

Due date: Monday, March 15 by 5pm. You may submit via email (hhalvors@), or to the PHI 325 inbox between 1879 and Marx Halls.

Objective: The goal of this paper is to state and defend a “philosophically interesting” claim vis-a-vis religion. It would be natural — and thus suggested — to write something related to what we have been reading. But that is not a requirement. If in doubt about the appropriateness of your topic, please consult the professor.

You can either make an interpretive claim — e.g. how to understand something Aquinas says — or, you can state and defend your own thesis. (Of course, these two objectives are not mutually exclusive.) I include a list of suggested topics at the end of this document. You can choose a topic from this list, or you can create a topic yourself.

For some suggestions on how to write a philosophy paper, in general, you might wish to look at www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html

Length: Approximately six pages, 1.5 spaced, 12 point font, 1in margins. That is approximately 2000 words. I believe that a high idea-to-page ratio is objectively valuable, and I will grade accordingly. So, if you can say something interesting and defend it adequately in the course of four pages, then you will get a higher score than if you say the same thing in six pages (with some irrelevant padding inserted).

Formatting requirements: You should employ a consistent system of citations, e.g. one of the standard systems described in the Chicago Manual of Style. I’m permissive in this respect, so long as your paper is readable and gives appropriate credit to other authors.

Some topic ideas: You may use any of the following topics as a starting point for your paper.

- How does Aquinas define the notion of “self-evident truth”? (How does his notion compare to some contemporary notions, e.g., of apriori knowledge?)
- Discuss (and possibly critique) Aquinas’ methodology for trying to prove God’s existence. If one were to try to settle the question of whether or not God exists, what would be the best method?
- Aquinas claims that (G) “God exists” is not self-evident, and one of his reasons for saying so is that some people “mentally deny G .” But then Aquinas claims to give five demonstrations of G from first principles (which are supposed to be self-evident). But shouldn’t anyone who reads and understands Aquinas’ demonstrations lose their ability to mentally deny G (which obviously is not the case). Shouldn’t “inability to

mentally deny” be preserved in deductively valid proofs? Can the tension here be resolved?

- Aquinas claims that the act of faith involves accepting the results of the “science” of a higher being (namely God). Suppose that there were two candidates for such a science, e.g., the truths of Christianity or the truths of Islam. If Reason is (as Aquinas claims) incomplete, then how could Reason settle the question of which faith to embrace? In what sense is it rational to choose one faith over another, or to choose one at all? (You could try to find an answer in Aquinas; or you could claim that Aquinas has gotten himself into trouble by the way he has set things up.)
- How does Aquinas purport to show that Reason is incomplete? Does his argument work? Are there perhaps other arguments that might better establish the limitations of Reason?
- Explain Anselm’s ontological argument (you’ll have to look that up), and Aquinas’ critique thereof. Who is right?
- Show how Richard Dawkins misrepresents the arguments in Aquinas’ five ways. When the arguments are more adequately represented, do Dawkins’ criticisms still apply?
- How are we to understand Boethius’ claim that a proposition E (e.g. the universe is eternal) can be true “according to reason/philosophy” whereas not- E is true “according to faith”? Is there any way to reconstruct his suggestion in a sympathetic light?
- Summarize the methodological suggestions of Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Boethius for managing a system of beliefs, some of which “come from reason” and some of which “come from faith.” (Is the issue here peculiar to faith vs. reason, or do their suggestions apply more generally to the management of beliefs from different sources?) Do any of their methodological suggestions have lasting value?
- Why, according to Bonaventure, might we be suspicious of the “teachings of reason”? Is Bonaventure guilty of the fallacy of poisoning the well (see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poisoning_the_well)? Or is there an important methodological insight here? (Suggestion: Human beings are generally less than perfect, morally speaking. How might theoretical reason be affected by human moral failure?)
- Bonaventure claims to be able to “prove by reason” that the universe was created some finite time ago. Aquinas disagrees. What exactly is the source of their disagreement? Are they disagreeing about method (in particular, about what reason is, and about what arguments are permitted when “using reason alone”)? Or are they really just disagreeing on particular claims, e.g., Aquinas thinks that there could be an actual infinity, whereas Bonaventure thinks not.

- Do we need revelation from God in order to know what is right and wrong? (You could either argue from the point of view of one of our authors — e.g. Aquinas, Boethius, Kant — or you could just state and argue for your own view.)
- What would the ideally rational person have done when faced with the data that confronted Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Boethius? (You may suppose, counterfactually, that there was no inquisition to enforce loyalty to the religious dogma.) For example, would the rational person have concluded that the universe is eternal, and that therefore the western monotheistic religions are false?
- Does Kant think that miracles are possible? What does he mean when he says (with obvious approval),

“As for miracles in general, there are rational human beings who, though not disposed to renounce belief in them, never allow this belief to intervene in practical matters; and this is as much as to say that, *in theory*, they do indeed believe in miracles, but avow none *in their practical affairs*.” (Blue book, page 123)

Does this stance make any sense?