

Discourses/Articles
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**THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT IN PHILOSOPHY
AND MEDITATIONAL TECHNIQUES**

It is a well-known fact that the process of meditation in the field of spiritual life is centralised in the attempt of consciousness to concentrate itself on Ultimate Reality. Here, in this connection, philosophical circles have been conducting deep researches into the possibility of Thought contacting Reality, and whether it is a possibility at all on account of the limitations to which psychological processes are naturally subject.

The seed of the controversy arose from the affirmation of the Greek philosopher, Plato, that Ideas are the Archetypes of things; that is, the forms of the objects visualised in sense perception and the objects which are the field of phenomena, are like shadows or copies of the Ideas which Plato affirmed as being universals. It was the insistence of Plato that the universal is prior to the particular, more real than the multiplicity of things, and that the Ideas are eternal while the objects of sense are perishable. Aristotle, his disciple, erroneously thought that Plato made a mistake in creating a division between eternity and time-process since the two realms fall apart from each other and eternity cannot invade the realm of phenomena. If this is the case, thought cannot contact reality, or as a consequence thereof, we may say that there is nothing in the world which can touch God by any means whatsoever. However, here Aristotle should be considered as gone wrong in the appreciation of Plato's foundational doctrine, because nowhere do we find Plato asserting that there is no connection between the eternal Ideas and the phenomenal objects of sense. The very fact of the objects being considered as shadows of the Ideas should give us a clue to the relationship between the Ideas and objects. There cannot be a shadow unless there is an original and the relationship between the two is obvious. This means to say that the faculties which are otherwise considered as phenomenal are not entirely distinct from the characteristic of the eternity of the Ideas, and are not organically dissociated from Reality, and the very aspiration for God arising from the heart of the human being should be proof enough to demonstrate that there is a vital relation between the phenomenal and the noumenal, the world and God.

In the medieval ages, Saint Anselm propounded the argument known as the Ontological Argument for the existence of God, making out thereby that the thought of God cannot arise in the mind of a human being unless the potentiality for God's Presence is already embedded in the human mind. Else, how does such an idea arise at all? As another great thinker has humorously said, the wonder is not whether God exists or God does not exist, but the wonder is that the tiny mind of the human being can conceive such a tremendous comprehensiveness called the Infinite. Saint Anselm's argument is that the concept of God is itself proof for the existence of God; otherwise there should be no reason why such an idea should arise at all in the mind of the human

being. It is well-known that nothing can arise from nothing and hence the thought of God cannot arise from a vacuum or a totally dissimilar cause.

Rene Descartes, the famous French Philosopher, modified this argument of St. Anselm and followed a mathematically deductive process of reasoning in proving the existence of God. Descartes concluded that a finite mind cannot be expected to generate within itself an Infinite Thought. The Infinite cannot arise either from a finite source or from vacuum. The Infinite can arise from the Infinite only. Descartes concludes that God Himself must have planted the idea of the Infinite in the mind of the human being; else, there is no explanation as to how such a profound thought can arise in a mortal brain, limited to sensory perceptions. His well-argued confirmation of the existence of an eternal Self is something well-known in the history of philosophy. He carried on a process of doubting everything that the mind can think and could doubt even the existence of his own self, but the fact that there is doubting, cannot itself be doubted. Unless the doubter exists, the doubt by itself will have no meaning. We may doubt everything, God, world, individual and everything, but cannot doubt the validity of there being such a thing as doubt. The doubter cannot be doubted. Further it follows from this argument that the doubter must be a conscious being, since there is no such thing as unconscious doubting. The doubter is conscious existence, one feature inseparable from the other. The Self is Existence-Consciousness. It is from this potential certitude of Self and the mind that thinks on the basis of this Self, that we can deduce further on the concept of the Infinite. The eternal is in the heart of man. God exists, because the thought of God exists.

However, the most formidable refutation of the Ontological Argument comes from the German Philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who analyses this Argument threadbare and concludes that the Ontological Argument has no philosophical value. Kant's proposition is that the human mind can work only within phenomena and it cannot think noumena which transcend the boundaries of its capacity of knowledge. Hence, there is no such thing as Thinking God. Kant's contention is that the ideas of God, world and soul are just regulative features, which suffice to give a synthetic unity of apperception to the perceptual process through space and time and the conceptual process through the categories of understanding, namely, the obligation on the part of the mind of the human being to think only in terms of quantity, quality, relation, and modality. Since God is not a quantity, quality, relation or modality, the mind cannot think God. The Ontological Argument is hereby refuted. But, here, one can observe, Kant deeply errs in his conclusion.

The error of Kant consists in this: That the noumenon cannot be known, cannot be asserted by anything which is within phenomena. It is futile therefore to say that the noumenon cannot be known. If that were so, even such a statement cannot be made. The argument that noumenon cannot be known is self-defeating. The idea of the noumenon cannot arise if it has no connection with the idea at all, which, according to Kant, is within phenomena.

Hegel tries to rectify the deficiency in the argument of Kant that thought cannot contact reality. We have already noticed that Kant makes a mistake in confining all thought to phenomena and simultaneously asserting that the phenomenal thought cannot contact noumena. How does the idea of noumena arise in the phenomenal mind

if the phenomenal mind cannot have even the idea of there being such a thing as the noumenon. Hegel turns the tables round by asserting that Kant's insistence on making a distinction between phenomenon and noumenon defeats his own philosophy. There cannot be a knowledge that two things are separated from each other unless there is a third thing which knows that they are different from each other. The categories, which Kant feels are restrictive, are not actually the categories of the human mind as Kant seems to think. On the one hand Kant says that understanding creates nature, on the other hand he says that understanding cannot contact the real. Now, whose understanding creates nature. Can any human being's mind achieve this feat? Is there anyone who with his mind can project a whole universe outside? Hegel argues that the understanding that Kant speaks of should be interpreted as cosmic understanding, the TOTAL MIND. This Total Mind is virtually the Mind of God. Thus, God alone can create nature. When the Ontological Argument asserts that thought is reality, it only means that Infinite Thought can contact Infinite Being. Hegel has brought God into the centrality of the thinking process. The Thought of God cannot be separated from God Himself. Universal Thought is the same as Universal Being. Indian philosophers explained this with the nomenclature that *Sat* is *Chit*, that is to say, Existence is Consciousness and Consciousness is Existence. Thus the ontological argument is reinstated by Hegel in the West and Acharya Shankara in the East.

Here is the highest technique of the greatest meditation which merges God, world and the individual in one breathless moment of ecstasy.

Comments by Laurence Browne on Swami Krishnananda's "Ontological Argument in Philosophy"

The main thrust of Krishnananda's article is, in his words, "St Anselm's argument is that the concept of God is itself proof for the existence of God." He says that this must be true because "nothing can arise from nothing". This is very easily refuted because a) it cannot be proven to be correct, and is therefore simply a statement of faith or belief, and b) it does not necessarily follow, in logic or in practice, that the existence of an idea means that that to which the idea refers has objective existence, e.g. I can have an idea of dragon or a phoenix, but neither of these exist objectively, though they may exist in the realm of ideas, as does say, Tolkein's Middle Earth or the various Buddhist worlds as described in some of the more grandiose sutras.

In the next paragraph Krishnananda uses Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum" to support the existence of a self which can doubt anything except the existence of the doubting. From this he infers the existence of a 'self'. Then he makes a big jump, again based on faith or belief rather than logic, to say that "The Self is Existence-Consciousness". In other words he brings in a fundamental Indian concept to bolster his argument without first establishing the premises for that concept beyond saying that Descartes' analysis of the self is proof that the 'Self' exists. He jumps from the small 's' self to the big 'S' self with the sort of pseudo quantum leap that is not permissible in philosophical reasoning. In any event, Descartes' analysis can easily be undermined by the 'neti-neti' or 'vichira' of jnana yoga, or an application of the Madyamika dialectic. And he ends this paragraph

with a restatement of the ontological proof: “God exists, because the thought of God exists.”

He then moves to Kant, who in his “formidable refutation” of the ontological proof stated that we can only know phenomena and that the noumenon cannot be known. Krishnananda refutes Kant by restating the ontological argument as if he has already ‘re-proved’ it: “The error of Kant consists in this: That the noumenon cannot be known, cannot be asserted by anything which is within phenomena. It is futile therefore to say that the noumenon cannot be known. If that were so, even such a statement cannot be made.” This is circular logic, based on the notion that his analysis of Descartes has ‘proved’ the ontological argument.

Krishnananda also appears to misquote Kant when he says that “Kant says that understanding creates nature.” He then goes on to say, “Now, whose understanding creates nature? Can any human being’s mind achieve this feat?” But Kant never said that. He said (quoted in Flew’s Dictionary of Philosophy), “The order and regularity in objects, which we entitle nature, we ourselves introduce. The understanding is itself the lawgiver of nature.” There is considerable difference between ‘creator’ (God) and ‘lawgiver’ (interpreter)!

Krishnananda also introduces in his defense of the ontological proof Hegel’s concept of the “absolute mind” and equates it with the “Mind of God”, stating that “Hegel has brought God into the centrality of the thinking process. The Thought of God cannot be separated from God Himself. Universal Thought is the same as Universal Being... Thus the ontological argument is reinstated by Hegel in the West...” Krishnananda makes several logical leaps, not the least being that of equating Hegel’s idea of the absolute (the theoretical summation of dialectical reasoning) with the unconditioned Absolute (Brahman) of Indian thought. Even if it was, the thought of Brahman (a concept, however vast) is clearly not the ‘Thought’ of Brahman (the Sanscrit ‘chit’), and we are left where we started with the ontological argument neither proven nor somehow ‘reinstated’ in Western philosophy; for Hegel’s concept of the absolute remains just that: a concept. The finger pointing at the moon is not and can never be the moon itself. As for the ontological proof it may be worth quoting Frithjof Schuon on the subject:

“To be able to accept the ontological proof of God, which deduces from the existence of an innate concept the existence of the objective reality corresponding thereto, one must begin by realising that the truth does not depend on reasoning – obviously it is not reason that has created it... In every act of assent by the intellect there is an element which escapes the thinking process, rather as light and colour elude the grasp of geometry, which can, none the less, symbolise them indirectly and remotely. There is no such thing as “pure proof”; every proof presupposes the knowledge of certain data. The ontological proof, formulated by Saint Augustine and Saint Anselm, carries weight for the person who already has at his disposal some initial certainties, but it has no effect upon the willfully and systematically superficial mind... Some of the Scholastic philosophers were too Aristotelian to be able to accept the usefulness of the ontological proof; reason was considered by them as leading to a certainty that was in some way new, rather than to Platonic “reminiscence.” (Logic and Transcendence, 1984, p.59)

CONCERNING THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

I have received a critique offered on my essay, The Ontological Argument, by Laurence Browne, for which I am grateful.

The History of Philosophy, whether in the East or in the West, has been a search for a relevance which remains to be discovered between Appearance and Reality. My purpose has always been not to enter into futile polemic but to arrive at a conviction that a thing called God must exist, without which certitude life would lose meaning. The technical description of the process of arriving at this certitude attempted by Philosophy is what is generally known as the Ontological Argument, meaning thereby Proof of Being. The part of my essay which the critique has not touched is the beginning paragraph pointing to Plato's doctrine of Ideas or The Idea which acts as the Archetype of everything phenomenal. We need not go here into the further development of this thought of Plato as there being archetypes for everything in the world, something which looks like there being an 'eternal object' for every 'actual occasion' in the language of A.N. Whitehead. The critique mentions here that the idea of a thing does not mean that the thing indicated by the idea does really exist; that is to say, there need not be an objective existence corresponding to the idea of a thing. Without going further into this subject, I would elicit an answer from the learned critic to Plato's doctrine of the Idea, which I believe Whitehead deeply appreciates, holding the opinion that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato. I would be edified if some light is thrown on this issue.

It was Acharya Sankara in India who formulated the argument for an Ontological Being in his statement that no one can deny one's own self or one's own existence. This existence has also to be a conscious existence, because unconscious existence cannot be conceived. In Sankara's words, this point is expressed as *Satta eva cha bodho, bodha eva cha satta* – existence is consciousness and consciousness is existence. From the certitude of the existence of one's own self, the certitude of the existence of anything else also follows, as is corroborated by Immanuel Kant in his chapter on the 'Refutation of Idealism'.

As far as my reference to Rene Descartes is concerned, it is just to say that his point is not much different from Sankara's dictum that the 'I exists, and it cannot be denied, because to deny the 'I', another 'I' would be required, a process which may lead to infinite regress. I do not know if there is any jump, as the critique points out, when it is discovered that the self is existence which is conscious. I do not also know if there is any objection to finding a common ground between Sankara's position as regards self and Kant's asseveration of a Transcendental Apperception, whatever meaning one would like to associate with Kant's presuppositions. The finitude of one's own self cannot rest quiet without finding comfort in a 'more than itself'. The finite has necessarily to make an automatic reference to a non-finite, which is generally designated as the Infinite. Human aspiration is never complete in its fulfilment without absolute fulfilment. That the existence of an idea does not necessarily indicate the existence of the thing to which the idea seems to refer, is a point to consider. Well, let us go further.

We may cite one *Sutra* from the great Yoga Text, The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, from its third chapter, which reads as '*Bahir akalpita vrittih mahavideha, tatah prakasavaranakshayah*'. The suggested meaning of this Sutra is that the empirical

thought, which we may consider as a psychological function that artificially relates itself to an object outside is one thing, and the thought precedent to this empirical thought which may be regarded as the way in which Cosmic Thought is inseparably related to the psychological thought, is another thing. The point is that an individualised psychological thought cannot even function as it is distanced from its object by the intervention of space and time, unless at the back of it, integrally related, there is a Thought which does not require an object outside it, as this Thought is inseparable from its object. Here Thought is Being. The *Sutra* makes out that this Metaphysical Thought, when deeply meditated upon, leads to the liberation of the finite thought from getting entangled in space and time and absorbs it into the Overself, which we may consider as the Transcendental Thought, or what we may say in the language of religious devotion, God-Thought – not God’s thought but God Himself as the Thought. This marvellous discovery, I believe, is what Aristotle intends when he makes out that God is Thought thinking Itself, the Prime mover of the world. Thinkers like Sir James Jeans have dared to say that God is just thought, may be a mathematical thought. To Sir Arthur Eddington, ‘The stuff of the world is consciousness.’

This is to say that it need not always be true that the idea does not have any relation to the thing of which it is the idea. Else, Acharya Sankara and Plato would be misled in their doctrines, and even Kant would be wrong if he does not set aside his critical phenomenal shackles with no reference to the noumenon; because a thing that is considered phenomenal cannot intelligibly exist without reference to something which is not phenomenal.

Laurence Browne’s Reply to Swami Krishnananda’s Reply

Thank you very much for your response to my critique. As you say, the purpose is not to get into debate, so I’ll just make one or two points.

Firstly, concerning Plato. Within Western philosophy Plato was the first real metaphysician. So powerful and influential was his system through the ages that Whitehead said – and no-one disagreed with him – that European philosophy had been a series of footnotes to Plato. As a result of creating his realm of Ideas and Forms, Plato became the first philosopher to systematically conceptualise the direct experience of both goodness and truth. After Plato goodness became an ethical ideal and truth the correctness of an intellectual judgment. Here we have the beginnings of the profound difference in the understanding of the nature of truth between the East (direct experience of Satchitanand) and the West (the correctness of an intellectual judgment). The same difference can be seen in Shankara’s understanding of ‘I’ and Descartes’ understanding of ‘I’: chalk and cheese as we say!

Whitehead himself tried to get away from the conceptualisation of experience – and from Plato’s overwhelming influence – and so developed his system of ‘process philosophy’ which is worth looking into. For example, Whitehead regarded space time and matter as abstractions, and in his view to consider them to be real would be to fall into the ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ since the conceptualisations of space, time and matter are mental constructs and are not the result of direct perception.

Because truth, in the West, became the correctness of an intellectual judgment, and later, with the scientific method, something for which we must have physical evidence, the traditional proofs of God, such as the Ontological and Cosmological Proofs, are not taken seriously in the West as proof that God exists. The proofs, however, can be used to assist those who already have a sense that there is a Supreme Being and want to become firm in their understanding. I myself found the Cosmological Proof (the idea of a First Cause) a great help to me when I was younger. Perhaps the most beautiful thing I have read on the Ontological Proof comes from Simone Weil: "The Ontological Proof is mysterious because it does not address itself to intelligence, but to love."

Perhaps the greatest Ontological Proof is our own experience of the inner self, which is the fount of bliss and warmth in our hearts. Ontology means being, and where else but in our own being can we experience its reality and depth? Also, the very existence of the saints and sages, who were and are filled with Sat, Chit and Anand, is a tremendous Ontological Proof, and one that must go hand in hand with our own inner experience. Only hints and indications can come from philosophy and reason, never proof in the modern sense.

A little more on Kant. In the early 19th Century the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher took Kant's morally independent self (the phenomenal self, cut off from noumenon) and asserted that it was able to experience its own transcendence through a "feeling of absolute dependence." Schleiermacher thus shifted the defense of religion from reason (the Proofs etc) to direct experience. According to Louis Dupre (in 'Transcendent Selfhood'), "Schleiermacher's feeling of dependence is more than a merely subjective experience which would fall under the objections of Kant's critique. It is a total consciousness which is both objective and subjective. Indeed it is man's most profound awareness of his own nature... The feeling of absolute dependence... reveals the transcendent ground of consciousness, the point in which consciousness is both itself and more than itself."

So Schleiermacher, both theologically and philosophically, established the connection between the phenomenon and the noumenon, which Kant had denied. He made the shift from thought to feeling, from the head to the heart, and that is the shift that has to be made by each person who wants proof that God exists. As Simone Weil said, "The Ontological Proof is mysterious because it does not address itself to intelligence, but to love." And love springs from the heart, not the head. (The Simone Weil quote is taken from Iris Murdoch's "Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals" which has a very comprehensive chapter on the Ontological Proof.)

There is a very nice quote from the science fiction writer, Robert Heinlein, which you might enjoy: "Logic is an organised way of going wrong with confidence." I really like that one!