

Dissertation proposal: Belief, Religion and Causality.

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Table of contents:

Figure list	3
Introduction	4
Belief	4
Anya Gallaccio's <i>La Dolce Vita</i>	6
Religion	7
William Blake's <i>The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun</i>	9
Causality	10
Peter Fischli and David Weiss' <i>The Way Things Go</i>	12
Conclusion	13
Reference list	14

Figure list:

Figure 1: Gallaccio, A. (1994) *La Dolce Vita* [installation]. Available at:

<https://www.studiostefaniamiscetti.com/exhibitions/anya-gallaccio-dolce-vita/>

(Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Figure 2: Blake, W. (1803-1805) *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* [water colour on wove paper]. Available at:

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/en-GB/objects/4368> (Accessed: 30 April).

Figure 3: Fischli, P and Weiss, D. (1987) *The Way Things Go* [Short film]. Available

at: <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/32552> (Accessed: 4 May)

In this essay I will be examining the three key words of belief, causality and religion and discussing how these are linked, eventually leading to a question that I will use for my dissertation. I will be discussing Aristotle, Aquinas and Hume considering their theories of existence, change and cause in relation to my key words; how a cause must have a causer and how this can be intrinsically linked to religion and/or belief. I will be examining Anya Gallaccio's installation, *La Dolce Vita*, William Blake's painting *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (Rev. 12: 1-4) and Peter Fischli and David Weiss' short film *The Way Things Go*.

Belief is defined as 'the feeling of being certain that something exists or is true' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025) mostly about something that does not have proof and often something that cannot be proven. Belief does not necessarily have its basis in certainty but rather the mental acceptance of the individual regarding a certain idea (Connors & Halligan, 2015). A subjective concept, belief takes a different form with each person; whilst the idea of belief is a standardised term the understanding and implication is specific to the individual. In Ancient Greece philosopher Aristotle based his understanding of belief around the concept of change, observing the natural environment and how it dramatically alters over time. He was inspired by the impermanence of the world and all of his beliefs were based on his observations that the world was changing.

Aristotle empirically viewed the world through nature. In his book 'metaphysics' he explained that he believed the truth about the universe could be found by observing the world. He is considered to be the first scientist as he searched for the truth by categorising things through their differences and grouping them together based on

their similarities much like Charles Darwin. 'seeing [...] makes us know and brings to light many differences between things' (Aristotle, 2018). Aristotle was fascinated by cause; he was searching for the answers to the questions of why are things the way they are?: what causes things?: why do things exist in the world? Through his extensive observation of the world around him he saw that the world was constantly changing as things grow and decay and he believed that everything is moving from a state of potentiality, where it has the possibility of doing something or becoming something, to a state of actuality, when potential is achieved. He also put forward the theory of causality, the idea that everything has four causes. 'these, then, are the causes' (Aristotle, 2018); material, the thing that something is made of: efficient, the way an object is created: formal, the idea or plan that led to the creation of an object: final, the reason why an object is created. Aristotle's theory of causality questioned the belief system in place at the time whereby everything was believed to be created by God. The theory of change thereby challenged the nature of belief.



Fig. 1: *La Dolce Vita* (Anya Gallaccio, 1994)

Anya Gallaccio creates site-specific installations quite often using natural organic materials that she leaves in the space for long periods of time to show the transformation that they have as they change and decay. Her work *La Dolce Vita* (figure 1) was first exhibited in 1994 and is a sheet of foil on the ground with numerous lit candles atop. The candles are left to burn and melt and as they do they create free, unique and uncontrolled wax pools and puddles on the foil. When each of the candles runs out they are replaced by another and the piece continues. 'By shows end they will flicker atop a wavy mass having constructed their own sculpture with only the barest intervention' (Judah, 2024). Anya embraces the nature of chance with this piece allowing the candles to, in effect create their own artwork, their own pattern and path atop the foil. The candles create an independent artwork without anyone intervening or controlling what happens or how it looks. Anya simply observes what happens and watches how the piece changes from moment to

moment and from day to day much like Aristotle's observations of the natural world. Both the natural world and La Dolce Vita control their own destiny, altering and changing by their own accord; both Gallaccio and Aristotle's beliefs are thereby motivated by the concept of change.

Religion is defined as 'the belief in and worship of a god or gods, or any such system of belief and worship' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). To believe is to be sure that something is true or real however religion is when people take what they believe in and then worship it, living their lives around the worship of their god/ gods or deity/ deities and their teachings. 'a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices about life and the world relative to the supernatural that unite the believers or followers into a social organization of moral community' (Yang, 2011). It is extremely hard to define what religion is because there are so many religions, and each religion believes in something different as well as believing that the other religions are wrong or misguided. Religion is also unique to each person meaning that not everyone will experience it or define it in the same way.

St. Thomas Aquinas is considered to be one of the Catholic church's greatest philosophers. In his book 'Summa Theologica' he discusses why the universe exists and concludes that the answer is because of God. Firstly, he agreed with Aristotle's view that everything in our world is in motion but expanded on this by proposing the idea that for something to be in motion there must something to put it in motion. This creates a chain of events however this chain can only go so far. It cannot go on forever and there has to be a start. So, Aquinas suggested that there is a being at the start of the chain that does not rely on anything else to move it and simply sets

the chain into motion. Aquinas called this the *unmoved mover* and said that it was God. '[I]t is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God' (Aquinas, 1947). Secondly, Aquinas believed that every effect has a cause and this chain of things causing each other cannot go on forever in an infinite regress. Aquinas suggested that there was a being that is not caused by anything else at the beginning of the chain. He called this the *uncaused causer* and once again concluded that this being was God saying 'it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God' (1947). Thirdly he argued that everything is contingent, which means everything relies on something else for its existence. Things are contingent in two ways: the first is they depend on something to bring them into existence for example how we depend on our parents for our existence, and the second is they also depend on outside factors for the continuation of their existence, for example how plants depend on light from the sun. However again this pattern of contingency can't go on forever as an infinite regress is impossible, so he suggested that there must be a necessary being that got its existence from itself that started the chain of contingency and he once again concluded that this being was God saying 'some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God' (1947). Due to Aquinas being Catholic his conclusion to all of his arguments are this being is God.

Religion means different things to different people and its presence and impact on a person's life differs. The UK is a secular society which means that religion is not a big part of everyday life unless chosen. Within the UK, lives are largely not controlled by religion, religious practice or the expectations of religion however this is not the

case in other countries. In Saudi Arabia religion plays a huge part in the way people live their everyday life. The most common religion is Islam and in deeply religious areas such as Zanzibar an alarm sounds five times a day informing people it is time to pray (Amo Zanzibar Tours and Safaris, 2025). At this time businesses will close and all people stop immediately and pray. Religion is also heavily influential over the government and laws in Saudi Arabia and many other Middle Eastern countries unlike here in the UK where church and state are separate (Wehrey, 2021).



Fig. 2: *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (William Blake, 1803-1805)

William Blake explored themes of spirituality and good and evil within his work and had a unique and distinct art style. At the time when he was creating his work he was not well known however 'he came to be highly regarded by later critics and readers

for his expressiveness and creativity, and for the philosophical and mystical undercurrents within his work' (Tate, 2012). His work *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (Rev. 12: 1-4) (figure 1) was created based on part of the New Testament of the Christian bible where a dragon prepares to eat the child of a woman as she gives birth. This painting is a visual commentary on the struggle between good and evil both within the bible and within Christianity as a whole and demonstrates the threat of evil within the world. 'the beasts back dominates the composition, emphasizing the scale of evil that the dragon represents' (Brooklyn Museum, 2025). However, it also demonstrates the power and goodness of God as he saves the woman and her baby; good reigning superior over evil arguably the basis for all religions.

Causality is defined as 'the principle that there is a cause for everything that happens' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). No singular event happens without a cause and must therefore be attributed to something that started the chain of motion.

Causality is the term for the relationship between cause and effect. 'Causes are regularly followed by their effects' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021).

Observing causality in the world around us helps us understand how and why things happen. 'a genuine cause and its effect stand in a pattern of invariable succession: whenever the cause occurs, so does its effect' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021). Cause and effect are intrinsically linked; observations in the natural world show how something will start a pattern of events which in turn explain why things happen and even try to predict what might happen next.

David Hume is one of the main philosophers that wrote extensively about causality. He disagreed with Aquinas' uncaused causer theory putting forward two main criticisms. He argued that just because things in our world can be explained through causes doesn't mean that the universe as a whole has a cause. This assumption that parts of something have the same properties as the whole is called the *Fallacy of Composition* (Hume, 1779). Hume argued that if there are explanations for the things around us and the causes of effects in the world, then there is no need for a whole universe explanation. Bertrand Russell supported Hume and expanded by saying that just because things have causes within the universe does not mean that the universe has a cause; every man has a mother is not proof that the human race has a mother (Philosophy Overdose, 2022). In Hume's second criticism he argued that because we live in a causal universe meaning causes and effects are seen everywhere does not mean there is a relationship between cause and effect. He said that it is a matter of logic that not all effects have causes and if the universe was looked at from the outside there might actually be no relationship between cause and effect. This is called the *Fallacy of Affirmation of the Consequent* (Hume, 1779). He also argued that humans were not present for the creation of the universe therefore it cannot be proved empirically that there is a necessary being or that this being is God.

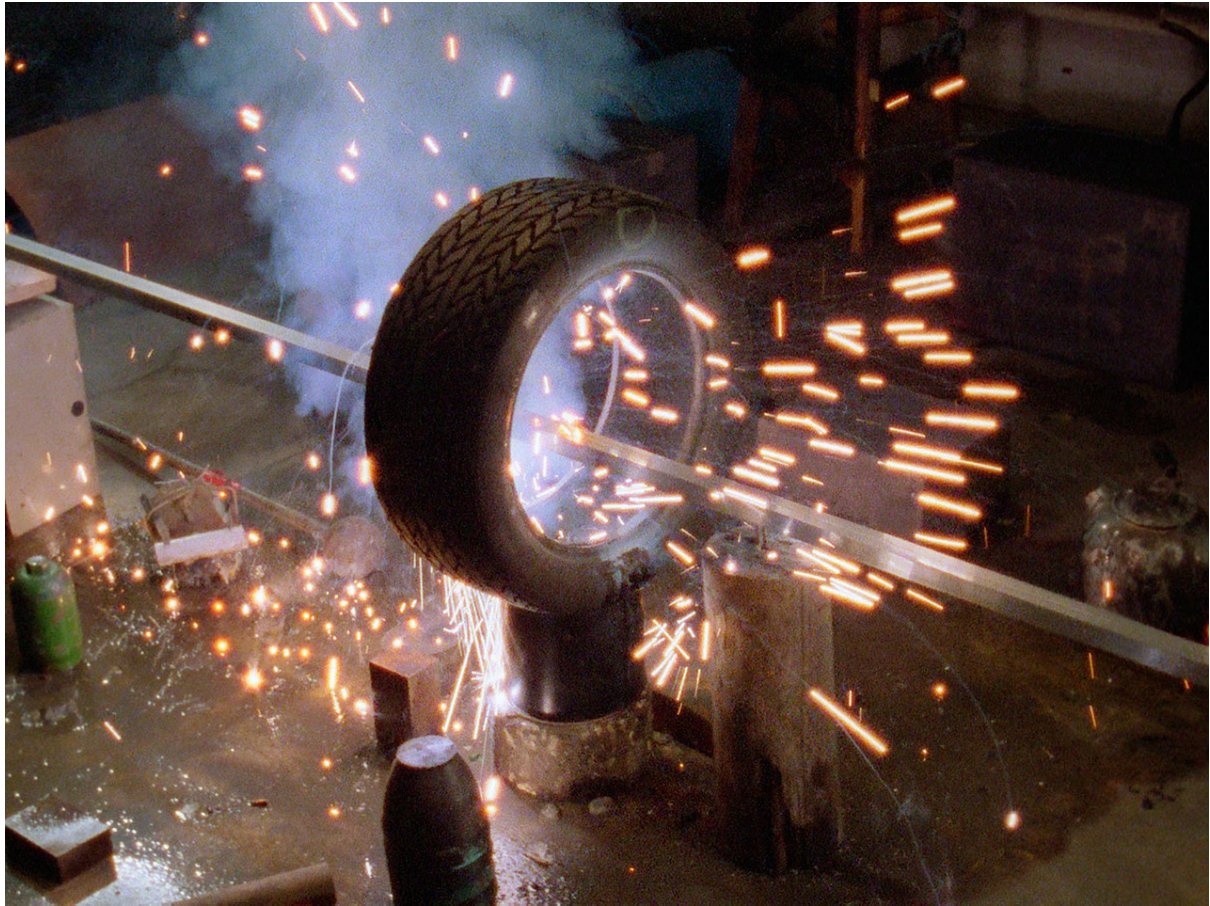


Fig. 3: *The Way Things Go* (Peter Fischli and David Weiss, 1987)

Peter Fischli and David Weiss began collaborating in 1979 and created a variety of different work; they rejected the idea of working in a set style or media, from videos, photographs and films to books and multimedia installations. This work (figure 3) is a still from a short film that they made in 1987 called *The Way Things Go*. In a warehouse they created a chain of things bumping into each other causing other things to move and fall over creating a chain of cause and effect. For example, at one point in the film a tire rolls down a plank of wood hitting a bottle that falls and hits a bucket that tips its contents out causing a chemical reaction that creates a small fire and lots of smoke. This chain of causality continues throughout the whole thirty minute film without any human involvement. 'the objects appear to move of their own volition' (The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, 2015) however the chain was meticulously set up by Fischli and Weiss in order to show a long series of cause and

effect; although the objects move independently the chain of motion is started by something as suggested by Aquinas. It is also reminiscent of the breakfast scene in Wallace and Gromit where Wallace uses the machines that he invented to start a chain of causality in order to wake up, have a bath, get dressed and then have breakfast.

Each of these key words contain characteristics applicable to religious art and human existence. For Aristotle the world is in motion with change at its centre, continually moving from potentiality to actuality; his theory challenged belief systems at the time questioning the existence of God. For Hume, although there is cause and effect throughout the world this does not mean there is a relationship between them and this in turn does not lead to the conclusion that there is a cause to the universe. Aquinas discusses the world in relation to the *Uncaused Causor* and the *Unmoved Mover*; despite agreeing with Aristotle that the world is in motion Aquinas argues for a force as the creator of the motion and this must be God.

The concept of religion and belief based systems have long been influential in underpinning all notions of creation and cause and effect. Religious art in turn uses imagery to visually depict and express beliefs, demonstrated in the religious undertones of William Blake's work and the imagery he uses to present the biblical story. I want to continue to explore artwork that is based on religion and the power it has both in religious settings as well as over people. Therefore my dissertation will be about the role of art within religion, specifically Christianity, and the power that art and religious iconography has. The question I will use will be: 'What influence and impact does religious art and iconography have within Christianity?'

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