

CTSA Seminar 1968 Summary

Natural Knowledge of God

Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.

The shift from classical to modern culture has introduced notable changes in the context within which the question of natural knowledge of God may be raised and answered. It will be to these differences that, in the main, I shall attend.

On the Aristotelian-Thomist world-view the question of God was continuous with questions about this world. The round of the seasons and, generally, the whole of terrestrial process owed its continuity and per se perpetuity to the influence exercised by the heavenly bodies, and the heavenly bodies owed their motion to the First Mover. There was a single category of causality that could be divided into several species and could be applied analogously to creator and to creature.

In contrast, modern science is specialized knowledge of this world and only of this world. It is empirical, and so it always proceeds from data. To the data it adds no intelligible unities or relationships that are not verifiable in the data, and it is subject to confrontation with further data and, if need be, to correction by them. But God is not a datum of sense and he is not a datum of consciousness. He cannot fall within the purview of an empirical science. Moreover, there can be no verifiable principle or law relating this world to God, for verifiable principles or laws hold only between data. A relation between the given and the non-given cannot be verified. So the contemporary question about God is, very bluntly, by what non-verifiable principle do you propose to conclude from this world to God's existence.

There is a further difference between the classical and the modern approach. The classicist was concerned, not with the conclusions actually reached by concrete men and women, but with the conclusions to be reached by an ideal named right reason. Classical proofs of God's existence were conducted, not by existential subjects, but by an abstract, per se, de iure subject. Such abstractness is foreign to us inasmuch as we have grasped the thought of even such forerunners as Newman and Blondel. The thinker is always the concrete man and his thinking goes on, not in some hypothetical vacuum, but under the decree of his free, deliberate decision to devote himself to the pursuit of the good of his intellect, the good that is truth. Besides the spontaneous openness by which we inquire, doubt, deliberate, there is the deliberate openness by which we persevere in raising and resolving all relevant questions. Such deliberate openness is needed to bring to term the question of God, and so that question is not merely a question of theoretical possibility but also of efficacious good will.

Finally, knowledge of God is not complete without knowledge of God's goodness. But knowledge of goodness, of the true as opposed to the apparent good, of value, occurs on the existential level of human consciousness, on the level on which we deliberate, evaluate, decide, act. Further, knowledge of God's goodness implies that the world God made and governs also is good; it implies that evils of this world are, not intended, but permissible and permitted; accordingly it involves a process of deliberation and evaluation that, so far from occurring within an already settled horizon, rather settles what one's horizon is to be. There is involved an exercise of what Joseph de Finance would name vertical liberty.

Such seems to be the contemporary context of the question of God and it will be with reference to that context that I shall treat the issues raised by asking whether our knowledge of God is natural.