16 August 2013 "God":- from Warburton: St Augustine, Anselm & Aquinas, Pascal, Spinoza, and Hume

St. Augustine

He was especially interested in the problem of evil. The fact that the world contains evil is an argument against the existence of God; as God is seen as "all powerful and all good." Augustine focused on moral evil. Why did God allow evil to happen? Augustine used the "Free Will defence" Evil is the result of Adam and Eve's choice to turn away from God in the Paradise story in Genesis. This led to Original Sin and the result that humans all pay the price for the Original Sin committed by the first humans. The discussion focused on the meaning of evil and original sin. The Genesis story is interpreted literally by some people, whereas others acknowledge that it is a Myth. The definition of myth used here, is not an idea or explanation which is widely held as untrue or unproven; instead the definition is a myth is a story about super human beings of an earlier age, or usually how natural phenomena or social customs came into existence. The Genesis story deals with the "deep question of why man, God's creature, refuses to acknowledge the sovereignty of his Creation, with the result that history is a tragic story of man's banishment from the life for which he was intended". (Ref: The Living World of the OT – B. Anderson) The problem of an imperfect world was not answered by St. Augustine, but it was generally acknowledged that in most circumstances, humans do have the freedom to choose between right or wrong, and to choose whether there is a God or not.

Anselm

Was keen to show that God's existence could be proved by rational argument. Anselm invented the Ontological argument.

Anselm argued that the fact that we have an idea of God proves God exists. This argument was disputed by the Monk Gaunilo - just because we can imagine something i.e. the perfect island does not mean it exists. Our discussion raised the idea of Transcendance - that some experiences are beyond description with words, and included powerful emotional experiences such as when listening to music.

Thomas Aquinas

He used the First Cause Argument – Where did everything there is come from? Everything that exists has a cause. He was convinced there could not be a never ending series of effects and their causes – infinite regress. At some point there was a beginning. God uncaused cause of everything there is. The question asked in the group was: What caused God? Answer God is infinite.

God existed before time existed.

Blaise Pascal

Famously known for "Pascal's Wager." A betting person would choose to live as if God exists, thus avoiding the risk of going to hell. In return the person would go to church, and pray etc. In our discussion it was suggested that this could result in time wasted going to church, praying etc and that it was not possible to make oneself believe just by thinking about belief. Pascal contradicts himself when he admits that belief in God comes from the heart and not a false gamble as to whether God exists or not.

Baruch Spinoza

He had a Pantheistic belief in God – God exists in everything. He was excommunicated from the Jewish faith. His view of God was strange – God is nature – impersonal and does not care about anything or anyone. He was a Determinist – he denied that even our intentional actions are freely chosen, believing that all our behaviours are causally determined by the laws of nature and situation. It was pointed out that Spinoza was very influenced by his own life experiences, and that he was very much a unique and controversial thinker of his time.

David Hume

He argued against the Design argument – this argument suggests that the complexity of the human eye, for example, would indicate that there was a designer. Hume thought the design argument was based on bad logic. i.e. the eye has design faults; why one designer and not a team? It was difficult to be openly opposed to religion in the 18th century. It is unclear whether he was an agnostic or an atheist?