



BRIAN WICKER

GOD AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY

*a discussion of the traditional
arguments for God's existence
in the light of contemporary
philosophy*

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GOD AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY

A discussion of the traditional arguments
for God's existence in the light of
contemporary philosophy

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THE ARGUMENT OF THIS BOOK

It is inevitable that, as children, we should entertain a picture of God which is appropriate to a child's needs. Since these requirements are largely emotional, centring on the necessity to find security and love, the child's picture of God naturally tends to be that of an emotionally satisfying parent who is eager and willing to give us what we want, but perhaps is also prepared to judge and punish when we displease him. Such a notion of God prevails, not only in the childhood of the individual, but also in the childhood of the human race as a whole. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not so very far removed from the God of the child.

But if our religion is to develop into maturity alongside our natural faculties, this self-centred emotionally satisfying image must be gradually extended. A mature imagination and an adult power of reason must be brought into play in our consideration of God and his relationship to us, and to the world he has created. Mr Wicker's book is designed to show how it is possible for us to give the fullest scope to reason in exploring this relationship, without undermining our faith or belittling our emotions. If Christianity is to make sense in a world largely devoted to the cultivation of scientific discovery, it is essential that Christians should be able to show, in their own persons, a mature and healthy

balance between their faith in God and their capacity to think hard and straight. This book only attempts to lay the foundations. Father McCurdy's *Who is God?* and Father Sillem's *Groping for God* try to take us further along the way to a balanced understanding.

INTRODUCTORY

It is often suggested in Catholic circles that, because many modern philosophers are agnostics, there must be something subversive about their whole approach to philosophy. While it is not difficult to show that this view is a mistaken one, it is easy to see how it has come to be held. It is largely the result of the divorce which has occurred, in all English-speaking countries, between the teaching of philosophy in Catholic schools and seminaries and the teaching of philosophy in non-Catholic universities. In the seminary, or the school apologetics course, philosophy has been taught as if it were merely a preliminary to, and handmaid of, theology. Philosophical questions have been discussed only in so far as they have an obvious bearing on faith, and often in such a way as to demonstrate how the philosopher's argument can be used to support truths already accepted on other grounds. Philosophy has not been taught as an independent and free exploration of our fundamental ideas, but as a system of set answers to a predetermined range of religious and moral questions.

In the universities today the situation is just the opposite. Nothing is taken for granted, everything is open to question and discussion. The result is often a sense of bewilderment and lack of purpose and direction. Students who look to philosophers to provide them with a guide to life come away

disillusioned and disappointed. This is not entirely the philosophers' fault; for they do not claim nowadays to occupy a privileged position from which to teach people how to conduct their lives. They see themselves as explorers and critics, not preachers or models of the good life.

One purpose of this booklet is to attempt, within the limits of one particular philosophical problem, to bridge the gap between these concepts of philosophy. It is hoped that it may help to show to Catholic students, who may come into contact with university philosophy, that the free discussion of philosophical questions about God and religion which is characteristic of the university atmosphere, is not necessarily a danger to faith, but an enrichment of experience and a stimulus to deeper thought and a more personal grasp of essentials. It is also true that a Catholic who has a firm and clear grasp of the authentic Catholic tradition in religious philosophy, can usually offer to the uncommitted an intellectual clarity which cannot be rivalled elsewhere. But, for such encounters to be worthwhile and fruitful, it is essential that the Catholic student should understand, philosophically, why it is that most people regard the attempts of past thinkers to prove that there must be a God as intellectually sterile and even disreputable. They need to realise the extent to which, without knowing it, Catholic philosophers have departed from the authentic tradition of St Thomas Aquinas.

PART I. WHAT IS THIS MODERN PHILOSOPHY?

There is a good deal of talk today about the so-called contemporary school of philosophy. But there is in fact no one set of ideas or methods which make up modern philosophy. It is, at most, an attitude or mood. Nowadays philosophy—at any rate in the English-speaking universities—is seen as a matter of analysis and discussion. The attempts of the past to build up great philosophical systems, by a process of deduction, from a small number of allegedly self-evident or unquestionable propositions have been mostly given up. This change does not necessarily mark a distrust of reason, but stems from a recognition of its limits. The philosopher no longer tries to compete with the scientist, theologian or politician. He is concerned to discuss and analyse the concepts they use, but not to do their work for them.

Now, since discussion is only possible in words, it is the analysis of language which occupies the centre of interest. In particular, philosophers are concerned with the kinds of thing you can say, or how far you can go in a certain form of argument without falling into contradiction or simply talking nonsense. They are not concerned with discovering new facts in the world, or explaining the behaviour of phenomena (that is the scientist's job), or proving inexorably some set of universal undeniable first principles. Their job is firstly to see that the things people say, in their capacities

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as scientists, theologians or politicians do not get them (or us) into useless or misleading muddles; and secondly to follow up the implication of what we know already, from these other activities, and to see where they lead us.

Of course, every philosophical discussion has to begin somewhere. Philosophy is interesting, in a way that geometry for example is not, because the things that have to be taken for granted at the start are not just assumed for the sake of argument, but are important to the lives of the people concerned. It is not surprising, therefore, that much time is spent in discussing the starting points themselves; for, as Newman saw, many of our disagreements are really about the things we take for granted at the outset, not about the validity of the arguments we use. Of course, it would be a mistake to imagine that, for this reason, there is no objective criterion by which to decide whether a particular starting point is true or false. We don't make a statement true just by accepting it as the first premiss in our argument, or false by rejecting it as a premiss in our opponent's. Consider the following example. There is a great deal of argument over the question whether capital punishment deters people from committing murders. There are good grounds for holding that those who approve of capital punishment often do so because the execution of a murderer acts for them as a means of legitimately releasing their own pent-up aggressive tendencies. The murderer actually does the killing and releases his aggressive impulses in that way; the remainder of us gain an aggressive satisfaction by seeing

that he is executed for it. We say, 'That fellow should be hung, drawn and quartered', or 'Hanging is too good for him' and so on.¹ In such a situation, the assertion that capital punishment deters murderers is partly at any rate a rationalisation of what a person on other grounds *wants* to believe. Similarly, an opponent of capital punishment may deny that it deters, not because the evidence proves this, but because his whole moral nature revolts against the idea of killing. But the question itself, whether capital punishment deters would-be murderers or not, can only be settled by appeal to certain *facts*—that is, to the crime statistics, to our knowledge of psychology, of social pressures and so on. The answer to the question whether capital punishment deters or not rests upon these facts alone. Of course, a true conclusion can be got from false premisses. For instance I might argue thus :

All paper is white
This is a sheet of paper
Therefore this sheet of paper is white

but that would be a disreputable argument, however true the conclusion may be. It is very important that we should base our arguments on true premisses, as well as arriving at true conclusions.

But while a case can often be made out, by reference to the known facts, for one starting point rather than another,

¹ Cf. *Capital Punishment* by Tidmarsh, Halloran and Connolly (Sheed & Ward 1963) p. 161.

it is also important to realise that no amount of mere logic can *compel* a person to change his chosen point of view. If someone decides to stand his ground, no philosopher can force him to shift it *just* by argument. However silly his opinions, you cannot prove to a madman that he is mad. But this does not mean that all opinions are equally good; or that everyone is 'entitled' to his opinion in the sense that every opinion is equally consonant with the facts of experience. What gives me a title to claim that my starting point is true is not my claiming it, but the *truth* of what I claim. Only if my starting point is a statement of something that really is the case am I entitled to claim that my starting point is a legitimate one. Of course it is very often true that it is difficult, or even impossible, to establish clearly that a statement of something really is the case. For example, it is extremely difficult to establish whether capital punishment deters murders. But this is not because we cannot agree as to what facts would establish it. It is because we can't easily get at these facts. Nevertheless, whether capital punishment deters is a question concerning these facts. These alone determine whether it is the case or not that capital punishment deters.

Argumentum Ad Hominem

But there is a deeper difficulty than this. For whether a person is prepared to accept my starting point as a basis for discussion may depend upon his whole way of looking at the world, and assessing his experience, as well as upon his

assessment of any particular set of alleged facts. In any complex issue which affects our whole outlook on life, this is indeed bound to be so. In such a situation the first step is to persuade an opponent, not by logical argument so much as by an appeal to his entire being, to exchange this initial way of seeing the world for another. We have got to get him to see that there is a different way of seeing things, which is as much in tune with the facts as his own, but which yields a deeper and more satisfying result for him in his personal life. The pamphlets in this series by Father Sillem (*Groping for God*) and Father McCurdy (*The Uncreated Light*) attempt to indicate the way this first step may be taken. In the present discussion all that is attempted is to show how, once someone has begun to see that there is a philosophical problem about God, the rigorous logic of the philosopher can properly be used to tackle it.

The Teaching of the Church

Let us look at the Church's teaching about the existence of God in the light of all this.

A problem which often troubles Catholics today is this: The Church teaches us, in the words of the first Vatican Council, that 'God, the origin and end of all things, can be known for certain by the natural light of human reason, from the contrary, agree that all the arguments which have been put forward as demonstrations of God's existence by thinkers in the past either fall a long way short of complete

proof, or (worse still) contain profound philosophical mistakes and are accordingly quite invalid. Are Catholics therefore to conclude that 'sound philosophy' (as Pope Pius XII called the Catholic scholastic tradition) is wholly incompatible with the approach to philosophy which is practically universal in English-speaking universities today? Or is there room for mutual understanding and reconciliation between them? In this pamphlet I want to show that not only is there no necessary opposition between the two, but that, properly understood, the mood of contemporary philosophy is closer to that of the perennial philosophy (as expounded by St Thomas Aquinas above all others) than to any of the philosophical movements which emerged during the intervening centuries. But in doing so it is very important to disentangle the really 'sound philosophy' from that of many subsequent scholastic writers who, while believing that they were just restating the views of St Thomas, were in fact deeply influenced by ideas incompatible with his own.

It needs to be emphasised, first of all, that although the Vatican Council decree is an article of Catholic faith, the question whether, or how, any particular form of reasoning succeeds in demonstrating God's existence is a purely philosophical issue. This being so, it is also right to emphasise that, in philosophy, a spirit of cut-and-dried dogmatism is out of place. A full treatment of the problems discussed in this pamphlet would involve subtle and difficult concepts. It would be dishonest to pretend that these could be much simplified without at the same time falsifying them. The

reader should realise that the following pages are nothing but a brief sketch of the subject, designed not to suggest any final answers to a perennially important philosophical dispute, but merely to offer a line of thought by which the 'sound philosophy' of Catholic tradition can be related to the contemporary mood of philosophical discussion.

The Church certainly says that to come to believe in God for certain, by considering the visible things of this world as effects which must imply a cause,¹ is a perfectly reasonable procedure. There is no good reason why anybody should be unable to do it. The first Vatican Council condemned those who thought they were exalting the virtue of faith by making it into something which goes *against* the rationality of our ordinary human nature, as though such a faith would be specially meritorious because it involved a kind of intellectual self-denial. Far from exalting faith, such a concept degrades it, by creating a conflict in man between his faith in God and the rational nature which God has given him. This is a sad reflection on the unity and perfection of God's creative purpose in making man in his own image.

So the Church insists that God's existence can be arrived at by a process of reasonable reflection on the things of this world. (Of course, the use of reason does not exclude the use of our other natural gifts, of poetic imagination for example.) But what can not be laid down in advance is

¹ Cf. the anti-modernist oath taken by all priests: "God can be known, as a cause from its effects and . . . therefore his existence can be demonstrated."

precisely what is to count as a reasonable procedure. This is because there cannot be any set of rules by which to judge all mental processes, to see if they are in accordance with reason or not. If there were, these rules could not be arrived at by reasoning itself, and would therefore have to be justified as rational by some further set of rules, and so on *ad infinitum*. So, when the Church says that by concluding, from a contemplation of something in the world, to the existence of a God who made the world, we do not necessarily have to invoke anything other than reason, she is asserting something which is a starting point, rather than something to be proved. If a man says that he is not prepared to call any such procedures rational, the argument cannot even begin. Some method other than this argument will have to be used to get him to *see* reason.

The Concepts of 'Demonstration' and 'Certainty'

I have said that today philosophers analyse language, rather than indulge in systematic metaphysical speculation. A typical case in which this kind of philosophical analysis is needed is provided by the exposition of the Church's teaching about God. It has often been stated in oversimplified versions of that teaching that God's existence can be proved by reasoning, much as a theorem in geometry can be proved. But even if we accept that God's existence can be known for certain through reasoning alone, it is better to speak of 'demonstration' in such a case, rather than 'proof'. To demonstrate means to show, or point out something,

which is not immediately obvious. A guide taking a party of tourists round London might point out St Paul's Cathedral, but we do not say that he thereby demonstrates it. Demonstration is concerned with pointing out an object, or a method of doing something, or a train of thought, which otherwise might not be noticed or considered. (This is how the word is used in the first paragraph of this booklet.) But the word 'demonstrate' is also often used to denote something quite different—a logically inexorable proof. And as I have said, it is often implied that this latter sense must be the sense intended by the Church's decree. But that is a mistake. Let us see why.

A theorem in geometry may *prove* that the sum of the angles of a triangle equals two right angles, without there having to be anyone about to see it done. But a cook can't *demonstrate* how to make pancakes if there is nobody there to see her do it. All she can do is go through the motions of her 'demonstration'; she can't actually perform the demonstration. Similarly, it may well be true that God's existence can be demonstrated by one person to another in rational discussion, but it does not follow that the demonstrator's arguments can do the same job when set out impersonally like a geometry theorem. It is a mistake to think that the statement 'God's existence can be demonstrated by reason' entails the statement 'there is an inexorable argument which proves God's existence'.

Another concept which needs analysing is that of *certainty*. It is part of the Church's teaching that, by reason,

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people are entitled to feel absolutely certain that there is a God (not just to feel that it is very probable). Now many people would say that you can't be really entitled to feel certain of anything unless you can *prove* it. The idea behind this opinion is that there can only be two sorts of genuine certainty. The first is the case which is not based on evidence at all, but just on mathematical deduction (like geometrical theorems). We know that there is a distinction between the notion of a point, with no size or shape, and a pencil dot on a piece of paper; or between the concept of a triangle and any diagram of a triangle. The theorems of geometry are statements about the concepts of point, triangle etc., not about diagrams. The statement that the angles of a triangle add up to 180° is not a statement about the angles we measure in a drawing, for if it were we would have to amend the theorem if we found a drawing in which the angles only amounted to 179° . Whereas of course in practice we say that this must have been an inaccurate diagram of a triangle. To the mathematician, then, it doesn't matter whether there are any real triangles in the world. All he says is that, *if* there were, their angles would add up to 180° .

The second kind of certainty is one in which a person is already in possession of everything which he needs in order to be certain of something, as in the statement 'I have a pain', which I am perfectly certain of because I am myself in possession of everything which can possibly bear on the truth of the statement. But all the important certainties in life lie between these extremes. They are based on evidence

all right, but go beyond what can strictly be deduced from it. And, as we have seen, we can't be dislodged from our certainties by people who claim: 'You have no right to be more certain than the evidence warrants'—for we can quite reasonably challenge their use of 'warrants' in so narrow a fashion.

The dispute as to whether smoking causes cancer affords an excellent example. Recently, the British Poster Advertising Association refused a poster which said 'Cigarettes cause lung cancer', on the grounds that they were not satisfied that any evidence had been produced that they do cause lung cancer. All that the statistics showed, they maintained, was that the two were 'linked'. But Dr Plant (responsible for the report to the Government on the matter) says 'the evidence against smoking is so overwhelming that it would be accepted by anyone who did not have some interest in it'. (*The Guardian*, December 18th 1962). Now there is no dispute here as to the statistics themselves, or about the trends they reveal. Nor is there a dispute of a philosophical kind about what constitutes a 'cause' (that might come later). What is in dispute is Dr Plant's right to feel certain. When we see that this is the real dispute, we realise that it cannot be settled by appeal to any further documents, or to any independent judge, as a dispute about a legal title can. But can't we say that, as in law, we ought to go on precedents—that is, similar cases that have arisen before? But then the dispute merely shifts to the question, are there any precedents, and how similar do they have to be? This is, in fact,

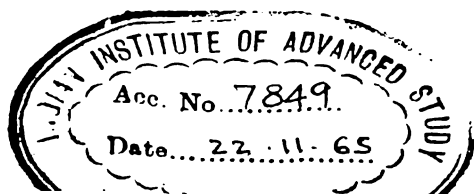
precisely how Dr Plant did argue. He said there were certain chemicals in the dye industry, and the people who handled them got cancer of the bladder. 'Do you call that cause?' he asked. 'I do.' These chemicals 'in ordinary parlance' caused cancer of the bladder, and so did smoking cause lung cancer. How much ought we to rely on the evidence of 'ordinary parlance' in this case? How far would it be reasonable to go on saying 'I don't regard that as an instance of a cause' in reply to Dr Plant's questions about other cases? These are typically philosophical questions, and they are typical in that, however much we go on arguing, we can't avoid the fact that, in the end, one's personal opinion depends on a choice. Dr Plant has *committed himself* to his certainty—on the basis of the evidence as he sees it, of course, as I have already insisted. The choice isn't arbitrary. But he doesn't claim that people who disagree must be mad (though he does claim they must be, somehow, defaulting). He is committed to believing that other people *ought* to see things in the way he does, and that if they were as free from prejudice as he is, they *would* do so. But these beliefs do not follow simply from the evidence available; they only follow from Dr Plant's personal (and, I would say, perfectly reasonable) act of voluntary and unconditional assent.

It is in some such way as this that the Church claims that anyone who does not see the world in such a way as to be certain that there is a God is a defaulter. But it should not be imagined that she says this any more arbitrarily than

Dr Plant says smoking causes lung cancer. She can marshal a good case, based on experience, which she claims is accessible to everybody who is prepared to think seriously. But, before we look into it, it may be as well to remind ourselves why the Church feels herself bound to present a case at all. The reason is simply that it is a fundamental part of the biblical way of looking at the world. If the Church did not make her claim she would be betraying her faith in the divinely inspired truth of Scripture. 'Proving' God's existence may be just a philosophical obsession, but 'demonstrating' it is an integral part of the outlook which God has imparted to us through the developing consciousness of his chosen people.

The Later Biblical View of God

It would be wrong to imagine that a philosophical concept of God was always part of the average Jewish outlook, as represented in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), or in the ancient historical traditions preserved in the Books of Samuel and Kings, or in the great prophetic writings. For the Jews of those times, God was a person (yes, even a person with human characteristics) who had made himself known to them by mighty acts of saving power in the past. He was the one who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt; who, by his self-revelation in thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai, had created a united priestly community out of the heterogeneous tribes who followed the leadership of Moses; who had called the great prophets



to witness to him against the infidelities of his people. But during the later period of pre-Christian Jewish history, when Greek civilisation and thought began, under the same divine providence, to exert its influence in the middle east, something of the Greek philosophical temper was given to the Jews and assimilated by the writers of the late 'Wisdom' literature. In this way God gave a new richness to the older Jewish modes of conceiving him, adding philosophical reflection to their deeply personal, and even anthropomorphic religious vision. This development is apparent in the books of Wisdom, Job and some of the Psalms, from which St Paul largely derived his own form of philosophical speculation.

I think that the essence of this later biblical outlook is simply that, just as the cook cannot make her demonstration to people who will not take any notice, or persist in looking in the wrong direction, so the world cannot demonstrate God's existence except to people who pay the right kind of attention to it.¹ The wrong kind of attention is paid by people who think that there must be a God or gods, but that he must be *in* the world—for example in the fire or the wind or the air. But their mistake is not nearly so bad as that of people who think they can make their own gods out of gold or silver or stone. For, at any rate, those who make the first mistake are looking in the right direction—they are concentrating upon the beauty and the power of the natural

¹ Important passages are: Wisdom 13; Job 12: 7ff and 36: 22ff; Psalm 18; Romans 1: 19ff; John 1: 10; Acts 17: 22ff.

world, not upon their own cleverness. Their mistake is that they concentrate too hard upon these things; being 'persuaded that the things are good which are seen' (as they should be of course) they think there is no need to look further to the God who is not seen. But the really important point is that, in the Bible, it is the world which demonstrates God's existence to us, by its power and beauty and life; our task is to search for the meaning of that activity. (We do not demonstrate it to the world.) It is taken for granted that there must be a divine power somewhere; the idea that there could be a world without a God at all is simply not considered. This is, I think, because the whole world is thought of as alive with power and movement: 'ask now the beasts and they shall teach thee: and the birds of the air and they shall tell. Speak to the earth and it shall answer thee. . . . Who is ignorant that the hand of the Lord hath made all these things?' (Job 12: 7-9). It is considered simply impossible for a person to look at the world and not acknowledge divinity somewhere—it is so obvious! Hence the idea of proving God's existence by intellectual argument was totally foreign to the biblical writers (St Paul included). It would be almost as absurd as proving that the cook has done her demonstration, when you have seen it with your own eyes.

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech
and night to night declares knowledge. (Psalm 18: 1-2)

Of course, God is invisible, and unlike the cook, the world, for all its power and beauty, cannot talk. Yet all the same it can 'show forth' (that is, 'demonstrate') his glory and 'proclaim' that it is his handiwork.

There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

Yet their voice goes out through all the earth
and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 18: 3-4)

The demonstration is going on all the time, for our benefit. It would, therefore, be quite out of keeping with the spirit of the later biblical outlook for us to suppose that a demonstration of God's existence from a consideration of the visible things of the world was something we should ourselves try to work out. Still less are we to suppose that a writer like St Paul had in his mind even a shadowy formulation of any of the classical arguments for God's existence. We are to look at any arguments for God's existence, not as if they were the product of our cleverness, but as if they merely led us, by an intellectual path, to watch and understand the demonstration which God has been laying on for us, in the world, from all eternity. They can never be a substitute for paying attention to the power and beauty of the world around us.

It is because arguments for God's existence only function as means by which to direct a person's attention to the right place that their initial premisses are the most important part of them. It is here that most of the traps are to be

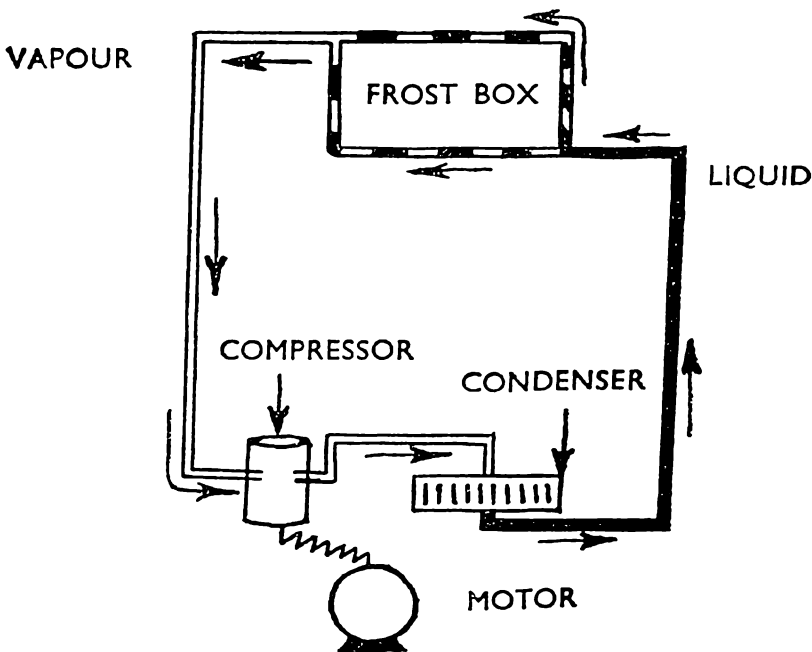
found. The rest of this pamphlet is devoted to discussing some points about two of the most familiar types of argument, especially with the last point in mind. I do not imply that these are the only worthwhile arguments, but I think they are perhaps those which are nearest to the spirit of the Bible.

PART II. ARGUMENTS FROM CHANGES GOING ON IN THE WORLD

St Thomas thought that the clearest of all arguments for God was one which was based upon the observation of movement among things in the world and which led ultimately to God as the first mover of the world itself. While movement from place to place is the most obvious kind of movement, any change, or process of an observable kind can be the starting point of the chain of reflection which leads to God.

St Thomas's argument can be illustrated thus.¹ In a refrigerator the temperature is kept down by a constant process of alternate condensation and evaporation in the 'refrigerant' which circulates in the system. If we study any particular stage of this closed system of perpetual change—say the moment of evaporation in the sides of the 'frost box'—we can always explain it by reference to a previous stage in the system. As we work back from frost box to condenser, from condenser to compressor, from the compressor to the warmed gas entering it and so on, we discover at each turn an effect produced by a previous cause.

¹ I am relying, for my exposition of St Thomas, on what I think is much the best commentary in English—that of Mr P. Geach in his *Three Philosophers* (Blackwell 1961).



But what such a study of the various stages does not show to us is how the whole system, considered as a single closed process, is kept going. To find what is responsible for that, it is no good looking for anything within the circulation system; for that would only constitute another stage in the closed cycle of changes, and would therefore be part of what we are trying to account for. Nor is it any good looking for the first moment when the system began to circulate, as though at that point we could find the answer to the difficulty. For the difficulty would remain even if the refrigerator had been

working from all eternity, without ever having begun at all. The question is not *When did it begin?*, but *What makes it go?*—and something must be making it go now, *however* long it has been going. Whenever we study it, the problem is the same. An eternal refrigerator would present the same problem to us as a refrigerator which we observed to begin circulating five minutes ago. The answer of course is simple; there is an electric motor—*which is not itself part of the circulation system*—and this provides power to the compressor, which the system could never provide for itself. The motor is different—one might say a superior—kind of cause from the various causes which are at work in the circulation system itself.

Now the motor too, of course, is only another system of changes—a closed set of electro magnetic processes. So is the set of physical processes which occur in the power station in the production of current, and which are the ‘superior’ cause of *its* activity. Each time we find a causal process, we find another superior one behind it. The observable world reveals itself to us as constituting nothing else than a single vast system of interrelated causes and processes.

Not that we have investigated them all of course. To arrive at the notion of the whole universe as a single system of changes we have to extrapolate from the part of it we do know to the rest of it which we do not yet know about. But this is a perfectly reasonable procedure, because what we mean by *the universe* in this context is simply the whole of that reality which is open, at least in principle, to scientific

observation. It is, roughly, the world of the astronomers. The universe, for purposes of this argument, *does not mean everything there is*; it just means the world we see on a starlit night, and everything of the same changeable kind which is too distant for us to discover yet.

Furthermore, just as it made no difference to the problem of the refrigerator, how long it had been at work, so it makes no difference to the present problem—how old the world is, or how big it is. It could be both eternal and infinite in size; the problem would remain the same. We can still ask: What is it that keeps the whole system going? But there is a difference now, for in this case we cannot answer that what keeps it going is another system of changes, which is responsible for this one but lies outside it. For the system we are now studying contains *all* systems of change. There cannot be anything beyond the universe in the sense that there can be a motor outside the circulation system of the refrigerator. It doesn't matter that we have no idea how much of the universe there is; however much of it there is, it is all within the one universal system. So if the source of the activity of the physical universe were itself changeable, then it would itself be part of the universe. Hence the only possible source of universal change is a changeless source which is not part of this changing system. But it also means that this changeless source cannot be outside the universe in the same sense that one object is outside, alongside another.

It is worthwhile to notice here that many philosophers have objected to this line of reasoning by pointing out that

the notion of the universe as a whole does not make sense. They argue that the terms we apply to describe relations between things in the world—terms like cause and effect for example—are only applicable because we can know from experience that the objects stand in a certain relationship to each other. We, being outside this relationship, can observe it. But we cannot observe the relationship between the universe and its source: and hence, it is argued, we have no right to talk about it. Now this is certainly a fatal objection to some forms of argument. But not, I think, to St Thomas's. For he would simply say that, since the universe is just the complete collection of the kinds of changeable things we do know about from observation and experience, there is no reason why we should not ask some of the same questions about them all that we can ask successfully about some of them.

Some Fallacious Arguments

I have summarised the essential points of St Thomas's first argument. Now, in order to make the important features of it clear, it is necessary to discuss certain commonly-found mistakes in the exposition of it.

The simplest trap awaits those who try to argue that, because behind each change or process or movement that we observe there lies some other, earlier change which causes *it*, and behind *it* there lies yet another and so on, we must eventually arrive at some ultimate cause which lies at the end of this whole series, and which is responsible for all the rest.

If A is caused by B and B by C and C by D, it is argued, there must be some last cause Z beyond which the causal series cannot go; otherwise the series could not be accounted for at all. There must be some cause Z, which is itself not caused by anything, but which causes Y, and Y in turn causes X and X causes W and so on, until one arrives at the movement A with which the argument began. You cannot go on for ever in such a series of causes. You've got to come to a stop somewhere; otherwise there is no accounting for the movement of any of the intermediate members, and hence no accounting for the movement A which first attracted notice.

There are various things wrong with this argument. One is that it claims that a causal series, going back for ever without arriving at a first cause in the series, is inconceivable. But plenty of people have thought of such chains of causes going back for ever. People have thought of the world as having always existed, without its having had a beginning; and St Thomas himself thought that one could only be sure that it had a beginning because the Book of Genesis said so.

But a more serious objection to the argument is that it is based upon a mistaken notion of explanation. It is absurd to suppose that, in order to explain the latest movement or change in a series of causes, one has to get back to some first member of that series. On the contrary, the further back one goes in the series the less explanatory power is to be found there. Consider the following argument: 'The physicist explains the motion of the train by the motion of the piston of the engine; the motion of the piston by the

expansion of steam; the expansion of steam by the heat from the coal; the energy in the coal, which is nothing more than compressed vegetable matter, by the sun's heat and light; the sun's heat and light by the motion of the nebula out of which it was evolved. Therefore, as far as a complete explanation is concerned, we find ourselves, at the end of a long series of physical causes, just where we were at the beginning. The motion of the nebula requires explanation just as much as the motion of the train.¹ The idea behind this argument is that the motion of trains is only fully explicable on the basis of some 'all-powerful Being distinct from the world'. But this is nothing but a play upon the word explain. The fact is that at each stage a *new* question is asked, and this new question demands a new answer. But this new answer is not an answer to the earlier question at all. If I am looking for an explanation of why locomotives move, an exposition of the principle of the steam engine is *the* answer to that question. It would be absurd for me to say, even after having had this principle explained to me, that I still do not understand why the train moves. It may be that my curiosity is still not satisfied, because I now want to know why steam has the power to expand so powerfully—and this may involve an exposition of (say) Boyle's Law about the behaviour of gases.² But it would be completely

¹ M. Sheehan, *Apologetics* 4th Edition (1942) p. 21.

² A further important point about the use of the word 'explain' ought to be made here. In 'explaining' the behaviour of gases it would be likely that a teacher would mention Boyle's Law. He would say that the behaviour of gases is, partly at any rate,

absurd to say that, if a person does not ask about the behaviour of gases, after having had the principle of the steam engine explained to him, he has not had the movement of the locomotive explained to him. For his question has been answered, and that is precisely what it means to say that he has had the matter explained to him. It is no use qualifying this by saying that, without knowing about the behaviour of gases, and the chemical composition of coal, and the origins of the sun and the Milky Way, the movement of the locomotive has only been *partially* explained, as though these other things helped to *complete* the explanation. For since these other things do not concern locomotives, they do not have any particular answer to the question why locomotives move. The point we are making is not that the principle of the steam engine is an incomplete explanation of the movement of the locomotive, but that for some people the exposition of this principle may give rise to curiosity about something else, which then itself demands explanation. But it is important to insist that this new explanation

'explained' by Boyle's Law. But this is quite a different use of 'explain' from that with which we have been concerned so far. In asking why trains move, we are looking for the *cause* of their movement. The principle of the steam engine shows us how it is that the engine is that cause. But Boyle's Law is not the cause of anything. It is an 'explanation' in quite a different sense. It is simply a *formula*, which, by being quite general and unrelated to any individual objects or situations, is able to unify our observations of different objects and situations and provide a basis for theory, prediction and experiment. Gases may be part of a certain system of causes and effects; but scientific formulae are not parts of such systems. They are theoretical interpretations of them.

is not part of the answer to the first question, for that has been answered already. Indeed, if it had not been answered, these further questions could not arise. It is precisely because the principle of the steam engine *does* explain the movement of the locomotive that a person may wish to raise the further question about why steam behaves in the way it does.

Of course, it is not just a coincidence when a person whose curiosity has been satisfied on one point begins to ask questions about another, earlier one. It is an important feature of human intelligence to see that the different questions and answers are related in a unified series. But this unity is not, itself, a matter of empirical observation. It is a unity we impose on our experience in response (we may reasonably hold) to something really united about the events themselves. But the fact that we naturally and rightly think of the questions I have been discussing as forming a unified series does not mean that they are, after all, only different formulations of the same questions. They are logically distinct from each other, and demand logically different answers, even if they are related in a series. It follows from all this, of course, that a certain curiosity and mental energy in the search for the causes of things—that is, a scientific spirit—is a right and even necessary characteristic for anyone who professes to live by faith. Faith is in no sense hostile to scientific enquiry—it merely demands that we give as much care to the delimitation of the field of scientific enquiry as we give to the pursuit of science itself.

To believe that science can, even if only in principle, solve everything is itself a kind of intellectual laziness, arising from a desire to oversimplify, and cut the awkward corners in thinking.

It is a mistake then, as I have insisted, to imagine that you can argue to God's existence from any *particular* example, or series of examples, of motion or process in the world. The question of God's existence can only be raised when some further problem appears, for which the immediate explanation is insufficient or irrelevant. What question could be raised for which there could be no sufficient explanation in the immediate causal antecedents of the event? Surely every particular event, or series of events, may have some sufficient explanation *within* the world even if science hasn't discovered it yet. The universe is not a collection of separate causal chains, each with its ultimate term, but a system of interdependent and interwoven processes. For instance, the reason why the engine driver pulls this lever at this time is as much a part of the system of processes which leads to the movement of the engine as is the motion of pistons in cylinders. So is the invention of the steam engine, and the deposition of coal in the ground. These are not separate members of a distinct causal sequence, of which God is just the final term, but all parts of a single world process. God's existence can only legitimately be brought in when it is a question of accounting for the total process of change of the entire interdependent world-system taken as a whole, and not for any particular part of it. The argument can only

be properly formulated if the separate changes which we observe at the beginning are first of all conceived of as making up part of the vast single system of changes which is the world. It is only this one vast process of perpetual change within a single system which requires a changeless God for its cause. That, at any rate, is the only kind of argument from changes in the world which can make any legitimate claim at all to 'demonstrating' God's existence—and it is the only argument which St Thomas would accept.

But, in going from separate examples of change to the totality of all change in a single cosmic process, the argument moves from the consideration of particulars to a consideration of the nature of the world as a whole. It is not surprising therefore that, for most thinkers, the profoundest argument for God's existence rests upon the fact that there is a world at all. That is to say, it begins not with particular examples of motion or change in the sense that these can be investigated by the physical sciences, but with the very instability of things themselves—their liability to perish from the world altogether.

PART III. ARGUMENTS FROM THE VERY EXISTENCE OF THE WORLD AT ALL

St Thomas begins his argument from the instability, or perishability, of things by observing that some of the things we know from experience are perishable. But he goes on to say that this cannot hold true of the universe as a whole unless there is a God. For if the universe were perishable, and if there was nothing outside it to stop it from perishing, then at some moment in the past there would have been nothing at all. And if that were so, nothing would exist now. His reason for saying this is as follows. If the whole world were really perishable—if it were capable of not existing, of ceasing to exist altogether—and if the duration of past time were infinite, then the world would have perished by now. For in that case, everything that could happen to it would have happened to it. This is part of what it would mean to say that the universe is really perishable. The very fact that it hasn't perished yet would otherwise show that it wasn't really capable of perishing at all. But if the duration of past time were not infinite—that is, if there was a beginning of the universe—and if the universe were all that existed,¹ then there was a time when once there was nothing. For on this

¹ This supposition is only absurd if the universe is defined as consisting of everything there is; and, as has been said, this is not how St Thomas uses the term 'universe'.

supposition we could work back to some original point at which of course there was no change occurring. But if the universe, which is essentially a system of change, were all that existed, and change did not exist, then it follows that nothing existed. But if that were so, how is it that anything exists now? So, whether the universe has always existed or whether it has only existed for a limited period, if it is all there is, an insoluble problem arises. Therefore, St Thomas concludes, this world of perishable things cannot be all that exists. There must be some things which are not liable to perish; that is, they *cannot not* exist. As a matter of fact he believed in lots of such beings—angels for instance.

But he now goes on to argue that, even if there are beings in the world which *cannot not* exist, there must be one such, at any rate, which is not in the world. Angels, for instance, though incapable of not existing, are not responsible for their own presence in the world. They are as much created things as human beings. However grand and imperishable the whole system of angels may be, that system itself is only derivative. So even if we believe in angels, as Catholics do, this does not make any essential difference to the problem. There must still be at any rate one being who is not only incapable of not existing, but does not get this imperishability from anything else. He must, then, be clean outside the realm of created things altogether.

Words like 'outside' need careful treatment here. One of the objections raised by the Bishop of Woolwich in his much-publicised book *Honest to God* is relevant to this

point. According to him, the traditional way of thinking about God involves regarding him as just another kind of being alongside, if apart from, the universe. Somewhere beyond the stratosphere or the nebulae perhaps. We have already seen how such a view is not that of St Thomas; indeed, it is quite incompatible with the latter's arguments (see page 30). But it is important to see what is at stake here.

When we say that God is outside the realm of created things we imply not that he is another kind of being alongside the other, familiar kinds, but that he cannot be counted among the kinds of being at all. In order to count, we have to consider things as being of a certain *kind*: apples, pages, people, occasions of sin. The reason why the question: How many is a cup and saucer? is nonsensical is that it implies the possibility of counting things without reducing them to things of the same kind. Similarly, God and the universe don't add up to two of any kind. (Even if we said they add up to two *beings* this would not help, for 'a being' is not a member of any particular kind of being.) It is this incommensurability between God and the universe that we refer to by saying that God is outside the universe, and if we grasp that point there is nothing objectionable in talking of his being outside it.¹

As with the first form of argument, it will be helpful now,

¹ Cf. *Blackfriars* for July–August 1963 for an article by Rev. Herbert McCabe O.P. in which these points concerning *Honest to God* are more fully discussed.

in grasping the essential points of this argument, to look at some of the mistakes that can easily be made in expounding it.

Some Fallacious Forms of Argument

A common form of bad argument uses this idea of the perishability of things in the following way. It is a matter of common observation that everything in the world comes and goes. But if everything came and went, and so depended for its existence on something else, nothing would exist at all. Therefore there must be something independent outside the world. The trouble with this argument is that its premiss (everything in the world comes and goes) is not a matter of observation—for we have not observed everything in the world. Of course, if (as in geometry) we *assume* this premiss to be true, the conclusion follows—but there is no need for us to assume it. Even if we took it as meaning only that all our past experience goes to show that it is extremely likely, this is just because our experience is inevitably limited. It is not a statement about ‘everything’, or what happens to it. It *cannot* be a matter of experience to say that everything in the world is dependent on something else. Hence experience cannot, by itself, rule out the possibility that there is something in the world which is not dependent. There is nothing so far to rule out the idea of a first cause which is in the world rather than outside it altogether.

The difference between this and the first version is rather

subtle. What this argument tries to do is make us think it starts from our own observed experience, while in fact it doesn't really get going as an argument until it reaches the (non-experiential) statement that 'everything in the world is dependent'. The idea of dependence is smuggled in, quietly, as though we can *see* that the universe as a whole is dependent. This is just what you can't *see*—the universe as a whole. While there is nothing contradictory about the concept of the universe as a unified system of interlocking processes—i.e. a single object of thought—we are nevertheless only part of that system, and cannot, even imaginatively, see it from the point of view of an outsider. The universe consists of things which are open to our enquiry. But we can never say for certain that we have investigated them all—there may always be others yet to be noticed. St Thomas, of course, has to assume something; but what he assumes is the idea that if a thing comes and goes this can only be because there is something else which makes this happen: i.e. a cause. He takes it for granted that observed happenings must have causes, but he doesn't take it for granted that we can *see* that the universe as a whole is caused. All he says is that *not everything* can be caused by something else.

The Principle of Causality

It is therefore the idea that events must have causes which is the fundamental assumption of St Thomas's argument. But is it necessary to assume it? Is it reasonable to doubt it?

Some philosophers (notably the eighteenth-century Scotsman Hume) have said yes. According to him, every time we say 'A causes B' we could just as well say merely whenever B happened A preceded it. It is just because this has always happened before that we think it *must* happen again—that is, that there is a causal connection. But Hume thinks that there is nothing to prevent something quite different happening next time, however many times B has been preceded by A in the past. In other words, things can just 'happen' (and indeed, always do, however many coincidences this may involve). If Hume were right, all arguments for God's existence based on causality would, obviously, collapse.

Now Hume begins by saying that everything which contributes to our notion of cause depends on our having observed, *from outside*, the constant conjunction of A's and B's. But surely this is false, for we have direct knowledge of ourselves as causes. I don't just notice that whenever I pinch myself it hurts. I *hurt* myself by pinching. I don't just notice that when I move the cricket-bat against the ball, the ball moves. I *make* it move by hitting it with the bat. I am quite certain I acted as a cause. This kind of certainty cannot be proved, of course; not for lack of evidence, but because we know it so directly that there can't be any question of evidence getting in between me and what I do.

But, of course, this personal experience of causing things to happen does not offer a basis for *deducing* that everything

that happens must be caused by something else. Yet it is, I think, the basis for our feeling certain that it is so, all the same. As we have seen, we don't have to be able to prove something in order to be entitled to feel certain of it. In this case, St Thomas's concept of tendencies comes in, for it is based on the idea that thinking in terms of causes (i.e. the tendency in things to make other things happen) is fundamental to our whole edifice of knowledge.¹ Systematic thought is founded on this concept of causality. On Hume's theory of causality, it would never have occurred to astronomers, for example, that there was an unknown planet affecting the orbits of those which were known, and so they would not have been impelled to look for one and find it. (Both Neptune and Pluto were inferred, from the disturbance in other planetary orbits, before they were seen. Recently, an astronomer announced the 'discovery' of a planet round another star—not the sun—in the same kind of way.) An important point follows from the concept of causality I am trying to explain. This is that it is useless to try to make the 'principle of causality' itself a feature in any argument for the existence of God. It is not part of the argument, but a

¹ See Part IV for a discussion of the concept of tendencies. For those interested in the scientific implications of all this I would recommend a book *Theories and Things* by R. Harre (Sheed and Ward, 1961: Newman Association Philosophy of Science Group series, 5/-).

See also the same group's Bulletin Nos. 45 & 46 (Jan. and April, 1962) for articles on causality in relation to the personal will, by P. Geach.

pre-condition of there being any arguing at all. Unlike some less wary apologists, St Thomas does not reason in this kind of fashion: 'Everything must be caused by something else; the world is a thing, therefore it must be caused by something else'. If the first premiss in this argument were true, then God could *not* exist. Neither does he argue: 'Everything is either caused by itself or by something else; the world is not caused by itself; therefore it must be caused by something else', for in this argument the first premiss is useless. (Either it is similar to saying: 'Everything is either red or it is not red'—a truism, but wholly uninformative about anything; or it implies that either God causes himself or something else does—which is absurd.) What he does say is: 'Everything we know by experience is caused by something else', and his reason for saying this is not that experience *proves* it, but that it is the basis for our being able to understand and systematise our experience.

In asserting, of some unexplained event, 'it must have been caused by *something*' we do not have to add, as if it made the matter more certain, 'because every event must have a cause'. The 'principle of causality' or 'sufficient reason' adds nothing to our certainty that it is reasonable, and only human, to look for a cause of the event. What it does is to show that a person who asks the question: What reason do you have for believing that there must have been a cause? is looking in the wrong direction, or is perhaps refusing to look at all. And to refuse to do that, I would want to add, is to be less than human. And now we are back

at the beginning of the discussion again, for what is 'inexcusable' in the eyes of Biblical Wisdom (which is the Church's wisdom too) is to be so immersed in other things as to refuse to look up at the demonstration of God's causality which is going on all around us in the world. But that is where philosophy ends and prayer has to take its place.

PART IV. ARGUMENTS FROM ORDER OR PURPOSE IN THE WORLD

Arguments of this kind are perhaps the most slippery of all, and most open to fallacious treatment. Unlike most less wary philosophers, St Thomas does not begin his argument with particular examples drawn from scientific observation, but from the assumption (which he thought very reasonable) that things in the world had certain *tendencies*. (The Latin words he used were *appetitus* and *inclinatio*.) These tendencies were actual properties of the objects concerned. For example, the tendency of an internal combustion engine to get hot through friction and the cooling tendency of water at such a temperature might produce under the bonnet of a car a state of temperature equilibrium. The temperature may not actually be changing at all. Under such conditions we might not be able to observe the actual operation of the tendencies as they work, because they cancel each other out. But this does not mean that there is nothing happening to keep the temperature constant. Some people might argue that if we cannot observe, in any way, an alleged tendency at work it is simply meaningless to talk about such an unobservable property. But for St Thomas such reasoning is false, for according to him the operation of the opposing tendencies of water and friction, although they balance each other out, always determine the situation. An equilibrium

between two active tendencies is not the same as the absence of any tendencies at all.

The reason why St Thomas thought that we cannot do without the concept of things having certain tendencies is that science can only be carried on on the basis of the idea that all things have tendencies. If it didn't occur to us that, say, thalidomide had a tendency to deform babies (even though this tendency was sometimes frustrated by other tendencies on the part of other things) we would never even begin to find out, by experiment, whether we could reduce the number of deformed babies by stopping the administration of thalidomide. But if the operation of causes between things can only be understood in terms of the fulfilment of the tendencies things have, then this applies to everything in which causes operate. So, if there is a causal order throughout the whole world (i.e. universe), this can only be because the whole world has a tendency which it exists to fulfil. But since the world, considered as a whole, is not a conscious living creature it cannot be the cause of its own tendency to self-fulfilment. Hence the tendency of the world, which its causal order manifests to us, must come from a being which is not a part of it, and which has the power of intelligence and design.

It is very important to notice that this argument, unlike some versions, contains two stages (as all his arguments do). First, St Thomas argues from the tendencies of things in the world (which he does not prove, though he clearly thinks that belief in them is a precondition of our thinking in

terms of causes at all) to the tendency of the world as a whole. Secondly, it is this latter universal tendency which 'demonstrates' God's power behind it. It is a characteristic of most of the fallacious arguments that they miss out the middle step, by trying to go from a particular feature in the world, straight to the God who is responsible for it.

What are the typical traps in this kind of argument?

An argument commonly used begins with the idea that, as a matter of common experience, we find evident purposiveness or orderliness in the functioning of natural objects—such as the wonderful working of the eye or the planetary system. It goes on to assert that such orderliness cannot be the product of mere chance, but can only be explained by assuming a divine intelligence which lies behind it. It is the present writer's view that all such arguments are faulty, for the following reason. If we begin with certain particular examples of apparent order, we *must* in the first place account for them by natural causes. The working of my eye is due to various hereditary biological features which I take immediately from my parents, not directly from God. Its wonderfulness is a product of biological evolution; it is *only* in these terms that we can answer the question: How did the human eye become such a perfect organ for seeing? If God is to be brought into such an argument it is necessary to show that this evolutionary explanation, like the steam-engine example quoted above (p. 32), is somehow inadequate. The exponent, therefore,

will have to go on to say that there is *so much* order in the world that natural explanation is not enough.

But then the question arises: How much order is there in the world?—and this can only be answered in terms of our present knowledge and on the basis of an agreement as to what constitutes order in the various fields. In other words, it cannot find a basis on anything firmer than a personal assessment of the present condition of knowledge. Moreover, the orderliness of the world is by no means the only stimulus to scientific enquiry. We are not only impelled to scientific research by the mystery of the orderliness of phenomena; the apparent disorderliness of the world is an equal, if not an even greater fact which stares us in the face, demanding explanation. This apparent disorder is most frequently the spur towards the formulation of a new theory, which will fit the disorderly elements in a situation into a new, orderly pattern. For example, many physicists feel dissatisfied with the present state of sub-atomic physics, with its inability to see beyond the so-called complementarity principle. This asserts that it is impossible to ascribe to a particle both position *and* momentum. If we can determine the one, we cannot at the same time know the other. This certainly seems an odd feature of the world, and it is the kind of oddity which scientists are always trying to eliminate—though in doing so they often only reveal another anomaly somewhere else. But the point that needs to be made here is that, in such a situation, in so far as there still appears to be disorder in the constitution of the world, there can be

a legitimate reason for arguing to a malignant, as well as a beneficent god—unless of course we reject this whole argument, as formulated by the bad philosophers, as invalid, as indeed I think we should.

PART V. CONCLUSION

Philosophy is a hard subject, full of pitfalls for the unwary; and I hope that this pamphlet has given the reader some idea of the complexity of the particular issues under discussion. I emphasise this aspect of the matter first of all because it would be no service to truth (and hence no service to faith) to pretend that there is an easy short cut to the solutions. In my own opinion it is better to avoid the problems altogether than to offer simplified answers, for purposes of apologetic, which are false precisely because they are simplified. It is very doubtful if anyone has ever become a Catholic because he was convinced by arguments for God's existence, whereas many people can be repelled by an apologetic which is more concerned with establishing a conclusion than with ensuring that the difficulties on the way to it have been fully recognised and met. In particular, Catholic students who may be faced with a skilful and sceptical philosopher will find themselves far better prepared if they realise the difficulties of philosophising about God than if they merely produce ready-made arguments from textbooks, useful though the latter can be if well thought-out.

But while the subject is a difficult one, it is by no means beyond the grasp of all but a very few. I have tried to provide illustrations to the problems which are intelligible and

also up to date (in place of those which St Thomas offers, and which are, of course, based on the understanding of scientific matters current in his own day). But illustrations, however apt, are only guides to the understanding of the philosophical issues involved. In order to expose these issues I have deliberately given a good deal of space to the commonest fallacies which are to be found in exposition of the classical arguments. Through understanding where an argument goes wrong, it is easier to remember how a valid argument can be constructed. But it would be a pity if only the bad arguments were remembered, and the good ones forgotten. It may be useful, therefore, to recall here the important points of difference between St Thomas's arguments and those of writers who have been less careful than he to avoid mistakes.

(1) For St Thomas, the cosmological arguments (i.e. those from motion or change and those from the perishability of the world—Parts II and III of this pamphlet) are always formed in two stages. In the first stage the reasoning proceeds from some particular fact of experience to the concept of the world as a single unified object of thought. In the second stage this latter concept of the universe as a whole is analysed to show that God must be the cause or maker of it. St Thomas does not argue that this or that particular thing can only be accounted for by supposing the existence of God. He only argues that the universe as a whole demands God as its source.

Exercise

Look at some popular works of apologetic to see if this point is borne in mind or not, for it is crucial to the validity of all the arguments.¹

(2) Since the arguments depend on the concept of the universe as a whole, it is important to notice how this is used in them. The commonest mistake is to suppose that the universe just means 'everything' and that 'everything' can be an object of experience, i.e. that we know from experience that 'everything' has a certain characteristic—that of being changeable and dependent on something else. St Thomas does not use the concept in this way at all. For him the universe does not mean 'everything'—or even 'everything apart from God'. It signifies the world of the astronomers—the whole of that reality which can be defined as that which lies in the series earth—solar system—stars—galaxies—nebulæ—'Heaven and Earth'. In using the concept in this way, we are not committing the fallacy of supposing that we can somehow stand outside the universe and make it an object of direct experience. Nor are we imagining that the universe is related to God in the way that one object is related to another. We are merely extrapolating from the part that we can experience to the whole reality, which we quite reasonably assume is constituted according to the same principles, and which we can legitimately make an object of thought if not of empirical observation.

¹ (e.g. M. Sheehan: *Apologetics*; or Harte's *Doctrine*).

Exercise

The German philosopher Kant (1724–1804) objected to the use of the concept of the universe as a whole. Does his objection hold against the argument presented here?¹

(3) It is impossible to square St Thomas's arguments with the notion that when A causes B all that happens is that B regularly follows A, and never occurs without A occurring first. It is essential to accept the idea that objects have within themselves 'tendencies' to make certain things happen, even though such a tendency is not directly observable. This concept of tendency is 'metaphysical', i.e. it goes beyond what can be directly obtained from perception and measurement. But it is embedded in common sense and common language, and is taken for granted by the methods of scientific enquiry. There are good grounds for holding it despite the objections of some sceptics and 'positivists'.

Exercise

The Scotsman Hume (1711–76) took the view that causality amounted to nothing but the constant conjunction of apparent coincidences. How did he arrive at this conclusion?²

Finally it should be noted that while the exercise of reason in regard to God is integral to Catholic faith, which

¹ (Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*: the first antinomy. Everyman Ed. p. 260. Also Copleston's *History of Philosophy* Vol 6 p. 286–8).

² Cf. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* Book I iii 2 (Everyman Ed. Vol i p. 76ff).

forbids the separation of our faculties into watertight, separate compartments, it can only do a limited job on its own. Even if we are prepared to accept the validity of St Thomas's arguments (which we are not committed to doing) as well as the assumptions on which they are built, they do not furnish us with a concept of the God of the Bible and of revelation. It follows from God's being unchangeable that he must be immaterial, but that he is a person interested in our destinies, and ready to intervene in the world for us cannot be inferred from philosophy alone. Reason is not a substitute for religion, nor is philosophy a substitute for prayer. The philosopher may be able to bring us to the threshold of mystery, but faith alone can take us into its depths.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

There are very few reliable books suitable for the beginner in this subject. Much of the discussion goes on in periodicals which are inaccessible to him, and few elementary books present the authentic thought of St Thomas without distortion, whether they are sympathetic or hostile to him. The following can be recommended, however, for the fairly serious reader:

- F. C. Copleston, *Aquinas* (Pelican books).
- F. C. Copleston, *History of Philosophy* (Burns & Oates). A comprehensive reference work with a good indexing system for looking up particular points, generally available in good libraries.
- E. A. Sillem, *Ways of Thinking About God* (Darton, Longman & Todd). A rather laboured book, but valuable as showing the general context, within Thomist thought, of the Five arguments for God's existence.
- D. J. B. Hawkins, *A Sketch of Mediaeval Philosophy, The Essentials of Theism* (Sheed & Ward).
- T. Gilby, *St. Thomas Aquinas—Philosophical Texts*, (O.U.P.). A useful English selection of the main passages from St Thomas's works relevant to philosophical problems.

Father Sillem's book has a list of other works useful to the more advanced reader.

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR, AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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