

Ontological and Cosmological Arguments in Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz

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Özet

Matematiğin gücü On Yedinci Yüzyıl'ın Akılcı Filozoflarını çok etkilemiştir. Descartes, Spinoza ve Leibniz'e göre, insan aklında doğuştan gelen bir takım hakikatler vardır ve bunlara dayanarak duyuların yardımına pek gerek olmadan, tıpkı matematikte olduğu gibi, karmaşık çıkarımlarda bulunulabilir, Akılcı Filozoflar olan Descartes, Spinoza ve Leibniz'in felsefe sistemlerinde uğraştıkları sorunlardan bir tanesi, sağlam veya kesin bilgi de dahil her şeyin kendisine dayandığı, Tanrının varlığı meselesidir. Bu nedenle, eldeki çalışmanın amacı, Descartes, Spinoza ve Leibniz'in, üzerlerinde çok tartışılan ontolojik ve kozmolojik tanrı kanıtlamalarını felsefe sistemlerinde nasıl kullandıklarını belirlemek ve açıklığa kavuşturmaya çalışmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akıl, akılcılar, doğuştan gelen doğrular, ontolojik ve kozmolojik kanıtlamalar.

Abstract

The power of mathematics impressed the so-called Rationalist Philosophers of the seventeenth century. Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz were convinced that the human reason held certain innate capacities or a priori truths on which complex inferences could be built, like in mathematics, without getting significant help from senses. Thus one of the issues the Rationalist Philosophers, namely, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz dealt with in their philosophic systems, is the existence of God upon which everything as well as sound knowledge depends. That's why, in this paper, I am going to try to illustrate both the ontological and cosmological arguments for the existence of God in Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz so that we can see and clarify how they employed these much debated arguments in their philosophical systems.

Key Words; Reason, the rationalists, innate truths, ontological and cosmological arguments.

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Introduction

St. Anselm was the first one who composed the Ontological Argument that appears in his book known *Proslogion*. However, to my knowledge, he spelled out at least three other arguments in an earlier book entitled *Monologion* in which all of these arguments begin with an existing finite thing and proceed step by step until arriving at the peak of the measure of Being. As a matter of fact these arguments illustrated in *Monologion* display Anselm's philosophical outlook, that is, his admission of Realism and his denial of Nominalism, the so-called the Problem of Universals in which the main difficulty is how to relate the objects of human mind and the objects existing outside of the human mind. Since the arguments given in *Monologion* is akin to the problem of universals, I will not spell them out.** Instead I am going to attempt to reveal the famous ontological argument because this argument has had many interesting variations as well as being popular with the rationalists philosophers of the seventeenth century.

As a rule Anselm's argument in chapter II of the *Proslogion* is usually summarized as follows. We believe that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. Even the fool who denies God's existence understands the expression a being, than which a greater cannot be thought when he hears it. And what he understands is in his understanding. So a being than which a greater cannot be thought exists in his understanding. But such a being cannot exist only in the understanding, for, if it exists in the understanding it can be thought to exist also in reality; and, since a being is greater if it exists in the understanding and in reality than if it exists only in the understanding, if it existed only in the understanding we could then think of a greater being, which is not possible. Thus a being than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality. (Anselm, 1962:54).

Having given the proof of God's existence in chapter II of the *Proslogion*, Anselm comes to chapter III to point out certain implications of that proof which serve to further remove any doubt about if God exists.

Anselm starts *Proslogion* III with the observation that "and indeed it so truly is that it is not even possible for it to be thought not to be." (Anselm; 1962: 54). If the argument of *Proslogion* II has established the conclusion that *there is absolutely no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality, then the first statement of Proslogion III would be the simple observation in Proslogion II that surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist in the understanding alone. The characterization of this being as such that it cannot be thought not to exist would express the proposition of Proslogion II that anytime such a being*

**See *St. Anselm's Monologion*, in *Basic Writings*. Trans. S.N. Deane, La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962.

exists in the mind, it exists in reality because it is the ontological distinctive value of the idea in itself that forces our mind to accept the existence of the being in question as its necessary implication.

For something is possible to be thought to be which is not possible to be thought not to be, and this latter is greater than that which is possible to be thought not to be. (Anselm, 1962: 54).

Clearly Anselm maintains the framework of the argument as it is developed from *Proslogion* 11. Specifically, we may understand the principle of *Proslogion* III as stating that for any being which can be thought to exist but which cannot be thought not to exist, this being is greater than a being which can be thought not to exist. Following the introduction of the principle, Anselm uses the *reductio ad absurdum* form precisely in the same fashion in which the form was employed in *Proslogion* II.

If, then, that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to be, that than which a greater cannot be thought *is* itself not that than which a greater cannot be thought; but this is contradictory. Therefore, something than which a greater cannot be thought so truly is that it is not even able to be thought not to be. (Anselm, 1962: 54-55).

We are already familiar with this sort of move from *Proslogion* II; in so far as we are aware that something greater can be thought than what can be thought not to exist, if that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to exist, the very same being that than which a greater cannot be thought is not that than which a greater cannot be thought. The very same being both is and is not that than which a greater cannot be thought, that is, if we assume that something than which a greater cannot be thought can *be thought not to exist*. But that something is not itself cannot possibly be concluded. (Schufreider, 1978: 35). I do believe that as in *Proslogion* II the *reductio of Proslogion* III depends upon the establishment of the very principle which is in question, a being which cannot be thought not to exist is greater than a being which can be thought not to exist.

As we have seen Anselm's thought proceeds from within his mind rather than beginning with the assumption that each proof must depart from some empirical evidence so that the human mind can get at God. In fact, before illustrating the ontological argument, Anselm is convinced regarding the existence of God, since he declares that unless he believes, he shall not understand God's existence.

After these preliminaries we can get to the main point related to the ideas of those *philosophers called Rationalist who stress the power and importance of reason in reliable knowledge*, in general, rationalism is to be identified with confidence in the capacity of human reason to arrive at truth, for which sense experience as a way of knowledge plays a role of secondary importance, The rationalists think of knowledge as

a system of truths being dependent on a solid and unshakable foundation. The basis of knowledge consists of a set of first principles known intuitively, from which other truths can be deduced by the methods of mathematics. The rationalist philosophers, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, were attracted by mathematics and employed mathematical kinds of reasoning for setting up their systems of thought. Descartes illustrated reality as a dualism, which consists in two fundamental substances, namely, thought and extension. Spinoza argued that there is only one substance having different kinds of attributes and modes. Leibniz claimed that though there is only one sort of substance, the Monad, there are various kinds of monads spelling out the variety of elements of reality. However, in order to secure a sound foundation for knowledge on which everything is dependent, these philosophers had to prove the existence of God, that is to say, they wanted to have a guarantee and to possess genuine knowledge by drawing conclusion the existence of God; consequent upon this, they attempted to shed light the existence of other minds and of the material or physical world.

Descartes and His Arguments on God

Let me first begin with Descartes' ontological argument for the existence of God. The subtitle of Descartes's fifth meditation is the essence of material things and the existence of God considered a second time*. So Descartes begins with the intention of asking the question of what material things are in essence. When he is discussing about the ideas of corporeal world, he sees another way of proving the existence of God. By the time he came to prove the existence of God, he had spoken of quantity, size, figure and so on which are the categories of extended substance. Furthermore, these ideas are known by him *clearly and distinctly* through his imagination. Descartes goes on to say that he has so many ideas in him which have immutable and true natures, even though they do not refer to anything in the external world. For example, he has an idea of a triangle which is immutable and eternal because this idea is not dependent upon his mind. That is to say, a triangle has some characteristics which do not depend on him; for instance, it is the property of a triangle that its three angles equal two right angles and so on. Having illustrated the mathematical items, which he clearly and distinctly perceives, he goes on by saying that "if the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God?" (Descartes 1986: 45). This is the criterion

To my knowledge, Descartes talks about the existence of God also in his books called *Principles of Philosophy*, Chapter I, especially the articles 13,14, 18-24, trans. by V.R. Miller and R.P. Miller, Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983; and *A Discourse on Method*. Part 4, pp. 62-68, trans. by John Veitch, *The Rationalists, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz*, New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc, 1974.

which Descartes uses as evidence to prove the existence of God. According to Descartes, the idea of God, which is a supremely perfect being, is as clear and distinct as the idea of any mathematical concept. So there cannot be a perfect being which does not contain existence for Descartes. Since existence is a perfection, perhaps the highest perfection, it will be contradictory not to include it in the clear and distinct idea of God. Therefore, existence must necessarily be attributed to the idea of supremely perfect being, in other words, examining the idea he has of a perfect being, he finds that existence is included in this idea; consequently it is certain that God, who is this perfect being, exists.

Descartes here is saying that there is an obvious logical connection between being God and existing, just as there is an obvious logical connection between being a triangle and having three angles that equal 180 degrees. However the idea of God is a special case because the idea of God possesses all perfections and for Descartes one perfection is existence itself. As a result of this, the essence of God necessarily contains existence. As we have seen, for Descartes, from the idea of God it follows necessarily that God actually exists.

According to Descartes, at first glance, this argument looks like a sophism; but the reason why this simple argument may appear a sophism is that as a rule, we make a distinction between essence and existence** so that we do not see that in the case of God his essence involves his existence. This is one of the three possible objections to his argument which he proposes against himself. To repeat, essence and existence are inseparable in the case of God because such a supremely perfect being must have all perfections and existence is itself a perfection. In other words, if existence is not a perfection, God could not be a supremely perfect being. For that reason, there is a logically necessary connection between being God and existing, (Descartes 1986: 46). In addition, Descartes argues that this idea of supremely perfect being is not dependent upon his thought: on the contrary "it is an image of a true and immutable nature". (Descartes 1986: 47). In order to support his argument, he gives other further considerations to us. According to Descartes, God is the only supremely perfect being whose existence pertains to his essence,

So far I have tried to illustrate Descartes' ontological proof for the existence of God. As we have seen, conceiving of God as a supremely perfect being, he noted that he possessed a clear idea of such a being within himself. For discovering the nature of God, he had only to discover what was contained in this idea. As a result, he found that the idea of existence was inseparable from God's essence even in thought.

** As far as I see, essence, for Descartes, is that which a thing's necessary properties are to be understood as its essence and properties entailed by its essence. On the other hand, existence is held as a property, which is to be ascribed to God being identified as the sum of all perfections. For more information, see article 16 in Principles of Philosophy.

Now it is time to look at Descartes cosmological argument for the existence of God. Descartes employs the principle that everything that exists must have cause of its existence; either it causes its own existence or its existence is caused by something else. Descartes begins with his own existence because at this point of the meditations that is the only thing which he knows to exist. He begins with looking into either he is the cause of his own existence or something else caused his existence. (Descartes 1974: 139-40). He goes on by saying that he cannot be the cause of his existence because he has no power to create a thinking being such as Descartes himself. Had he had enough power to create himself, he would have made himself more perfect than he is. If he derived his existence from himself, he should never doubt nor lack anything at all. As a result of these considerations, he comes to draw a conclusion that something else must be the cause of his existence and since the chain of causes cannot go back to infinity, there must be a first cause which is the cause of everything and of Descartes, and this is God. Descartes makes a distinction between two causes which are *in fieri* and *in esse* by saying that: it is possible to see an infinite regress *in fieri* cause since regress goes back to time in this case. However *in esse*, it cannot be an infinite regress because this is sustaining cause for Descartes not efficient cause so that God preserves Descartes at present. Descartes claims that there is a real and positive sense in which God can be said to be the cause of himself; he said that since we do not derive our existence from ourselves, we must ultimately have been produced by a self-causing being, a being that has the power of existing through its own might or existing through itself.

Spinoza and His Arguments on God

In order to analyze Spinoza's ontological argument, first of all we need to discuss his view of substance so that we can understand his argument clearly. Spinoza first argues that substance exists necessarily. (Spinoza 1974: *Ethics*, part I, prop.VII). Only after he has shown this does he introduce the concept of God, or being absolutely infinite into his proofs. Furthermore, his demonstration that God exists necessarily rest squarely on his treatment of substance; for he simply argues that God is substance and substance exists necessarily. (Spinoza 1974: *Ethics*, part I, prop.XI). God exists necessarily on Spinoza's view, simply because he is substance, and not because he is substance of this or that specific nature. By focusing on this concept, accordingly, we will direct our attention to the heart of the ontological argument.

Spinoza describes the main features of substance by means of the distinctions (1) between that which is in itself and that which is in another and (2) between that which is conceived through another. (Spinoza 1974: Ethics, part I. Df. iii). The first of these distinctions, I think, serves to indicate that substance is metaphysically basic. To say that something is "in another" is to say that the thing in question is simply a modification of something else, simply as Spinoza terms it, a mode, in which something else exists. Spinoza defines substance as that which is not "in another", but rather "in itself". I think he means that substance is something of which other things are modes while it is not itself a mode of anything else. The second distinction seems to mark a somewhat broader point about substance. He says that substance, besides being in itself, is also conceived through itself that it is something "the conception of which does not need the conception of another thing from which it must be formed". (Spinoza 1974: Ethics, part I, Df. iii). To say that something is conceived through another is to say that in order to conceive it properly, in order to understand what it is we need to appeal to the concept of something other than it itself. However substance is not conceived through another. It is something which is not to be understood in terms of anything else, but which instead is that in terms of which we understand other things.

Now let us look at Spinoza's argument about the existence of God. Everything is either caused by another or cause of itself. That is to say, things are either dependent upon other things for their existence or they are not dependent, but exist just by their own natures and hence necessarily. Substance cannot be caused by another; however if it were, it would have to be conceived through that other thing, since the cognition of an effect depends upon and involves the cognition of its cause. (Spinoza 1974: Ethics, part I, Ax IV). That would be absurd, however, since substance is conceived through itself by definition. Therefore substance cannot be caused by another. It must rather be caused by itself, i.e., it must exist necessarily. It follows from Spinoza's principle that what is caused by another is also conceived through another. For to say that something is conceived through another is to say that we can only understand what the thing is by conceiving it in terms of something else. It is to say that the very being of the thing in question is constituted by something other than itself, and hence that it is in another. What is caused by another is therefore a mode in Spinoza's terms. Moreover modes are always caused by another: for a mode, something that is in another and conceived through another, has its existence constituted by something other than itself, and thus it is caused by another. Now the point of importance in all this is that substance, which is not "in another", cannot be caused by another. To think of substance as caused, we would have to think of it as in another and conceived through another. We would have to think of it, that is as mode of something else; and obviously, that would be self-contradictory. In a few words, the first argument that God exists depends upon the notion that

substance is defined as being self-caused in Spinoza. That is to say, it is the essence of substance to exist. The argument is a *reductio ad absurdum* because it is contradictory to assert that a self-caused substance is non-existent since self-caused includes existence in its essence. Thus, to deny the existence of a substance would be to assert that the existent is non-existent. That is to say, one would then be claiming that, that whose essence includes existence is non-existent, and this is absurd.

As far as I understand the second proof for the existence of God depends upon the principle of sufficient reason or sufficient cause; for the existence or non-existence of anything there must be a cause or reason. The reason or cause must be either within the thing or outside it. This argument depends upon Spinoza's theory of definition which states that the definition of a thing must either include the cause in itself or refer to the proximate cause. Since substance is unique, it cannot be caused by any other thing; it must be self-caused. So the definition of substance - that which is conceived in itself and through itself- entails the concept of self-causation; its essence includes its own cause. Now there is no cause which could prevent God, or an absolutely infinite substance from existing. Such a cause would have to be outside of it or within it. If the cause were external, there would have to be a substance of the same nature to affect it. But there cannot be two substances of the same nature because this would violate the singularity or conceived through itself aspect of the definition of substance. There could not be a substance of a different nature which prevented this substance from existing because that would violate the axiom of mutuality - things must have something mutually in common to be understood through one another or to be causally related to one another. So the cause or substance which prevents God from existing could not be outside of God; it could not be a proximate cause. Then it would have to be the essence of God himself which would entail his own non-existence. God would be a contradictory substance; the definition would be inconsistent and self-contradictory. Again it would be *reductio ad absurdum* to state that the essence of a thing which includes its own existence is non-existent. So neither within nor without God is there a cause which could prevent God's existence. God exists necessarily. (Spinoza 1974: 186).

In the final analysis, both proofs depend upon causation. The first proof argues that a self-caused thing must exist because its essence includes existence. The second argument depends upon the singularity of substance and the axiom of mutuality which underlie the axiom of sufficient causation or sufficient reason.

Now let us look at Spinoza's cosmological argument for the existence of God. As far as I understand, Spinoza's cosmological argument is an *posteriori* argument based upon the notion that existence is power. Spinoza asserts that it is self-evident that "ability to exist is power". (Spinoza 1974: *Ethics*, part I, prop.XI). If everything which exists is finite then the finite would be more powerful than the absolutely infinite; this is absurd.

So either nothing exists or God exists; we exist, so something exists. If something finite exists, something which is in something else, then surely something absolutely infinite, something in itself must exist. If anything at all exists, then there must be an absolutely infinite substance which exists. As we have seen this argument is dependent upon the fact that we exist. We must be either self-caused substances or things which are in something else which necessarily exists. If something exists, it must be either infinite itself or in an infinite substance in which we exist. If something exists, there must be an absolutely infinite substance which exists whether it is us or God; but we have defined God as an absolutely infinite substance. So God must exist, it is obviously clear that the cosmological argument in Spinoza is a revision of Descartes' causal argument.

In a word, Spinoza argues that there can be but one absolutely independent being, which is God on whom everything else is dependent. All other beings including the universe and everything in it are modes or aspects of this infinite Substance.

Leibniz and His Arguments on God

When we come to Leibniz in terms of ontological argument, he neither wholly accepts nor wholly rejects this argument; it needs to be supplemented, so he says, by a proof that God, so defined, is possible. He wrote out a proof that defines God as the most perfect Being, i.e., as the subject of all perfections, and a perfection is defined as a "simple quality which is positive and absolute and expresses without any limits whatever it does express." (Russell 1972: 586). Leibniz easily proves that no two perfections, as above defined, can be incompatible. He concludes: "There is, therefore, or there can be conceived, a subject of all perfections, or most perfect Being. Whence it follows also that He exists, for existence is among the number of the perfections" (Leibniz 1974: 461-62).

Let us try to look at Leibniz' argument about the ontological proof of the existence of God closely. The revival of the ontological argument first by Descartes and then by Spinoza aroused considerable controversy in the late seventeenth century. Leibniz criticized the argument on several occasions. He said in the *Monadology*, "God alone has the privilege that he must exist if he is possible". (Leibniz 1974: 462). It was the second premise that God's existence is possible that Leibniz regarded as problematic. He said that it may be asked whether it is in our power to set up such a being or whether such a concept has reality and can be conceived clearly and distinctly without contradiction. For opponents will say that the concept of a being... which exists through its essence is a chimera, (Cottingham, 1988: 100). Thus Spinoza's ontological argument cannot go through unless it can be shown that the concept of a necessarily existing being is possible. And a similar structure will apply

to the Cartesian version of the argument since Descartes presupposes that the concept of a "supremely perfect being" is one which can be clearly and distinctly perceived, that is, which does not involve any hidden contradictions. The point that Leibniz is making here is a valuable one, and has a philosophical importance which goes far beyond the question of whether the ontological argument is sound. Both the Cartesian theory of clear and distinct ideas and the Spinozistic notion of adequate ideas that are self-manifestingly true, seem to rely on the claim that, we can by the light of reason alone, determine whether or not a concept is coherent. Leibniz's point is that matters may not be this simple: you may think you have an idea of **X**, but X may in fact be an incoherent notion.

On Leibnizian view, it is not enough to think of something in order to assert that we have an idea of it. As we know, despite his criticisms of the ontological argument, Leibniz believed that it could be repaired. One line he suggested was that since the divine essence is by definition supremely simple, indivisible and unified, there can be no room here for any contradiction or incoherence since all contradiction implies a clash between separate elements of a complex entity. (Leibniz 1974: 462-63).

The cosmological argument is more plausible than the ontological argument. It is a form of the First-Cause argument which is related to the unmoved mover. The First-Cause argument points out that everything finite has a cause, which in turn had a cause and so on. This series of previous causes cannot be infinite and the first term in the series must itself be uncaused, since otherwise it would not be the first term. In Leibniz the argument takes a somewhat different form. He argues that every particular thing in the world is "contingent", that is to say, it would be logically possible for it not to exist; and this is true, not only of each particular thing, but of the whole universe. Even if we suppose the universe to have always existed, there is nothing within the universe to show why it exists. But everything has to have a sufficient reason according to Leibniz's philosophy; therefore the universe as a whole must have a sufficient reason, which must be outside the universe. We can conclude that this sufficient reason for Leibniz is God (Leibniz 1974 : 462-64).

In sum, I can say that Leibniz's cosmological argument cannot be easily refuted. As we have seen the First-Cause argument rests on the assumption that every series must have a first term, which is false. But Leibniz's argument does not depend upon the view that the universe must have had a beginning in time. On the other hand, the argument is valid so long as we grant Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason.

In a nutshell, as has been mentioned earlier, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz are called "the Rationalists" because they insist on certainty in knowledge and because they thought that mathematical reasoning was the ideal of certain and sound knowledge. For

that reason, they assigned God great importance and place in their philosophical systems so as to secure a genuine basis for knowledge on which everything depends including the existence of the physical world, of material things, of other minds as well as the interaction between the mind and mater and so on.

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