

Is God Material?—Discussions with an ex-Protestant

The reason for your turning from the state of ‘a bible bashing Protestant of 30 years’ to an effective atheist, or agnostic who believes that if God exists at all, he is material, lies in the very contradictions of Protestantism. It is the most illogical and narrow of religions because it insists with Martin Luther that the authority of God should be rejected in favour of the authority of the individual. With that step the basis of all religious certitude is lost. Truth is the identity of what is asserted with what is. If you deny the standard—what is, ie, reality—your ability to get at the truth is lost. Protestants deny the standard, the authority of God, and replace it with something shifting and uncertain, their own authority. It can be shown that this loss of belief in the authority of God in the theological order redounds in the philosophical order to a loss of belief in the authority of reason.

Proving all this is not something that can be done easily. It takes time and one must move from one truth to another. I’m quite happy to make myself available out of hours to persuade you. Meanwhile I thought I would give you some of the principles—and there are about a dozen of them—which have to be embraced before the errors of your Protestant ways can be seen for what they are!

*

*

Anyone who has a language other than English understands that speaking a different language involves *thinking* in a different way. It is the same with philosophical terminology. The world in which we live is caught up in terminology which flows from philosophical errors of almost 400 years. The language I want to use is much older. It is the language of Aristotle and St Thomas. If the language that follows seems strange, then, there is a reason for it.

Descartes, moved by the scepticism that followed on Luther’s revolt against the authority of God, said: ‘*I think, therefore I am*’. He got it exactly wrong. The truth is: I am and therefore I think. Do follows be, not the other way round. Descartes was the *fons et origo* of all our problems. He is ultimately the reason why modern thinkers can’t think straight. But he is not the ultimate cause: that was Martin Luther.

Now for some philosophy.

The Real Distinction

We come into this world and discover—the very first thing the child perceives—existence. Things exist. They ‘be’, to use philosophical terminology. They exercise the act of existence. Here is the most fundamental of all philosophical truths. *What* a thing is differs from the fact *that* it is.

What it is signifies its essence, or nature or quiddity

That it is signifies existence, ie, it exercises the act of be here and now.

A man may walk, then we say he exercises the act of 'walk'; he is a walker. He may eat, then he exercises the act of 'eat'; he is an eater. He may talk, then he is a talker. When he exists, he exercises the act of 'be', he is a be-er, or as the language inadequately expresses it, he is a be-ing.

Essences

The essence, or nature, of a mosquito, of a dog, of a man does not comprehend the *existence* of any of these. In the same way, the idea, the plan, of the Opera House does not comprehend its existence. There was a time when it was something in the mind of Joern Utzon and nothing more than that. Even his spelling it out on paper did not give it any reality other than something conceived, something of the mind. To the form of the thing, there had to be added existence. In due course the builder (taking the thousands of contributors as one) with great labour and complexity of materials, produced in the real this thing which was, and which remained nonetheless, in the mind of its designer.

So does their author (I put it no higher at this stage!) produce the living (ie, existing) mosquito, horse or man.

Nothing comes from nothing. Every creature has a cause. Indeed it has four causes.

Causality

Take the table at which you sit. It came into existence for some reason, perhaps the reason was that the carpenter needed to feed his wife and children. That reason is a cause of the table. Had that reason not existed, neither would the table. The reason for its existence is known as its **final cause**, from *finis*, L, meaning an end.

Neither would the table exist if the carpenter had not built it. He is its **efficient cause**, from *efficere*, L, to make; to effect; to bring into existence.

Both these causes have this common characteristic that they do not abide in the table. Once they operate and the table comes into existence, they form no part of the effect. For this reason they are known as *extrinsic* causes.

It is otherwise with the remaining two influences which are essential to the existence of the table. The most obvious of these is the matter out of which the table is made, the wood, the nails, the glue, the varnish. These, taken together, constitute the **material** cause.

Lastly, and most importantly, is the influence which makes this thing produced by the carpenter a table, and not a chair, or a box, or bottle rack. This is the form of table, tableness if you like, which determines that this thing will be a table. This is the **formal** cause.

Both the formal and the material causes remain in the effect. They are *intrinsic* causes.

The whole exercise may be illustrated like this—

			[Final Cause, or
			[
	[Extrinsic	(ie, not contained	[
	[in the effect), and is	[
	[either:	[
	[[Efficient Cause
	[
Cause	(that which		
	exercises influence		
	unto the be of a		[Material Cause, or
	thing dependent		[
	in regard to its be)		[
	is either :	[or Intrinsic	[
		(ie, contained	[
		in the effect), and is	[
		either:	[Formal Cause

Now, as with the table, so with the mosquito, the dog and with the whole of creation including you. In each element, each instance of each nature found on earth and throughout the entire universe this doctrine applies.

There are four causes of you and you had not the slightest say in any of them! St Paul might say to you: ‘what have you that you have not received’.

The critical element in the doctrine of causality for the believer is the two extrinsic causes, the efficient cause and the final cause: *who made you, and why were you made.*

Knowledge

Go back to the real distinction—

What is, is comprised of	[WHAT is, (the <i>essence</i> , or nature, or quiddity) and,
	[
	[The IS whereby it is (its <i>existence</i>)

What the man John Smith is, is dramatically different to the what (the quiddity) of a mosquito, or that of the dog. Every nature has certain fixed, stable and abiding properties. It does not change, despite what Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer asserted to the contrary.

Now recall the point made above about *do following be*. A corollary of that essential truth is that there is a proportionality which follows every nature between—

nature powers acts habits ends.

Thus a dog has doggy nature, exercises doggy powers, does doggy acts, follows doggy habits and achieves a doggy end. A man has human nature, exercises human powers, does human acts, exercises human habits and achieves a human end.

Nature

What is a nature (or essence or quiddity)? 1) First, though it is only exercised in the material, in an individual, it is not something material. So doggy nature is exercised in *Spot*, and *Rover* and *Fido* and however many other members of the species but the nature, dog, is not exhausted by these or even by all the dogs that will walk the face of the earth until the end of time.

It is not something singular. It is something universal. That is, some one (*unum*) which is found in (*versus*) many (*alia*). If you have some Latin you will see the significance of the description ‘universal’. In the 12th and 13th Centuries the question of universals was even more in people’s minds than Darwin’s theory of evolution is in minds today. Only it wasn’t a theory. It was a reality looking for precise definition. Plato thought these essences existed in the real. That the essence DOG existed in the real and that all the individual dogs we encountered were but shadows of this really existing essence. But the truth is that while the essence exists in the real as singular—in this individual dog, it exists as universal only in the mind; in the human mind, and, ultimately, in the mind of the author of creation.

It exists in mind, and yet it is infinitely more important than the material part of the dog because it is that which makes him be a dog, not a cat, or a toad or a tadpole. It is the formal cause of the dog.

Rational Animal and Brute Animal

Now go back to the question of natures and their properties and the proportionality that follows them. Step outside the instances I have used and consider what it is that distinguishes man from the brute.

The way man knows differs fundamentally from the way the brute animal knows. The brute knows singular material things. The man knows them too but he does more with his knowledge. He uses his five senses just like the dog but whereas the dog knows individual things, the man knows *the natures of* those individual things. That is, he knows the universal essences, the forms, of the things of which each is a singular sensed individual instance.

Man knows more. He knows the immaterial—the most important—aspect of any creature because it is the immaterial (the essence or nature) which determines *what* the creature is. The immaterial is *infinitely* more important than the material. Matter limits and makes singular; the immaterial is unlimited and universal and more noble because unsullied by the limitations of matter.

But not only does man know the immaterial aspects of material things, he knows things which *themselves* are immaterial, such as honour, justice, mercy, love, nobility, degradation, size, humour, quality, spirit etc, etc, . . .

Now the proportionality (the proportion of proportions) which attaches to every nature attaches to the nature of one who knows immaterial things. Here is the analysis again—

nature powers acts habits ends

Man has the *power* to know immaterial things. He uses that power to do immaterial *acts*: he forms concepts, immaterial things, he expresses those concepts by vehicles which themselves are material (speech, the written word) but the things expressed remain immaterial. He forms *habits* which concern these immaterial acts, of speech, of science, of art. He uses them to achieve immaterial *ends*: knowledge for its own sake, justice, honour, love, nobility, the good of others. It follows inevitably *that he can only do these things if he is possessed of a nature which is immaterial!* Though man is composed of matter, his chief characteristic is not material. Indeed, man is an immaterial being in a material body. St Thomas Aquinas says that man is the least of all immaterial beings because of this dependence on a body.

The lower is for the sake of the higher. Man's material part is for the sake of the immaterial part. This immaterial part of man—and I'm not telling you anything you don't know when I claim that it is his intellect in which this is constituted—is the foundation of human dignity and of all human achievement. Aristotle said that the least degree of intellect in one creature was greater than the whole of the rest of created being.

Our minds are receptive; but the mind of the author of our being (whom I will now call God) is creative. We didn't create the infinite variety of natures we see around us, *he* did. Man is the author of artificial things—of shoes and ships and sealing wax—but God is the author of natural things—of cabbages and kings! But God did something else, he created our minds apt to receive, that is, to understand, the natures that he had created. There is an adequation between the nature created and the same nature known such that the thing created is identical with the thing known¹. Do you begin to see what Moses meant when he wrote in Genesis: *God created man in his own image?*

The chief consequence of this establishment of the immateriality of man is that the fundamental part of him CANNOT DIE. Matter corrupts: that which is immaterial does not corrupt; it cannot. Matter is not a strength in man; it is the source of all his weakness. The body dies; the soul, the immaterial part, lives on. The Catholic Church maintains that all men, all the presently living and all the dead down the long centuries are in fact alive. The fact that the dead are no longer on earth does not mean that they no longer exist, that they are no longer living. They are no longer living in a body but it does not follow that they are no longer living. God is the God of the living, and not the dead, as

¹ This is the link between *thing* and *think*. When we think we become the thing! Not in its material, but in its *immaterial* being.

Our Lord said to the Sadducees, and His Church maintains the same truth. That is why we Catholics pray for them.

So What Do We Learn About God?

Nemo dat quod non habet—we use this universal maxim in the law. ‘You can’t give what you have not got.’ It has infinitely more force in philosophy than it does in the law. Nothing comes from nothing. More does not come from less. All of these principles simply express common sense. If man has an immaterial soul; if his constitutive principle is immaterial, it must come from a source, a cause, which is itself immaterial; from a source which has at least the same level of being. **IT CANNOT COME FROM A SOURCE WHICH IS MATERIAL.** Matter is that which is limited, determined. It is ever changing, trying to turn into something else. In philosophical terms it is pure *potency*, pure ‘can-be-ness’. The immaterial form is that which limits, determines, establishes, that which makes this parcel of matter be a mosquito, a dog or a man. In philosophical terms it is called *act*, from the Latin, *actus*, ‘does-be-ness’. It is in virtue of his human form that a man *does be* a man. It is in virtue of his matter, his body, that he *can be* something else, that he is open to sickness, deficiency, weakness, corruption, that he wants to take on another form through death.

Ergo, whatever God is, he is not material. He is certainly immaterial.

*

*

A quote, to finish, from one of the Greek philosophers. Xenophanes, who lived 500 years before Christ, thought infinitely more clearly than do the thinkers of the 21st Century. Here is his pagan assessment of the nature of God:

Always he remains in the same place, moving not at all; nor is it fitting for him to go to different places at different times, but without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind.

Michael Baker