

PHIL 3600 - Philosophy of Religion

Tentative Course Outline

1. The Nature of God
2. Problems Concerning Omnipotence
3. God and Morality
4. The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge
5. Arguments for the Existence of God
 - a. Pascal's Wager
 - b. The Ontological Argument
 - c. The Design Argument
6. Arguments Against the Existence of God
 - a. No Evidence Arguments
 - b. The Problem of Evil (?)
7. Life After Death (?)
8. God, Death, and the Meaning of Life

2. Problems Concerning Omnipotence

a. Aquinas on Omnipotence

i. The Cartesian Account of Omnipotence

ii. Possibility Accounts of Omnipotence

- The Relative Possibility Account

- The Thomistic Account

iii. Testing the Thomistic Account

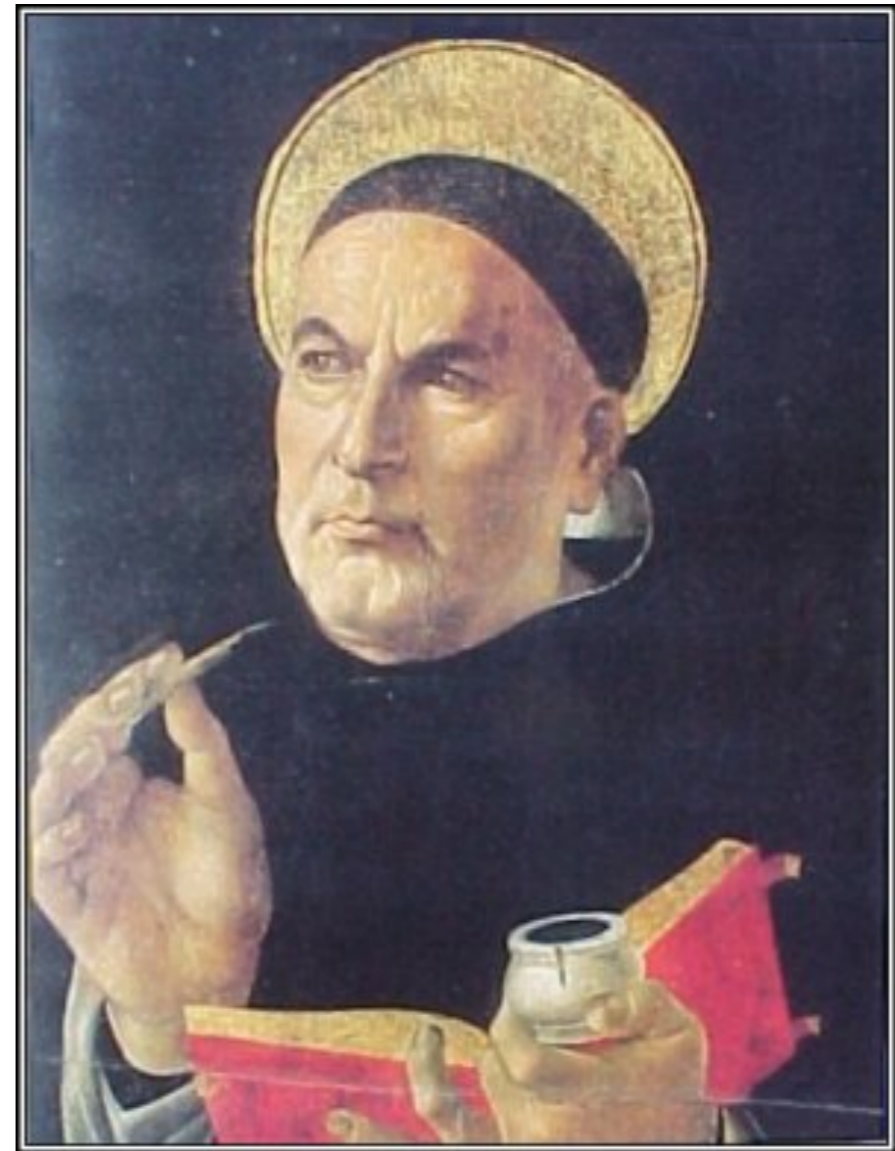
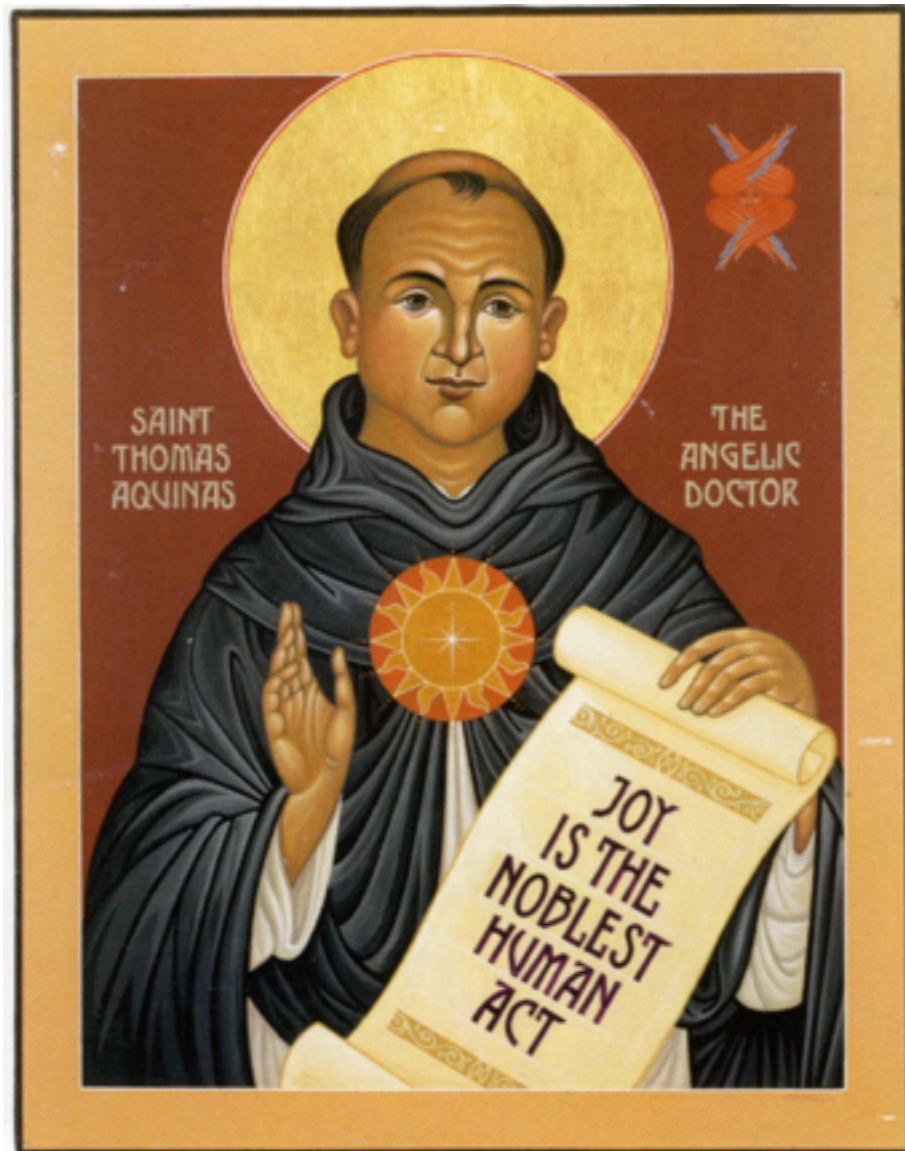
- Divine Suicide

- The Paradox of the Stone

- Divine Sin

b. Rowe's Amendment

c. A Thomistic Solution to Divine Sin?



Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

“All confess that God is omnipotent, but it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists.”

a. Aquinas on Omnipotence

- Obj. 1 - divine movement
- Obj. 2 - divine sin
- Obj. 3 - “sparing and mercy”
- Obj. 4 - necessity



The Cartesian Account of Omnipotence:

For a being to be **omnipotent** is for it to be able to bring about any state of affairs whatsoever, including impossible states of affairs.

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An Argument Against the Cartesian Account of Omnipotence:

P1. If the Cartesian Account of Omnipotence is true, then if some being is omnipotent, an impossible state of affairs can be brought about.

P2. If an impossible state of affairs can be brought about, then there is some state of affairs that is both possible and not possible.

P3. But no state of affairs is both possible and not possible.

C. Therefore, if the Cartesian Account of Omnipotence is true,
then no being is omnipotent. [P1, P2, P3]

a. Aquinas on Omnipotence

The Possibility Account of Omnipotence (uninterpreted):

For a being to be **omnipotent** is for it to be able to bring about any possible state of affairs.

The Relative Possibility Account of Omnipotence:

For a being to be **omnipotent** is for it to be able to bring about any state of affairs that is possible relative to it.

Problem → implies that everything is omnipotent

a. Aquinas on Omnipotence

The Thomistic Account of Omnipotence:

For a being to be **omnipotent** is for it to be able to bring about any state of affairs that is possible absolutely.

Aquinas' Definition of 'absolute possibility':

a state of affairs is *possible absolutely* just in case it “does not imply a contradiction in terms.”

a. Aquinas on Omnipotence

Aquinas' Definition of 'absolute possibility':

a state of affairs is *possible absolutely* just in case it
“does not imply a contradiction in terms.”

Examples of states of affairs or propositions that are
absolutely possible:

The earth is flat.

Pigs fly.

Tiger Woods lives forever.

Nowadays, philosophers sometimes use the term
'logically possible' for this idea.

a. Aquinas on Omnipotence

Aquinas' Definition of 'absolute possibility':

a state of affairs is *possible absolutely* just in case it
“does not imply a contradiction in terms.”

Examples of states of affairs or propositions that are
absolutely or logically impossible:

The earth is both flat and not flat.

There are four-sided triangles.

Tiger Woods is a married bachelor.

a. Aquinas on Omnipotence

The Thomistic Account of Omnipotence:

For a being to be **omnipotent** is for it to be able to bring about any state of affairs that is possible absolutely.

iii. Testing the Thomistic Account

- Divine Suicide

For God to destroy himself is for God to bring about this state of affairs:

God's being destroyed.

But this is an impossible state of affairs!

For God, by definition, is essentially eternal.

Thus the state of affairs above entails

An eternal being being destroyed.

And this entails

A being that exists at every time failing to exist at some time.

And this is a contradiction.

Thus it is an absolutely impossible state of affairs.

So the fact that God cannot bring it about does not count against his being omnipotent, on the Thomistic Account of Omnipotence.

Nice going Thomas!

iii. Testing the Thomistic Account

- The Paradox of the Stone

“A more involved problem, however, is posed by this type of question: can God create a stone too heavy for Him to lift? This appears to be stronger than the first problem, for it poses a dilemma. If we say that God can create such a stone, then it seems that there might be such a stone. And if there might be a stone too heavy for Him to lift, then He is evidently not omnipotent. But if we deny that God can create such a stone, we seem to have given up His omnipotence already. Both answers lead us to the same conclusion.”

-- George Mavrodes, “Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence” (1963)

iii. Testing the Thomistic Account

- The Paradox of the Stone

Here is the state of affairs in question:

S: There being a stone that God cannot lift.

The dilemma begins by asking, Can God bring about S?

Aquinas should say: NO.

For S entails

There being a stone that an omnipotent being cannot lift.

And this entails

There being a stone that a being that can lift all possible stones cannot lift.

And this is a contradiction.

Thus it is an absolutely impossible state of affairs.

So the fact that God cannot bring it about does not count against his being omnipotent, on the Thomistic Account of Omnipotence.

Strong work Thomas!

iii. Testing the Thomistic Account

- Divine Sin

Consider this state of affairs:

T: *An innocent child is tortured to death.*

Does T imply a contradiction?

NO.

Thus T is absolutely or logically possible.

(In fact, T is, unfortunately, probably actual.)

Can God bring T about?

NO. To do so would be to do something wrong, something an essentially omnibenevolent being cannot do.

So then if the Thomistic Account of Omnipotence is true,
God is not omnipotent!

What's up with that, Tom?!

iii. Testing the Thomistic Account

- Divine Sin

“To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence.” — Aquinas

Two problems:

- (i) Just doesn't seem right to say that acting *wrongly* diminishes one's *power*.
- (ii) Even if acting *wrongly* does conflict with being omnipotent, nowhere does the Thomistic Account of Omnipotence accommodate this.

iii. Testing the Thomistic Account

- Divine Sin

The Argument from Divine Sin Against the Thomistic Account of Omnipotence (TAO):

P1. *An innocent child being tortured to death* is an absolutely possible state of affairs.

P2. God cannot bring about that state of affairs.

C1. Therefore, there is an absolutely possible state of affairs that God cannot bring about. [P1, P2]

P3. If there is an absolutely possible state of affairs that God cannot bring about, then if TAO is true, then God is not omnipotent.

C2. Therefore, if TAO is true, then God is not omnipotent. [C1, P3]

b. Rowe's Amendment

“In view of this difficulty, it is perhaps necessary to amend Aquinas' explanation of what it means for God to be omnipotent. Instead of saying simply that what it means is for him to have the power to do anything that is an absolute possibility, we shall say that it means that God can do anything that is an absolute possibility *and not inconsistent with any of his basic attributes.*”

— Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 7-8

b. Rowe's Amendment

Compare Rowe's theory to that of Samuel Clarke (English philosopher, 1675-1729):

“ ... God is both perfectly free and also infinitely powerful, yet he cannot possibly do anything that is evil. ... infinite power [cannot] extend to moral contradictions which imply a destruction of some other attributes as necessarily belonging to the divine nature as power.”

— Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1705)

b. Rowe's Amendment

The Clarke/Rowe Account of Omnipotence:

For a being to be **omnipotent** is for it to be able to bring about any state of affairs that is (i) possible absolutely and (ii) such that the being's bringing it about is not inconsistent with any of the being's essential attributes.

How does the Clarke/Rowe account solve the problem of divine sin?

But might the Clarke/Rowe account be open to new problems?

YES



The Problem of
Essentially Limited
Beings

c. A Thomistic Solution to Divine Sin?

What if we remove essential omnibenevolence from God's nature, replacing it with mere omnibenevolence?

There is independent reason to do this!:
doing good when one could easily do bad seems more admirable and praiseworthy than doing good when one had no other choice.

And it blocks the Argument from Divine Sin

b. A Thomistic Solution to Divine Sin?

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