying to discover truths that go beyond the limited powers of our senses. What is the status of universals? Are there such items of thought, or can we only know particulars? Just how you answer these questions will provide you with some preliminary ideas on the question. Of course, the merits (if any) of Augustine's “solution” in terms of divine illumination can be determined to some extent by comparing it with other “solutions” which you have previously encountered in this module.

Point to ponder
Do you think that Augustine's notion of seminal principles can be compared to modern theories of the evolution of species? Why? Why not?

Feedback: There is no “correct" answer to this question. We want you to think about this issue.

Point to ponder
Do any of Plato's problems re-emerge in the theories of Augustine?

Feedback: Plato's attempt to explain how we can recognise truth when we encounter it and his solution (by means of recollection) can be said to re-emerge in a different way in Augustine's concept of divine illumination. Plato's account of the world of experience as a poor copy of the world of Forms has a parallel in Augustine's position that only by entering into dialogue (prayer) with God can we discover truth.

Point to ponder
Can the biblical idea of a personal God be satisfactorily connected to the notion of the (Form of) Absolute Goodness found in Plato's metaphysics?

Feedback: In his metaphysical analysis of God's nature, Augustine employs terms similar to, and in some cases derived from, those of Greek philosophy. But he also wishes to remain faithful to the biblical image of God as the divine Person (Father) in active contact with humankind. There are elements of overlap between these different conceptions of divine qualities. For example, the notion of goodness is shared by both the ultimate reality of metaphysics (Plato's Absolute Goodness) and the personal God of Biblical religion. Another notion which they hold in common is that final end at which all things consciously and unconsciously aim. But there remains a huge difference between the abstractions of metaphysics, reached by rational analysis, and the Person imaged by religious piety or discovered in religious intuition. What is an infinite personality? For instance, all the people we know interact socially with other people and social interaction entails the idea that each of these people is subject to some sort of restriction or limitation. But an infinite person, on the other hand, would act, not interact. The difficulty lies in trying to discover what God is like by extrapolating from some infinite and limited quality of which we have experience to the infinite version of this quality. Unfortunately, since the “infinite version" of a finite quality would not be a version of that quality, but something utterly different from it, this does not help us understand God's nature. The conclusion is that Augustine's attempt to connect the personal God of Christianity with the ultimate reality of Greek metaphysics fails.

4.3.6 Conclusion

As we said at the beginning of this study unit, Augustine's ideas played a significant role in Western thought. For example, Augustine had an extremely pessimistic view of humankind and, for more than a thousand years, Augustine's opinion of the miserable predicament of humankind was a basic conviction shared by everyone. Even those who oppose his views will find that in some ways they have come under his influence. To mention a trivial example, many people today mistrust an antiseptic that does not sting when applied to a wound. The belief that “it can't be good if it doesn't hurt" is Augustinian. More seriously, while his ideas remain a cornerstone of the Catholic Church, it was to him that the leading Protestant thinkers turned when they rebelled against Rome (in the 16th century). His views, although somewhat differently interpreted, also constitute the core of most Protestant sects. Importantly, it was through his writings that the letter and the spirit of Greek philosophy remained alive throughout the Dark Ages following the collapse of Rome. Augustinianism, then, is still very much alive today!

4.4 ANSELM AND THE PROOFS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

1. The physical world is always changing as are our physical senses. Therefore, unaided we are unable to reach any knowledge that is certain.

2. God provides physical light to illumine the world so that we can see. However, more importantly, through the divine illumination of our reason we are able to judge our perceptions (mental impressions) to be either true or false. Hence for Augustine, “believing is seeing.”
3. God has implanted in all of realty the seminal principal, his “energy” that ensures that existence is possible and continues in all of its unique diversity. By analogy today we could see this seminal principal as the DNA molecule found in biological life.

St Anselm (1033-1109) was himself an Italian Augustinian whose fame rests on his belief that faith is prior to reason:

> *I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this I also believe - that unless I believed, I should not understand.*

After we have accepted on faith the revelations given through Scripture and through the Christian fathers (like Augustine), reason can fulfil its role of clarifying meanings and providing proofs. However, Anselm employed his powers of reason in order to establish, by rational argument, the existence of God. We shall now examine this position in some detail.

4.4.1 Anselm's ontological argument

In two famous works *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, Anselm developed various proofs for the existence of God:

1. According to his first argument, the goodness of things in this world must be caused and must therefore stem from one thing that is good, or from many things that are good. But if many causes have their goodness in common, it is because of this goodness that they cause good things; therefore, we must assume a common source. In either case, whether the cause be one or many, we are led to a single unitary source of all goodness. Since it is the source of all goodness, this source is not good because of something else, but is itself Goodness. God is Goodness itself, not something that possesses goodness.
2. Since whatever exists must have a cause and since an infinite regress of causes is impossible, there must either be one ultimate, non-finite cause or several causes. If there is one cause, we have encountered God. If there are several, then either they support each other mutually or they exist independently. But the former is impossible, for that which is supported cannot be the cause of that which supports it. But if there are several independent ultimate causes, each must exist through itself, and therefore they must share this common power. Now, since it is this common power that is the source of all else, there cannot be several causes but only one. God is not something that has this supreme power; he *is* this power.

Dissatisfied with his formulation of these proofs, Anselm finally developed his famous ontological proof (Stumpf & Abel 2002:105-108). When we are really thinking of something (and not merely uttering the associated verbal symbol), that thing is in our understanding. Of course, we need not understand that it exists, for we may be thinking of something which we believe does not exist (e.g. the unicorn), or we may be thinking of something of whose existence we are uncertain. But in any of these cases, if we are thinking of something, if we understand it, then it, and not something else, is in the understanding. This point applies to our thought of anything, including God. However, in the case of God, we are thinking of a unique thing, for we are thinking of the greatest thing conceivable, the being “than which nothing greater can be conceived” (Stumpf &Abel 2002:107). Now if a being exists in the understanding alone, it cannot be the greatest conceivable thing, for a being that exists in reality as well as in the understanding would be greater.

Consequently, since God is the greatest being conceivable he must exist in reality as well as in our understanding. Or, to put it another way, if the greatest conceivable being exists in the understanding alone, then it is not the greatest conceivable being - a conclusion which is absurd.

4.4.2 Objections

On reflection, it may occur to you that Anselm's proof is open to objection on two points:

1. Do we in fact have an idea of an absolutely perfect being? This was the question posed by Anselm's contemporary, Gaunilo, who noted that the sceptic who is not convinced of God's existence would not grant Anselm's assumption that people have an idea of a most perfect being. To this Anselm could have replied that he was not trying to convince sceptics that God exists, but to provide Christians with a rational understanding of Christian truth ("I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand"). In any case, he would have maintained that he could prove that people have an idea of a perfect being. This proof is similar to Plato's position that we have ideas such as that of absolute (the Form of) equality. Anselm actually argues that we have various experiences of "degrees of perfection'' for instance, we experience some things as better or more beautiful than others. We can make this kind of relative judgment only because we have a standard of comparison: the idea of absolute perfection.
   It will be seen that the argument here turns on the question how can a finite mind transcend and reach an understanding of an infinite object? What a finite mind feels to be an intellectual grasp of an infinite object may be only an emotive response. One ought to remind oneself of the need to distinguish between emotive understanding and the kind of meaning needed for philosophical communication. So, although "most perfect being" has a powerful emotive meaning, has Anselm actually provided this phrase with of a meaning that enables us to discuss "the most perfect being'' philosophically and unemotionally?

   2. *Is existence indeed an added perfection?* That is, is a being that exists necessarily greater (more perfect) than one that does not exist? Allowing that people have an idea of a most perfect being, does it follow that a being corresponding to this idea must exist? Anselm's assumption is that existence is indeed an "added perfection." If existence is not an added perfection, there is no contradiction in allowing that the most perfect being exists only as an idea. Gaunilo's point is precisely this! If one wants to call existence a "quality" of existing things a property they possess (in the sense that colour is a property of coloured things) it is important to see that it is a different kind of quality or property. While one does add something to the nature of an uncoloured thing by colouring it, one does not add anything to the nature of a non-existent thing by bringing it into existence!

Points to ponder

Would you say that you know (in the strict sense of the word) that God exists, or would you prefer to say that you believe that God exists?
If you chose the former alternative, how do you know this?
If you answered in the affirmative to either of the alternatives above, what do you base your knowledge/faith upon?

Feedback: Philosophical enquiry about our ways of thinking about the existence of God is one of the most fundamental epistemological and metaphysical issues. The point of this enquiry is not to persuade any person to change their deepest convictions about this (or any other) matter, but rather to consider the reasons for upholding whatever beliefs and convictions one wishes to uphold. In this way, one sharpens one's critical faculties, while incidentally engaging in reflection upon matters which may deeply affect one's outlook on life. You may need to turn back to the discussion in section 2.9.4, on how to understand the relationship between knowledge, truth, belief, and justification (in Plato's thinking).

Point to ponder
How does Anselm proceed from the concept of God to prove that God exists in reality?

4.4.3 Conclusion

What is significant about Anselm's attempt to prove God's existence using reason alone is that it demonstrates the possibility of a distinct contrast between faith and reason. Questioning such proofs inevitably raises issues about the relation between faith and reason. Even in an age of faith, human beings could not get on without using their reason. Clearly, they need to know where reason is appropriately used and where it should be set aside. They need a logical, decision process that shows what a valid proof is. If this decision process discloses that certain articles of the Christian faith cannot be proved, then they need a theological doctrine that shows how faith and reason are related at the point where reason leaves off and faith takes over. So Anselm's failed attempt helped clear the ground for such an attempt by the greatest of all medieval philosophers St Thomas Aquinas.

4.5 THOMAS AQUINAS

1. By observing the natural world and the principles operative in it, one can argue, inductively and deductively, towards a proof of God's existence.
2. All reality is in motion (process) there must have been a force or energy that initiated the original motion. (e.g., if you saw a ball rolling across the floor, you would naturally assume somebody initially pushed the ball.)
3. Everything that exists has a cause (the entity that brought it into existence). A first cause for everything must exist (e.g., if I found a cell phone on the street, I would assume that somewhere there must exist a cell phone manufacturer).
4. All things in that natural world appear to be impermanent (possible), they exist for a while then die. However they then “start up” or grow again. This implies that at the heart of reality is an eternal (necessary) creative power that sustains things in existence and that was always there, this must be God. (e.g., a tree lives and dies but then the seeds from it sprout new trees).
5. We are able to make valid judgements and comparisons only because in reality everything that exists has a maximum state. So for example, by analogy, we recognise that a tear drop is a minute quantity of salt water because we know that the ocean is a vast quantity of salt water. By implication we only can make sense of our present transient existence because an infinitely larger existence (God) frames our present reality.
6. Everything in existence appears to have an inbuilt orientation to fulfil a specific purpose and not another. This “purposeful intelligence” must have been implanted by another higher being (God). For example in a modern day business each employee carries out a specific job function. This we know has occurred because the person has been given this job description by a CEO or manager who is coordinating their functions.

The great achievement of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is that he brings together into a formidable synthesis the insights of classical philosophy and Christian theology. More specifically, Aquinas “Christianises” the philosophy of Aristotle. Augustine, as we saw, formulated an earlier synthesis of philosophy and theology by combining the Christian faith with elements of Plato's thought. Both medieval philosophers wrestle with the twin problems of the relationship between faith and reason, as well as with the problem of universals. Through his efforts, Aquinas perfected the “scholastic method”. Scholastic philosophy is an attempt to put together a coherent system of traditional thought, rather than a pursuit of genuinely novel forms of insight. It relies on strict logical deduction and finds expression in intricate systems of thought in which theological considerations dominate philosophical ones. Aquinas's major works are *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologica.* These works consist of huge, logically organised structures of assertions (propositions) in which the place of every proposition is determined by its logical relations to all the others to those on which it depends and to those that depend on it. *Summa Theologica* can, in fact, be taken as a reflection at the level of thought of a structured, ordered hierarchy of matter and form, which, following Aristotle (see study unit 3.10.3.1), is what Aquinas takes the whole universe to be.

The biggest difference between earlier medieval philosophers and Aquinas is that, whereas his predecessors all maintain that faith and reason do not conflict, none of these assertions could be regarded as convincing as long as various biblical authorities could be quoted for or against the assertion that faith and reason are not in conflict. Aquinas develops a method that actually resolved these contradictions, thereby providing “proof'' that faith and reason do not conflict with each other.

4.5.1 Proofs for God's existence

That God exists is, of course, an article of faith; but it is also, Aquinas holds, a proposition capable of proof by natural reason. He offers, in all, five proofs for God's existence (Stumpf & Abel 2002: 112-114). In each, Aquinas starts with some particular occurrence (for example, some fact of experience, like motion) and argues that, but for such-and-such an attribute of the divine nature, this occurrence would never have occurred. Thus Aquinas's proofs have a causal form the changes that we observe occurring can only have God for their cause. We shall next consider each of these proofs in turn, together with certain clarifying and critical comments.

4.5.1.1 Proof from motion

Aquinas argues that “whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another''. Any motion must ultimately go back to a first mover a mover that imparts motion to other things, but is not itself in motion (compare study unit 2.10.3.2) for if it were in motion it would need a mover. Since there evidently are things in motion, there must be “a first mover, moved by no other; and this everyone understands to be God” (Stumpf & Abel 2002:113).

4.5.1.2 Proof from efficient causality

Aquinas's second proof is based on the notion of efficient causality. An efficient cause is an agent, a maker, something that brings something else into being. Just as there cannot be an infinite series of movers (proof from motion), so there cannot be an infinite series of efficient causes. There must be a first efficient cause, which brings about effects but is not, itself, an effect.

No matter how many caused causes there are in a series, there must be an uncaused cause (a first cause) that is responsible for the chain of causality that runs through the whole series. To this cause, “everyone gives the name of God” (Stumpf & Abel 2002:113).

4.5.1.3 Proof from possibility and necessity

The third way to prove God's existence begins with Aquinas drawing a distinction between possible beings and necessary beings. In nature we find that it is possible for things to be and not to be. Such things are possible or contingent because they do not always exist. For example, there was a time when a tree did not exist; it exists, and finally it goes out of existence. For this reason, something that is possible which cannot-be, in fact “at one time is not”. But if there was a time when nothing existed, then nothing could start to be, and even now there would be nothing in existence, “because that which does not exist begins to exist only through something already existing” (Stumpf & Abel 2002: 113). But since our experience clearly shows us that things do exist, this must mean that not all beings are merely possible. Aquinas (Stumpf & Abel 2002:113) concludes from this that there must be something the existence of which is necessary ...This all men speak of as God.
To these three proofs it is possible to reply that no one doubts that motion occurs, that events have causes, that there is an order in the world, and that there are degrees of temperature, and so on. Aquinas's position is that the only way to account for such facts is through the hypothesis that God exists and that these are His effects. With respect to his first proof, the question we can ask Aquinas is whether motion can be accounted for without the assumption of a first unmoved mover. Many people, undoubtedly, will initially agree with Aquinas that the whole world process must have begun by an initial movement. But both ancient materialists (such as those who proposed the concept of atoms as basic constituents of matter) and modern ones have denied both the intelligibility and the need for a first cause. Their position is that, no matter how far back in time one goes, one can always find a cause for any specific movement. But this cause is itself some other movement of the same kind. As long as there is an infinite series of motions, any particular motion can be explained by other motions. Hence the need for a first cause to explain the occurrence of motion does not arise.

The question, however, is whether such an infinite series of motions (or causes) is conceivable. Aquinas denies that it is. In reply, the series of positive numbers 1, 2, 3, and so on could be mentioned. It is clear that this series does not have a last term, since after any number n, however large; there is another number n + 1. Similarly, it could be maintained that, before any time t, however remote in the past, there was an earlier time t-1, in which motion was occurring. If there is no greatest positive number, why need there be any first motion? Why, as a matter of fact, if the notion of a greatest positive number is really a contradiction in terms, is not the same true of the notion of a first, unmoved mover? Aquinas begins by arguing that every event must have a cause, and since he denies that an infinite series is possible, he concludes that there must be a first cause. But since a first cause is uncaused, his conclusion contradicts his original contention that every event has a cause.

But this analysis of Aquinas's position is over simple. He agrees with the natural scientists that it is impossible to explain the totality of events in the same way we explain particular events. But he differs from the scientists in that he insists that some other kind of account of the totality of events can be given. Whereas scientists are chiefly concerned with explaining particular events and are totally uninterested in the totality of events (if they even find such a concept intelligible), Aquinas has the kind of mind that is deeply interested in such totalities.

Aquinas saw that, if any account of such an idea is to be possible, such an account must be in terms other than those in which we explain parts. His name for these other terms was “God".
The basic difference in outlook between Aquinas and the scientists reflects the gulf between the religious and the scientific outlook a radical parting of the ways.
This often happens in philosophical inquiry, since the function of philosophical analysis is not so much to find the answers as it is to make clear what the alternative answers are!

4.5.1.4 Proof from the degrees of perfection

In our experience we find that some beings are more and some less good, true, and noble. But these and other ways of comparing things are possible only because things resemble, in their different ways, something that is the maximum. In other words, there must be something that is truest, noblest, and best. Aquinas argues that the maximum in any category (genus) is the cause of everything in that category. From this Aquinas concludes that “there must be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God” (Stumpf & Abel 2002:114).

Aquinas's proof from the degrees of perfection also appeals to an empirical fact the fact that differences of degree exist. He argues that such differences can be accounted for only on the hypothesis of an objective standard. It is meaningless to talk about “more" or “less" except in terms of a norm from which these are deviations, and this norm, this absolute criterion, is God. But although we cannot talk about “more" or “less" without some sort of standard, it does not follow that this standard must be absolutely objective. The argument only proves the existence of an absolutely objective criterion if we assume an absolutely objective “more" and an absolutely objective “less”, and this is precisely the point at issue. In other words, Aquinas's argument is based on the unproven assumption he then claims to prove.

This criticism can also be stated in terms of the distinction that has been drawn between “accounts inside the system" and “accounts of the system as a whole". Comparisons inside the system are meaningful, but conclusions drawn from them are always relative to the area of the system included in the account. If we want to arrive at a more definitive comparison we can take a larger part of the system into account. Since the system is indefinitely large, it is always possible for us to get a more definitive comparison than the one we have at the moment, however definitive this comparison may be. That is, we can always find another criterion for checking our present criterion of “more” and “less”, and all these criteria are within the system as a whole. Thus, for ordinary purposes of checking our conclusions up to any degree of precision we choose, we do not need an absolute criterion at all. On the other hand, if we want an absolutely objective criterion of “more” or “less”, we must go outside the system to a consideration of totality and, in doing so, we are then committed to giving a different kind of account.

4.5.1.5 Proof from the governance of the world

Aquinas's final proof is based on the premise that, if something acts in order to achieve a goal, there must be a being with the intelligence to know what the goal is and how to attain it. So while a natural body such as a tree is not itself intelligent, its goal-seeking activities must be caused by an intelligent governor. This governor who directs all unintelligent natural things to act purposefully is God. The proof from the governance of the world is sometimes referred to as the proof from teleology, that is, the purposefulness of all existence.

What was said about the proof from the degrees of perfection above can also be said about Aquinas's fifth proof from the governance of the world. Arguments that are valid about governance inside the system are not relevant to the governance of the system as a whole. But here a prior point must be dealt with.

Does the argument about governance really hold even with respect to events inside the system? The ends to which material things appear to be aiming may, in fact, be only projections of our human hopes and fears. If this is so, it is unnecessary to assume “the existence of an intelligence which directs them to their end”, that is, God. Consider, for instance, the temperature range of this planet. Temperatures very much colder or very much hotter than those that occur on earth would make life as we know it impossible. Aquinas could have argued that, since we cannot suppose that the temperature itself has willed to adjust itself to our needs, we must conclude that it was directed to this good end by a divine intelligence. But this conclusion does not follow. First, this temperature range is ``best'' from our point of view merely because we have an interest in the continuation of the human race a matter in which we are, after all, somewhat prejudiced witnesses! And, second, we know that all sorts of temperature ranges exist on other planets. This planet happens to be one that permits life like ours. What seems to be design may, in fact, be coincidence? To take an example: the card game of bridge. If we were dealt a straight suit of spades on the first and only occasion anybody anywhere ever played bridge, we might regard this “good thing” as evidence of purpose on somebody's part. But when we know that millions upon millions hands of bridge are being played all round the world, it should not surprise us that this combination is sometimes dealt. That it happens to be dealt to us is obviously the “best” for us, but we do not attribute it to a kindly card-playing providence who wants us to win rather than other bridge players!

To summarise this long discussion, it can be said that if Aquinas's proofs appear to be valid, he has so far established the existence of (1) moved mover who is (2) the first cause of all that is, (3) an absolutely necessary being, (4) the final criterion of value, and (5) the governor and designer of the universe. But are they valid? This depends on whether the empirical facts to which they appeal can be accounted for in some way other than by tracing their causes back to God's activity. And to this question, as we have seen, it is impossible to give a simple answer. Whether or not we think the empirical facts can be accounted for in some other way will depend on how we define “account” and whether we are satisfied with the kind of account that can be given of parts inside systems.

Point to ponder
Are there similarities between Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God and Aquinas's proof from the degrees of perfection (the fourth way)?

Feedback: There clearly are similarities, as can be demonstrated by direct comparison of the views of the two philosophers which are found in both the study guide and in the actual formulations of the philosophers.

Point to ponder
Do you agree with Aquinas that there cannot be an infinite series of movers or of efficient causes, but there must be a first mover and a first efficient cause?

Feedback: This is a question of evaluating the opposing lines of analysis taken by the scientific (piecemeal) approach as opposed to the religious (totalising) approach. As pointed out, the basic difference in outlook between Aquinas and the scientists reflects a radical parting of the ways.

This often happens in philosophical inquiry, since the function of philosophical analysis is not so much to find the answers as it is to make clear what the alternative answers are! Here you are encouraged to formulate your own response to the question in terms of these alternatives

Points to ponder
Do you think that a cogent (that is, compelling convincing) proof for the existence of God is needed to support a person's religious faith?
Which arguments for or against the existence of God do you find most persuasive?

4.5.2 The physical world

We now turn from Creator to creature, from God to the universe of things. For Plato and Aristotle, an account of God's nature was intended merely as an aid to under- standing nature. For Aquinas, the study of nature is a part of theology. For him, the chief task of the scientist is to provide an adequate interpretation of the account of creation given in Genesis (thereby removing any occasion for scepticism) and to reconcile Aristotle's physics with this biblical account.

According to Aquinas, all the many movements that can be observed in the universe the behaviour patterns of living creatures or the motion of material objects are nothing but the ways in which all these things, each in its own way, seeks God. Aristotle had said much the same thing, but without the religious overtones: everything seeks its good and its fulfilment.
The Aristotelian universe that Aquinas accepted is a hierarchy of individual substances in which the place of each substance is determined by its degree of actuality. At the bottom of the hierarchy, being and reality fade into nothingness into the mere possibility of being something. At the top of the hierarchy is God, who is pure actuality, complete being, perfect fulfilment. No other substance is wholly actual, but every substance is actual to the extent that it is at all. In so far as it is already something, it has form; in so far as there is something about it that might be but is not yet, it is matter. Everything has in it a drive to become, in so far as it may, fully and actually all that it might be. Thus all movement and change is a coming-to-be, a fulfilment of something's nature.

For example, consider some substance A, which is completed by B. B is A's good. Since B is what A, in so far as A is able, aims at, it can be said that B is A's end. Again, since A's recognition of B's goodness is what moves A to act, it can be said that B is the cause of A's action. Thus the problem of a duality of goods can be re- stated in causal terms:
How can there be two causes for A's behaviour B and God?

If we are forced to say that either B or God is the cause of A's behaviour, and if we adopt the first alternative, we end in a completely secular philosophy: B is A's cause; C is B's; D is C's; and so on. We have a godless universe in which, because God is inactive, knowledge of reality does not depend in any way on the divine nature. If, on the other hand, we adopt the second alternative, we have to conclude that changes on earth are the direct products of divine activity. We have to say, for instance, not that fire causes heat, as it certainly seems to be, but that “God causes heat in the presence of fire.” Things, that is to say, are not real, nor are their apparent causal activity real. They are merely the symbols of a reality separate from them and above them.

From Aquinas's point of view, there is one major objection to the latter alternative. If the natural world is not real, God's creative act and Christ's incarnation are both illusions, and God is not a transcendent being since there is nothing for His nature to transcend.

This is why he adopted the concept of a dual causality wherein God's causality is considered to be compatible with causality among the things of the world. An example will (hopefully) clarify this concept of Aquinas.

When Macbeth (in Shakespeare's play) cries, “Out, out, brief candle!” he is responding to the news of his wife's death. Word of this death, brought by the doctor, might therefore be said to be the “cause” of the exclamation. But in a larger sense, the cause of Macbeth's exclamation is his ambition and Duncan's assassination and the knocking at the gate and the murder of Banquo and the flight of Macduff indeed, the whole play. So it is the play as a whole that explains any particular part of it for instance, this exclamation. Likewise, Aquinas takes the view that things can be understood as causing other things to react in certain ways, but if one is looking for a larger overall explanation of the events, one will need to refer to God's purpose in willing nature to take the form that it does.

4.5.2.1 Theology and the sciences

The conception of dual causality, described above, determines Aquinas's conception of the relation that holds between theology and the other sciences. In a purposefully structured universe, all scientific knowledge is teleological (oriented towards an ultimate end) in character. Since all things aim at ends, the movements they make are efforts to realise these ends. Hence, if we want to understand some particular object's behaviour, we must ask to what end it is moving. Every science is, as such, the knowledge of ends. The particular sciences are devoted to various limited ends. But since theology is the science of God, and since God is the supreme end that all things seek, all the particular sciences are “perfected” by theology. Physics, psychology, botany, and all the other particular sciences give us true knowledge, but only about relative ends. Therefore, they all require supplementation by theology, which gives us knowledge about the perfect and complete end.

Point to ponder
How does Aquinas's conception of the workings of nature reflect his understanding of the role of theology?

Feedback: In his conception of dual causality Aquinas tries to show how understanding the workings of nature in sciences such as physics, psychology, botany, and so on ultimately depends on theological presuppositions.
In a purposefully structured universe, all scientific knowledge is teleological (oriented towards an ultimate end) in character. Since all things aim at ends, the movements they make are efforts to realise these ends. Hence, if we want to understand some particular object's behaviour, we must ask to what end it is moving. Every science is, as such, the knowledge of ends. The particular sciences are devoted to various limited ends. But since theology is the science of God, and since God is the supreme end that all things seek, all the particular sciences are “perfected” by theology. Physics, psychology, botany, and all the other particular sciences give us true knowledge, but only about relative ends. Therefore, they all require supplementation by theology, which gives us knowledge about the perfect and complete end.

4.6 CONCLUSION

We have examined two major concerns of Aquinas that exercised a lasting influence on the course of philosophy. His proofs for the existence of God show the basic difference in orientation between the religious perspective and the common scientific outlook. As an exercise in philosophical analysis, our critical clarification of his position stands on its own, and is intended to neither undermine nor support either worldview.

The reason for exploring Aquinas's view of nature was not so much to set his position on this topic apart from his notion of God, as to show how his conception of God is intimately connected to his view of nature. By showing this interrelationship between God and nature, in terms of Aquinas's concept of causality, we have attempted to demonstrate, to you, the dominant role that theology played in medieval philosophy.

Looking back upon medieval philosophy from our current vantage point, we may find it difficult to sympathise with this premodern perspective. However, let us not be too hasty. A little reflection will reveal the extent to which, today, we struggle with the fragmentation of experience that has resulted from the scientific worldview. Although Augustine and Aquinas's attempts to construct an all- embracing worldview seem Utopian to us, we have a problem: how can we replace cultural pluralism with some vision of cultural unity that will include all members of the human race? Medieval philosophy in general and the thought of Thomas Aquinas in particular achieved a level of cultural integration that has been absent from Western philosophy until the present day. Significantly, while this state of affairs may be accepted by many today, it is accepted with a measure of resignation and sadness.

4.7 Summary

To repeat what we indicated at the end of the previous study unit: the intention behind this study unit is to encourage you to reflect on the bases of your own experiences, beliefs, and knowledge claims. In this study unit we continued our examination of epistemology and metaphysics by investigating philosophy in the middle Ages (the medieval period); this period dates from the time of Augustine until the systematic work of Aquinas. While Augustine's synthesis of Plato with certain biblical doctrines helped preserve the influence of platonic philosophy in the “Dark Ages” after the fall of Rome, it was Aquinas who showed how the ideas of that other great classical Greek philosopher, Aristotle, could be used to re-establish and consolidate the development of Western cultural thought at a time when Western society lagged behind other cultures. The careful analyses of the existence of God suggested by Anselm and Aquinas and the lively debate on this matter that these two men inspired laid the foundation for the next major period in the history of philosophy: the Enlightenment period (often, somewhat oddly, referred to as “modern” philosophy).

4.8 Self-Assessment Questions

1. Explain the role of the five senses in attaining knowledge in Augustine's epistemology.

2. Comment on Augustine's concept of divine illumination in relation to Plato's notion of anamnesis and Aristotle's conception of the relation between universal and particular

3. Explain how Augustine's view of the role of God represents his attempt to explain not only the possibility of knowledge, but also the nature of the world.

4. What implications can you see in Augustine's doctrine that God created all things ex nihilo, out of nothing?

5. What criticisms do you personally have of Augustine's theories of knowledge and reality?

6. Do you agree with Anselm that “I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand"? Give reasons for your position.

7. Explain and evaluate Gaunilo's objections to Anselm's proof for the existence of God.

8. Outline Aquinas's five proofs for the existence of God.

9. Do you think that Aquinas succeeded in proving the existence of God? Give reasons by referring to the various objections levelled against Aquinas's views.

10. Explain Aquinas's conception of dual causality.

11. Do you consider Aquinas's metaphysical views to be an “improvement” of Aristotle`s? Give reasons.
12. Do you think there is any value in studying medieval philosophy?