Lecture No. 4

Medieval Philosophy and the Renaissance

From theocentrism and dogma to humanism, anthropocentrism, and the first modern view of politics.

Core arc

Cosmos → Creation → Dogma → University
Reason → Human Self-Assertion



Creation mosaic: a visual emblem of medieval theocentrism

How this lecture is organized

The presentation follows the four semantic blocks of Lecture 4 and makes each shift visually explicit.

1

Theocentrism

creation, time, person

2

Patristics

Augustine and dogma

3

Scholasticism

Aquinas and logic

4

Renaissance

man, nature, politics

Guiding question

How did European philosophy move from a God-centered universe and scriptural interpretation to the Renaissance discovery of man as a creative, self-fashioning power?

Course continuity

This lecture follows the ancient foundations studied earlier and shows how Christian Europe reorganized the meaning of cosmos, truth, and the human being.



Earlier course visuals

A civilizational rupture: from an eternal cosmos to created reality

Lecture 4 presents the shift as more than a change of ideas: it is a new ontology, a new time-sense, and a new place for man.

Ancient worldview	Medieval worldview
• The Greeks saw the world as Cosmos: self-sufficient, eternal, and internally ordered. • Even the gods belonged to the world-order and remained under Fate or Logos. • Philosophy contemplated an already-divine reality.	• Christian thought transforms the world into Creation: contingent, dependent, and sustained by God. • The world is “open” toward its Creator and has no cause for being within itself. • Reality becomes meaningful through relation to the Absolute.

The decisive consequence

The world is no longer the final reality.

Nature becomes a sign, an artifact, and a commentary-bearing domain. To know the world is increasingly to read its dependence on God, not simply to describe its structure.

This is why medieval philosophy becomes inseparable from theology.

Cosmos vs. Creation

A compact analytical comparison of the ancient and medieval images of reality.

Dimension	Cosmos	Creation
Ultimate status	Self-sufficient order	Created and dependent
Relation of the divine	Gods remain inside the world	God transcends and sustains the world
Matter / being	Eternal or co-eternal with order	Brought into being ex nihilo
Nature	Living whole for contemplation	Artifact bearing traces of design
Knowledge	Explain the structure of being	Interpret creation and revelation

Creation ex nihilo and the “open” world

Creation out of nothing changes the status of both nature and explanation.

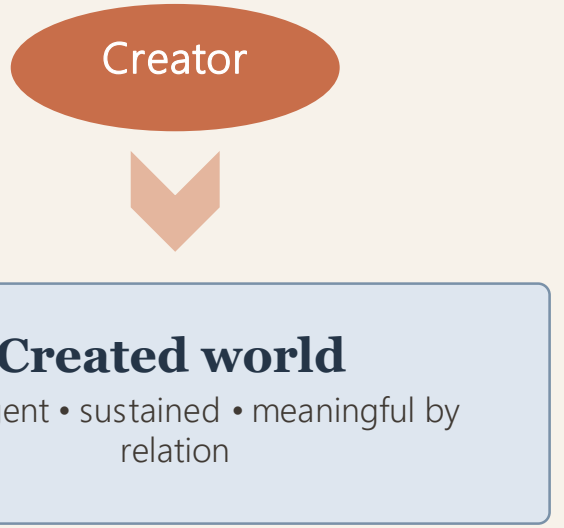
What ex nihilo means

- Matter is not eternal; it does not ground itself.
- The world exists by divine will, not by necessity.
- Nature becomes dependent, finite, and interpretable as a crafted order.

Medieval consequence

To study nature is to search for the traces of a Master rather than the self-sufficiency of matter.

Ontological structure

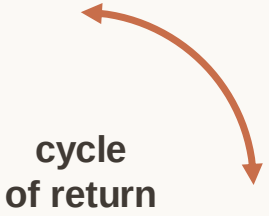


Unlike the closed Greek cosmos, medieval reality is “open” toward what transcends it.

Time is transformed: from eternal return to historical drama

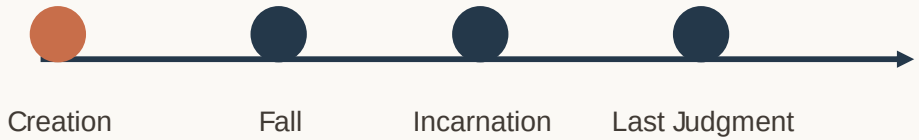
Christianity replaces cyclical repetition with a meaningful line stretching from Creation to Judgment.

Greek time



No definitive beginning, no final culmination, and no ultimate historical goal.

Medieval time



History becomes a vector, not a wheel.

This grants meaning to historical events and makes salvation-history philosophically thinkable.

The human being: from microcosm to the image and likeness of God

Medieval theocentrism paradoxically elevates man by making him a being capable of dialogue with the Absolute.

Antiquity

Man as microcosm

A smaller part of the great whole; meaningful, but still contained by cosmic necessity.

Middle Ages

Man as person

Created in the image of a Personal God, endowed with an immortal soul and free will.

Paradox

Theocentrism prepares humanism

By declaring the world secondary to God, Christianity frees man from blind natural necessity and makes him uniquely answerable before the Absolute.

→ future Humanism

The five pillars of medieval thought

Lecture 4 organizes medieval philosophy around five structural principles.

1 Theocentrism

God is the center of being; everything else has reality by participation in the divine.

2 Creationism

The world is created ex nihilo by divine will; matter is no longer self-grounding.

3 Providentialism

History is a meaningful path governed by providence rather than blind fate.

4 Personalism

Man is a person with a unique soul, dignity, and free will.

5 Hermeneutics

Truth is interpreted as commentary on revelation.

Common consequence

Philosophy is not abolished, but repositioned. It now serves the intelligibility of revelation and helps articulate a world already seen as meaningful in God.

Pillars I–III: theocentrism, creationism, providentialism

These three principles reorganize metaphysics, nature, and history.

1 Theocentrism

God is the only ultimate reality. Nature, man, and history possess being only insofar as they participate in the divine.

2 Creationism

Unlike the ancient view of eternal matter, medieval thought insists that the world is freely created “out of nothing.” Nature therefore appears as a meaningful artifact.

3 Providentialism

History is a linear process directed by providence. Events in public and private life are read as moments within a divine plan.

Pillars IV–V and the formula “Ancilla Theologiae”

Personalism and hermeneutics define both the human subject and the method of knowing.

4 Personalism

The modern idea of the “person” is born here: man is not just an instance of species-being, but a singular soul responsible before God and capable of free choice.

5 Hermeneutics

Truth is not discovered as an unknown object; it is interpreted through Scripture, commentary, and the symbolic reading of the world.

Ancilla Theologiae

“Philosophy as the handmaid of theology” does not mean reason is humiliated.

Lecture 4 stresses the opposite: Aristotle’s logic is used with extraordinary precision to make dogma thinkable. Reason becomes a disciplined instrument of explanation.

The three central problems of medieval philosophy

Medieval thought is not monolithic: it lives in tension between revelation and rational justification.

1

Theodicy

How can an all-good and almighty Creator coexist with evil?

2

Universals

Do general concepts really exist, or are they merely names?

3

Freedom

If God foreknows all things, is genuine human choice still possible?

These debates generate the medieval discipline of distinction, proof, and commentary.

Faith and reason: the pulse of the medieval mind

Lecture 4 presents the age as a long argument about where reason should stop and where it should serve revelation.

Two risks

Mystical surrender
Reason falls silent before mystery

?

Scholastic science
Reason becomes a rigorous tool of clarification

Can mystery be honored without abolishing thought?

The answers given by Tertullian, Anselm, and Aquinas mark three moments in the intellectual maturation of Christian Europe.

Tertullian: reason must humble itself before mystery

The lecture uses Tertullian to represent the most radical insistence on the limits of reason.

Formula

Credo quia absurdum

"I believe because it is absurd."

- Not a celebration of stupidity, but a recognition of divine incomprehensibility.
- To force God into human logical categories is to profane mystery.
- Faith is a leap where reason reaches its limit.

Character of thought

- Reason is limited and subordinate to revelation.
- The will of faith has priority over systematic demonstration.
- Mystery is protected by paradox rather than explained away.

Lecture 4 label

Voluntarism

Priority of will and acceptance over logical closure.

Anselm of Canterbury: faith seeks understanding

Anselm turns reason into an instrument that clarifies, articulates, and disciplines belief.

Formula

Credo ut intelligam

“I believe so that I may understand.”

- Faith is the beginning, not the end, of inquiry.
- Reason is a divine gift that should not be neglected.
- Dogma becomes logically articulable rather than merely accepted.

Why Anselm matters

He gives medieval thought a new confidence in reason inside religion.

- Scholasticism becomes possible when faith allows itself to be explained and systematized.
- University culture grows from the conviction that revelation and logic can converse.
- Reason is no longer merely tolerated; it becomes method.

toward the university

From Tertullian to Anselm to Aquinas

The lecture frames medieval philosophy as a movement from protecting mystery to harmonizing faith and reason.

Tertullian

Reason must bow before mystery

Priority of will and acceptance

Anselm

Reason clarifies what faith receives

Beginning of scholastic method

Aquinas

Faith and reason are two rays of one truth

Systematic synthesis

General movement

From defending the sacred against rational reduction → to defending the right of reason to function within religion.

Two great stages of medieval philosophy

Lecture 4 distinguishes an early age of dogmatic formation from a later age of university systematization.

Patristics

II–VIII centuries

- Main task: formation of dogma and defense against pagan criticism.
- Dominant mood: mystical fervor and inward confession.
- Philosophical language: adapted Neoplatonism.
- Central figure: Augustine of Hippo.

Scholasticism

IX–XIV centuries

- Main task: systematize Christian knowledge in schools and universities.
- Dominant mood: proof, classification, and rigorous distinction.
- Philosophical language: Aristotle and formal logic.
- Central figure: Thomas Aquinas.

Patristics vs. Scholasticism: a structured comparison

Both stages serve Christianity, but they do so in different intellectual styles.

Characteristic	Patristics	Scholasticism
Foundation	Platonism and intuition	Aristotelianism and logic
Setting	Monasteries and religious communities	University chairs and schools
Style	Apologetic and confessional	Systematic and explanatory
Relation to reason	Reason is subordinate to faith	Reason partners faith in cognition
Cultural gift	Sense of history and interiority	Discipline of proof and method

PATRISTICS

Augustine of Hippo

From the emotional creation of faith to a grand metaphysical system of history, evil, and inner experience.

Main figure / turning point



Augustine: Christianity translated into philosophical language

Augustine becomes the main architect of the early synthesis of Biblical faith and classical philosophy.



Augustine of Hippo
354–430 CE

Historical role

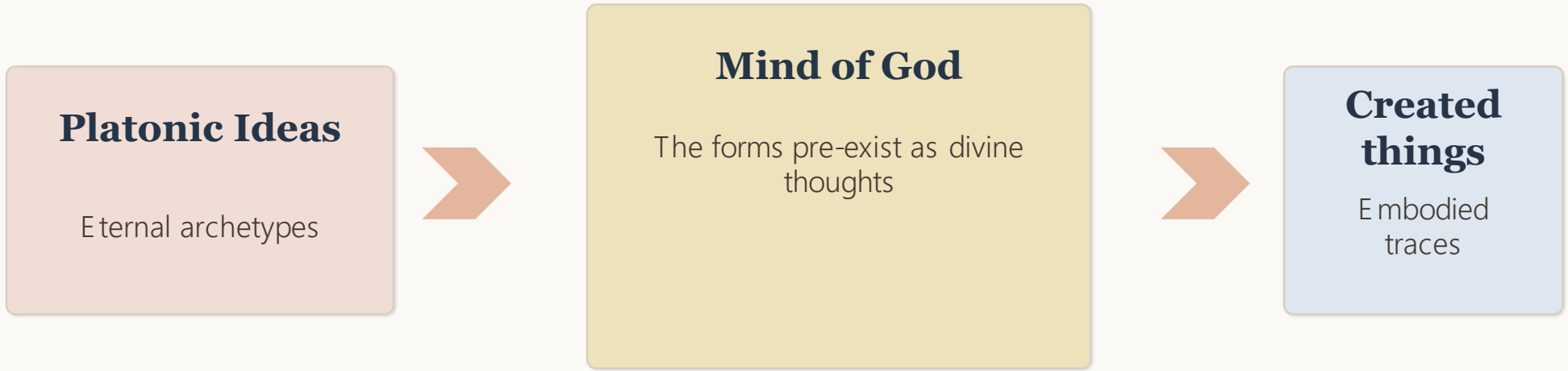
- Christianity had become the religion of empire and needed conceptual articulation.
- The “Church Fathers” had to translate Biblical imagery into the language of Greek philosophy.
- Augustine created the most influential version of that synthesis, shaping Europe for centuries.

Why he dominates the period

He combines history, psychology, metaphysics, and theology into one coherent Christian worldview.

The “baptism of Plato”: ideas become thoughts of God

Augustine does not reject Plato; he relocates the Platonic world of ideas into the divine intellect.



Thus nature can be studied as a readable embodiment of divine design.

Theodicy: evil as privatio boni

Augustine's classic answer is that evil is not a substance, but a lack or privation of good.

Privatio boni

Evil has no independent ontological status.

- Darkness is not a substance alongside light; it is the absence of light.
- Disease is not a positive rival to health; it is health diminished.
- Evil is therefore a "diminishing of being," not a created thing.

Why this matters

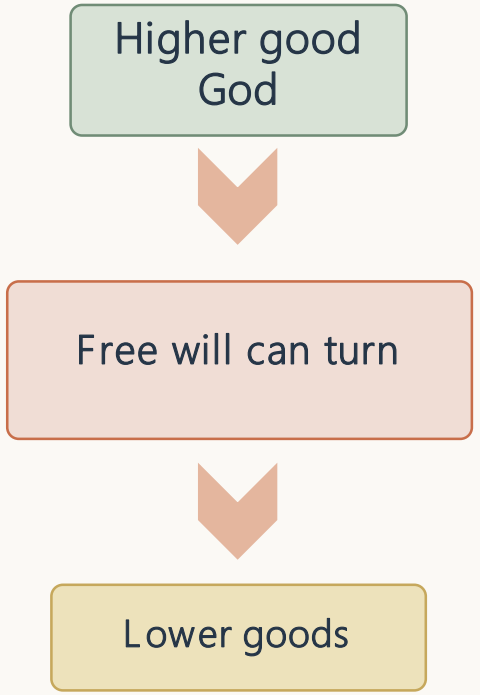
- God is not made into the positive author of evil.
- Creation remains fundamentally good as creation.
- The moral problem shifts from substance to misuse of freedom.

Theodicy here is a defense of divine goodness through ontology.

Free will: where evil actually enters the world

Augustine moves the source of moral evil from God to the will of rational creatures.

Moral structure



- Evil arises when a rational being turns away from the higher toward the lower.
- God permits this possibility because without freedom man would not be a person, but a puppet.
- Responsibility therefore belongs to the creaturely will, not to divine malice.

Personhood is preserved at the cost of risk.

The doctrine of the Two Cities

Augustine transforms history into a moral drama between two kinds of love and two kinds of community.

Earthly City

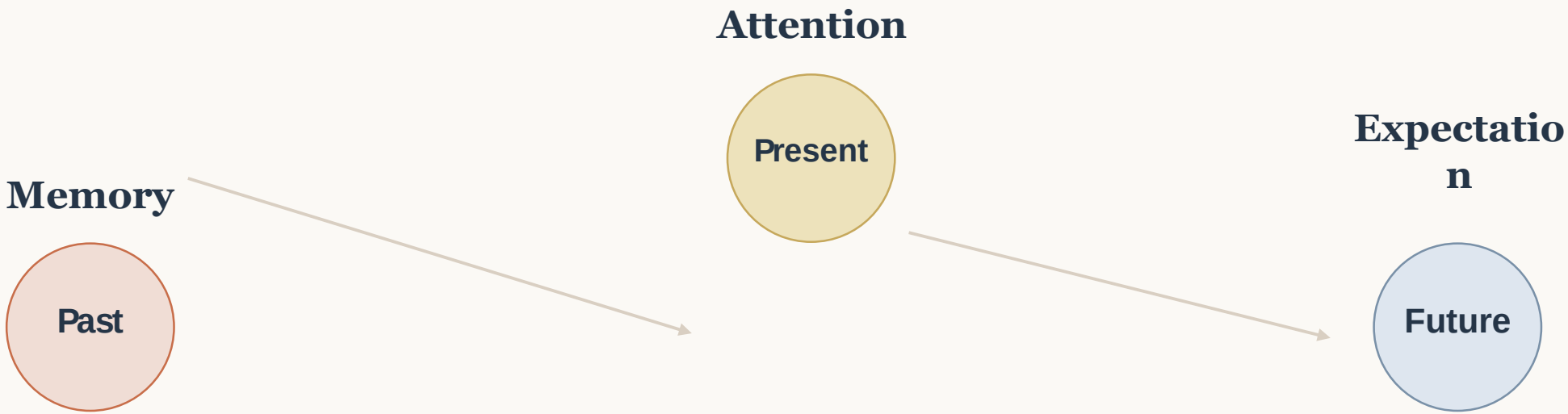
- Based on love of self carried to contempt for God.
- World of egoism, domination, power, and perishable goods.
- Historically visible, but spiritually unstable.

City of God

- Based on love of God carried even to contempt for self.
- Spiritual community of the righteous rather than a mere political state.
- The final victor in the drama of history.

Augustine’s inward turn: time exists in the soul

In the Confessions, Augustine makes inner experience philosophically central.



Time is not an object “out there”; it is lived as three modes of the soul.

What Augustine gives to European thought

Lecture 4 presents Augustinian Patristics as the source of a historical, psychological, and moral depth unknown to classical cosmology.

History has a goal

Humanity moves within a meaningful line rather than within cyclical recurrence.

Truth is inward

The “inner man” becomes a privileged space of philosophical inquiry.

Evil is choice

The moral subject becomes responsible rather than ontologically corrupted by nature alone.

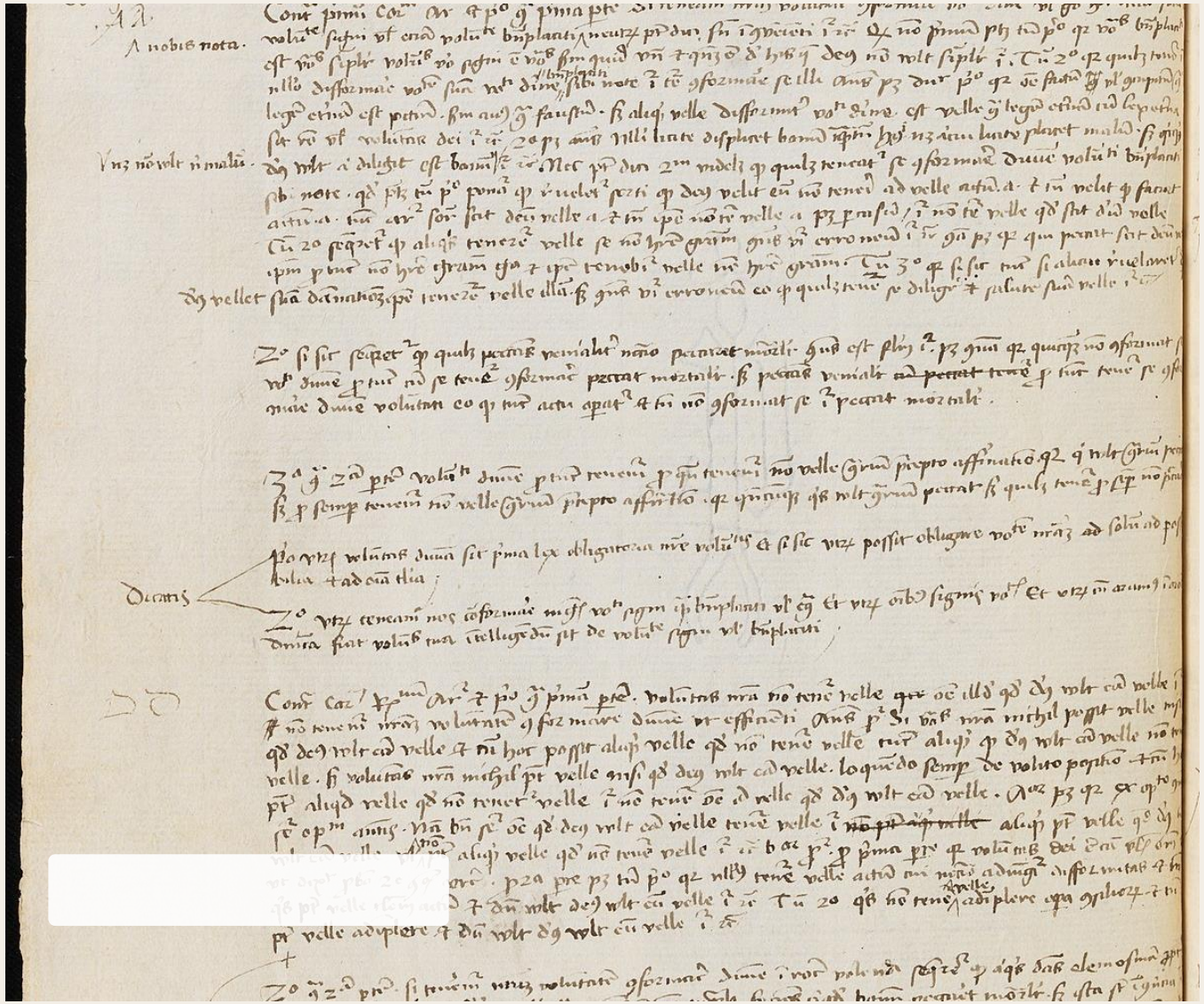
This is why Augustine remains the commanding figure of medieval interiority.

SCHOLASTICISM

Thomas Aquinas

From monastery cell to university hall: faith becomes a discipline of distinction, demonstration, and synthesis.

Main figure / turning point



From monasteries to universities

Scholasticism marks an institutional shift as well as a methodological one.

Monastic cell

Meditation, commentary, scriptural exegesis

Lecture hall

Teaching, disputation, shared intellectual method

University culture

Bologna, Paris, Oxford: proof becomes public and structured

Scholasticism is not mere repetition; it is Christianity learning to think in public, in method, and in argument.

Aquinas and the “Christianization” of Aristotle

The recovery of Aristotle’s works forces Christian philosophy to rethink its relation to natural science.



Thomas Aquinas
1225–1274

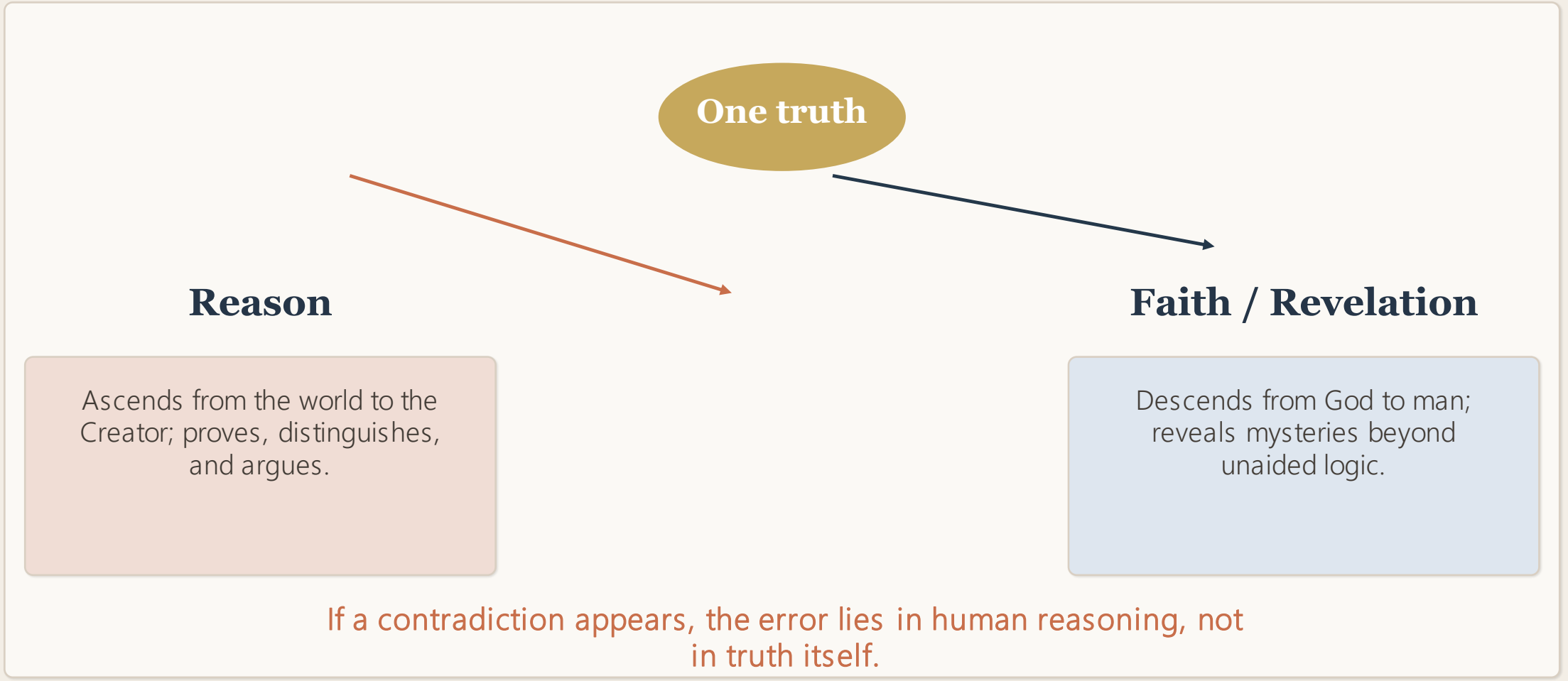
- Until the thirteenth century Augustine’s Platonism dominated Europe.
- Aristotle re-entered Latin thought through Arabic intermediaries and posed a challenge: how should the Church handle a science that explains nature without constant reference to miracle?
- Aquinas answers by reconciling revelation with Aristotelian rationalism rather than choosing one against the other.

Result

Theology becomes a structured science and philosophy becomes its rational preamble.

Harmony of faith and reason

For Aquinas, both faith and reason come from the same God and therefore cannot genuinely contradict each other.



Philosophy and theology: distinct spheres, one horizon

Aquinas demarcates what reason can know and what only revelation can disclose.

Philosophy can reach

- motion, causality, contingency
- existence of God as first principle
- natural law and rational order of ethics

praeambula fidei

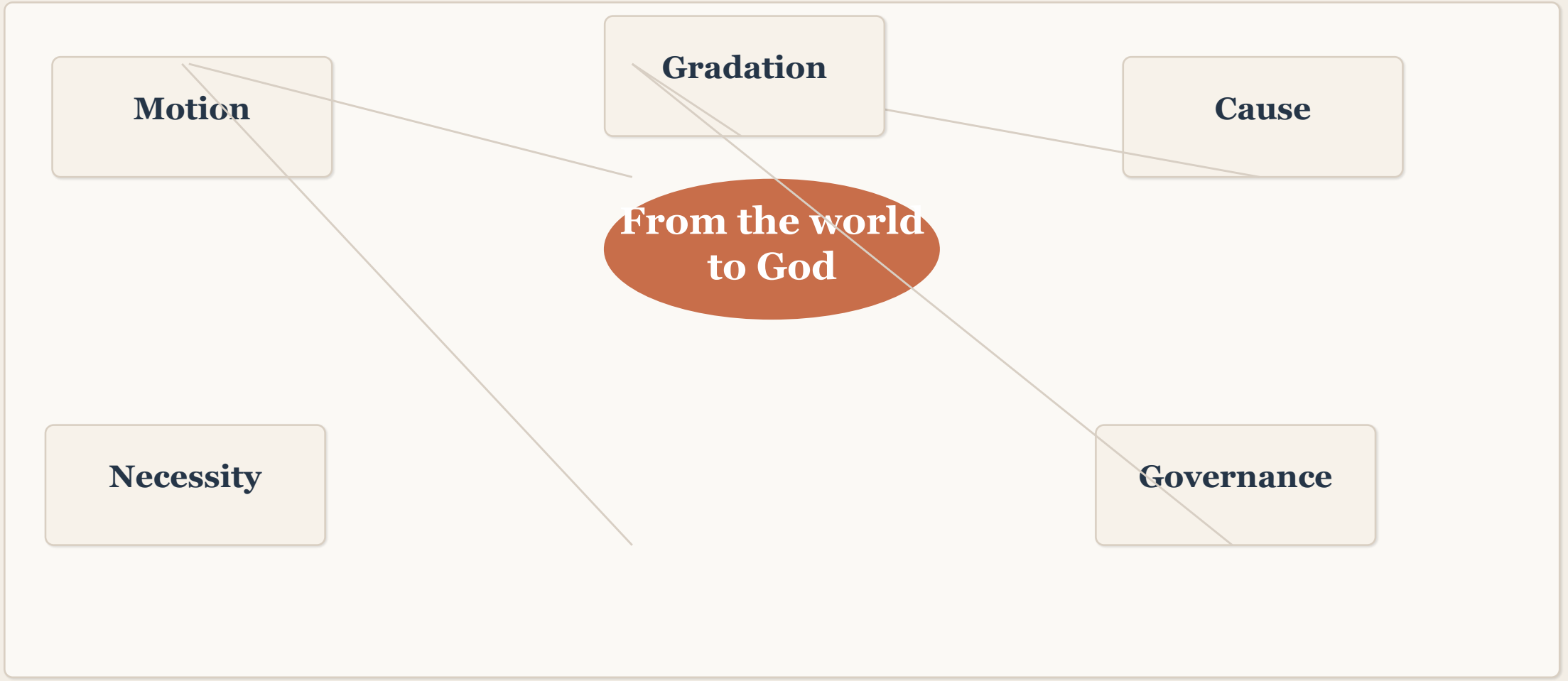
Theology reveals

- Trinity and Incarnation
- salvation history and grace
- mysteries inaccessible to unaided logic

Philosophy is the “preamble of faith”: it prepares, but does not replace, revelation.

The Five Ways: from the visible world to God

Aquinas argues that God is not self-evident to us, but can be demonstrated through the structure of the world.



Five Ways I–II: motion and efficient cause

The first demonstrations begin from the fact that finite things do not fully explain themselves.

1. From Motion

- Whatever is moved is moved by another.
- A regress of movers cannot explain motion absolutely.
- Therefore a Prime Mover is required.

2. From Efficient Cause

- Nothing can be the cause of itself.
- Chains of efficient causes demand a first explanatory ground.
- Therefore a First Cause is posited.

Modern vulnerability

Both arguments invite questions about infinite regress, cosmology, and whether a first explanatory principle must be personal.

Five Ways III–V: contingency, gradation, teleology

The later proofs argue from dependence, degrees of perfection, and order in nature.

3. Necessity

Contingent things depend on something necessary.

4. Gradation

Degrees of goodness imply a supreme perfection as measure.

5. Governance

Order in nature suggests an intelligent finality or design.

Taken together, the Five Ways teach the scholastic habit of arguing from observable features of the world toward metaphysical first principles.

The dispute over universals

The central conceptual question: do general terms such as “humanity” or “goodness” correspond to something real?

Example problem

What is a “circle”?



many particular round things

- Realism: universals have real being.
- Nominalism: universals are only names.
- Conceptualism: universals exist as concepts formed by mind in response to similarity.

The debate is really about the relation between language, thought, and reality.

Realism, conceptualism, nominalism

Three answers to the same problem structure the medieval debate.

Realism

Universals exist first in the mind of God, then as the essence in things, and finally in the human mind after cognition.

Conceptualism

There is no separate mystical “humanity,” but the mind justifiably forms a concept because real similarities are present in things.

Nominalism

Only individual things exist. “Humanity,” “whiteness,” or “circle” are names — signs our language uses for many particulars.

Against “double truth”

Aquinas rejects the idea that reason and faith could contradict each other and still both be true.

Double truth

Associated with Averroist interpretations

- Reason and revelation may issue opposed conclusions.
- The same proposition might be philosophically false but theologically true.
- This protects both domains by separating them radically.

Aquinas: unity of truth

- Both natural reason and revelation come from God.
- Therefore truth cannot be two-headed or self-contradictory.
- If conflict appears, reason has argued badly or misread its limits.

This is the decisive scholastic confidence: reality is intelligible because its sources are one.

Thomistic anthropology and ethics

Aquinas also reshapes the understanding of the human person, body, and moral life.

Body + Soul

Not a soul imprisoned in a body, but one substance of matter and form.

Natural Law

Reason can read the moral order built into human nature and action.

Beatitudo

The final end of man is blessedness: fulfillment through knowing God and living according to reason.

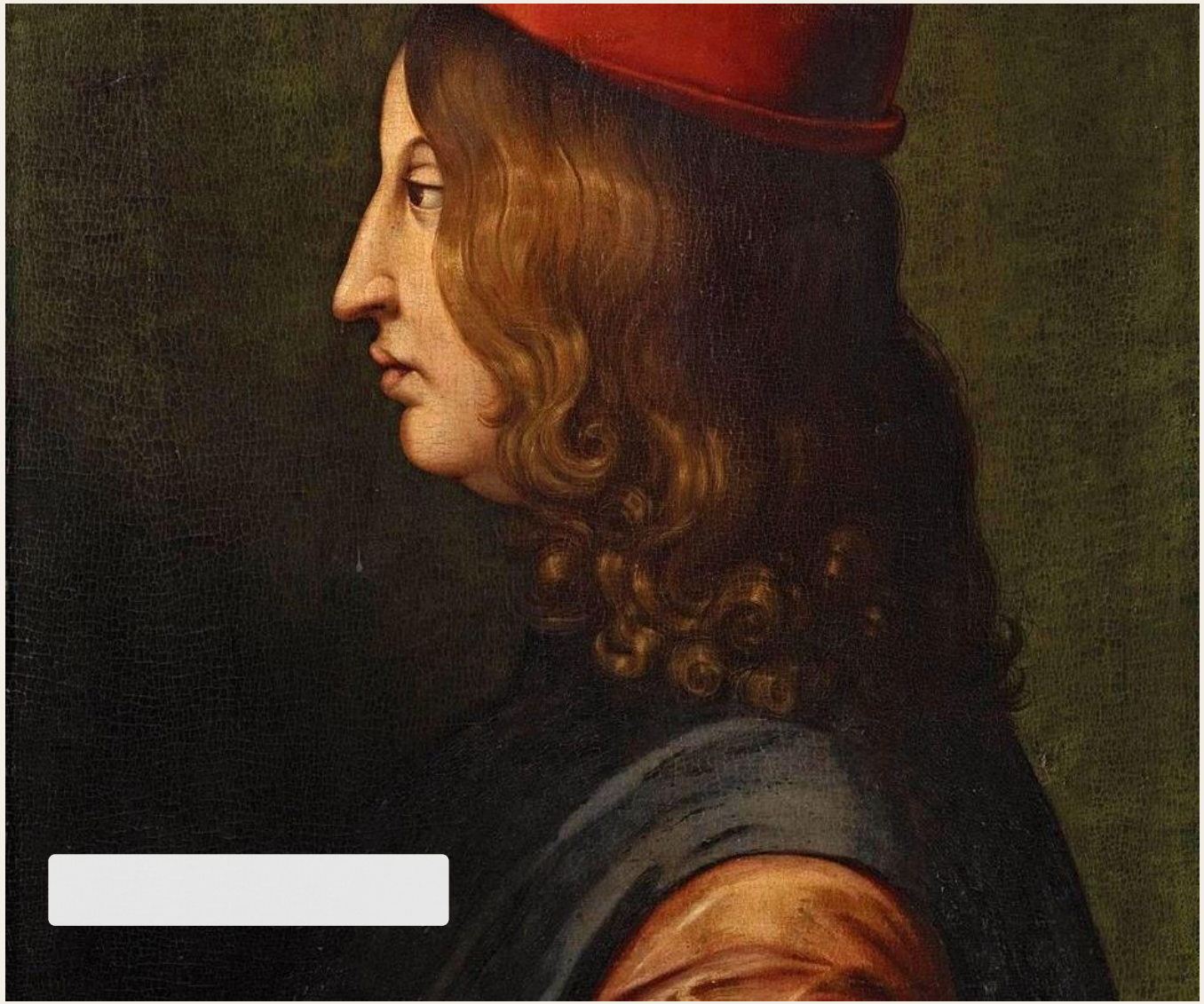
Earthly activity gains dignity because the body and the rational order of nature are not enemies of spiritual life.

RENAISSANCE

The return to man

A semantic explosion: not merely a revival of antiquity, but the emergence of a new confidence in human creativity.

Main figure / turning point



Anthropocentrism and the dignity of man

The center shifts from God as sole focus to man as creative co-author of culture and history.



Giovanni Pico della Mirandola
1463–1494

- In the Renaissance, man is no longer chiefly a sinner in need of humility, but a being of creative potential.
- Pico argues that man has no fixed place in the hierarchy of being: he can descend or rise by choice.
- The dignity of man lies precisely in this indeterminacy and self-fashioning power.

Anthropocentrism does not erase God; it recenters value on human freedom, talent, and cultural creation.

Humanism, the “universal man,” and secularization

The Renaissance ideal is no longer holiness alone, but comprehensive cultivation of human capacities.



Leonardo da Vinci as emblem of the uomo universale

- Humanism liberates thought from rigid scholastic authority and returns to classical texts with new energy.
- The ideal figure is the broadly developed person: artist, engineer, poet, scientist, thinker.
- Secularization begins when earthly life, beauty, the body, and the joy of inquiry gain legitimacy against medieval asceticism.

From the cult of holiness to the cult of talent.

Pantheism, infinity, and the scientific imagination

Renaissance natural philosophy loosens the medieval division between earthly and heavenly reality.



Giordano Bruno



Closed hierarchical cosmos



Toward an open and dynamic universe

Nicholas of Cusa and Bruno treat God as diffused in nature rather than locked outside it. If God is infinite, the universe cannot remain the small, closed house of medieval geocentrism.

Machiavelli and political realism

The Renaissance also secularizes politics by separating statecraft from theological and moral idealism.



Niccolò Machiavelli
1469–1527

- In The Prince, the state is treated not as a fragment of the City of God, but as an earthly mechanism with its own laws.
- The ruler must be judged by effectiveness and preservation of the polity, not only by personal virtue or religious conformity.
- Politics is thereby secularized: it becomes a domain of pragmatic analysis and the embryo of modern political science.

The “overturn”

Power is analyzed as power, not disguised as pure moral theology.

From theocentrism to modernity

The Renaissance does not simply end the Middle Ages; it redistributes the center of gravity of European thought.

Dimension	Medieval	Renaissance
Center	God / theocentrism	Man / anthropocentrism
Nature	Symbolic creation	Living field of inquiry and creativity
Human being	Penitent soul	Co-creator and self-fashioning subject
Knowledge	Commentary on revelation	Return to texts, arts, nature, experiment
Politics	Subordinated to theological horizon	Analyzed as autonomous statecraft

New freedom arrives together with new anxiety: once divine guardianship loosens, man stands before an infinite and colder universe.

Key takeaways and discussion prompts

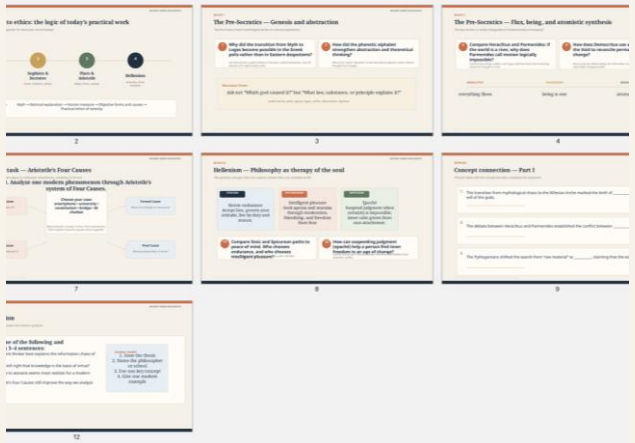
A final synthesis of the lecture's main semantic moves.

Four takeaways

- Medieval philosophy replaces cosmic self-sufficiency with created dependence and providential history.
- Augustine gives Christianity a philosophy of evil, history, and inward time.
- Aquinas turns theology into a disciplined science by harmonizing revelation and Aristotelian reason.
- The Renaissance recenters value on man, creativity, nature, and political realism.

Useful seminar prompts

- Is theocentrism really the opposite of humanism, or its hidden precondition?
- Which of Aquinas's Five Ways is most vulnerable today?
- Does Machiavelli begin modern freedom or modern cynicism?



Course continuity

Lecture 4 stands between the ancient foundations of philosophy and the emergence of modern thought.