Chapter Seven

Medieval Philosophy

**Key Words:** Scholasticism, theology, Christianity, Apologists, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, God, reason and faith, two-fold theory of truth, Cosmological argument, argument from design.

Aristotle’s death created a vacuum in Greek intellectual culture as afterwards it failed to produce a thinker who would equal the imagination of either Plato or Aristotle, the two great system builders of ancient Greek thought. Later, with the emergence of Christianity, the decline was complete. Now we come across another interesting development in human intellectual history; the emergence of Scholasticism; the tradition of Catholic theologians. While the Greeks in general were rational, critical and advocated free thinking, the Scholastic thinkers who were inspired by the official philosophy of the Catholic Church underlined uncritical and unconditional faith. For them the authority of the Bible and of the Catholic Church was unquestionable.

During the last period of Hellenic speculation, Christianity became popular in the Roman kingdom. In turn, Christianity was influenced by the philosophical traditions of the Greek-Roman world. One of the greatest challenges faced by early Christianity was to justify its beliefs on rational grounds. The early theologians thus turned to the established philosophical tradition of the Greek world, particularly to the philosophical theories of Plato and Aristotle. The Apologists attempted to philosophically defend faith and used some fundamental insights of the Greek philosophical tradition in order to provide rational expression to fundamental Christian beliefs.

They also had to develop philosophical principles that would link the various dictums of Christian belief with the life of men in this world and hence had to formulate doctrines and theories. The birth of what is known as Scholastic philosophy therefore can be traced to these attempts of the early Christian thinkers to expose, systematize and demonstrate the Christian dogmas. For the ancient Greek thinkers, philosophy was primarily a rational and critical endeavour. The Greeks not only developed rational philosophical systems but also initiated scientific thinking and promoted critical reflection in many spheres of human life. But for the Scholastic thinkers, philosophy was a handmaiden of religion and they hardly encouraged rational and critical reflections independent of the religious dogmas.
Scholastic Philosophy

The Scholastic philosophy by and large accepts the truth of Christianity without questioning them. Hence it cannot be treated as philosophy in the strict sense of the term. According to the Scholastic thinkers, philosophy was at the service of religion or was a handmaiden of theology. They employed the techniques of philosophers; rational speculation. But unlike the philosophers who would not accept anything without questioning it, the theologians accepted certain beliefs about God and His powers without questioning their validity.

It was Apostle Paul who offered a Christian theology for the first time. Afterwards the Gnostics who dominated the Catholic system attempted developing a philosophy of Christianity by bringing together Greek metaphysics and Christian dogmas and later the Apologists developed a more systematic doctrine, which they thought would justify Christian beliefs.

Medieval Philosophy: An Introduction

The term medieval philosophy is used to designate the period from the end of the Roman Empire in Italy until the Renaissance; roughly from the 5th to 15th century A.D. It designates the philosophy of Western Europe between the decline of classical pagan culture and the Renaissance. During this period Latin became the official language of Catholicism and also acquired the status of a language, which was employed for articulating scholarly thoughts. In other words, Latin was medieval European philosophy’s Sanskrit.

There are several historical factors that have led to the emergence of Scholasticism. The collapse of Roman civilization was definitely the most significant factor behind its emergence. In one sense the Church had replaced the empire and its social structures and remained till the end of 12th century the institution that supported and controlled intellectual culture in Europe.

Theoretically, the most fundamental insights of Scholastic thinking were derived from the intellectual insights of Athenian philosophy, particularly from the philosophical doctrines of Plato and Aristotle. During the 4th century AD, Boethius (480-525) had written commentaries on Plato’s and Aristotle’s works which became popular among intellectuals of that age. The Jewish tradition was another significant influence and during these early years. Islamic philosophers and Indian thinkers also would have influenced the
Scholastic thinkers, as these two were the major spiritual traditions of those days. But later by 12th century AD Aristotle became more influential.

Among the Greek philosophers, it was Plato and Aristotle who were more influential. **Platonism** was found interesting and useful by the early theologians owing to its stress on the idea of eternal soul and condemnation of matter as unreal. Plato’s doctrine of soul advocated its eternity and has also discussed the problem of its moral development. Plato’s hardcore monistic philosophy had separated the soul from the body and elevated the former to the domain of reality.

But the Scholastic thinkers also faced some difficulties with Plato’s doctrines as the latter advocated more radical views about the soul’s moral development than the official Catholic thinkers. Plato held that souls would reincarnate and the Christian idea of resurrection does not fit within Plato’s doctrine of soul and its moral development. Plato envisages a union of the soul with the ultimately Good, a proposition which was unthinkable for the Catholic philosophers, as they considered God as the absolute being who remains a separate entity with supreme absolute status than everything else that depend on Him.

**St. Augustine’s (AD 353-430) Philosophy**

Augustine is arguably the most influential of all Middle Ages thinkers and his philosophy addresses a fundamental problem, which all those thinkers who attempt at reconciling faith with reason would encounter: the apparent opposition between religion and philosophy or faith and reason. Augustine ventures to argue that religion can aid philosophy in its rational pursuits and also holds that revealing its philosophical basis can enrich Christianity. His *Confessions* is one of the most influential and important philosophical works of all times.

Intellectually, Augustine was significantly influenced by Plato and his followers and was particularly fascinated by the idea that the physical is separated from the spiritual. He treated this separation as a very important problem. But philosophically he was preoccupied with the concept of God and held that the only knowledge worth having is the knowledge of God. He argues that it was God who created substance, and was also responsible for the order and arrangement the world exhibits. God has created time when he created the world, as God remains the eternal, timeless creator of everything. He is the ultimate source of everything and points of origin of everything. God is equated with Being, Goodness and Truth.
What is characteristic of Augustine’s philosophical doctrine is a reconciliation of the dualism between religion and philosophy on the one hand and faith and reason on the other. He contends that reason is capable of comprehending God, as God has given reason to us in order that we may know all things including God. Philosophy occupies a very important role in this endeavour. To philosophize is to see truth directly and without the intervention of the eyes of the body. Reason, according to him, is the eye of the soul and wisdom is the highest truth after which we should strive. He affirms that wisdom is nothing but God and to have wisdom means to have God.

The dualism is further reconciled by demonstrating how a true philosophy can become identical with true religion. According to Augustine, both have the same strivings for the eternal. God despises Reason, his first-born Son, which is God himself to us in order to make us more perfect than other beings. But while reconciling faith with reason he maintains that chronologically, faith precedes intelligence, as in order to understand a thing we must first believe it. In other words, faith is a condition of knowledge. It is a provisional state, inferior to knowledge, and ultimately resolves itself into it. Faith and reason are uniquely correlated. Augustine summons that we must understand what we firmly believe and see the rationality of our faith. We may understand in order that you may believe, and believe in order that you may understand, says Augustine.

**Concept of God in Augustine’s Philosophy**

This is the central idea of Augustine’s philosophy. According to him, God is the being beyond whom, outside of whom, and without whom, nothing exists. God is the beginning, the middle, and the end of all things. He is good and yet without quality. He is great, without being a quantity. Augustine holds that qualities like goodness, justice, and wisdom are not accidental attributes of God, but they constitute his innermost essence. Again, omnipotence, omnipresence, and eternity are his divine essence. Everything is in God, though he is not the All. God is the creator of intelligence and yet is superior to it. He is present everywhere, without being bound to any place. He exists and yet is nowhere. He lives eternally and yet is not in time. He is the principle of all change and yet immutable.

With regard to the question of knowing God, Augustine is keen in pointing out some difficulties we may encounter when we try to comprehend God with the employment of reason. He warns that reason encounters antinomies in speculating about God. Reason can only negatively describe God and can state what God is not. In other
words, with reason alone one cannot comprehend God’s nature. Augustine admits that reason can partly conceive God, but definitely cannot comprehend God in the fullness of his perfection. God, according to Augustine, is absolutely holy and cannot will evil. In God willing and doing are one, in the sense that, what he wills is done without any intermediate being. All ideas or forms of things are in Him and everything owes its form to Him.

The God – world relationship is also unique. God had created the world out of nothing and this process of creation is something that is ongoing. It is affirmed that the world actually depends on God, who was also responsible for the creation of time and space. It was God who created matter and everything that we experience. But this process of creation also indicates how much God loves His creation. God had created the world on account of his infinite love.

Augustine had gone to the extend of saying that God and the world which he created are identical. This is often described as Augustinian pantheism, though in reality he was not a pantheist and had ultimately viewed God and the world as different from each other.

The most interesting aspect of Augustine’s doctrine of God is his treatment of the problem of evil. He had advocated what is known as the doctrine of *ex nihilo*. To understand his position let us consider the following passage from David Hume’s writings:

> Is he [Deity] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? (David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion)

The question is, where does evil come from? If God is good and has created all these things good then is God himself the creator of evil? If God is not the creator of evil, then there must be someone else independent of God who had created it. This would reject God’s immutability and absolute status. But we know that God is the cause of everything and if at all evil exists, God would have created it. But we also know that God is absolute goodness and the whole of creation is an expression of His goodness. Everything that exists is then good, as they would have been emanated from God. But being a Good and benevolent being God would have willed everything for the best of his creatures. If then, what about evil? We may here reach a paradoxical conclusion that if everything is good then evil also must be good.
To resolve this paradox, Augustine argues that, evil is like the shadow of a picture. Like the shadow, it belongs to the beauty of the whole. Of course, evil as such is not good, but it is good that evil is. It is a privation of essence and the omission of good and it depends on the good for its existence. If there is no good, there is no evil. It is the absence of something which nature ought to have. Augustine adds that moral evil comes from a defective will and the worst form of evil is turning away from God.

Now that question needs to be answered is, why did not God omit evil? Since God is omnipotent and nothing is impossible to him, he could have omitted evil and saved mankind from its endless sufferings. Here again Augustine justifies God’s act of creating evil by saying that he had done it in order to serve the good. By creating evil, God had enhanced the glory of the universe.

In other words, we may say that, according to Augustine, in the strict sense of the term, real evil does not exist and it exists only as a privation or absence of the good. Its presence makes man more and more responsible and in this sense ads meaning to his life which needs to be understood in terms of the moral development of the soul.

The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas

Though many of the primary objectives of Aquinas’ philosophy were similar to Augustine’s, his approach and conclusions were significantly different, as unlike the latter, Aquinas was influenced by Aristotle’s philosophy and he actually aims at a synthesizing of Christianity with the philosophy of Aristotle. He had written commentaries to many of Aristotle’s works including, *On the Soul*, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Metaphysics* and inaugurated a new era in the history of Christian theology by significantly varying from the prevailing outlook of Christian theologians who were influenced by Plato’s philosophy and his uncompromising idealism. Aquinas opposed those Platonist theologians who refuted the reality of the concrete physical world and emphasized the realm of abstract and purely spiritual forms and ideas.

Aquinas attempted demonstrating the rationality of the universe as a revelation of God and tried to explain the relationship between philosophy and theology and faith and reason from an Aristotelian perspective, which adopts a dualism. He tries to show how these opposing approaches actually do supplement each other. But most important of his philosophical doctrines is his assertion of the superiority of faith.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas maintains that the physical world has an undeniable reality. According to him, the soul and the body are in union. This feature of his thought
attempts overcoming the prevailing body-negativism by proclaiming that the body and the natural world have value. Aquinas looks for a compromise between the divine and material realities. It is possible to have knowledge about the world. But the usual methods we employ to gain knowledge would be insufficient for that.

**Knowledge and the role of philosophy**

Aquinas affirms that our entire intellectual knowledge rise from the senses and all philosophy start with what we know about existing objects. Hence he maintains that the common starting points to human thought are grounded in sense perception and it is the objective of philosophy to identify them. Aquinas was more an Aristotelian than a Platonist and accordingly contended that the empirical world as real. As we have seen in a previous chapter, since Aristotle considers the empirical world as real, knowledge about the same was a major concern for him. Aquinas too considers the knowledge about the empirical world as important, as he maintains that the world created by God should not be completely negated. Hence the scientific endeavours are considered as legitimate. Since such endeavours presuppose reason, it has an important place and value in human endeavours. But he reminds that it has its limitations.

**Reason and Faith**

Like most theologians, Aquinas too tries to ascribe reason an important place and assigns to reason a function. Nevertheless, he was not prepared to grant it an ultimate status. The search for truth does not exhaust with rational enquiries. Reason enlightens us about many aspects of reality, but with reason alone we cannot demonstrate things like Trinity, incarnation, original sin, creation of the world in time, the sacraments etc. which are central concerns of Christianity. In other words, philosophy, being a rational endeavour, falls short of dealing with them. He affirms that they are revealed truths that are beyond reason and hence are not objects of philosophy. Reason can neither prove nor disprove them. But Aquinas maintains that they are not altogether unreasonable.

In this context of discussing the nature of religious claims he introduces the two-fold theory of truth. Religious claims call for a two-fold theory of truth; the one, which the inquiry of reason can reach, and that which surpasses the whole ability of the human reason. The example for the former is the proofs theologians and philosophers have advanced for proving God’s existence and for the latter is the conception of Trinity, eternal life etc. Aquinas emphasizes that there is no contradiction between them. Aquinas argues that matters that are revealed are not necessarily unreasonable, as if we believe in
them, their reasonableness would become clear. On the other hand, he asserts that we cannot provide rational proofs for the mysteries of religion, as they presuppose faith. Aquinas writes:

There is a twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God. Some truths about God exceed all the ability of human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune. But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are the truth that God exists, that he is one, and the like. In fact, such truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of natural reason. (Aquinas: Summa Contra Gentiles, I, ch.3, n.2)

In other words, the twofold theory of truth separates revealed theology from rational theology. The former is dogmatic and is beyond errors, while the latter is philosophical, but can err and hence is imperfect. Revealed theology is a genuine speculative science, which is not based on natural experience and reason. It is the science that concerns with knowledge of God and hence is nobler than any other science. On the other hand, rational theology can make demonstrations using the articles of faith as its principles and can apologetically refute objections raised against the faith even if no articles of faith are presupposed.

**Proofs for the Existence of God**

Before we conclude the discussions of this chapter, we shall briefly examine the proofs for God’s existence as discussed by Aquinas. As we have seen, this aspect of theology is rational, as it tries to rationally justify God’s existence. Aquinas in the *Summa Theologia* outlines five ‘proofs for God’s existence; the first three ways deal with the cosmological argument, the fourth with the moral argument and the last one with teleological arguments (argument from design).

The cosmological argument is based on Aristotle’s conception of the prime mover, or the unmoved mover. Like Aristotle who says that the universe demands the existence of something which moves, without itself being moved by something else, this argument states that all moving things presuppose an unchanging and an unmoving entity. This argument thus starts from the idea of motion. Motion implies the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. For example, when a seed becomes a tree, it is the potentialities of the seed which is getting actualized in the process. But something that is already in actuality alone can move a thing from potentiality to actuality. In other words, a thing cannot be both a mover and moved at the same time- self-mover. Whatever is
moved is moved by another and that by yet another and this cannot go to infinity. Hence there must be a first mover who is God.

The second way to demonstrate the cosmological argument is by means of the idea of efficient cause. It says that the world has an order of efficient causes. Everything in the world has a cause. But a thing cannot be the efficient cause of itself, as it cannot be prior to itself. Every efficient cause has a prior cause and this cannot go on to infinity. Therefore, there must be a first efficient cause who is God.

The third way to demonstrate the cosmological argument is to approach it from the background of the notion of contingency. Certain things are found to come into being and be destroyed and hence they either may or may not exist. In this sense, they are contingent. But if all things were mere accidents, then nothing would actually exist, which is not true. Hence not all things are mere accidents. There must be one necessarily existing being, which is God. Again, every necessary thing must have a cause of its necessary existence. But the chain of causes cannot go back to infinitely. Hence there must be something necessarily existing through its own nature, not having a cause elsewhere but being itself the cause of the necessary existence of other things. This is God.

The Fourth Way to prove God’s existence proceeds from the idea of the degrees of perfection. Aquinas says that, we find degrees of perfection among things. There are greater and a less degree of goodness, truth, nobility etc. These degrees are meaningful only in relation to something that is perfect: something that is the truest, the best, the most noble, and the greatest being. This is God, who is the cause of the existence of all things and of the goodness and perfection whatsoever.

Aquinas’ fifth way is the argument from Design. He says:

We see that things which lack knowledge, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is obvious that they achieve their end, not fortuitously, but designedly. Now whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is directed by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God. [Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Article 3, Question 2]

The fifth way of proving God’s existence thus argues that all natural objects are arranged according to a plan and there is something intelligent by which all natural things are arranged in accordance with a plan. This is God. God is thus the first mover, the first cause, the necessary being, the greatest being and the intelligent designer.
Quiz

1. Who among the following offered a Christian theology for the first time?  
   (a) St. Thomas Aquinas  (b) St. Augustine  (c) Apostle Paul  (d) St. Francis
2. What was characteristic of Augustine’s philosophy?  
   (a) Reason can comprehend God  (b) Reason is incapable of comprehending God  
   (c) God is not comprehensible by any means  (d) God is known only through faith.
3. Which of the following is not held by Augustine?  
   (a) God has given reason to us  (b) Reason is the eye of the soul  
   (c) To have wisdom means to have God  (d) Reason does not lead to God.
4. Reason, according to St. Thomas Aquinas:  
   (a) Has no important place in his scheme  (b) Has been granted an ultimate status  
   (c) Does not enlightens us about any aspects of reality  (d) Cannot demonstrate the creation of the world in time.
5. According to Aquinas, Revealed theology:  
   (a) Can err and hence is imperfect  (b) A genuine speculative science  
   (c) Cannot prove the existence of Trinity, eternal life etc.  (d) Deals with truths that can be relationally comprehended.
6. Which of the following proofs for God’s existence if not advanced by Aquinas?  
   (a) From the idea of efficient cause  (b) From the notion of contingency  
   (c) From the idea of the degrees of perfection  (d) From the idea of God as the greatest conceivable being.

Answer Key:  
1. (c)  
2. (a)  
3. (d)  
4. (d)  
5. (b)  
6. (d)

Assignments

1. Discuss St. Augustine’s treatment of the problem of evil.  
2. Discuss the two-fold theory of truth.  
3. Explain the proofs for the existence of God advanced by Aquinas

References and Further Reading

Books


**Web Resources**


