

First Principles

A visualization of the cosmic microwave background (CMB) radiation, showing a complex network of purple and blue filaments and voids against a dark background. A bright, glowing white and yellow sphere is positioned at the center, emitting a horizontal beam of light that passes through the center of the image.

Theology 100

Part 3

Pastor Tim LeCroy



Where do we start?

Aristotle

All men naturally desire knowledge. An indication of this is our esteem for the senses; for apart from their use we esteem them for their own sake, and most of all the sense of sight. Not only with a view to action, but even when no action is contemplated, we prefer sight, generally speaking, to all the other senses. The reason of this is that of all the senses sight best helps us to know things, and reveals many distinctions.

Experience seems very similar to science and art, but actually it is through experience that men acquire science and art; for as Polus rightly says, "experience produces art, but inexperience chance."

-Metaphysics



Aristotle

Scientific Knowledge, therefore, is the quality whereby we demonstrate that a man knows a thing scientifically when he possesses a conviction arrived at in a certain way, and when the *first principles on which that conviction rests are known to him with certainty*—for unless he is more certain of his **first principles** than of the conclusion drawn from them he will only possess the knowledge in question accidentally.

-*Ethics*

We do not consider any of the senses to be Wisdom. They are indeed our chief sources of knowledge about particulars, but they do not tell us the reason for anything, as for example *why* fire is hot, but only that it *is* hot.

-*Metaphysics*



Immanuel Kant

That all our knowledge begins with experience there can be no doubt. For how is it possible that the faculty of cognition should be awakened into exercise otherwise than by means of objects which affect our senses, and partly of themselves produce representations, partly rouse our powers of understanding into activity, to compare to connect, or to separate these, and so to convert the raw material of our sensuous impressions into a knowledge of objects, which is called experience? In respect of time, therefore, no knowledge of ours is antecedent to experience, but begins with it.

In whatsoever mode, or by whatsoever means, our knowledge may relate to objects, it is at least quite clear that the only manner in which it immediately relates to them is by means of an intuition. To this as the indispensable groundwork, all thought points. But an intuition can take place only in so far as the object is given to us. This, again, is only possible, to man at least, on condition that the object affect the mind in a certain manner.

-The Critique of Pure Reason, 1781



René Descartes

It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences.

-Meditations on First Philosophy, 1641



René Descartes

All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived. But it may be that although the senses sometimes deceive us concerning things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away, there are yet many others to be met with as to which we cannot reasonably have any doubt, although we recognize them by their means.

-Meditations on First Philosophy, 1641



René Descartes

What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. *I am, I exist, that is certain.* But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist. I do not now admit anything which is not necessarily true: to speak accurately I am not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or a soul, or an understanding, or a reason, which are terms whose significance was formerly unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing and really exist; but what thing? I have answered: a *thing which thinks.*

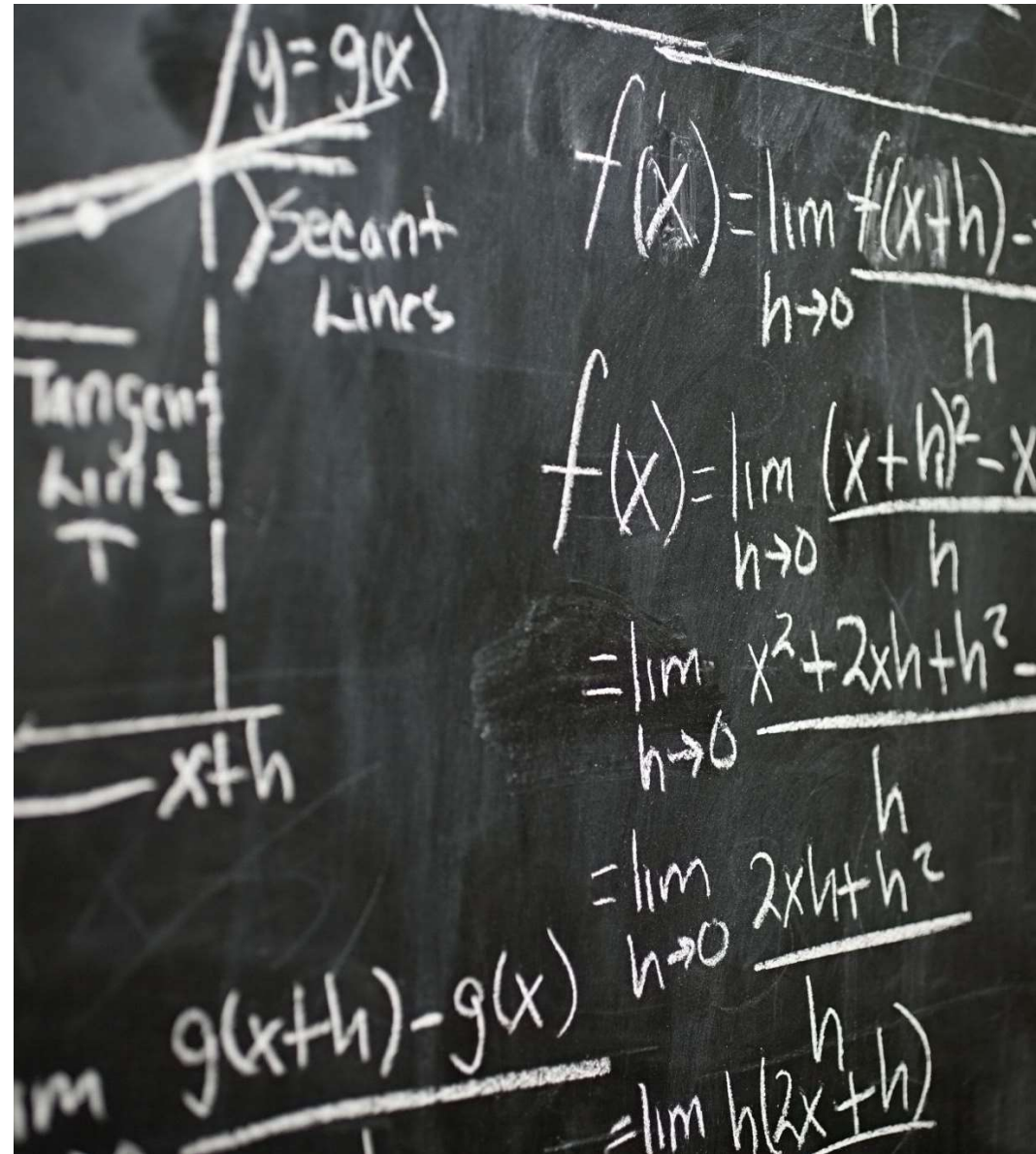
-*Meditations on First Philosophy*, 1641



What are First Principles?

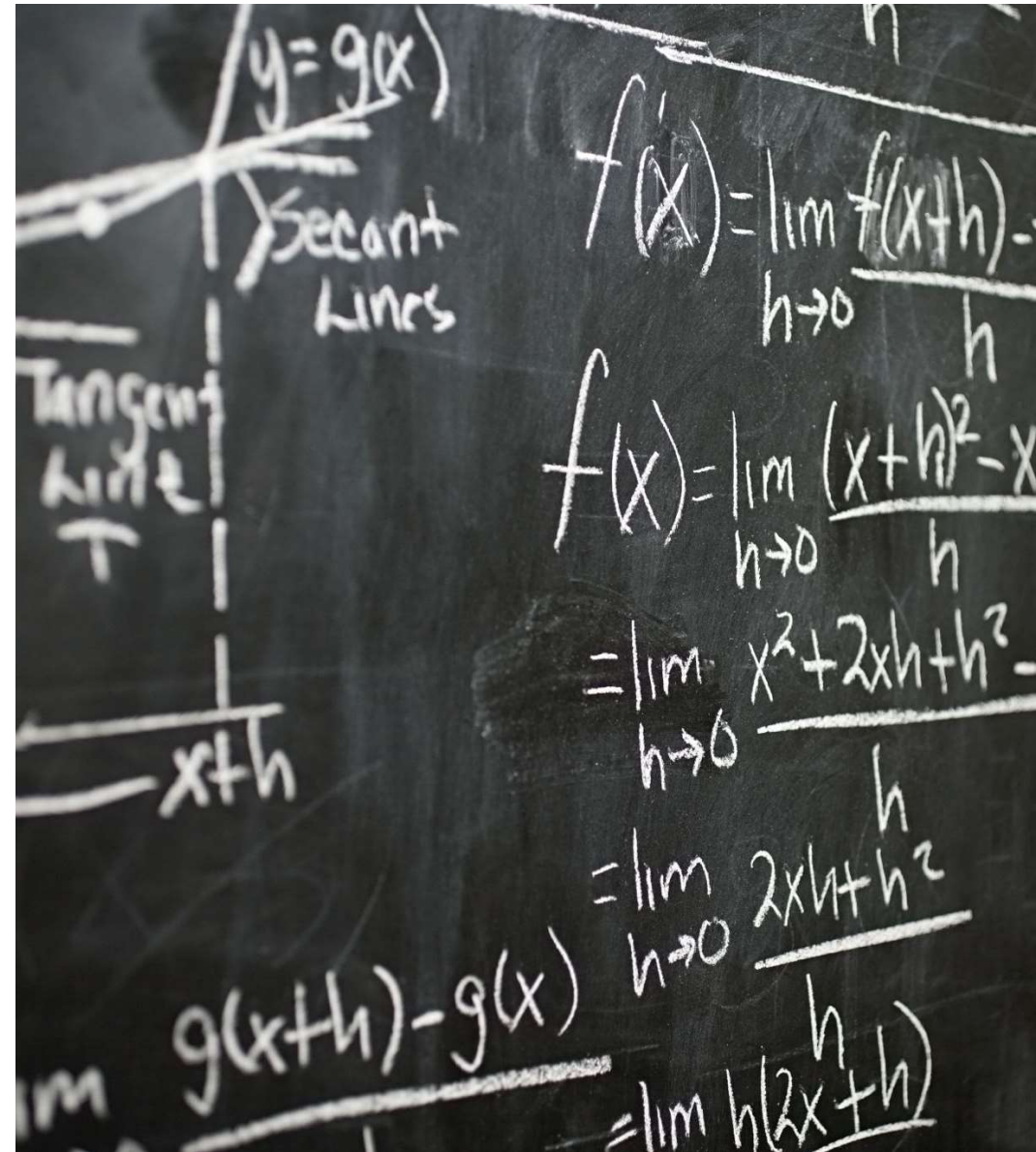
The things we know for certain

1. That we exist (Descartes)
 - a. Because if we don't then none of this matters
2. What we can sense
 - a. But even then our senses and especially our interpretation of our senses can deceive (Plato, Aristotle, Descartes)
 - b. Mathematics is the only science that is indubitable (Descartes)
3. What we can intuit with our senses from experience (Aristotle, Kant, Descartes)
 - a. With the acknowledgement that these can be faulty (Descartes)
4. This is not Wisdom, which explains the "Why" (Aristotle)



Is God a first principle?

- Yes and No
- Presuppositionalism presupposes there is a God and goes from there
- But this is often not enough for those struggling with doubt or for those who are committed atheists
- In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes moves from knowledge of personal existence directly to the existence of God. He proves it through his synthesis of Aristotle's argument from the Unmoved Mover and Anselm's Ontological Argument from the *Proslogion*.
- From science we can observe that everything has a cause. We can trace those causes back to an event called....



The Big Bang



But what caused the Big Bang?

1. It has no cause
 - a. Infinite regress (the universe does not have a beginning)
 - b. Circular: space/time moves in loops, not linear
2. The First Cause
 - a. God
 - b. Some other mover

God as the Unmoved Mover

- It makes the most sense that the universe would have a beginning.
- It also makes the most sense that a very powerful being would be the first cause
 - Alternate universe theory still needs a beginning
- In order to truly be the first cause, this being would have to be eternal (exist outside of time), having no beginning
- If we struggle with the idea of God having no beginning, the universe has the same problem. Something or someone has to be eternal.
- Either we worship the universe as an eternal, self-existent reality, or we worship God as an eternal, self-existent reality.

Aquinas' Five Arguments for God

- The argument from motion
- The argument from causation
- The argument from contingency
- All three of these arguments postulate that there must have been a first cause, and this first cause is God
- Aquinas also adds an argument from goodness and an argument from governance
 - This is similar to Plato and Aristotle's arguments for the existence of the unmoved mover (The One) from the existence of truth and beauty.



The God of the Bible Is the Unmoved Mover

- If God is the unmoved mover, the only way to truly know God is if God reveals God's self to us.
 - Aristotle says that science can't produce the "why"? Descartes points out that there are things we can't know. Kant says that we can't know what the first cause is because it's outside of our sensory experience.
 - Therefore God would have to reveal the true nature of God to us if we were to have any knowledge of God



The God of the Bible Is the Unmoved Mover

- The Bible claims to be the revelation of that God
 - Westminster Confession of Faith 1.1 Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation: therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.
- This is the central Claim of Christianity: The God of the Bible is the Unmoved Mover



Our First Principles

- I exist
- I can intuit with my senses from experience that the universe has a beginning
- The beginning needs a cause
- That cause needs to be eternal, powerful, good, and true
- We cannot know this first cause without it revealing itself to us
- The Bible's claim is that the Bible itself is the revelation of this first causer to us so that we can know him.



Next Week

The Bible's story of how the universe came to be

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