

Tutorial Letter 202/2/2021

**Name of module: Introduction to Western
Philosophy**

Module code(s): PLS1501

Semester 2

**Department of Philosophy, Practical &
Systematic Theology**

This tutorial letter contains important information
about your module.

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Dear Student

1 INTRODUCTION

This tutorial letter discusses assignment 02 and offers you guidelines for the final examination.

2 GENERAL COMMENTS ON ASSIGNMENT 02

Question: Critically Discuss St Thomas Aquinas' Five Proofs for the existence of God **[100 marks]**. (Hint: A Critical Discussion in addition to consisting of a recapitulation of the arguments of Aquinas must also include your own independent assessment of his reasoning and whether you think it is sound)

Discussion

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is considered one of the greatest philosopher-theologian of the Middle Ages. He set out to provide proof for the existence of God based on what he considered to be empirical facts about the world. The first three arguments are often referred to as the Cosmological argument because they each begin from the fact that there is a cosmos or a world whose existence needs to be accounted for. His aim was to offer clear and compelling arguments for the existence of God; the perfect creator of the universe. Aquinas therefore set out to provide philosophical arguments to demonstrate the existence of God using rational argumentation rather than simply relying on faith. These five proofs for the existence of God appear in his famous work the *Summa Theologica*. We describe each of the arguments below.

a). Argument from Motion

It is certain and agreed on the basis of our experiences of the world that some things in this world are in motion. Since whatever is in motion is moved by something other than itself, then either the chain of movers go back infinitely far (which is impossible) or else there is a first, unmoved, mover, an original source of motion- and this is God.

Objection: If the principle that everything that is in motion is moved by something else is indeed true then it should hold true for everything including the so-called prime mover himself. The decision to postulate the unmoved mover goes against the very principle on which this argument is premised. You can also object to this argument by appealing to the findings of modern physics concerning motion.

b). Argument from efficient causality

In the world that we perceive around us there are a series of causes. In each ordered series of causes, the first item is the cause of the next item, and this in turn is the cause of the next. An efficient cause is an agent, a maker, something that brings something else into being. 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."

Objection: You can begin by raising issues with the idea of cause and effect itself- as the empiricist philosopher Hume (1711-1776) has tried to show. Even if the argument were to be valid that there is indeed a first cause, it does not necessarily follow that such a cause is God. It could be any other being. One can also raise the objection that even God himself would also need a cause to explain his being there. This series of causes can go back to infinity. The other weakness is that in this chain of cause and effect we can never be sure through our own knowledge that we have now reached at the first cause. Equally important is the objection that why should there be one first cause instead of many. You can also draw from findings in modern physics in objecting to this argument.

c). Argument from possibility and necessity

Aquinas begins by 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. So if there was a time when nothing existed, then nothing could start to be and even now there would be nothing in existence. But since our experience clearly shows us that things do exist, this must mean that not all beings are merely possible. Aquinas concludes from this that there must be something in the world whose existence is necessary and this everyone calls God.

Objection: If there is no being that owes its existence to itself then that principle must also apply to God himself. If God is taken as the necessary cause for everything then the objection raised against the first and second arguments also apply here. This argument is also criticised as an attempt to define God into existence similar to the objections raised against the Ontological argument as you may already notice.

d). Argument from Degrees of perfection

In our experience we come across some things which are more or less good, or true or noble than others and so on. But 'more' and 'less' are terms that are used to describe how a thing is close to what is greatest of its kind. Hence there is something that is truest, and best, and noblest and consequently greatest in being. 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".

Objection: This is considered perhaps as the weakest of all his arguments. There is a problem with the assumed yardstick to measure things. The qualities he uses in trying to illustrate the logic of his reasoning are also subjective and not absolute.

e). Argument from the governance of the world

We see things that lack intelligence such as natural bodies operating so as to achieve a goal or end. They always strive to reach their goal and to pursue their end as if they have knowledge. But things that do not have knowledge cannot act as if they have a purpose unless they are guided to do so by something that has knowledge and intelligence. This intelligent being or governor who directs all unintelligent natural things to act purposefully is God.

Objection: the assumption made of a designer does not necessarily hold. Things may be following natural processes and the theories of science and evolution suggest something that

may be more plausible than postulating one intelligent designer. Like the teleological argument, there is still no reason why we should arrive at one designer rather than a whole team of designers.

Note on the critique of the arguments

The major question you should have in mind after reading all the five ways provided by Aquinas to prove God's existence is whether the facts he put forward cannot be explained with reference to something else or some other factors other than God. If that is possible then the postulation of God may not be necessary.

For each of these arguments you must provide critiques or objections where you demonstrate the inherent logical problems in each of the proofs provided. This you can do immediately after presenting each argument or you can do so at the end of the essay by providing a narrative that points to the problems of the arguments as a whole. By studying section 4.5 in your Study Guide it should be clear that there is a range of objections/critiques against these five proofs for the existence of God. These are discussed individually in the section. For that reason, I will not repeat them here. You simply have to turn to the relevant sections of the Study guide.

The hind included in brackets after the question requires you to begin to practice being a philosopher. In other words, it requires you to provide your own critical evaluation of the arguments and to pronounce whether you find them plausible or not and at the same time provide a reason or two. It is important to remember that we expect you to provide this critical analysis as part of your individualised reflection on what you have read.

3. THE EXAMINATION

In order to prepare yourself well for the final examination, please take note of the following:

A timetable will be send to you with all the details pertaining to your final examination. There will be a three hour take-home examination consisting of two sections A and B. Section A is short descriptions and conceptual analysis and Section B is a long essay. You must keep your answers precise and to the point, it is unnecessary for example to provide the biographical history of Plato in a question about his epistemology, focus exclusively on the content of the question asked.

Plagiarism

Please do not be tempted to Copy. This being a take home exam, you must understand that as soon as you submit, your script will automatically be put through a plagiarism detection system (Turnitin). It is therefore crucial that where you decide to use material from a source, proper methods of referencing must be used in the body of the essay itself including name of author and year, then quotation marks and page if direct words are taken from a source. The full reference must then appear in the bibliography provided at the end of the essay. Any source consulted must therefore be referenced properly including the Study Guide because this was authored by someone. Familiarise yourself with Tutorial Letter 301 which provides guidelines on intellectual integrity and referencing in Philosophy. It is also crucial that you visit the following website which speaks about Plagiarism so that you know what it is and also what not to do <https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/myunisa/default/Study-@-Unisa/Student-values-and-rules>

Revision

You will notice that the Study Guide is divided into Study Units each of which deals with a particular topic. Upon finishing one Study Unit, you should be in a good position to tackle the self-test questions included in your Study Guide. We have also included copies of previous examination question papers on myUnisa to assist you during revision. Please follow the discussion forums on the myUnisa page for this Module.

Selecting questions

Take your time to read the Instructions and the entire exam question paper before deciding which questions to tackle. It may help to write down some of the main points you think should appear in each answer to measure your understanding of the question before you begin answering. Bear in mind that you will also need time to proofread your essay before final submission.

Conclusion

We are available all the time to assist you via email and on the discussion forum with any subject related questions and discussions.

All the best.

Prof P Mungwini