

Paul Gruber

Topic 2:

“[The World] could not have come into existence of itself, without the help of some Agent to produce it. And that this Agent needs be such an one as cannot be apprehended by our Senses; for if he should be the Object of Sense, he must be Body, and if Body, then a Part of the World, and consequently a Created Being; such an one as would have stood in need of some other Cause to create him; and if that second Creator was Body, he would depend upon a third, and that third upon a fourth, and so ad infinitum, which is absurd. Therefore the World stands in need of an incorporeal Creator.”

Abu Bakr Ibn Tufail (c. 1105 – 1185). *The History of Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*. Translated from the Arabic by Simon Ockley, 1708. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers, 1929, p. 101-102

This utterance appears in Abu Bakr Ibn Tufail's famous philosophical novel, which had often be called an arabesque Robinson Crusoe: The hero, if we want to call him so, Ibn Yaqzan, grows up on a solitary island like a savage, but during his life he autodidactically develops the whole Ancient and Moslem philosophy. Therefore, it is obvious that the sentences above were written from an utterly rationalistic point of view, believing in the high abilities of mind. But is there – in general – any possibility to prove the existence of creation and thereby of a creator?

Firstly, it is inevitable to take a look at the process of creation itself: Aristotle wrote in his – unfortunately not very popular – treatise *De generatione et de corruptione* that coming into being means that a possibility is being realized, coming from *potentia* into *actualitas*. But this includes that the developing *substantia* did not exist before. Therefore, we have to ask ourselves not only how it could come into being but also what developed? Aristotle is not an essentialist like the followers of Plato and consequently cannot accept the existence of an *essentia* before the *ens*. Both depends on and guarantees each other, as Thomas Aquinas pointed out in his early writing *De ente et essentia*. As a result, the possible being neither can exist *actualiter* nor can be itself due to the fact that it does not have an *essentia*: It is nothing as well as not. – Coming into being and change seem impossible either from this point of view, according to the fact that all change is the coming into

being of certain situations or circumstances. However, we can see with ease that things are changing in reality – and if this would be an illusion as Parmenides and with him his school suggest, at least the illusion would change.

The problems and questions caused by this thought had been seen of course by Aristotle himself and settled with the utterance that coming into being and destruction are the same, but different in relation to their object: as well as to see and being seen are one action in the occurrence of seeing. And the vanishing objects do exist already and therefore are something able to vanish – which means to make coming into being possible.

Furthermore, not even the material of the coming into being substantia can exist – if we believe in the truth of the utterance above –, because it is not this things substance yet. However, Aristotle solved this problem of creation and change as well: The new things come into being so far the beings they are developing from are not. There is a presence of nothingness in every being – whether it is its past or future or possibility etc. – as he said in the famous passage about change in Physics, resembling the commentary on Laozi by Wang Bi, the most important member of the so-2/3 called xuanxue or Dark-School. Thus, at this point we have to accept the existence of not yet or even never existing facts in the actuality.

But this coming into being cannot be the one Ibn Tufail mentioned when he wrote about creation: He means ens as a whole, including the not yet or ever being beings. Otherwise, god would have created neither possible facts nor past and future, that are not actualiter either. But what is then the coming into being he talks of? – If we try to speak about the rise of mere ens and see it as a change from possibility to actuality, we see then there would be a possibility of being. This possibility would be completely actualiter as well as its own possibility because it is. In a word, the possibility would be its own reality and therefore its own ens. Or even his – because that is, as we might recognize, the definition of god due to Thomas Aquinas in Summa theologiae: Deus est suum esse subsistens and actus purus.

But can we think and understand god? Obviously we cannot be aware of him sensuously as Ibn Tufail said in the quote above, because then he would be material and therefore part of the world he created. But furthermore, we cannot even think him due to the fact that thinking means to distinguish different beings. But what can be differentiated in a being being its own being as well as its own possibility and essence? As a consequence, we can say that the thought of creation is the thought of an unthinkable creator being the possibility of the being of the world himself. To quote Wittgenstein's Tractatus logico-philosophicus, we cannot speak of the sense (this is why Thomas

Aquinas refused the argument of the Proslogion by Anselm: the false premise is that we cannot think god as the greatest thinkable being) but it is possible for it to show itself in the existing beings because they appear as possible. – And Wittgenstein himself really thought of god in this sentence as we can see in his journals during the war.

Thus, is it reasonable not to believe in the existence of god? Then the possibility of existence as a whole has to be denied too, what would be absurd. As a consequence, one can neither say god is nor he is not. Because – if he is – he is his being himself and additionally because he cannot be understood, how could it be possible to understand, prove or disprove his existence?

But in the end, what does it mean for us to believe in god as well as in the creation of the world as a whole? To refer again to the doctor angelicus, looking at the world as created means to see it as meaningful and good. Leaving now the original arabesque background of Ibn Tufail's quote behind, in the bible can be read that at the seventh day at the end of the creation god looked at the world and saw it was good. In the tradition of Augustinus's theory of grace and the whole medieval scholasticism, Aquinas wrote in his commentary on the introduction of the Gospel of St. John, god always is the cause: Because he sees and thinks the beings existing they are, and because he loves and approves them they are good. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the English word "sanction" – with its root "sanctus" – is a synonym for "approval" or that the German philosopher Josef Piper called the creation the nucleus of thomistic ethics. To sum up, creation is the reason of duty, or as Wittgenstein said during a conversation with the Circle of Vienna at Waismann's: "The deepest definition of value is that it's the will of god."