

TOPIC 6:

Meditation 3:

... First, though it is true that my knowledge is increasing, and that I have many potentialities that are not yet actual, this is all quite irrelevant to the idea of God, which contains absolutely nothing that is potential. Indeed, this gradual increase in knowledge is itself the surest sign of imperfection, because if I am learning more, that shows that there are things I don't know, and that is an imperfection in me. What is more, even if my knowledge increases for ever, it will never actually be infinite, since it will never reach the point where it isn't capable of a further increase; God, on the other hand, I take to be actually infinite, so that nothing can be added to his perfection. And, thirdly, strictly speaking potential being is nothing; what it takes to cause the representative being of an idea is actual being.

If one concentrates carefully, all this is quite evident by the natural light. But when I relax my concentration, and my mental vision is blurred by the images of things I perceive by the senses, I lose sight of the reasons why my idea of more perfect being has to come from a being that really is more perfect. So I want to push on with my enquiry, now asking a new question: If the more perfect being didn't exist, could I exist? My hope is that the answer to this will yield a new proof of the existence of a perfect being – a proof that it will be easier for me to keep in mind even when I relax my concentration.

Well, if God didn't exist, from what would I derive my existence? It would have to come from myself, or from my parents, or from some other beings less perfect than God (a being more perfect than God, or even one as perfect, is unthinkable).

If I had derived my existence from myself, I would not now doubt or want or lack anything at all; for I would have given myself all the perfections of which I have any idea. So I would be God.

Here is a thought that might seem to undercut that argument. Perhaps I have always existed as I do now. In that case, wouldn't it follow that there need be no cause for my existence? No, it does not follow. For a life-span can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others, so that from my existing at one time it doesn't follow that I exist at later times, unless some cause keeps me in existence – one might say that it creates me afresh at each moment. Anyone who thinks hard about the nature of time will understand that what it takes to bring something into existence is also needed to keep it in existence at each moment of its duration. Thus there is no real distinction between preservation and creation – only a conceptual one – and this is one of the things that the natural light makes evident.

So I have to ask myself whether I have the power to bring it about that I, who now exist, will still exist a minute from now. For since I am nothing but a thinking thing – or anyway that is the only part of me that I am now concerned with – if I had such a power I would undoubtedly be aware of it. But I experience no such power, and this shows me quite clearly that I depend for my continued existence on some being other than myself.

Perhaps this being is not God, though. Perhaps I was produced by causes less perfect than God, such as my parents. No; for as I have said before, it is quite clear that there must be at least as much reality or perfection in the cause as in the effect. And therefore, given that I am a thinking thing and have within me some idea of God, the cause of me – whatever it is – must itself be a thinking thing and must have the idea of all the perfections that I attribute to God. What is the cause of this cause of me? If it is the cause of its own existence, then it is God; for if it has the power of existing through its own strength, then undoubtedly it also has the power of actually possessing all the perfections of which it has an idea – that is, all the perfections that I conceive to be in God. If on the other hand it gets its existence from another cause, then the question arises all over again regarding this further cause: Does it get its existence from itself or from another cause? Eventually we must reach the ultimate cause, and this will be God.

It is clear enough that this sequence of causes of causes can't run back to infinity, especially since I am dealing with the cause that not only produced me in the past but also preserves me at the present moment.

One might think this: Several partial causes contributed to my creation; I received the idea of one of the perfections that I attribute to God from one cause, and the idea of another from another.

Each perfection is to be found somewhere in the universe, but no one thing has them all.

That can't be right, because God's simplicity – that is, the unity or inseparability of all his attributes – is one of the most important of the perfections that I understand him to have. The idea of his perfections as united in a single substance couldn't have been placed in me by any cause that didn't also provide me with the ideas of the perfections themselves; for no cause could have made me understand that the perfections are united without at the same time showing me what they are.

Lastly, as regards my parents, even if everything I have ever believed about them is true, it is certainly not they who keep me in existence. Insofar as I am a thinking thing, indeed, they did not even make me; they merely brought about an arrangement of matter that I have always regarded as containing me (that is, containing my mind, for that is all I now take myself to be). So my parents can't be the cause-of-me that I am enquiring about.

Given the failure of every other candidacy for the role of cause of me and of my idea of a most perfect being, I infer that the only successful candidacy is God's. Thus, I conclude that the mere fact that I exist and have within me an idea of a most perfect being – that is, God – provides a clear proof that God does indeed exist.

It remains for me only to ask how I received this idea from God. I didn't get it from the senses: it has never come to me unexpectedly, as do most of the ideas that occur when I seem to see and touch and hear things. And it's not something that I invented, either; for clearly I can't take anything away from it or to add anything to it. When an idea is sheerly invented,

the inventor is free to fiddle with it – add a bit here, subtract a bit there – whereas my idea of God is a natural unit that doesn't invite or even permit such interference. The only remaining alternative is that my idea of God is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me.

It is no surprise that God in creating me should have placed this idea in me, to serve as a mark of the craftsman stamped on his work (not that he needed any mark other than the work itself). But the mere fact that God created me is a good reason for thinking that I am somehow made in his image and likeness, and that I perceive that likeness in the same way that I perceive myself. That is, when I turn my mind's eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing that is incomplete and dependent on something else, and which aspires without limit to ever greater and better things; but I also understand at the same time that he on whom I depend has within him all those greater things, and hence that he is God. The core of the argument is this: I couldn't exist with the nature that I have – that is, containing within me the idea of God – if God didn't really exist. By 'God' I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me – the one that has no defects and has all those perfections that I can't grasp but can somehow touch with my thought.

This shows clearly that it is not possible for him to be a deceiver, since the natural light makes it clear that all fraud and deception depend on some defect.

But before examining this point more carefully and investigating other truths that may be derived from it, I want to pause here and spend some time contemplating God; to reflect on his attributes and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so

far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it. For just as we believe through faith that the supreme happiness of the next life consists in contemplating the divine majesty, so experience tells us that this same contemplation, though much less perfect, provides the greatest joy we can have in this life.