

REVIEW OF JOSEF SEIFERT, *ERKENNTNIS DES VOLLKOMMENEN: WEGE
DER VERNUNFT ZU GOTT* (Bonn: Lepanto Verlag, 2010)

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Can we, by the use of our human reason, come to a knowledge of the existence of God as the Supreme Being, infinitely good, wise and powerful? Seifert's book is a resounding *yes* to this question. He takes up the famous classic "Five Ways" of St. Thomas Aquinas, explains each of them in a new way, thereby deepening and enlarging them. More than that, he adds three new ways, making a total of Eight Ways to God. Taken all together these eight ways represent an original and highly significant contribution to the extensive literature on the classic question of the existence of God. Of Seifert's eight ways I shall discuss five.

These ways to God, though logically distinct, should be viewed together, and in a sense combined, so that they really constitute reasons for *God*, and not simply for a first cause or an unmoved mover, etc. All of them, each in its own way, are ultimately rooted in the principle of sufficient reason: the realities which our experience reveal to us cannot ultimately stand alone but must be rooted in, stem from and be explained by a Higher Reality, God, Who is thereby revealed to us. That is, the Eight Ways are both logical arguments and also revelations and manifestations of God.

The single most significant characteristic of Seifert's approach to the God question is its personalistic character. He starts with the deep reality of the *human person*, delves into its essential nature and shows how this reality can be accounted for only by the Reality of God.

The five of these eight ways or arguments that I shall discuss are the following:

- (1) The argument from motion as applied to a human person's existence in time.
- (2) The personalistic-causal-teleological argument from the essence of the human person.
- (3) Further personalistic arguments based on personal acts and experiences.
- (4) The argument from an imperfect, incomplete and limited world to God as absolute perfection and completeness.
- (5) The ontological argument: God's own essential nature as proof of His real existence.

(1) In St. Thomas, the First Way, the argument from motion in the world to a prime-unmoved mover (God) focuses on physical motion. But there is more: our being in time, our moving through time. Our life is a constant flux, from a past that is gone to a future that is not yet. We live in an instant, the present, surrounded by a nothingness in the past and a nothingness in the future. What accounts for this movement through time? It cannot lie in us: we receive our being at every moment; we cannot give it to ourselves. It cannot come from another being who is likewise time-bound. It can only come from an eternal being above time, beyond time: God.

Put another way, only a being who fully possesses his being can be the sufficient reason for human beings, for us who do not possess our being but receive it at every moment.

(2) In St. Thomas, the Second Way, the argument from causality to an uncaused cause (God) focuses on the physical world. Even more telling is the need for an ultimate cause for the human person. If already the impersonal world of material things and processes calls for an ultimate cause in God, all the more so the human person. This is because of the spirituality of the human person. The book develops an extensive series of arguments to establish this, the reality of the spiritual soul. A few of these arguments may be briefly mentioned:

First, there is *consciousness as such*. This surely cannot be something material. It makes no sense to ask of consciousness how much it weighs or how wide it is; consciousness must be a spiritual reality.

Second, there is a person's inner awareness of his own existence, *the reality of the self, the "I."* This is essentially different from the extension characteristic of matter, one part next to another.

Third, only a *spiritual soul can be so deeply united to a physical body* as to form one bodily human person. *I sit, I stand*, not simply my body; this attests to the reality of the bodily person. But a bodily person is only possible through that deep, mysterious union of spiritual soul and physical body that constitutes a human person. Two physical bodies could never achieve such a union. They would always remain either essentially separate, one part next to another; or one would absorb the other, as when a drop of water falls into the sea and loses its reality.

Fourth, a person is *unique and unrepeatable*. There may be another person very much like me, but there could never be another person who *is* me. This uniqueness can be accounted for only by the spiritual soul; matter could never have such uniqueness.

Fifth, there is a long series of arguments for the reality of the spiritual soul based on the nature of *knowledge, awareness and reflection*. No material being could ever reflect back on itself and become aware of itself. This is possible only for a spiritual, unextended soul.

Sixth, human persons have *freedom*, the power of freely choosing how to respond and act. A person has power over his own body. No material thing has this.

The cause of the coming into being of each individual human person, in particular the spiritual soul can be accounted for only by an eternal, necessarily existing, all-powerful spiritual being. It could never be explained by evolution, which is essentially impersonal and thus below the level of persons; nor by the activity of parents whose role in procreation is essentially a making use of what is given to them and not the product of their own conscious, inwardly understood agency (as when a sculptor makes a statue).

Marvelous as it is that God is Creator of the huge and magnificent physical universe, it is even more marvelous to contemplate Him as the Creator of even just one human person!

(3) There are further personalistic arguments based on personal acts and experiences; they divide into two main types, moral arguments and arguments from the nature of love. It is

particularly these arguments that not only presuppose God but manifest and reveal God. The world of moral good and evil is essentially directed to God and can be ultimately fulfilled only in God. And through its truth it is a way to the truth of God, the real existence of God.

In Kant's ethics there is an apparently similar "pointing" to God in morality. But Kant and Seifert are essentially different on this point. For Kant God is a mere postulate; we need to assume God in order to make sense of morality. But Seifert shows that God is not a mere postulate but a reality clearly revealed to us in our moral experience. God is the only possible being before whom our moral life can take place. To repent an evil I've committed makes sense only if my repentance is directed to the Absolute Person, the Eternal Judge of moral good and evil, before whom my moral life takes place. In the act of repentance God is manifested.

Several other moral realities are discussed, all of them revealing God and thereby leading us necessarily to God as the ultimate being before whom alone morality can be what it truly is: moral responsibility, reward for good and punishment for evil, an unconditional moral ought and the voice of conscience.

The other of the two main types of personalistic arguments based on personal acts and experiences is the argument or way to God from the nature of love. There are several key points here that show how love can be a way to know and understand the reality of God.

First, there is the intrinsic value and loveliness of the person we love. This is the reality that engenders our love and to which our love is a response; and this reality calls for God as its creator. No other human person can be the creator or provide the sufficient reason for such a reality; still less could any impersonal force be the creator and sufficient reason for it.

Second, a key feature of all love is the *intentio benevolentiae*, which means that love desires all that is truly and objectively good for the person we love. In one way human love can achieve this good for the other person. In fact human love is itself the greatest gift one can give to the beloved person. But in another way human love is incapable of achieving the desired happiness of the beloved person. When we see the beloved person aging, being sick, and, worst of all, approaching death, we feel our helplessness to bestow the good we desire in our love for the beloved person, to make her truly happy and to remain in that happiness. Without God the *intentio benevolentiae* of human love would remain tragically unfulfilled, even contradicted and eternally frustrated.

Third, another key feature of all love is the *intentio unionis*, which means that love is an ardent longing for unity with the beloved person; and in particular for the reciprocity of love, that if I love another person I long for that person to love me back with a love of the same kind and intensity. But in human love there are many limits to such a union. The most horrible of these is death, my death and that of the beloved. So we can see that this intention for unity would remain eternally deprived of its ultimate fulfillment if we were to exist only in this life. Only through God as perfectly and supremely good and loving, and the eternal life that He gives us, can the *intentio unionis* of human love achieve all its depth and the fullness of its metaphysical reality.

Fourth, so far we have spoken of love between human persons. But the highest form of love is the love of God. All the essential features of love find their ultimate fulfillment only in the love of God. The reality of this love reveals to us the reality of the God to whom it is addressed. The very meaning and *essence* of love finds its highest expression in the love of God. And the *act* of loving God discloses God as the being to whom it is addressed, in the same way as repentance reveals God as the Absolute Person to whom it is directed.

(4) There is the argument from an imperfect, incomplete and limited world to God as absolute perfection and completeness. This is based on the Fourth Way of St. Thomas, which it deepens and enlarges, and of which it is a personalistic version. When we look at the world we see that it has certain degrees of perfection and imperfection. But why does it have just this measure of each of its perfections and imperfections and not some others? Thus we might ask: Why do I have these personality traits and not others? Why am I here in this part of space rather than another? Why do I live in this historical time rather than in another? Why does my life have just this duration and not another? From a realization of the inexplicability of the precise limits of our personality, our time, our space and other factors given to us, we can recognize the non-necessity (contingency) of the precise limits of our situation in this world. From there we can reach the realization that only a being of infinite perfection can provide the ultimate answers to these questions about the perfections and imperfections of this world, about the precise status of its many contingencies. And only an infinitely perfect being who himself has no contingent limits can answer and explain why He Himself exists.

(5) Finally there is the ontological argument from St. Anselm, deepened and amplified. Briefly, it is that God's own essential nature is a proof of His real existence. God is here conceived as that "greater than which nothing can be conceived." Does such a being really exist? Suppose we try to conceive of it as having existence only "in the mind," as an object merely of our thought, and not in reality. If we do this, do we not see that in such a case it would no longer be that "greater than which nothing can be conceived"? Something that really exists independently of our minds is something "greater" than a being which exists merely in thought. Therefore God as the being "greater than which nothing can be conceived" cannot exist merely as an idea in our mind but must have real existence independently of us.

Further, such a being must exist necessarily. That is, a being whose non-existence is possible is less perfect than a being whose non-existence is impossible, whose existence is thus necessary. It follows then that if we try to conceive the being "greater than which nothing can be conceived" as something which might not exist, we are not really thinking of it as that "greater than which nothing can be conceived" and we have lost sight of our original understanding of God. For God is the being whose essence includes necessary existence. He therefore exists not only *actually* but also *necessarily*.

Put another way, God's existence is either necessary or impossible; God cannot happen to exist when He might also just as well not exist. If He exists, He exists necessarily. If it is clear that His existence is not impossible, that it does not involve a logical contradiction, it follows that He exists, and exists necessarily, that He *must* exist.

In sum, real existence is as much a necessary attribute of God as His being All-Powerful, All-Knowing and All-Good. God cannot be God without being All-Powerful, All-Knowing and All-Good. In the same way God cannot be God without also really existing and existing necessarily.

In a brief chapter Seifert takes up the question of the origin of evil and suffering and why an All-Powerful, All-Good God would allow the terrible suffering we see in the world. He distinguishes carefully between moral evil and suffering. He argues that moral evil is much worse than suffering; and that moral evil is due to the misuse of human freedom, which is a necessary requirement for moral goodness. He further argues that a world full of suffering and moral goodness is incomparably better than a world in which there is no suffering but also no moral goodness.

These considerations are certainly helpful, but they do not solve the problem of moral evil and suffering, which Seifert fully recognizes as an immense problem for the existence of God. The key point is that the clear and compelling evidence *for* the existence of God developed in the book can never be refuted by the horrors of moral evil and suffering when these are taken as supposed evidence *against* the existence of God. Basically, the fact that we cannot grasp “how” two realities each of which is clearly given to us can exist together should never lead us to deny or doubt “that” each of them really exists. For a failure to understand can never amount to a valid denial of something that is clearly given to us by insight and reasoned proof. The failure to understand the goodness and power of an infinite God in the face of immense moral evil and suffering lies entirely in us; it is not in God Who is Himself the Absolute Good and Love.