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PREVIEW

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MAN'S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD
(as set forth in the philosophies of
St. Thomas Aquinas and F.R. Tennant)

by

William Paul Barnds

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Philosophy

Under the Supervision of Professor Charles H. Patterson

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND COMMON ANSWERS TO IT.

The fundamental problem with which this thesis is concerned is the question: Can Men Know God?. This involves, as a matter of fact, two questions, namely: Can we know that God exists? and if so: Can we know His nature?. There are three chief answers which men give to this question. There are persons who believe that God exists and that He can be known. Secondly, there are those who believe that God does not exist, and therefore cannot be known. Thirdly, there are those who believe that God probably exists, and, if so, that He can probably be known, but there is no absolute certainty about this problem.

In the first two positions it is held that compelling arguments can be given which lead to absolute conclusions. The third position does not involve certainty, but only probability. The degree of probability may be high or low. There may be a degree of probability which is so high that it closely approximates certainty, but it never attains it. A thoroughgoing theist may find himself at home in this group. Also, an agnostic may be at home here. So long as a person holds that there is even a slight probability that

God exists, he fits into this third group. It is only when he maintains absolutely that there is no God, that he belongs in the second group.

In this thesis, the position of St. Thomas Aquinas is taken as representative of the first group; the position of F.R. Tennant as representative of the third group.

Consideration of the second group will be omitted. Our question, therefore, will be essentially this: What are the arguments employed by St. Thomas and Tennant respectively? And what are the relevant merits of these arguments?

II. THE CONCEPT OF GOD AS USED IN THIS THESIS

The concept of God which St. Thomas and Tennant both accept is essentially this:

God is personal, although the adjective "personal" is here used analogically. God is not merely personal, and no more than personal. Although He is not necessarily a super-Person, it is possible that there is more to His nature than personality. But whatever else He may be, He is at least personal. This implies that He is intelligent; that He has the ability to form purposes; that He possesses the power of moral will.

God is understood by both St. Thomas and Tennant as being apart from the cosmos -- that is, He is transcendent. He is not to be identified with the cosmos. He is not

dependent upon it for His existence. He is separate and distinct from it. This does not mean that He has no contact with or influence in the cosmos; the idea of God's immanence is not hereby precluded -- but it does mean that He is not just a part of the cosmos, and limited by it.

In view of this confessed conception of God, our initial question now becomes this: Do the arguments advanced by St. Thomas and Tennant prove that God exists and that His Nature is as here defined?

III. THREE WAYS OF KNOWING GOD.

There have been, and are, in the main three methods which have been employed as ways of knowing God.

(1) The method of logical inference. One of these methods is that of logical inference. The position involved is that the human reason, unaided by any divine help, can demonstrate that God exists. The arguments employed are logical inferences. This method assumes the trustworthiness of the human reason when it reasons logically. Certainty is claimed for the conclusions thus reached. It is the method used by mathematicians in proving mathematical theorems, and it produces the kind of certainty which is produced by mathematics. This kind of reasoning, however, assumes certain postulates from which the theorems are derived; and although the arguments are logically cogent, the theorems

are not proved true unless the postulates from which they are derived are true.

The method of logical inferences just described is employed in the discipline of Natural Theology. In this thesis Natural Theology is understood in the sense in which it is described in the following quotation:

Natural Theology is that branch of philosophy which investigates what human reason unaided by revelation can tell us concerning God. The end at which it aims is to demonstrate the existence of God, to establish the principle divine attributes, to vindicate God's relation to the world as that of the Creator to the creature, and, finally to throw what light it can on the action of divine providence in regard to man and on the problem of evil. In the discussion of these questions the Natural Theologian bases his conclusions purely and solely on the data afforded by natural reason. He claims that these are sufficient for his purpose: that in this manner the mind may rise from the contemplation of the visible universe to a knowledge of the First Cause from whom it proceeds: from the experience of finite beings to a knowledge of the Infinite Being, whose perfections are faintly shadowed forth by the things of the created world.¹

St. Thomas Aquinas and Natural Theology. St. Thomas is the great medieval exponent of Natural Theology. However, it is important to note that St. Thomas also believes in revelation. He believes that there is knowledge beyond human reason, which God reveals. This is required by the exigencies of man's religious need. St. Thomas writes:

It was necessary for man's salvation that there should

¹G.H. Joyce, Principles of Natural Theology (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1923), p. 1.

be a knowledge revealed by God, besides the philosophical sciences investigated by human reason. First, because man is directed to God as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason: The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee (Isa. LXIV. 4). But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason can investigate, it was necessary that man be taught by a divine revelation. For the truth about God, such as reason can know it, would be known only by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors; whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that, besides the philosophical sciences investigated by reason, there should be a sacred science by way of revelation.²

In the present thesis the concern is not with revelation as St. Thomas conceives it, but rather with the findings of the unaided human reason. That is to say, the concern is with the contention that it is possible to prove logically that God exists and that He must have at least such and such attributes.

St. Thomas demonstrates God's existence by five classic proofs which will be expounded and evaluated later. It is with the results obtained by using these techniques of Natural Theology that this thesis is concerned.

²Anton C. Pegis, Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume 1 (New York: Random House, 1945) Question 1, Article 1, p. 6.

Neo-Scholasticism with such exponents as Mercier, Maritain, and Sheen furnishes a modern development of the method employed by St. Thomas.

(2) The Method of Faith or Mystical Experience. The second method of knowing God is essentially a matter of faith. According to this point of view, it is possible for a person to have direct assurance of God's existence through avenues other than thinking. Some exemplars of this method are Thomas a Kempis and Meister Eckhart. Since this method is not that of St. Thomas nor of Tennant, we are not concerned with it here.

(3) The Scientific Method. The third method of knowing God or of demonstrating His existence is the scientific method. It is essentially a hypothetico-deductive procedure which takes into account all of the empirical evidence available. Observation, hypothesis, verification, and conclusions all figure in this method.

The theory of evolution illustrates this method. An hypothesis is adopted which appears to give an account of the facts which are observed. The implications of the theory appear to be in harmony with the facts, and to the extent to which this is so, the hypothesis is said to be verified.

Absolute certainty is not claimed for hypotheses. Hence the only kind of knowledge afforded by the use of this

method is probable knowledge. This is due both to the fact that complete empirical evidence is never available, and also to the contention that a rival hypothesis may account equally well for all facts in question.

"Probable knowledge" does not mean here knowledge of probabilities. Rather it refers to hypotheses which are only partially verified, i.e., for which some favorable evidence exists. No hypothesis can be completely verified if by "verification" is meant logical proof, but hypotheses may attain varying degrees of certainty.

F.R. Tennant is one of the chief exponents of the method just described. He has presented his viewpoint in the two volume work entitled Philosophical Theology.³

³Tennant, F.R., Philosophical Theology. In two volumes. (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1935)

CHAPTER II

THE POSITION OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

ON HOW MEN KNOW GOD

1. Life and Work of St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas Aquinas was born in 1225 near Aquino in Italy. In 1244 he made his decision to become a Dominican. He was licensed to teach in 1256. He died in 1274. In 1323 he was canonized by Pope John XXII.

St. Thomas was a voluminous and erudite writer. His works include a commentary on the Four Books of Sentences of Peter Lombard, the Summa Contra Gentiles, the Summa Theologica, the Compendium of Theology, commentaries on some works of Boethius, on Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, on a number of works of Aristotle. He also wrote some short tracts among which are On Being and Essence, On the Eternity of the World, and On the Unity of the Intellect.

2. The Summa Theologica. The Summa Theologica is his really monumental work. It is a vast, comprehensive summary of Christian doctrine. It is this treasure-trove which will furnish the relevant sections for the argument in reference to the views of St. Thomas.

3. The Style of St. Thomas. The style of St. Thomas is formal and apt to be terse. He outlines carefully his presentation. He states possible objections to a given

proposition and then proceeds to answer the objections. He frequently uses proof-texts from Holy Scripture in answer to objections. He also quotes the Church Fathers in rebuttal. He makes especial and frequent use of Aristotle whom he calls "The Philosopher."

There is a fine originality which characterizes St. Thomas' work. After quoting Scripture or some other authority, he proceeds to write "I answer that" and with such a confident introduction he then states his own argument.

It is true, of course, that St. Thomas held an attitude towards Holy Scripture which had not the advantage of higher critical studies, nor of the modern scientific world-view. Yet despite these limitations his attitude was not literally slavish, and he was quick and agile in interpreting Scriptural passages in ways that to him seemed proper.

St. Thomas is meticulous in his phraseology and his arguments are closely knit. He is careful in his exegesis of the text of another writer. He is also eager to deal with possible objections. The objections are not "straw-men" but points of view that really have to be considered.

4. The Two Ways of Knowing God. In the Introduction the fact has been pointed out that St. Thomas Aquinas recognizes two ways of knowing God. The one is through divine revelation; the other is through the use of man's

natural reason. It is with this latter method that this thesis is mainly concerned.

5. Some General Comments on Revelation in St. Thomas' Thought. Nevertheless while this thesis is not concerned chiefly with St. Thomas' views of revelation, but rather with his view of the knowledge of God which can be acquired by the use of natural reason, it is appropriate to point out a few of his beliefs about the knowledge available through revelation. This will help to see the distinction he makes between the two methods of gaining knowledge, and also between the kinds of knowledge thus gained.

(a) The Created Intellect Can See God's Essence. St. Thomas believes that the created intellect can see the essence of God, whatever that term may mean. St. Thomas answers an objection to the position that a created intellect can see the essence of God. He writes:

Therefore, some who considered this held that no created intellect can see the essence of God. This opinion, however, is not tenable. For the ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of the intellect. Hence, if we suppose that a created intellect could never see God, it would either never attain to beatitude, or its beatitude would consist in something else beside God, which is opposed to faith. For the ultimate perfection of the rational creature is to be found in that which is the source of its being; since a thing is perfect so far as it attains to its source.⁴

St. Thomas holds thus that the created intellect can

⁴Op. cit., q. 12, Art. 1, p. 92