

Swinburne's Reconstruction of Leibniz's Cosmological Argument

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In Western thinking, the tradition of the argument for the existence of God began with Plato and Aristotle. It was carried forward in medieval scholasticism, eminently in Aquinas's so-called *quinque viae*, and reached its peak in modern philosophy. To date approximately 1850 different proofs for the existence of God are known. The most frequently represented and well-known types of proofs are the ontological, cosmological, teleological and the moral or deontological type, referring respectively to the arguments of Anselm, Aquinas (cosmological and teleological), and Kant. In this paper I will discuss the development of modern philosophical proofs, from Descartes's and Spinoza's ontological arguments, through, Leibniz's cosmological argument to Swinburne's revision of Leibniz.

The History of Modern Proofs for the Existence of God

The early modern and modern history of the ontological argument, which was originally developed by Anselm of Canterbury, belongs to the history of the effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the neo-Platonic understanding of being as the totality of all possible perfections to which the predicate of real existence belongs. Whereas Anselm's argument offers a logical foundation for the real and ontologically necessary existence of God, the modern version of the argument begins with the concept of God as the most perfect being. In modern philosophy this argument also functions as the foundation of a rationalistic metaphysics: Since God functions here as the guarantor of the agreement between thinking and reality, "it must be shown from the idea of God that this idea corresponds to a real essence, in a way that is independent of any experience."¹

This function is fulfilled by the more popular idealistic-theoretical argument presented by René Decartes (1596-1650). Descartes begins with the givenness (*Gegebensein*) of a distinct notion of God as an infinite and perfect

¹ Otto Muck and Friedo Ricken, "Gottesbeweise," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 4 (Freiburg: Herder, 1995), 882.

substance, and, applying the metaphysical principle of causality, concludes to the existence of an external cause of this idea of God, which has to possess in itself at least just as much reality (*Sachgehalt, realitas formalis*) as the idea of God itself. The idea possesses *realitas objectiva*; the only cause which could produce this idea is an actually infinite substance, which contains in itself all the perfections, including real existence.²

Descartes's design of the ontological argument in the narrower sense begins from the *idea* of God as a perfect nature that includes in itself all the perfections of being. This idea is the first and most excellent of the ideas inborn in the subject; it is grasped clearly and distinctly in itself.³ In accordance with the rule of truth, according to which everything, which the subject recognizes clearly and distinctly must belong to the nature or essence of the subject-matter, Descartes assumes that the idea of God as the absolutely perfect nature must designate or refer to something, which could not *not* exist.⁴ It is, therefore, self-evident that God, as the highest nature, also really exists. Only in God does existence belong to his nature.⁵ Descartes's version of the ontological argument directly relates to the philosophy of Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715). Like Descartes, Malebranche begins from the natural givenness (*Gegebensein*) to the intellect of the idea of God as an infinitely perfect nature, an idea that implicitly contains the concept of necessary existence.⁶ This simple and natural idea of the infinite is at the same time the *véritable être* of being without restriction. It is impossible without existence.⁷ In other words: it is evident that this being possesses "necessary existence."⁸ Malebranche's ontological argument assumes the real and necessary existence of the idea of the infinitely perfect and absolute divine being.

Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677) gives the ontological argument the following frame: "God or the substance, which consists of infinite attributes, from which each expresses an eternal and infinite nature, exists necessarily."⁹ Spinoza first proves this theorem by reducing the opposite position, that "God does not exist," to self-contradiction (*reductio ad absurdum*). He refers to the theorem¹⁰ that states that, since the substance could not be produced by anything else, the nature of the (divine) substance must belong to its existence (*causa sui*). The proof for this theorem rests on the application of the first definition of the whole *Ethica*, which says that the cause of itself can be only this, which contains

² René Descartes, *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, III, 22-29, in René Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol.

⁷ (Paris: Cerf, 1904), 41-46.

³ *Ibid.*, 7-11, 65-69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, V, 7-11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, V, 12, 69.

⁶ Nicolas Malebranche, *Recherche de la vérité*, IV, 11, 2, in *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, vol. 2 (Paris: J. Vrin, 1963), 93.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁹ Spinoza, *Ethica. Ordine geometrico demonstrata*, I, Propositio XI, in Benedictus de Spinoza, *Die Ethik. Lateinisch und Deutsch* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1977), 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Propositio VII, 12.

the existence or whose nature can be comprehended exclusively as existing.¹¹ “Substance” is understood as something, which exists in itself and will be comprehended through itself.¹² Therefore, the infinite substance must be its own cause (*causa sui*), and consequently, it must be something the essence of which contains existence; therefore it must necessarily exist. This eleventh theorem,¹³ and with it God's necessary existence, Spinoza proves as follows:

If there could not be a reason and cause hindering it to exist, something does not necessarily exist. For God's existence, however, there can be no preventing cause and no preventing reason because such a cause or such a ground could only be in God's own nature or outside it. Such a reason cannot lie in God's own nature however, because this position would contain a self-contradiction, which has to be excluded from God's absolute infinity and perfection. Equally implausible is the position that such an obstacle exists outside God's own nature; a substance substantially different from God could have nothing in common with God. Consequently, there can be no obstacle for God's existence; God's existence is necessary.¹⁴

In a detailed comment to his third proof, which is part of the *a posteriori* course of his defense of the necessity of God's existence, Spinoza formulates an *a priori* demonstration of God's necessary existence, which he conducts on the basis of the conceptual content of the idea of God as the absolutely and infinitely perfect nature. Because the perfection of the nature of an object is identical with its reality, the simple infinite property of existing inheres in the infinitely perfect nature of God. In the concept of the perfect essence, an infinite power of existence is included. In other words, the absolutely and infinitely perfect essence must necessarily exist.¹⁵

Gottfried Friedrich Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) criticizes both Descartes's ontological argument and his concept of God as a nature which includes all perfections in itself.¹⁶ Leibniz nevertheless tries to show that the concept of the perfect nature contains no contradiction in itself because the divine perfections, which he determines as strictly simple qualities, can exist together in the same subject.¹⁷ Leibniz's second *a priori* argument for God's existence begins with the fact of eternal truths, which he calls “essences or possibilities.”¹⁸

¹¹ Ibid., Def. I., 4.

¹² Ibid., Def. III., 4.

¹³ Ibid., Propositio XI, 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 24ff.

¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

¹⁶ Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Discours de Métaphysique*, in G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophische Schriften*, vol. 1 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), 56.

¹⁷ Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Quod ens perfectissimum*, in G.W.F. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, 6, 3 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1980), 578f.

¹⁸ Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Vernunftprinzipien der Natur und der Gnade. Monadologie*, (Hamburg: Meiner, 1982), 43-45.

These possess reality; they are a matter of fact.¹⁹ These reality-containing possibilities must have an origin, which contains in itself the ideas of all possible things; without this origin, there could be nothing real in possibilities and therefore, nothing at all possible. Since, however, the real presupposes the possible (and there is something real), there must be something possible. God's existence is thereby shown to be necessary.²⁰

Leibniz also develops a so-called contingency argument, which begins from the concept of the contingency or non-necessity of the real. The contingency of the real necessitates a sufficient reason, an explanation for "why the real acts in one way and not another."²¹ Within the infinite chain of contingent causes for a contingently real event, there is no sufficient reason; after all, something that is itself contingent cannot be a sufficient reason for yet another contingent object. Therefore, the reason of all contingent things must be in something that is not in itself contingent and therefore is an ontologically necessary substance.²² Finally, Leibniz's system of a pre-established harmony between all the monads also contains a proof for the existence of God, provided that it presupposes an infinite power and wisdom, which guarantees the harmony of substances that do not have any influence upon one another.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), systematizes and criticizes the classic arguments by tracing them back to three basic forms: ontological, cosmological, and physico-theological. With respect to the ontological argument, Kant criticizes the fact that it incorrectly understands existence as the reality or perfection of being. Existence for Kant merely designates the spacial and temporal position of an object. Therefore, in the concept of the *ens realissimum* (the most real being) existence is not necessarily contained.²³ In the cosmological argument, Kant sees an invalid move from the existence of the contingent to the existence of the absolute on the basis of the misapplication of the category of causality, which is valid only within the world of appearances.²⁴ On the assumption that theoretical reason is only applicable to objects of possible experience, Kant categorically excludes an objective demonstration of God's existence, while developing a unique moral or ethico-theological proof on the basis of practical reason.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Die Streitschriften zwischen Leibniz und Clarke*, in G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, vol. 7 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1890), 363.

²² Ibid., 454-456.

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, in Immanuel Kant, *Akademie-Ausgabe*, vol. 3 (Berlin, 1911), 387, 400, 403.

²⁴ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 407.

Swinburne's Reconstruction and Reformulation of Leibniz's Cosmological Argument

Richard Swinburne's 1979 monograph *The Existence of God* develops Leibniz's cosmological argument for the existence of God. Generally a cosmological argument is an argument for the existence of God from the existence of some finite object or, more specifically a complex physical universe.²⁵ The starting-point of cosmological arguments are evident facts of experience. There can be no reasonable doubt about the truth of statements which report these experiences. But according to Swinburne it is "equally evident that no argument from any such starting-points to the existence of God is deductively valid. If an argument from, for example, the existence of a complex physical universe to the existence of God were deductively valid, then it would be incoherent to assert that a complex physical universe exists and that God does not."²⁶ But in fact such an assertion is not incoherent and therefore atheism seems to be a supposition which is consistent with the existence of a complex physical universe such as ours.²⁷ Even if the cosmological argument is not deductively valid Swinburne tries to show that it is a good inductive argument. He does so in the following way: "An argument from the universe to God may start from the existence of the universe today, or from its existence for as long as it has existed—whether a finite or an infinite time."²⁸ Swinburne follows Leibniz who considered the argument in the second or latter form. We must consider the series of states of the universe starting from the present and going backwards in time, S1, S2, S3, and so on. Each of these states would be a smaller, finite time. There are laws of nature, L, which bring about the evolution of S3 from S4, S2 from S3 and so on. God might play a role for this connection in one of two ways: as responsible for L, and so as providing a complete explanation of the occurrence of each state S; or at the beginning of the series (if it has one) as the starting-point of the process.²⁹

Swinburne excludes the second way with the argument that there would be no possibility to show in a convincing manner that the universe had a first state.³⁰ This assumption seems to me flawed. It appears to be an apodictic supposition which is not the result of a satisfying argument. Be that as it may, Swinburne resumes his assumption of a timely, unlimited or infinitely old series of states in the universe.

This first form of Swinburne's cosmological argument functions in the following way: "If the universe is infinitely old, then each state of the universe S_n will have a full explanation in terms of the prior state S_{n+1} and natural laws L."³¹ Therefore L and S_{n+1} will provide a complete explanation of S_n. The

²⁵ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 118.

²⁶ Ibid., 119.

²⁷ Ibid., 120.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 121.

³¹ Ibid., 121-122.

validity of natural laws is either scientifically totally inexplicable or it has a non-scientific explanation, for instance of a personal kind. In the latter case it could be assumed that there is a person, namely God, who brings about the operation of L and via L the total series of all states of the universe at each moment of time. So according to Swinburne we can conclude that if the universe is of infinite age, the total series of past states as a whole will have no cause and so no explanation, provided that the only causes of its past states are prior past states. Expressed in a more exact manner, if each state has a complete explanation in terms of a prior state, the total series of past states will have no cause and no explanation. “For although each state of the universe will have a complete explanation (unlike in the case where the universe is finite, where its first state will not have any explanation), the whole infinite series will have no explanation, for there will be no causes of members of the series, lying outside the series.”³² In this case “the existence of the universe over infinite time will be an inexplicable brute fact. There will be an explanation (in terms of L, that is of natural laws) of why, once existent, the universe continues to exist. But what will be inexplicable is the non-existence of a time before which there was no universe.”³³ Or in easier and more exact terms: “If each state of the universe at each instant of time has a complete explanation which is a scientific explanation, then the existence of the universe at each instant of time and its having certain permanent features have no explanation at all.”³⁴ For confirmation of this argument Swinburne refers to Leibniz’s text, *De rerum originatione radicali* (mentioned above). Swinburne agrees with Leibniz assumption “that the existence of the universe over infinite time would be, if only scientific explanation is allowed, a brute inexplicable fact.” And “just the same would apply if the universe does have a first state.” Because “that state Sf would be a brute, inexplicable fact.” Swinburne continues: “The existence of the universe over time comes into my category of things too big for science to explain.” And he adds: “If the existence of the universe is to be explained, personal explanation must be brought in, and an explanation given in terms of a person who is not part of the universe acting from without. This can be done if we suppose that such a person G brings it about at each instant of time, that L operates, and so brings it about for each Sn+1 that Sn+1 brings about Sn.”³⁵ Swinburne explains this theistic thesis or supposition with the so-called “powers-and liabilities account of scientific explanation” in the following terms: The supposition that a person G acts from without the universe “to conserve it in being is the supposition that G brings it about that it has the power P” to bring about its continued existence with whatever constant characteristics it has and the liability K to exercise necessarily P. And Swinburne concludes that “at any time he (that is the person G) could make the universe bring about different subsequent permanent characteristics or not give it the power to bring about its

³² Ibid., 124.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 125.

³⁵ Ibid., 126.

subsequent existence.”³⁶ In what sense is G (that is God) a full cause of the existence of the universe throughout its history (with its permanent characteristics)? God is a full cause of each state of the universe throughout its history “by his making it the case (through some intention of his) that the prior state brought it about, and yet his states are not states of the universe. G would be the cause of the existence of the universe (with its permanent characteristics) over all the time that it exists, by a series of intentions, or rather a continuing intention to keep it in being.”³⁷ And the postulation of G in its simplest terms means a G of infinite power, knowledge, and freedom, that is God. So “the choice is between the universe as stopping-point and God as stopping-point.”³⁸ And is there any reason which could determine this choice?

Swinburne refers again to Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason as a metaphysically necessary truth. This principle claims “that everything not metaphysically necessary has an explanation in something metaphysically necessary. A being has metaphysical necessity according to Leibniz, if from „essence existence springs,” i.e. if it could not but exist.”³⁹ If this “could not” were a logical “could not,” the metaphysically necessary being with whom explanation is supposed to end would be a logically necessary being. But the logically necessary cannot explain the logically contingent. Furthermore it is “coherent to suppose that there exists a complex physical universe but no God, from which it follows that it is coherent to suppose that there exists no God, from which in turn it follows that God is not a logically necessary being. If there is a logically necessary being, it is not God.”⁴⁰

If “however, Leibniz’s metaphysically necessary being is not a logically necessary being, but (speaking metaphorically) the supreme brute fact,”⁴¹ then his principle of sufficient reason means nothing else than the simple claim “that there is a terminus to explanation, that everything which has a full explanation has an ultimate, or at least a complete explanation.”⁴² “Leibniz claims that the universe is not metaphysically necessary, and so that its existence needs explanation.”⁴³ According to Swinburne this claim might be right only in terms of the relatively greater simplicity and explanatory power of a *potentia explanans*. Therefore he considers the explanatory power of theism or the theistic supposition with respect to the universe. By the fact that it is not a logically necessary truth that there is an explanation of the existence of a complex universe which is in the process of change, the theistic argument “can, surely, be only an *a posteriori* one from the simplicity and explanatory power of a postulated *explanans* in comparison with the complexity of the *explanandum*.”⁴⁴ Because of

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 127.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 128.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

its great simplicity Swinburne consequently examines the explanatory power of theism or the theistic supposition with respect to the physical universe, which is a rather complex whole of parts and is in the process of change. With respect to the complexity, particularity, and finitude of the universe Swinburne literally assumes that it cries out for the simplest explanation. And indeed the supposition that there is a God of infinite power, knowledge, and freedom is an extremely simple supposition. Additionally there are good reasons why God should have made a complex physical universe. "For such a physical universe can be beautiful, and that is good; and also it can be a theatre for finite agents to develop and make of it what they will," which is a good thing. "There is quite a chance that if there is a God he will make something of the finitude and complexity of a universe. It is very unlikely that a universe would exist uncaused, but rather more likely that God would exist uncaused."⁴⁵ Of course, it is not only "very unlikely" that God would exist uncaused, it is entirely impossible that a perfect and completely simple being like God could be caused by anything else. Swinburne summarizes the results of his cosmological argument for the existence of God by saying that "the existence of the universe is strange and puzzling. It can be made comprehensible if we suppose that it is brought about by God. This supposition postulates a simpler beginning of explanation than the supposition of the existence of an uncaused universe, and that is grounds for believing the former supposition to be true."⁴⁶

Let us summarize briefly the key-points in Swinburne's cosmological argument. If the complex physical universe is of infinite age Swinburne concludes that although each state of this universe would have a complete explanation, the whole infinite series of states would have no explanation, in other words, the existence of the universe over infinite time would be an inexplicable brute fact. For confirmation of this idea Swinburne refers to Leibniz's *De rerum originatione radicali*; he assumes that this type of cosmological argument for the existence of God is not deductively but only inductively valid. This means that it is not incoherent to assert simultaneously that a complex physical universe exists and that God does not exist. It is coherent to suppose that there exists no God, from which it follows that God, who might be a metaphysically necessary being, is not a logically necessary being. In contrast to a logically necessary being, God's epistemic state is that of a supreme brute fact. Applying Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason to the existence of the universe Swinburne takes the fact that the existing universe is not metaphysically necessary as a premise for his conclusion that its existence needs explanation. But in what sense does it need it? According to what has been said this explanation cannot be a logically necessary truth but only an *a posteriori* one of relatively great simplicity and explanatory power. And Swinburne finds these conditions to be fulfilled in the best manner by the theistic assumption that a personal being of infinite power, knowledge and freedom brings about the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 132.

continued existence of all states of the physical universe, including its permanent characteristics throughout all of its history.

Leibniz's cosmological argument has undergone a significant alteration in Swinburne's work. It has lost its pretension to demonstrative power and has gained a more humble claim to possess an explanatory power for the existence of a complex physical universe. This is a significant departure from the pre-Kantian tradition, reflecting Kant's critique of all proofs for God's existence. Swinburne allows Kant to deprive the cosmological argument of demonstrative necessity but gives it back an explanatory power; the supposition of God's existence is "more likely" than its opposite. God's real existence is intellectually more satisfying than his non-existence—this is the modest result of Swinburne's revision of Leibniz's cosmological argument.