

Small Group Assignment 8: Science Replaces Scholasticism

Scholastics were medieval theologians and philosophers who focused their efforts on protecting the teachings of the Catholic Church from being challenged and replaced. They never tested anything empirically.¹ Instead, scholastics emphasized the importance of “revealed truth” in figuring out what was right from what was wrong. This means they relied on God Himself to talk to them and *reveal* truth to them. The problem with relying on revelation was determining whether God was actually talking to you or you were simply talking to yourself. There was no way to scientifically test where the voice (and ideas) were coming from; it was, after all, quite possible scholastics were just convincing themselves God was inspiring them. Ultimately, scholastics had one purpose—to defend Church teachings from challenges by freedom seeking kings², questioning scientists and troublesome philosophers.

Scholastics relied on not only their inner voice but also the use of logic and deduction.³ Deduction is a powerful tool because you can use it to create a big idea from little information. For example, in the 20th century we finally had telescopes powerful enough to look outside of our galaxy. A Catholic priest named Georges Lemaître (1894-1966 CE) was the first to notice galaxies were either tinted blue or red. Thus, he deduced light was cast from these galaxies like sound traveling from a car to a person standing still (as in the Doppler Effect). When a car approaches a person standing still the sound is low but when the car passes by the pitch becomes higher. Light, Lemaître deduced, must also change when it is traveling towards and away from us, i.e. if a galaxy was “blue-shifted” it was flying away from the Milky Way but if it was “red-shifted” then that galaxy was flying towards us. Deduction, as illustrated in the example above, can be quite a powerful tool; however, it is not without its problems.

¹ Testing something empirically means testing it by means of observation or experience rather than through theory or pure logic.

² Henry II (1133-1189 CE) of England spent a lot of energy trying to free his kingdom from Church control. This trend of kings and queens weakening the influence of the Church on their kingdoms continued in England, France, and the Holy Roman Empire throughout the 13th to 18th centuries.

³ When we only have a little bit of information we use deduction to work from what little we do know to create a larger picture. The problem with this approach is it requires a lot of imagination and basically no testing or experimentation. Aristotle, for example, used deduction to explain why objects “fell” downwards. He didn’t appeal to the existence of gravity but instead deduced it is in the nature of an object to “want” to fall down. The strange thing about thinkers before the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution is they believed objects actually had intentionality, e.g. magnets were explained as not being attracted due to a force called magnetism but that they had “souls” that sought one another out.

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 CE) was an important scholastic and theologian who was responsible for creating something fancy called the “ontological argument” for the existence of God. The word *ontology* has Greek roots and is roughly equivalent to the English word *necessity*. Anselm deduced that it was *necessary* God exist. He reasoned that he could picture the most perfect and powerful being in his mind. The only way this was possible was if God actually existed (because, Anselm argued, the *concept* of a God had to point to the *object* God). In other words, it was necessary God exist because otherwise a concept of this being would not be possible. The problem with Anselm’s argument is it is easily disproven. Another thinker came along about 150 years later named William of Ockham (1285-1347 CE). William, like Anselm, was a theologian and worked for the Church. William, however, unlike Anselm was not made a saint by the Catholic Church. Instead, William was persecuted for doing things like absolutely disproving Anselm’s proof for the existence God. Specifically, William reasoned he could conceive in his mind of the most perfect and powerful unicorn; however, he concluded that just because he had a concept of a unicorn in his mind this didn’t *necessarily* mean the unicorn actually existed; and that’s the problem with scholasticism, really: it was never based on evidence, it was based on a series of self-reinforcing assumptions about reality.

In the 17th century, the Church was successfully challenged by scientists and philosophers. Science represented a new way of looking at the world. The scholastics looked at the world *spiritually*; they explained the world *spiritually*. Scientists looked at the world *materialistically* and explained physical reality by appealing to laws of nature rather than to a God pulling strings behind the scenes. Scientists didn’t rely on revealed truth like scholastics; rather, they literally tested their assumptions against physical reality; it was the work of early scientists, like Galileo Galilei (1564-1642 CE) and Isaac Newton (1643-1727 CE), who nudged science in the direction of finding patterns in nature; and from these patterns they developed laws like the Law of Gravity, the Law of Planetary Motion and the Laws of Thermodynamics. The Church was also challenged by modern philosophy because philosophers like Rene Descartes (1596-1650 CE) and John Locke (1632-1704 CE) encouraged people to “doubt systematically.” When someone doubts systematically they ask a series of questions, and conduct a series of logical tests, to determine whether or not a belief is valid or if it is fallacious. The best philosophers,

like Descartes and Locke, also used scientific knowledge to inform their thinking. This is because intellectuals were more focused on finding patterns in nature, patterns in human societies, etc. and from these drawing conclusions about their meaning and significance. Scholastics, on the other hand, started with the meaning and significance and *then* explained what they saw.

Humanist philosophers used logic and deduction, as well. However, while scholastics designed arguments simply to defend Church teachings and authority, humanists were motivated out of a genuine desire to describe and understand *truth* for its own sake. This doesn't mean humanists did not believe in God; on the contrary, virtually every humanist, scientist and philosopher during the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment periods believed in God. God wasn't in question. The Church's doctrines, teachings and authority were; and the Catholic Church's authority gradually grew weaker and weaker over time.

Objective: to practice thinking like either a scholastic or a humanist to gain a fuller appreciation for how the medieval world focused on *spiritual* matters while the modern world focuses on *material* (or physical) things.

Procedure

- a). Get organized into groups of three to five.
- b). Then as a group research, think about, and respond to the six medieval concepts below. The scholastic justification (explanation) for accepting the medieval concept is provided for students. Groups will respond to the scholastics by crafting a *humanist* response.

Note: use a combination of *Google*, scripture and your own intuition, creativity, logic and imagination to develop your humanist responses. Try to build a consensus among all group members through thoughtful discussion on what your responses should be. Ensure your written responses *directly* address the medieval concept under discussion.

The argument style information sheet (found on page 3) will guide you in how to both write and think like a humanist and think like a scholastic.

- c). Record your responses in a *Google Doc*. Share this document with your teacher (rdelaine@lcbi.sk.ca) once your group has completed the assignment's tasks.

Argument Style Information Sheet

Remember that scholastics:

- Focused on developing arguments to defend Church doctrine (teachings) and authority
- They did not use experiments but appealed to faith
- They developed arguments based on simple logic, deduction and Church doctrine (teachings)
- Arguments created by scholastics never required any *testing* proof or observable evidence to be regarded as accurate

Remember that humanists:

- Focused on discovering how the physical world actually worked for the sake of truth; they never appealed to faith
- They used logic, deduction and experimentation (observation, trial and error, mathematics)
- All humanist answers require some **form of proof** (see exemplar below) to be regarded as accurate

Exemplar

Medieval Concept: according to official Church teaching the punishment for sinful behavior was disease.

Scholastic Explanation

Sin is a disease of the soul; thus, it follows that when the soul is unhealthy so too is the body.

Humanist Explanation

Disease is not a punishment for sin. Instead, sickness results from being exposed to disease carrying things, e.g. ticks, rats, etc. or disease causing things, e.g. bacteria and viruses. **This material explanation for the cause of disease is proven by vaccination: for example if you inject a little bit of the virus into a person the body develops antibodies to fight the infection thereby immunizing the affected person from the disease, e.g. small pox, measles, diphtheria, etc.**

1). Medieval Concept #1

According to the scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas, the existence of God can be proved, e.g. The cosmological argument (an argument on how the universe came to exist).

Scholastic Explanation

Aquinas argued that the universe *began* to exist; if something began to exist, something else must have caused its existence; therefore, the universe was caused by something else, e.g. God.

2). Medieval Concept #2

According to the Greek philosopher Ptolemy, the surface of the Moon was pristine (or perfectly smooth). The Catholic Church adopted this idea and expanded on it by explaining the Moon was perfect because no sin had ever been committed there.

Scholastic Explanation

Sin causes disease and deformity of the body. Sin, therefore, also infects the physical world in the form of imperfections like valleys, mountains, gorges, canyons, etc.

3). Medieval Concept #3

The Catholic Church insists that the new doctrines it created and the old teachings in the *New Testament* are co-equal in authority.

Scholastic Explanation

According to the *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus passed his authority on to Peter. Jesus insisted that Peter would be the head of the faith community (the church) after his earthly mission ended with the crucifixion and resurrection; moreover, according to the same gospel Jesus said whatever the Church willed his Father in Heaven would also will. Therefore, the Church must have at least the same authority as scripture.

4). Medieval Concept #4

The nature of the lion is such that he is not enraged by men if he is not harmed by them. Lions will attack men instead of women. Lions only kill children if they are exceptionally hungry.

Scholastic Explanation

Lions are majestic, kingly creatures; and since they are dignified they will only kill men when provoked and do not ever kill either women or children.

5). Medieval Concept #5

According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, larger objects fall faster than smaller ones because it is in their nature to do so.

Scholastic Explanation

A large object *feels* heavier than a smaller object; heavier objects are harder to hold up or suspend in the air; therefore, they must fall faster to the ground than smaller objects.

6). Medieval Concept #6

Monarchs, by virtue of their divine right to rule, have the power to heal by their touch.

Scholastic Explanation

In *Romans* 13:1 the Apostle Paul says there is no authority except God and those authorities that do exist do so only by God's permission; therefore, since God has placed kings into privileged positions of power it can be deduced God has likewise given kings the power to heal. Kings, after all, are as close to divine beings as can exist on earth.