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Spinoza's Arguments for the Existence of God

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In this paper I have approached Spinoza's arguments for the existence of God from a somewhat unusual angle. In philosophy it is customary to consider an argument and give reasons for accepting or rejecting it in part or wholly. If I were to fall in line with the traditional method of discussing philosophical problems I would be content to point out that, in my opinion, Spinoza's arguments fail to prove the existence of God. But, in that case, I would be concerned only with Spinoza's explicit intention in presenting his arguments and the sense in which Spinoza thought that his arguments were convincing. The true worth, and what I may be permitted to call the occult intention of the arguments, would remain unnoticed. To make these explicit is a difficult task, particularly as Spinoza himself was not aware of the real force of his arguments. He thought they proved the existence of God *more geometrico*, i.e. in the same way and with the same kind of inevitableness as reasoning in geometry establishes a theorem. In this he was, I think, mistaken. The real significance of his arguments, unsuspected, I repeat, by Spinoza himself, requires to be brought out in the light of what philosophical, as distinct from mathematical, reasoning is or should be. If we can penetrate behind the external form of the arguments into their underlying intention, felt at most only vaguely and sub-consciously by Spinoza but not brought to the level of self-consciousness, we shall perhaps understand that rather puzzling phenomenon of an argument appearing to be conclusive and almost self-evidently valid to one philosopher and to another as inconclusive or even obviously fallacious. In such cases the disagreement does not arise because either philosopher possesses less of the critical faculty or intellectual integrity than the other. There is a genuine philosophical impasse, and so long as the real nature of the argument is not uncovered a discussion between the two contending parties would amount to nothing better than talking at cross-purposes. I suspect that in a good many philosophical discussions, specially of the polemical kind, philosophers talk at cross-purposes and are not

aware of doing so since they do not attend to the presuppositions of what they are saying. Their way of thinking illustrates a kind of *non-sequitur* which is widespread in philosophy and which does not occur in any other sphere of intellectual inquiry.

The phrase, 'the occult intention of Spinoza's arguments', requires explanation, but it is not as mystifying as it sounds. We may recall Collingwood's remark that in philosophy we seek to know better what we already knew. I interpret this to mean that in philosophy we do not merely draw out the implications of our starting-point but return to it again and again and understand better what we have non-inferentially presupposed. This is an attempt to raise thought to the level of self-consciousness which is characteristic of the philosophical, and particularly the metaphysical, way of thinking. At a deeper level of self-consciousness one becomes aware not merely of one's absolute presuppositions but of the whole process of the gradual maturation of one's basic commitment or starting-point of view. The starting-point of a philosophical system is not and cannot be logically grounded, for the only neutral logical grounds one can have are the laws of thought which are too abstract and empty to give rise to a concrete system of philosophy. Here one not merely philosophizes but, what is more important, becomes fully aware of what one does when one philosophizes. At this level of self-consciousness we may come to recognize that all along there was a hidden intellectual pressure to make explicit a logic or pattern of thinking which, in a pre-critical stage of thought, takes the form of a mode of reasoning *more geometrico*. It is this hidden pattern of reasoning struggling to find self-expression that I have called 'the occult intention' of philosophical arguments. What this intention is in the present case will be brought out in my discussion of Spinoza's arguments for the existence of God, which, as they stand, are unconvincing and even fallacious, but which, when reconstructed in the light of their true form and purpose, might well appear not only convincing but also self-evident, at any rate to those who do not reject metaphysical concepts as meaningless and metaphysical problems and their solutions as arising out of 'linguistic muddles'. Between those who do reject transcendent metaphysics as meaningless and the Spinozist there would, of course, be no common basis for discussion.

To get at the root of Spinoza's argument one must recognize¹ that philosophical thinking operates with what I have elsewhere called 'criterion words'. Some of these words are 'rational', 'valid', 'logical', 'adequate' and 'proof'. They are criterion

¹ *Philosophical Arguments and Disagreement*: Address to the Indian Philosophical Congress, Jodhpur, 1966.

words in the sense that their use presupposes the application of a criterion. Further, the criterion is not purely logical in the sense of being neutral and common to all thinking but is built into the system which a philosopher adopts and develops and derives its specific character from the basic framework of the system within which it operates. The same criterion word would thus have a different special significance when it operates within a system which is the development of a different basic point of view. Thus criterion words, without being equivocal, are not used in a univocal sense.

Surprisingly, philosophers show a lack of awareness of this feature of criterion words and hence they talk with each other interminably at cross-purposes.

Another important point which we must note is that 'existence' is also, implicitly, a criterion word. This fact has not been taken into account either by the supporters or by the critics of the Ontological Argument. Kant was content to point out that 'existence' is not a predicative expression, but he, along with other philosophers, failed to give a satisfactory positive analysis of the existential judgment. The peculiarity of the existential judgment is that 'exists' is a criterion word in the sense that one has to use a criterion for deciding whether the judgment is true or false. So much perhaps would be admitted by philosophers, but what has been overlooked is that the criterion used determines the specific meaning of the word 'existence' and that since the criterion differs in different contexts the significance of the word 'exists' does not remain the same. The word 'existence', therefore, without being equivocal, is not used in a univocal sense. Thus, before we answer the question, 'does God exist?' by considering arguments for and against, we must first try to understand what is meant by attributing existence to God, i.e. what criterion we are to use in order to decide whether the proposition 'God exists' is true or false. This raises the discussion of the question whether God exists to a different level from that in which discussions involving the traditional arguments for the existence of God usually take place. It also reveals to us the true, but hidden, intention of the ontological argument and enables us to understand why the argument appears completely convincing to some philosophers and completely fallacious to others.

It should be noted that the basic concept of a philosophical system is alogical in the sense that its logic or pattern of reasoning is interior and not anterior to it. If such a concept is not to be arbitrary it must itself be a criterion-concept, i.e. it must provide a criterion in the light of which one thinks and develops a philosophical system. A criterion-concept is thus not arbitrary since it provides its own justification. Now in the case of transcendent metaphysics, I suggest that the basic concept, which is also a criterion-concept, is the concept of God as the

Perfect Being. Hence 'existence' when predicated of God has a specific meaning which is determined by the criterion provided by the concept of God. Hence the proposition 'God exists' is seen to be self-evidently true.

The ontological argument as presented in the history of philosophy from St. Anselm downwards is an attempt to reach this insight, but it fails because its supporters have uncritically tried to frame the argument on the model of mathematical reasoning. The ontological argument is interpreted as an attempt to pass from the idea of God to the existence of God in the same way in which one passes, in mathematics, from definitions and axioms to theorems. The argument, it is claimed, shows that in the case of God and God alone essence involves existence. This is a specious argument, but I think it derives its force from the ambiguity of the term 'self-existent'. Undoubtedly it would be a contradiction to say that God, the Perfect Being, can come into existence, or that His existence, even if eternal, is dependent on another. God, by definition, can never be a creature in any sense; nor is Divine Nature compatible with dependent existence. But the fact that the idea of God is necessarily that of a being who is self-dependent and self-existent does not lead to the conclusion that God exists. All that we are permitted to conclude from the 'self-existent' character of Divine essence is the hypothetical proposition, '*if God exists, He necessarily exists eternally and as a totally independent being*', or, as Spinoza puts it, as *causa sui*. The maxim that in the case of God essence and existence are one must then be understood to mean that God's 'essence' provides the criterion which gives the specific significance to the word 'existence' when existence is attributed to God.

This, I believe, is the underlying truth of the ontological argument, though Anselm and other supporters of the argument, including Spinoza, missed its true significance. The argument constructed on the geometrical model is not valid, but they have been convinced of its validity because, I suspect, they have, without being explicitly aware of it, used the concept of existence as a criterion-concept and the concept of God as providing the criterion which gives the specific meaning to the predicative expression 'existence' when applied to God. Those who say, like Spinoza, that God cannot be conceived except as existing are either making an illegitimate transition from the ideal order to the actual order (by treating 'existence' as a quality) or they are *implicitly* using the idea of God as a criterion for settling the question of His existence.

I shall now illustrate this point with reference to two of Spinoza's arguments for the existence of God.

In Spinoza's theory, definitions and principles of explanation mingle inextricably. To understand or explain a thing, according to him, is to assign to it a cause. That which is

caused by another does not have the reason of its explanation within itself. It is not in itself but in something else. 'All things which are, are in themselves or in other things' (Axiom I). That which is in itself and has the reason of its existence within itself is called 'Substance'. 'I understand Substance to be that which is in itself and is conceived through itself: I mean that, the conception of which does not depend on the conception of another thing from which it must be formed' (Defn. III). Substance, therefore, is '*Causi sui*'.

'I understand that to be Cause of Itself whose essence involves existence and whose nature cannot be conceived unless existing.' Thus, in the form of what seems a harmless definition, Spinoza lays down the crucial step in his proof of the existence of God. It should be clear that these Definitions as well as the Axiom on which they rest (Axiom I) are in fact criterion-statements, i.e. they make use of criterion-concepts. What Spinoza is doing is to lay down an ideal of explanation which can only be satisfied if we accept the reality of Substance or God. Only in 'Substance' are all things explained and Substance is itself self-explaining. Spinoza claims to show that Substance is Infinite, i.e. it is God. Apparently to himself Spinoza provides a demonstration of God's existence, but in reality what he is doing is inviting us to accept the concept of God as the key concept in the light of which our intellectual system is to be organized.

Not realizing that he is using the notions of Substance and God as principles of explanation or as criterion-concepts Spinoza naturally believes that his task is to prove first the existence of Substance and, through Substance, the existence of God. His 'proofs' are both unnecessary and invalid. Consider first how Spinoza tries to show that 'existence appertains to the nature of substance'. Substance is 'that which is in itself and is conceived through itself'. Now 'one substance cannot be produced by another', for the second substance must have a different attribute (Prop. V) and hence it will have nothing in common with the first substance (Prop. II). 'Of two things having nothing in common between them, one cannot be the cause of the other' (Prop. III). Spinoza draws the corollary 'that a substance cannot be produced from anything else'. The proof of this relies on Axiom I which says, 'All things which are, are in themselves or in other things.' If a substance cannot be produced from anything else we have to recognize that it is its own cause. Hence existence appertains to the nature of substance, for, by Definition I, that is Cause of Itself 'whose essence involves existence and whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing'.

Spinoza's argument to show that 'one substance cannot be produced by another' is both unnecessary and unconvincing. Why should the two substances, the cause and the effect, be supposed to have the same identical nature? Why cannot

a greater substance, i.e. a substance having the same attribute, but in a greater degree, produce a lesser substance? It might be answered that this would run counter to Spinoza's definition of Substance as 'that which is in itself and is conceived through itself: I mean that, the conception of which does not depend on the conception of another thing from which it must be formed'. Precisely, Spinoza's definition has already ensured that nothing can be called a substance which is or can be produced by another. This definition is not arbitrary because it lays down a criterion-concept, but in that case it is quite unnecessary to try to prove that 'one substance cannot be produced by another' since our thinking is to be determined and guided, according to Spinoza, in the light of the notion of Substance itself. The explanation of nothing is finally satisfactory (another criterion-concept) unless it is explained in terms of the concept of Substance which is itself self-explaining, since it provides the criterion for all valid explanation.

In considering Spinoza's definition of substance as *Causa sui* we must remember that the notion of cause is used as a principle of explanation. '*Causa sui*, therefore, does not merely mean 'the self-existent', but also, and for Spinoza's argument, primarily, the self-explaining, that in which thought comes to rest. Thus, we have here, from the very first sentence, the idea of God functioning as a criterion of thought. Again, take the definition of substance as 'that which is in itself and is conceived through itself'. To conceive is to understand (not merely to define), to make intelligible; and intelligibility is obviously a criterion-concept. Spinoza makes this clear when he says that substance is that whose 'knowledge does not depend on the knowledge of any other thing'. 'Knowledge' does not mean merely the awareness of a thing, but the understanding of it, i.e. the having of an adequate idea of it. What Spinoza does, therefore, is to identify the most adequate idea with the idea of Substance. This cannot be done unless, first, the idea of Substance is the same as the idea of God and, second, the idea of God functions as a criterion, or provides the criterion for metaphysical thinking.

Substance, says Spinoza, is that 'which is in itself'. This is supported by Axiom I: 'All things which are, are in themselves or in other things.' Now what is it 'to be in oneself'? If this is not a mere tautology, viz. a thing is what it is, it means that we are to *understand* the thing as explained in terms of itself alone, i.e. it is self-explaining or Infinite. 'In other things' does not mean spatially contained in something else, as a pen is contained in a box. It means, again, that the explanation of it carries us beyond itself; in other words, it is finite or a fragment of a larger whole. To say that everything is either Infinite or finite and that the finite necessarily

points to the Infinite (which is what Axiom I means when it is spelled out) is axiomatic only if the idea of the Infinite is explicitly used as the criterion of metaphysical thought and as the only possible criterion of such thinking.

Those critics of Spinoza who accuse him of setting up arbitrary definitions and then building up a system by drawing consequences from them have completely missed the intention underlying Spinoza's argument. Every 'definition' given by Spinoza expresses an intellectual insight, an insight not merely into the nature of things, as Spinoza thought, but also and mainly into the guiding principle of metaphysical thinking, the coincidence of the basic metaphysical concept *about* which one thinks and the criterion *in the light of which* one thinks in constructing a metaphysical system.

Having shown that 'existence appertains to the nature of substance' Spinoza next goes on to show that Substance which necessarily exists is necessarily Infinite, i.e. Substance = God. This identification is supported by Defn. II. 'That thing is said to be Finite in its Kind which can be limited by another thing of the same kind.' He thus seems to think that the idea of Substance is distinct from the idea of God (the Infinite). Existence is proved directly of Substance and indirectly of God when it is shown that Substance is necessarily Infinite.

The argument to show that substance is infinite is, like the argument, to show that substance necessarily exists, both inconclusive and unnecessary. Substance cannot be limited 'by another thing of the same kind'. But there is no reason why in principle one substance cannot be limited by another (greater) substance or be in its own nature limited. This is ruled out only because such a substance would not have the grounds of its intelligibility in itself and substance', by definition, is self-explaining or *causa sui*. 'Substance', as I have shown, is a criterion-concept, not only in the sense that its use presupposes a criterion, but in the more fundamental sense that there is a criterion built into the concept itself. And this built-in criterion is none other than the concept of God or the Infinite. The proof of the existence of substance implicitly uses the idea of God as the criterion for determining existence.

Thus Spinoza is mistaken in thinking that he starts with the idea of substance and reaches the idea of God by proving that substance is necessarily infinite. We cannot reach the idea of the Infinite from any other idea, or reach the existence of God from the existence of anything else. We cannot show that something which necessarily exists is necessarily God unless we surreptitiously introduce into the idea of this something the idea of God. Whatever force Spinoza's argument has derives from the fact that from the first he implicitly identifies the idea of substance with the idea of God. And God's existence cannot be proved unless it is seen that we are using the idea of God as a criterion-concept. And this is

precisely what Spinoza does though he is not himself aware of it. The 'proof' actually consists in bringing thought to the level of self-consciousness, but Spinoza is under the impression that the argument proceeds *more geometrico* to demonstrate the existence of God from a set of definitions and axioms.

I shall now consider another proof which Spinoza gives of the proposition 'God or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists' (Prop. XI). We shall see that this proof also uses the idea of God as a criterion-concept. The proof is as follows: 'A cause or reason ought to be assigned for each thing, why it exists or why it does not.' 'Now this reason or cause must be contained in the nature of the thing or outside of it.' 'That must of necessity exist concerning which no reason or cause is granted which could prevent its existence. If thus no reason or cause can be granted which could prevent the existence of God or take his existence from him, it must certainly be concluded that he does exist of necessity.'

Spinoza's argument is that whatever exists, necessarily exists, and of whatever does not exist, we can say it is impossible for it to exist. Hence, if nothing prevents God's existence, God necessarily exists. Now, if God does not exist, what is the cause which prevents his existence? The cause must be in another substance of another nature. But such a substance can have nothing in common with God (Prop. II) and, therefore, can neither give him existence nor take it from him.

I have suggested that Spinoza's argument in support of Prop. II has no force. It assumes that two substances can act on each other only if they have a community of nature, and two different substances cannot have any community of nature. I have suggested that substance A may have the same quality as substance B, but possess it in a higher degree. I think, however, that the above argument of Spinoza to prove the impossibility of God's non-existence does not really rely on Prop. II. Or at least it can be given a much stronger form. The argument in its stronger form may be stated thus: The non-existence of a thing which does not exist must follow from something more comprehensive than the thing whose non-existence we affirm. Thus the non-existence of dragons follows from the order of Nature which is more comprehensive than the single species whose existence we deny. Now if the non-existence of God has to be accounted for it must be explained as following from a cause or order of existence greater than God. But, by definition, God is *causa sui* and is conceived in himself. There can, therefore, be no possible cause greater than God to account for the non-existence of God. Hence God necessarily exists. Spinoza's view would be that ultimately the non-existence of dragons and all non-existing things as well as the existence of all existing things are entailed by the existence

of God; so God's nonexistence is an impossibility, because the only being who could prevent God from existing, i.e. who could explain the non-existence of God, is none other than God himself!

Granting that there is no higher being or being of any kind from whose nature the non-existence of God could follow as a necessary consequence, does this necessarily show that God exists? I think it does, provided we accept Spinoza's ideal of explanation stated in his principle that everything is caused or is the cause of itself, or what cannot be produced from anything else will, therefore, be its own cause (Proof of Prop. VII). But in accepting this principle of explanation or criterion-statement we are really committing ourselves to the proposition that God exists! It is clear that for Spinoza the ideal of adequate explanation implies that there is no contingent fact or no proposition which is merely contingently true in the sense that something merely happens to be the case or a proposition merely happens to be true. Thus, according to Spinoza, we cannot say that it just happens that God does not exist and there is no need to look for an explanation of this fact or to ask what it is that makes the non-existence of God necessary. Nothing can be left unaccounted for and nothing is finally accounted for except in terms of that which accounts for itself, and naturally only that accounts for itself which is self-existent and perfect. With this high ideal of explanation which forecloses the question of God's existence before it can even be discussed it is obvious that science cannot account for the non-existence of God; nor, for that matter, can anything whatsoever account for God's non-existence. And since it is impossible for anything to account for God's non-existence it follows necessarily that we cannot conceive God as non-existent. Likewise the existence of God can be accounted for only by God Himself, since there is nothing greater than God from which God's existence can follow.

Why does this argument carry immediate conviction to a Spinozist and none whatever to a number of philosophers who are not lacking in intelligence to follow the argument? Spinoza thinks that the proposition 'God exists' is self-evidently true in the sense that its truth lies on the surface and can be easily seen. He who doubts whether Substance exists is 'like one who should say that he has a true idea and yet should doubt whether it were false'. He thinks that the truth of his argument will be 'manifest to such as pay it the least attention'. I have tried to explain how such a paradoxical situation can arise in philosophy, a situation in which an argument is regarded as self-evidently true by one philosopher and as totally lacking in any kind of persuasiveness by another. The explanation becomes obvious when we realize that one party to the dispute has introduced into the argument not only premises

and conclusions and the logical processes that lead from the one to the other, but also, though not quite explicitly, a principle of explanation and a criterion-statement in the guise of a definition. Contingency, for Spinoza, is not ultimate. This proposition is not argued because, for Spinoza, it is the principle which determines the pattern of all valid arguments. The ideal of explanation is never part of the argument but presupposed by it. Not only does Spinoza's argument presuppose that nothing can remain merely contingent, but it is governed by a further and deeper presupposition, namely, that what ultimately explains everything or anything is that which must be self-explaining. The demand of thought for explanation points, in the last resort, to that which is all-comprehensive and contains its own intelligibility within itself; in other words, to that which is Infinite and *Causa sui*, e.g. God. If this ideal of explanation is not granted, contingency can never be overcome. After a point the demand for explanation must be given up as illegitimate as it would merely open the door to infinite regress. Those who remain unconvinced by Spinoza's reasoning do not find fault with the logic of the argument; they are unconvinced because they do not share with Spinoza the underlying presuppositions of the argument. Hence for them it is intelligible to assert that God may not exist, or that, if he exists, he merely happens to exist and, likewise, that his non-existence, if he does not exist, is a contingent fact. That contingency is not ultimate is a principle of explanation which the Spinozist accepts and the non-Spinozist denies. This principle of explanation holds within it the 'proof' of God's existence; it is not a deduction from definitions and axioms but something surreptitiously woven into them. The definitions and axioms contain criterion-concepts and Spinoza implicitly uses the notion of God to fill out the content of these criterion-concepts. The proposition 'God exists' does not form part of the total system, not even as its crown and termination, since it is the principle underlying and guiding the whole system. Hence Spinoza does not 'prove' the existence of God; this is what he imagines his argument does. What it actually does is to use the idea of God as a criterion-concept and derive from it a principle of explanation in the light of which the argument takes shape, leading apparently to a conclusion which appears to Spinoza as something 'manifest to such as pay it (the argument) the least attention' simply because, in reality, it has been implicitly presupposed throughout the whole course of the argument.