

2012: Week 3

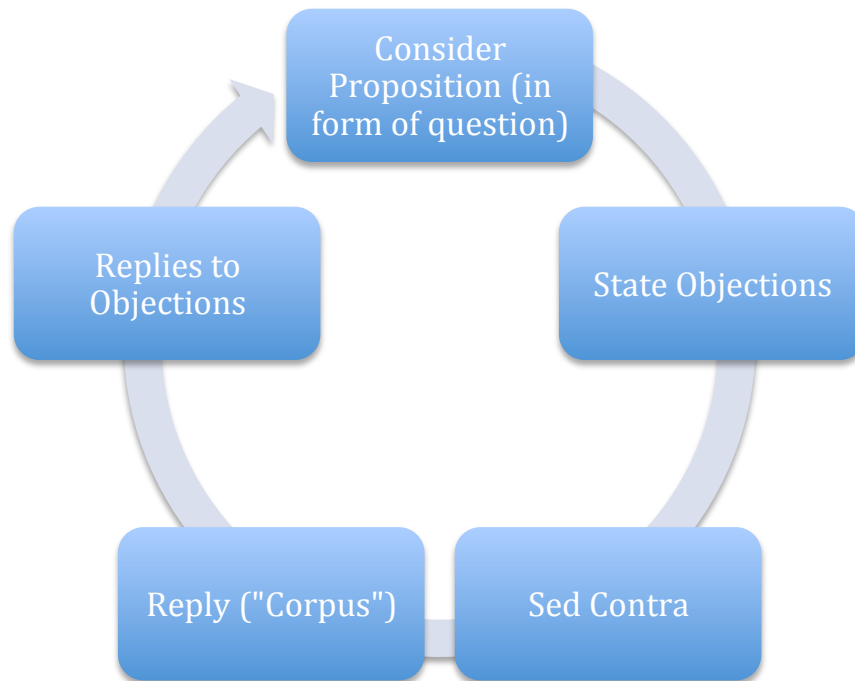
**GUILD SEMINAR  
“FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING”**

Week 3; “God”

Overview:

1. Collect for Day
2. How Aquinas argued
3. Classical Trinitarian Doctrine
4. Modern Objections to Classical Doctrine
5. Migliore’s Reply
6. Classical Arguments for God’s Existence

## How Aquinas Argued



### Example:

*Proposition:* Is God both omnipotent and good?

*Objections:* “It would seem that God is not both omnipotent and good, because of this moral dilemma, based on the reality of evil. If God is omnipotent, his tolerance of evil means that he is not good. If God is good, his tolerance of evil means that he is not omnipotent. Therefore, God is either not omnipotent or not good.”

*Sed Contra:* Through the gospel we find that, notwithstanding the reality of evil, God is both omnipotent and good.

*Corpus:* Consider Paul’s exposition in Corinthians of the “power of the cross” etc.

*Replies to Objections:* The moral dilemma rests on the implied premise that the only way a good and omnipotent God could address evil is by eliminating it. However, that is not necessarily true, and the gospel in fact shows God addressing it in another quite compelling way.

### **Classical Trinitarian Doctrine**

The claim at issue in this chapter has to do with what Migliore calls the “Niceno-Constantinopolitan teaching.” These early ecumenical (meaning the “whole church”) councils (Nicaea: 325 AD; Constantinople: 381 AD) formulated Trinitarian doctrine in this proposition:

God is “one in essence, distinguished in three persons.” (DM, 70)

1 *ousia*  
3 *hypostases*

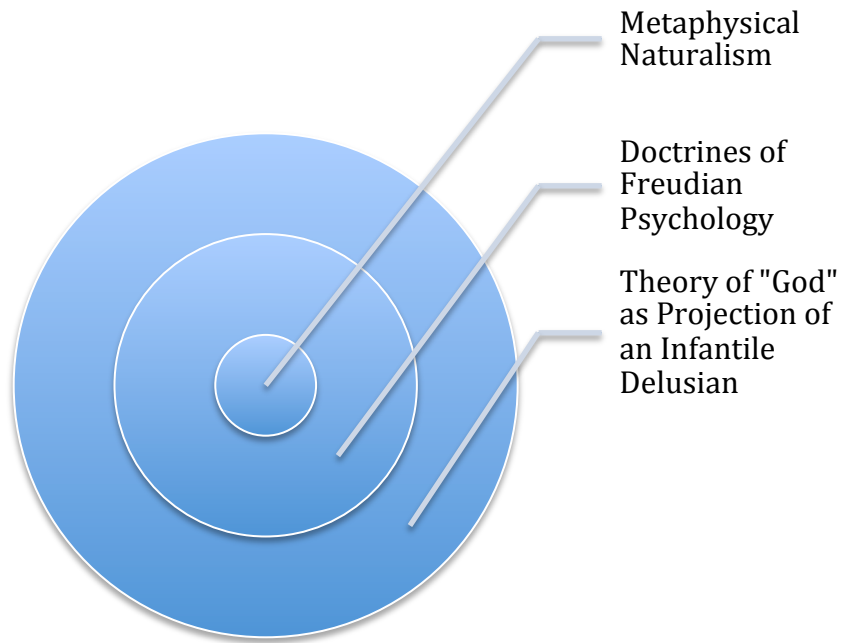
Migliore asks: “Is it possible to retrieve and re-present the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in a contemporary idiom and in all its revolutionary significance?” (DM, 68)

*Question for Discussion:*

In an echo of traditional procedure, we find that Migliore opens his chapter by listing a series of broad objections to a traditional Christian conception of God. How many objections does he name, and what are they?

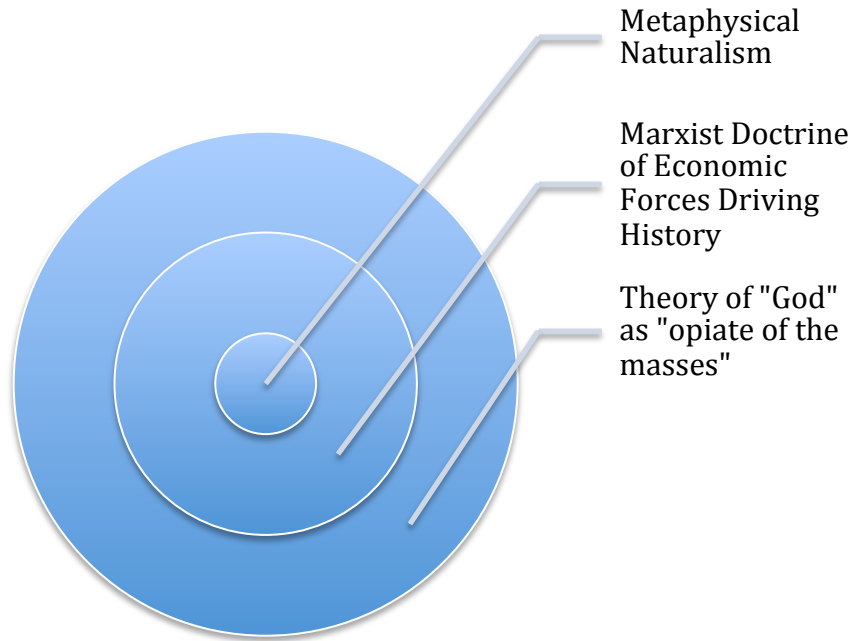
**Modern Objections to Classical Doctrine**

The Freudian Intellectual Tradition



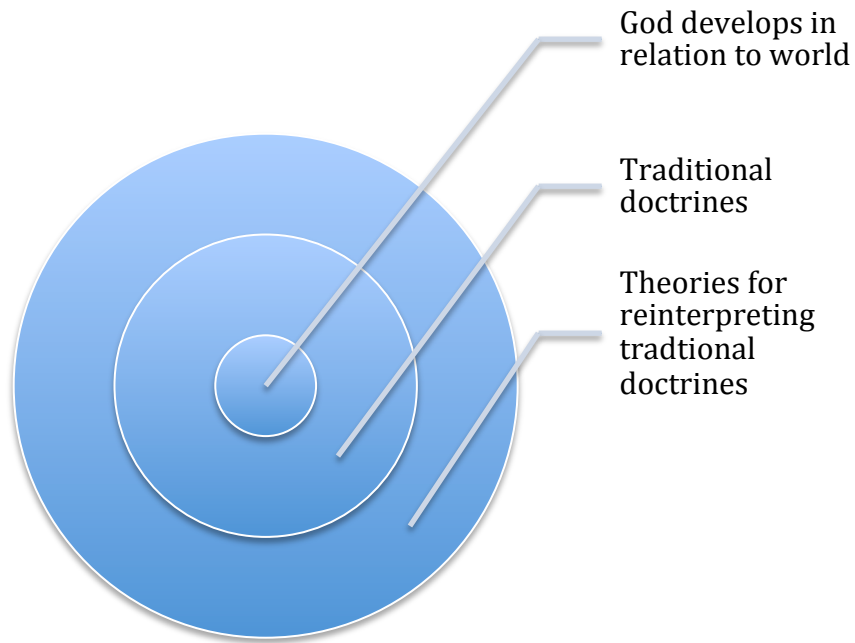
*Data: Religious Belief and Experience*

The Marxist Intellectual Tradition



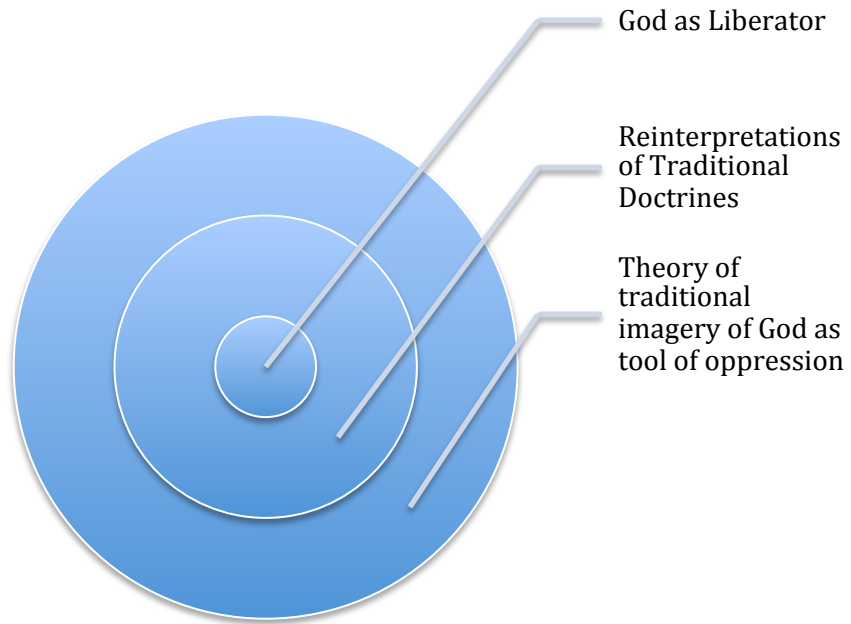
*Data: Religious Belief and Experience*

Process Theology

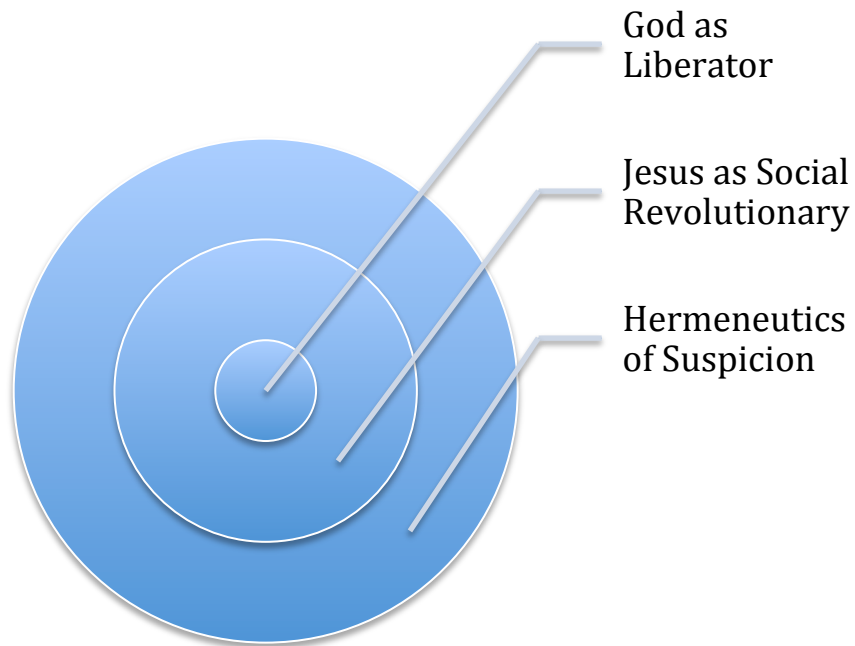


*Data: World in Flux and Experience of Evil (Slavery, Holocaust, War etc.)*

Feminist Theology



*Data: Recent history and present experience of inequality*



*Data: Biblical text and early Christian history*

*Question for Discussion:*

As you were reading, what was your initial response to this material?



### **Migliore's Reply**

Coming from Migliore, what would be the "Sed Contra"?

Perhaps something like this: Although we can appreciate that the modern objectors to traditional doctrine make some valid points, they do not overturn the doctrine of the Trinity. This is because the Doctrine of the Trinity . . . wants

"to re-describe God in the light of the event of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of God's transforming Holy Spirit." (DM, 71)

"wants to say that God's love for the world in Christ now at work by the power of the Spirit is nothing accidental or capricious or temporary. It wants to say that there is no sinister or even demonic side of God altogether different from what we know in the story of Jesus who befriended the poor and forgave sinners." (DM, 72)

It means . . .

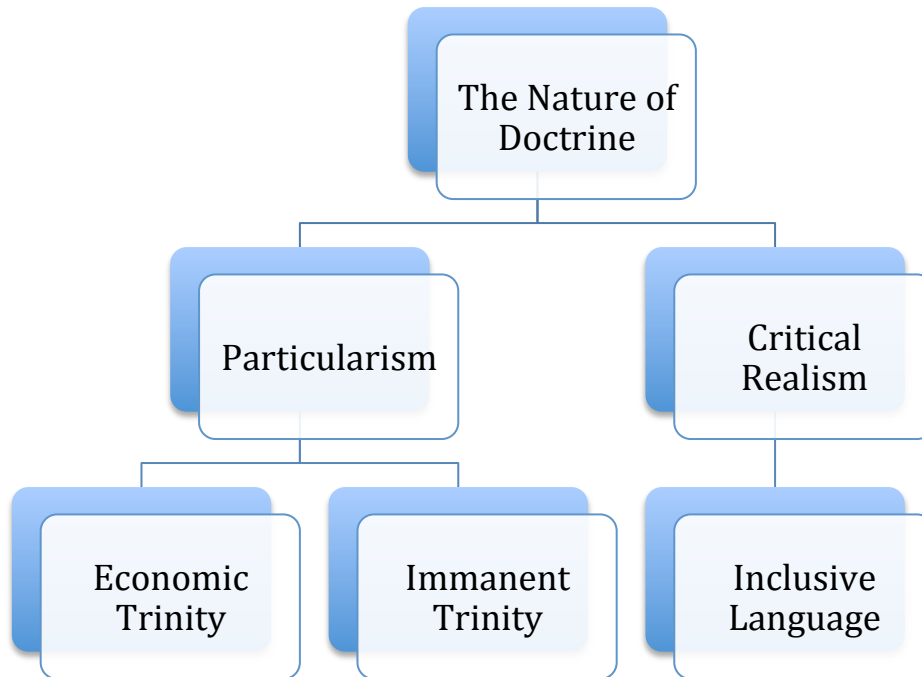
"The reign of the triune God is the rule of sovereign love rather than the rule of force." (DM, 72)

"God loves in freedom, lives in communion, and wills creatures to live in a new community of mutual love and service. God is self-sharing, other-regarding, community-forming love. This is the 'depth grammar' of the doctrine of the Trinity that lies beneath all the 'surface grammar' and all of the particular, and always inadequate, names and images that we employ when we speak of the God of the gospel." (DM, 73)

*Question for Discussion:*

Considering his "Corpus," what are the key parts in his explanation?

## Migliore's Theories Concerning Doctrine of Trinity



*The Nature of Doctrine*

Migliore does not consider doctrines revealed teachings. The doctrine of the Trinity “re-describes God in the light of the event of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of God’s transforming Spirit.” (DM, 72)

“Rightly understood, the doctrine of the Trinity is not an arcane, speculative doctrine; rather, it is the understanding of God that is appropriate to and congruent with the gospel message. In applying the terms ‘appropriate’ and ‘congruent’ to this understanding of God, I am saying, negatively, that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a revealed doctrine. It did not descend miraculously from heaven, nor was it written by God on tablets of stone. It is the product of the meditation and reflection of the church on the gospel message over many centuries. In other words, the starting point or root of trinitarian faith is the good news of the love of God in Christ that continues to work in the world by the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is the church’s effort to give coherent expression to this mystery of God’s free grace announced in the gospel and experienced in Christian faith.” (DM, 67).

*Particularism*

This is a notion strongly associated with Karl Barth, who held that to understand God we must make “a concerted attempt always to move from the particular to the general rather than from the general to the particular.”<sup>1</sup> For example, to develop a Christian understanding of God, we do not begin with a generally agreed upon notion of God, and then color that in with some particular and distinctive Christian teaching. Rather, we start from the faith that God was in Christ, and work from that point to develop a general understanding of who God is and how God relates to the world.

In this vein, Migliore writes:

“Christian faith and theology do not speak of God in a general and indefinite way; they speak of God concretely and specifically. Christians affirm their faith in God as the sovereign Lord of all creation who has done a new and gracious work in Jesus Christ and who continues to be active in the world through the power of the Spirit. On the basis of this particular history of revelation and redemption, the Christian community confesses God to be the source, the mediator, and the power of new life. God is the majestic creator of the heavens and the earth, the servant redeemer of a world gone astray, and the transforming Spirit who empowers new beginnings of human life and anticipatory realizations of a new heaven and a new earth. To use the familiar terms of the biblical and classical theological tradition, God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” (DM, 66–67)

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<sup>1</sup> George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University, Press, 1991), 32.

*Economic Trinity*

This refers to “the one yet threefold agency of Father, Son, and Spirit in the ‘economy’ of salvation.” (DM, 69).

*Immanent Trinity*

This is the assertion that God is as God does. God has acted in relation to the world through “the one yet threefold agency of Father, Son, and Spirit.” Therefore, God is eternally differentiated as Father, Son, and Spirit.

Migliore: “When Christians speak of God as eternally triune, they simply affirm that the love of God that is extended to the world in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is proper to God’s own eternal life in relationship.” (DM, 70).

This doctrine was developed in opposition to two ancient heresies that held that what God has done in the world may not truly show us who God is.

*Subordinationism* posited one great God, the Father, and two “exalted creatures or inferior divinities.” Migliore says this was a theological strategy “to protect God from conflict with matter, suffering, mutability and death.” (DM, 71).

*Modalism* posited that the names “Father, Son and Holy spirit” refer to “mere masks of God that do not necessarily manifest God’s inmost being.” (DM, 71)

To restate a passage already quoted above, it is the doctrine of the Immanent Trinity that:

“wants to say that God’s love for the world in Christ now at work by the power of the Spirit is nothing accidental or capricious or temporary. It wants to say that there is no sinister or even demonic side of God altogether different from what we know in the story of Jesus who befriended the poor and forgave sinners.” (DM, 72)

*Critical Realism*

This is a theory about the reach and meaning of human attempts at explanation. The following is a quotation from Keller’s dissertation:

“Arthur Peacocke suggests that good scientists and theologians have at least two things in common. One is the working assumption “of a skeptical and qualified realism—the belief that they are in the process of finding out the ‘way things are.’” The other is the realization that for these purposes we must rely on metaphors and models which are only “candidates for reality,” and these—limited, fallible, always

subject to revision—are as close to the truth as humankind can come.<sup>2</sup> “Critical realism” is the name for these two ideas in combination.

Migliore writes:

“The doctrine of the Trinity is the always inadequate attempt to interpret [the Biblical] witness in the most suitable images and concepts available to the church in a particular era.” (DM, 67)

He is saying that our language, concepts and images of God are always limited and fallible, and are moreover changeable. This insight opens discussion of the issue of masculine bias in theological language and the possibilities and challenges of a more inclusive language.

### *Inclusive Language*

Note from Keller. There seems to be no completely satisfactory solution to the challenge of gender specificity in theological language. On the one hand, conventions have changed, especially in academic centers but also to some extent in churches. On the other hand, many of the primary sources used for theology reflect earlier conventions. For example, in writing my dissertation I relied on an English translation of Barth that pre-dated the shift away from the generic use of “man,” “mankind,” and of the masculine pronoun. In the interest of simplicity and clarity, when I quoted from those translations I let that usage stand, though it is now archaic. As to the problem of gender-specific language for God, I incline somewhat toward traditional conventions. That is, I occasionally refer to God as “he,” as is the case in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and the Book of Common Prayer. There are some problems and disadvantages with this approach, but my choice is to accept these in preference to the problems involved with the other alternatives, including avoiding use of pronouns for God in all circumstances. Regarding humans, I use a generic “she” from time to time, to balance the ledger just a bit. In general, I try to steer a course that doesn’t let this issue distract attention from other issues on the table.

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 40–41. In this passage, Peacocke does draw a sharp distinction in the way that the sciences and theology justify beliefs about the way things are. The sciences do it by “success in prediction and control”; theology, “by providing resources which give moral purpose, meaning and intelligibility” to individuals, and “contributing to the survival of society.”

Migliore writes:

“Today we are even more aware of how imperfect and historically bound all language about God is. The search for new and more inclusive images of God that complement and correct the almost exclusively male images of the tradition is an important development in recent theology.” (DM, 74–75)

He notes that this leads to disagreement: “At present the church has not arrived at any consensus on how to expand the exclusive masculine imagery of God in the tradition.” (DM, 75)

Noting that the Bible does speak in places of God as father and mother (Is. 49:15; 66:12–13; Matt. 23:37), this is his proposal:

“In view of [this richness of Biblical imagery of God] the language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while constituting an enduring biblical baseline for the church, must not be absolutized in its theology and liturgy. The search for other imagery to speak of the triune God should be affirmed [n]. At the same time, new images of God should be considered complements to, rather than replacements for, the traditional images. It must also be remembered that all of our images of God, old and new, masculine and feminine, personal and impersonal, receive a new and deeper meaning from the gospel story beyond the meanings that they have in the contexts in which they are ordinarily used.<sup>3</sup> When we speak of God as father or mother, the meaning of these designations is determined finally not by our cultural or familial history but by the history of God’s steadfast love for the world that stands at the center of the Biblical witness.” (DM, 75–76)

*Question for Discussion:*

What do you think of Migliore’s proposal regarding the use of inclusive language for God in theology and liturgy?

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<sup>3</sup> Note the motif of particularism at work in that statement.

**ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD<sup>4</sup>**  
(See the “conversation” in Migliore, pp. 356-357.)

**A. The Cosmological Argument** (Thomas Aquinas’ Third Way.)

1. Everything in the universe is a contingent being. (I.e., it depends on something antecedent to itself for its existence.)
2. An infinite series of contingent beings is self-contradictory.
3. Something cannot come from nothing.

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Therefore, the universe of contingent beings requires the existence of a necessary or self-existent being. (I.e., an uncaused cause, an unmoved mover.)

**Critique:** This argument can at best produce only a Deistic understanding of God.

**B. The Teleological Argument** (Cf. Thomas’ Fifth Way, William Paley, F. R. Tennant.)

1. The occurrence of designful activity, the complexity of which is reasonably beyond chance causation, requires a designer as its cause.
2. Such designful activity occurs in the universe.

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Therefore, a designer exists as the necessary cause of this designful activity.

**Critique:** This argument is countered by the dysteleological, seemingly random, chaotic, non-purposeful aspects of the natural order (disease, natural disasters, etc.)

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<sup>4</sup> Prepared by Pat Murray

### C. The Ontological Argument (Anselm's First Form)

1. We conceive of a being than which no greater can be conceived (the greatest possible being).
2. A being that exists in reality is greater than a being that exists only as an idea in the mind.

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Therefore, the being than which no greater can be conceived necessarily exists in reality.  
(Corollary: It is self-contradictory to deny the existence of the greatest possible being.)

**Critique:** Kant argued that the *concept* of the greatest possible being may be greater than the concept of a lesser being, but both remain merely concepts. We cannot turn a concept into reality.

### D. The Moral Argument (Immanuel Kant, C. S. Lewis)

1. In an ideal moral order, happiness would be perfectly correlated with goodness. (I. e., there would be absolute justice. Kant calls this the "Summum Bonum.")
2. The rational mind intuits an absolute duty to strive toward the realization of this ideal moral order.
3. Ought implies can. (If we ought to fulfill a duty, then necessarily it must be possible.)
4. The conditions necessary for the fulfillment of the ideal moral order (Summum Bonum) are not present within the finite order of history and humankind's physical life-span.

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Therefore, a transcendent and eternal Moral Orderer exists as a pre-condition of the fulfillment of the ideal moral order (and of our duty to strive for it).  
(Corollary: Rational beings are immortal.)

**Critique:** We can question the existence of a universal, absolute sense of moral obligation on the basis of moral relativism (moral principles are merely individual or group preferences). If relativism is true, the second premise is false and the



argument fails.

### **E. A Modern Combination of the Moral- Teleological Arguments**

(Adapted from Halverson, *A Concise Introduction to Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Ch. 52.)

The “God” question is best understood as the question of whether the universe, taken as a whole, ultimately sustains moral value (personhood) or annihilates it. (Compare Immanuel Kant’s Moral Argument and William Paley’s Teleological Argument. See also John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 4, Chapter X, part 10: “Incogitative being cannot produce cogitative being.”)

#### **Argument:**

1. The appearance of moral subjects (personhood) in the vast enterprise of “nature” is the prime teleological phenomenon calling for explanation.
2. This phenomenon is not explainable by appeal to the non-personal and simple properties of the matter-energy complex. I. e., atomic matter, in how ever complex an arrangement, is not a sufficient causal explanation of the existence of personhood, with its capacity for rational and moral normativity. (This is a rejection of Emergentism and Epiphenomenalism.)

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Therefore, a personal causal Ground exists with sufficient power to cause the appearance of personhood as the teleological summit of natural evolution.