



# **Tutorial Letter 202/2/2020**

## **Introduction to Western Philosophy PLS 1501**

### **Semester 2**

#### **Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology**

This tutorial letter contains important information  
about your second assignment and the final examination

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Dear Student this tutorial letter contains information for your second assignment and your final examination this semester.

## 2 GENERAL COMMENTS ON ASSIGNMENT 2

In your assignment you were asked to discuss Aquinas' 5 proofs for the existence of God. Hereunder we provide full feedback of all the aspects of the proofs you were required to demonstrate grasp over as well as some of the critique you could have given of these "proofs". Finally we discuss briefly the various aspects of the rubric which was used in order to mark your assignments.

**Critically Discuss St Thomas Aquinas' Five Proofs for the existence of God [100marks] ( 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)**

### Introduction

That God exists is, of course, matter 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.

### 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).

## 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).

## 3 Argument 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.

## Critical Evaluation of the first 3 proofs

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 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.

## 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!

## Conclusion

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.

## ASSIGNMENT RUBRIC

|                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Grammar, Spelling, Style and Coherence                                                                              | <b>20 %</b> In order to score a total mark in this section you would have had to exhibit perfect grammar and spelling throughout your essay. Proper section titling as well as shown a good use of style in expressing your argumentation.                                                                                                                                                    |
| Referencing (in text) and bibliography/ references                                                                  | <b>15%</b> In order to score a total mark for referencing you would have to have disclosed the sources of all arguments and insights you relied upon in your article following the correct scientific convention consistently. You would also have had to provide a full list of the references relied upon with author names, titles, year of publication, publisher and city of publication |
| Exposition of the arguments (accurate recapitulation of the understanding of the argument and summary in own words) | <b>50%</b> In order to score full marks here you would have had to provide an exhaustive recapitulation and interpretation of each of the causes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Critical Appraisal of arguments (demonstration of evaluation of the arguments / contextualization/ criticism)       | <b>15%</b> In order to score full marks under this section you would have had to show evidence of your own evaluation of the arguments, poking holes in them , comparing them with other aspects of your independent knowledge either to support them or ‘criticise’ them.                                                                                                                    |

### 3 THE EXAMINATION

The examination which you will sit for on **Monday 6<sup>th</sup> of July 2020** covers the entire content of the module. The careful study of your assignments is however a good way to prepare for the exam and the nature of questions which will be contained in it.

Because of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding this semester's examination, the examination itself will be quite extraordinary – not in difficulty but form. The exam will become available to you at **11:30** and you shall have 12 hours within which to complete and submit it, the submission time is **23:30**.

The exam will be open book so you may consult all the reading and research materials at your disposal, including your Tutorial Letters, your personal library and the internet. You must however acknowledge all sources you have relied upon in the scientifically appropriate and academically honest fashion, please consult your Tutorial letter 301 for assistance with this. Both a full reference list and in text references shall be expected.

The examination itself will have a total of **100 MARKS** and consist of 2 Sections **A and B**.

**Section A** will be a compulsory long essay out of **50 MARKS** and will consist of a question regarding any aspect of your Introduction to Western philosophy. It will call for much of your independent reflection as much as

**Section B** will consist of **4 choices** of which you must **choose any 2** the questions each of them out of **25 MARKS** will contain questions on figures of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, namely Plato and Aristotle on the one hand Augustine and Aquinas on the other.

A Tutorial Letter 203 will follow next week providing information on the exact procedure to be used in downloading your exam , preparing the word document and uploading it.

Good luck in preparing for your exams. There are more than 5 weeks to go still. If you spend an hour each day going through your study materials and direct any questions or concerns you have to me via email, you should do very well .

Best Wishes  
Mr Dladla



## 4 LECTURER(S) AND CONTACT DETAILS

### Lecturer(s)

Mr. Ndumiso Dladla

Contact details:

**Office:** Room 09-106, Theo van Wijk Building,  
Muckleneuk Campus, Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, Pretoria,  
SOUTH AFRICA  
**Postal Address:** P O Box 392, UNISA, 0003, SOUTH AFRICA  
**Telephone:** +27 12 429 6403  
**Fax:** +27 86 276 4525  
**e-mail:** [dladln@unisa.ac.za](mailto:dladln@unisa.ac.za)

Because of the lockdown, we are not at our offices in the coming weeks, you may email me your queries and request a phone call from me if the matter justifies it accompanied with your phone number and I shall arrange to call you at a time of mutual convenience.

If you are unable to make contact with me for whatever reason please write an email to Mr Delpont whose email appears below.

Mr. PT Delpont

Contact details:

**Office:** Room 09-55, Theo van Wijk Building,  
Muckleneuk Campus, Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, Pretoria,  
SOUTH AFRICA  
**Postal Address:** P O Box 392, UNISA, 0003, SOUTH AFRICA  
**Telephone:** +27 12 429 3391  
**Fax:** +27 86 276 4525  
**e-mail:** [delpont@unisa.ac.za](mailto:delpont@unisa.ac.za)

## 5 CONCLUSION

We hope this tutorial letter has been helpful in showing what was expected from you in your second assignment as well as in providing the necessary information for your preparation for the final examination. We wish you the greatest success with your examinations and encourage you to contact us via email.

All The Best!