

7: God's Simplicity

We began our discussion of Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics in the previous lecture. We touched on a particular secular, scientific model for understanding the world where fundamental reducibility is key (we called this a bottom up approach). Aquinas, on the other hand, takes a top down approach, saying that it is not just the matter of an object that is important, but also its organization, or substantial form, which grants new powers of causality as complexity increases. In this lecture we will continue with Aquinas's metaphysics, specifically looking at the concept of God's simplicity.

I. The Personal and the Impersonal: Ultimate reality as described in the secular, scientific model discussed in the previous lecture is impersonal. Everything, including persons, is reducible to the fundamental particles composing it, and likewise is governed by the impersonal laws of physics. Perhaps the greatest challenge for this picture of the world is construction of the personal out of the impersonal. In this view, one's thoughts, ideas, mental states, and free agency all must be understood as built out of the physically determined interactions of non-personal particles at the finest level.

As established, Aquinas views the world from precisely the opposite direction, a top-down approach of causality. Furthermore, the ultimate foundation of reality is God the Creator - God has a mind and a will, and thus the ultimate foundation of reality is not impersonal. It is well and good to say that God is the ultimate foundation of reality, but what is God's nature?

II. God's Simplicity and Subsistent Being: For Aquinas, a fundamental attribute of God is God's simplicity. The concept of God's simplicity is somewhat straightforward to say, but extremely difficult to fully understand because it rests in seeming paradox. According to the doctrine of simplicity, God is being itself, which means that God's essence is "being," which in turn means that God is His own being.

God is being itself, but it is also true that God is a being with a mind and a will (a God who knows us in the second person and indwells us), and yet the God who does these things is still being itself. God is being, and yet God is subsistent (meaning God exists), so God is both the universal and fundamental being underlying all else, and yet God is also a being, a concrete particular. This seems fundamentally paradoxical, because a universal is not and cannot be a concrete particular, just as a concrete particular cannot be a universal. God is a special case, and we cannot fully understand this.

Analogies can only be pushed so far, but it might be helpful to think about this paradox as analogous to the particle vs. wave paradox in quantum mechanics. Particles cannot be waves, and waves cannot be particles, and yet light functions as both. Sometimes we must understand light as a wave, and sometimes we must understand light as a particle, though that seems contradictory.

III. Transcendentals and Correlates: An important part of Aquinas's metaphysics that has serious implications for this understanding of God is the idea of transcendentals. In this, some concepts correlate to each other. For Aquinas, being, goodness, and truth are all correlates - that is, they are the same thing under different descriptions. Think here of the bagel example given in the lecture. The implication is that if God's nature is being itself, then God's nature is also goodness, and also truth.

This metaphysical reality is the foundation for Aquinas's ethics. What it is for something to be good, is for that something to be in accord with God's nature (which is unchanging).

IV. Conclusion: In conclusion, the ultimate foundation of reality is being, but it is also a Being who is personal. This is not the cold, impersonal, reductionist particles of physics. We do not have the problem of figuring out how persons have been constructed from impersonal matter. Instead, we are persons made in the image of a personal God, who has both a mind and will, and even so is also being itself. What is good for us is to live in accordance with God, who by virtue of being "being itself is also "goodness itself." Even so, God is still a being who is present to us, indwells us, and with whom we can talk.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the doctrine of God's simplicity in a nutshell?
2. What does it mean for being, truth, and goodness to be correlates, and what are the implications of this?