WHAT DO ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD REALLY PROVE?

In the history of philosophy, both eastern and western (although more in the latter than in the former), considerable philosophical acumen, effort, and energy were spent in constructing arguments for the existence of God. Such pre-occupations with the existence of God are not just a matter of the past. Quite the contrary, to-day as ever before, philosophers are busy either polishing and revising old arguments or constructing new ones—witness recent work of Norman Malcolm, Charles Hartshorne, George Mavrodes, and Alvin Plantinga, to mention only a few contemporary philosophers of different persuasions but all interested in proving the existence of God.[1] The purpose of the present paper is to show that in a very real sense arguments for the existence of God can never even get off the ground—in the sense that their premises cannot be formulated in an unambiguous way, let alone their truth as well as that of their conclusion, namely, God exists; and that all purported proofs for the existence of God are nothing but rationalizations producing the illusion that one has a rational basis for holding that God exists. It will also be shown that insofar as there are different conceptions of God in different cultures, any argument for the existence of God is necessarily culture-bound. The most a given philosopher can claim, then, is that God, according to his own conception, exists. If so, paradoxically enough, it follows that many Gods with mutually incompatible properties exist. This is indeed a disturbing conclusion for monotheists. I turn now to a consideration of these points.

Let us start with the type of arguments for which the conception of God as most perfect being is crucial, irrespective of such arguments being called ' ontological ' or ' moral '. Proponents of arguments of this type usually do not clarify " most perfect being, " besides saying that such a concept necessarily includes ' existence ' or means, among other things, " the being with highest moral perfection. " But this would not do, for ' perfection ' is a valueladen term and one has to make clear what attributes constitute perfection, while we may readily grant that all the constitutive

attributes, whatever they may be, may be thought of as exemplified in God in the highest degree. That is, perfection has two aspects, a qualitative and a quantitative, and unless the two aspects are distinguished and the attributes which make up the qualitative aspect are spelled out, the argument cannot be formulated unambiguously. And it is obvious that different advocates of argument from highest perfection consider different attributes as marks of perfection. Which attributes a given philosopher so regards depends upon his cultural background and philosophical persuasion. Thus it is only by unpacking the crucial term, namely, 'most perfect being', we come to know that two philosophers have different conceptions of perfection and hence of most perfect being, whose existence both claim their arguments prove. Otherwise, one would mistakenly believe that they have both proved the existence of the *same* God. It is clear now that the so-called ontological argument, or, for that matter, any argument which employes the notion of perfection, is, contrary to general belief, in an important manner grounded in value judgments. That such is the case may not, however, be apparent. Thus when a philosopher from a given culture and with a certain philosophical persuasion presents an argument employing the concept of highest perfection, his fellow-philosophers (from the same culture and philosophical persuasion, of course) do not ask for a clarification of 'highest perfection', the reason being that all of them being from the same culture, implicitly agree as to what attributes constitute highest perfection. And those among them who challenge the argument usually do so from some other angle, such as whether 'highest perfection' necessarily includes 'existence', etc. My point here is that if the advocate of the argument is pressed right at the beginning to define 'highest perfection', he confronts serious and insurmountable difficulties and it becomes clear that he cannot proceed with the argument without making controversial value judgments. Thus suppose he says that 'highest perfection' means, among other things, highest wisdom, and I ask him why not highest stupidity, for after all the latter is as rare and hard to come by as the former. The philosopher would immediately object to my question by saying that perfection is made up of only the positive and not the negative qualities. The bag of troubles is

now wide open, for the philosopher has to tell us on what criteria he classifies a given attribute as positive or negative. To continue, consider two conceptions of God, according to one of which perfection includes might and heroism and according to the other peacefulness and non-violence. Surely, then, any proof for the existence of God according to the first conception will be at odds with a proof according to the latter. It is fallacious, then, to think that both are proofs for the existence of the same God. If two conceptions are different then the two entities (actual or possible) to which they refer are also different and hence a proof for the existence of one entity is not the same as that for the existence of the other. To be sure, a philosopher may try to reconcile two incompatible conceptions of God as the above by saying that God as most perfect being exemplifies both highest power for violence and wrath and highest non-violence and peacefulness. But such an amalgamated conception is obviously self-contradictory, and the philosopher may again try to remove this self-contradictoriness by maintaining that God, although He has both these attributes in the highest degree, uses them appropriately in any given situation in light of His highest wisdom. This suggestion seems nice and interesting. But the question arises as to how the philosopher knows that such is the case? The only answer to this is that the philosopher so conceives God. And what does this prove ? Nothing, except that the philosopher has a certain conception of God, not that there exists an entity fitting that conception. His argument thus never gets off the ground. The so-called arguments for the existence of God are often constructed without explicating of such crucial concepts as ' highest perfection ' and ' most perfect being '.

In order to substantiate this observation further, I now point out a similar difficulty with respect to the type of arguments known as cosmological arguments. These arguments, as is well-known; try to establish the existence of God by not permitting an infinite casual chain and by arbitrarily terminating it in God. But, one asks, why so terminate the chain ? The answer is that the advocate of the argument so conceives God that He is the uncaused cause (or the unmoved mover) in whom, by definition, originates the causal chain needed to account for what there is.

But has the advocate of the argument thereby proved there exists God who is an uncaused cause ? Surely not, all that is shown is that the philosopher has a certain conception of God. It might be mentioned in passing that for an Upanishadic Hindu such cosmological arguments as the above do not prove the existence of Brahman which, according to the Upanishads is beyond all predicates, including 'uncaused cause'. Thus the argument for the existence of God which convinces, for example, a Christian philosopher fails to convince an Upanishadic Hindu philosopher. The important point to note here is that the former and the latter have two radically different conceptions of God.

Let me now throw further light on this point by considering that notorious and ignominious phenomenon known as 'religious wars', for example the Crusades. For our purposes, we need not worry about the real (!) reasons for and causes of the Crusades. All we need to acknowledge is religious animosity between two peoples. Now suppose that the Christian and the Moslem each has his own argument for the existence of God. The question now arises whether their proofs are centered around the same concept of God. My contention is that insofar as there is religious conflict, in the sense that each is not content to leave the other in peace with his own conception of God and is actively engaged in opposing the other's, their conceptions of God differ in at least one respect, whatever that may be. If so, their supposed proofs are not proofs of the same God. Nor does the fact that during some periods they both live in peace prove that they have the same conception of God. Each prays to and worships his own God without concerning himself with the other. Some might object that these observations are irrelevant to a philosophical proof of God. I submit that such an objection is mistaken and powerless, for it is futile to pretend that philosophers and their proofs are somehow totally unrelated to their education, upbringing, culture, and religious and philosophical persuasions. Thus Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Paley, Hartshorne, Malcolm, Plantinga, Sankara, and Ramanuja have each his own conception of God in their proofs. It may be the case that two or more philosophers have the same conception of God. But it is imprortant to note that although different philosophers may accept, for example, argument from highest perfection, they give different meanings to 'highest perfection' and this means

that they are proving the existence of different Gods. Thus there is only verbal agreement among them insofar as they all employ the phrase ' highest perfection ' or ' most perfect being ' and no real agreement. Each philosopher proves to his own satisfaction the existence of God according to his own conception. Thus in the Jewish conception of God is included His choosing some people (in preference to others). And if we ask a Jewish philosopher why God choose a particular people rather than others, he can only answer, " Well, to have so chosen is a mark of His perfection." Needless to say, such an answer will be rejected by others who believes that such acts as choosing and displaying preferences cannot be marks of highest perfection. The point, then, is that when a philosopher constructs a proof for the existence of God, he has to set up some conception or other of God and no conception of God can incorporate in itself all the properties all people attribute to God. If someone tries to be so large-hearted as to generate an all-inclusive conception of God, the resulting conception of God would be either vacuous or self-contradictory. Thus when a philosopher presents an argument for the existence of God, the question to ask is not whether the argument is valid but rather what his conception of God whose existence he is trying to prove is and why that particular conception and not some other. In answering this question, it becomes clear that his conception is only one among many possible ones and that all that the philosopher is doing is to rationalize his own conception through some supposed proof. Against this charge, the philosopher might maintain that he is not concerned with other people's conceptions of God and that he is proving the existence of God according to his own. Such an assertion is both honest and correct. But the only trouble is seldom do philosophers state that their proofs are proofs for existence of God according to their own conception and often leave the impression that they are proving the existence of God according to some universally accepted conception. I have rarely come across a Moslem philosopher who says he is proving the existence of Moslem God, a Christian philosopher a Christian God, or a Bahai philosopher a Bahai God, etc. And there is no need to point out that philosophy books and articles are notorious for such titles as " Arguments for the existence of God " and one wonders which God (s).

I now raise the question why in the first place a philosopher concerns himself with proving the existence of God. It should be kept in mind that this question is different from the one as to why people believe in God—to which we have the well-worn Freudian, Marxist, and other kinds of psychological and socio-political answers. Whether or not such explanations are satisfactory and acceptable is not our concern here. One main reason, philosophers engage in constructing arguments for the existence of God is that they want to assure themselves that their belief in God is rationally grounded. That is, they want to support their belief in God by reasons. But while granting that a desire to seek such rational grounding of one's belief in God is the motivating force behind constructing arguments, we may still legitimately seek psychological and other explanations as to why someone in the first place believes that God exists. Be the latter as it may, we want to ask whether arguments for the existence of God really provide a rational basis for believing that God exists. It seems not, for as has been argued earlier, if each person or group of persons proves at best only that God according to a particular conception exists, none of the arguments satisfies what I call the 'uniqueness claim', namely, the claim that only God according to one's own conception exists but not according to those of others. That is, offering a uniqueness argument is part of the meaning of rationally grounding one's belief in God, insofar as one believes that one's own conception of God is universal and does not even hint that one allows for its being not so. But in the absence of uniqueness arguments all the so-called arguments for the existence of God are no more than rationalizations of one's own belief that God according to his own conception exists. Put differently, in order for it to be acceptable, any argument for the existence of God should prove not only that God according to its proponent's conception exists but also that it is impossible for God according to their conceptions to exist. But to the best of my knowledge and belief this has never been done. It is worth noting that this observation has serious implications for monotheism. A polytheist, by definition, grants that he believes in the existence of many gods and is primarily concerned with proving his gods by rationally grounding his belief, leaving aside the question of rational vindi-

cation of the existence of the gods of others. But the situation is radically different with respect to monotheism, for a monotheist, such as a Jew, Moslem, or Christian, by definition believes in the existence of one and only one God and to rationally support this belief he has to show not only that there exists God according to his own conception but also that no other gods *can* exist. And surprisingly enough, this requirement has never been squarely faced by monotheistic philosophers and theologians. Having lacked arguments, when challenged they resorted to the sword and the bayonet and a variety of religious and philosophical chauvinism. Witness the Moslem destruction of Hindu temples and idols which the Moslems saw as the epitome of polytheism. Thus the problem of universality and uniqueness has a special bearing on proofs for the existence of God. For all monotheists maintain that their God is not a sectarian God but universal and the only one. And such a claim can only be supported by showing that it is impossible for any God other than their own to exist.

My claim that any supposed argument for the existence of God is a rationalization of an initial belief is supported, ironically enough, by Mavrodes (who, it seems, holds that God's existence can be proved) when he writes: "....unless a person has faith in God, the mere fact that there is a sound argument for God's existence—or even that he has heard such an argument —cannot make his belief in God rational."[2] In other words, Mavrodes is saying that a mere proof, no matter how logical and sound, is not enough unless backed up by prior faith in God. And what is faith in God ? I answer that it is that frame of mind in which rationalization appears as rational vindication. Prior faith is a necessary condition for accepting a given argument as providing rational basis for one's belief in God's existence. But how explain the initial faith ? On rational grounds ? Obviously not. It can only be explained by bringing in psychological, cultural, and other considerations, individual and collective. In order to bring into focus the rationalizing role of faith, it is enough to ask whether a man would give up his faith if he is unable to find arguments in which to rationally ground it or if his arguments are rationally refuted. The answer to this is by and large 'no', and this shows that the supposed proofs

a believer produces are no more than rationalizations of his anterior faith. They have little bearing on what he originally comes to hold on faith, no matter how he comes to embrace that faith.

Philosophers in general and in particular those who busy themselves with proving the existence of God are a strange and curious breed of men. Thus while priding themselves as men guided by reason and rationality, they nevertheless go on looking for and constructing proofs to provide a rational basis for something which in the first place they come to hold on the basis of faith. No wonder, then, the whole enterprise of proving the existence of God is a thorough failure. But philosophers are men of robust souls not to be daunted by such failure. The driving current of faith is too strong for them to see the distinction between ratiocination and rationalization when it comes to their precious faith.

Let someone think that my claim that when a philosopher presents arguments for the existence of God he does so with a specific conception of God in mind is unfounded, let me quote Plantinga : " In this study I set out to investigate the rational justification of belief in the existence of God *as He is conceived* in the Hebrew-Christian tradiation."[3] Let us assume Plantinga's arguments are valid. What do they prove ? They prove no more than that he has proved to his own satisfaction (and that of the followers of the Hebrew-Christian tradition) that the Hebrew-Christian God exists. But these arguments do not convince a non-Christian, for example a Hindu or a Buddhist. It is also interesting to note that Plantinga passes by the notion of perfectly good[4] without saying that it means different things to different people. To be sure, he does deal with the problem of evil. But what is to be considered as evil depends upon what is meant by ' perfectly good '. Thus my point that one at best proves the existence of God according to one's own conception of God holds with respect to Plantinga. It is to Plantinga's credit, however, that unlike many other philosophers he explicitly states at the beginning of his work that it deals with the existence of God according to a particular conception.

That the power of anterior faith is too strong to resist constructing arguments can be clearly seen in the case of Malcolm. Thus while he claims to do and exhorts others to do philosophy according to the Wittgensteinian view that the proper task of philosophy is to disentangle conceptual confusions and clear up conceptual muddles and not to tell what does or does not exist Malcolm defends Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God.[5] But to claim that God exists is not just clearing up conceptual muddles. It is much more than that—it is to claim that there exists something with certain attributes. It is an existential claim with respect to a certain kind of entity, not an empty verbal claim which in any case need not be taken seriously. The point of these remarks is that the power and hold of faith is so strong that Malcolm does not hesitate philosophizing against his own canons, to the extent one can gather them from his writings.

A similar observation with regard to the power of faith can be made with respect to Plantinga. He tries to prove the existence of God by an analogical argument which he himself sums up as follows : " If my belief in other minds is rational, so is my belief in God. But obviously the former is rational; so therefore, is the latter."[6] Limitations of space do not permit me to deal with this argument in detail here and so I restrict myself to comment or two. It seems quite rational to believe in other minds (the term ' minds ' is admittedly complicated and ambiguous) without having to believe in God and there are many who do so. It then follows that either these men are irrational or Plantinga's argument simply fails. Plantinga would have had a stronger case had he constructed an argument of the following type : It to believe in other minds is rational and God (the Hebrew-Christian, of course) is another mind, then to believe in God is rational. But what does it mean to show God is another mind ? Further, he should show that God is not just another mind but a mind with the attributes of the Hebrew-Christian God. I simply cannot see how any one could go about showing this. It is also to be noted that Plantinga's argument is concerned with *having a rational belief* (on some agreed criteria of ' rational '), not with whether such a belief is true. If by 'rational' we mean logically possible, then it is logically possible that God

does not exist. Plantinga's argument, then, seems to be no more than saying that God's existence is logically possible, which is really not saying much in spite of the fine distinctions he makes and the subtle arguments he presents. And, as pointed out earlier, even if one accepts Plantinga's arguments, it only proves the existence of the Hebrew-Christian God and not that other gods do not exist. If so, it conviences only those who are already committed to the Hebrew-Christian faith. Thus Plantinga's arguments cannot circumvent my basic thesis that any argument for the existence of God is necessarily tied down to some particular conception of God and as long as it is logically possible to have other conceptions no arguments need be taken seriously, for it would be merely a rationalization of a prior faith and commitment to a certain conception of God.

To conclude, the so-called proofs for the existence of God prove nothing about God's existence but only that a philosopher has a certain conception of God. Further, even if we have a particular proof for the existence of God, by giving different meanings to the different crucial concepts occurring in the argument, for example 'God' and 'most perfect being', we can prove the existence of many Gods. In fact, each instantiation of the argument-form, of which the original argument is but an instance, is a proof of a different God. Thus if someone accepts the argument from highest perfection, then each different conception of highest perfection results in a proof for a different God. That a given argument for the existence of God is based on some particular conception of God presents serious difficulties to monotheism. For insofar as every monotheist claims that his own God is both most perfect and the only one, it follows that the claims of different monotheists, such as Moslems and Christians, conflict with each other. The only way out of this impasse, then, is either to give a uniqueness demonstration or withdraw the monotheistic claim as well as the claim to highest perfection. In my judgment, for what it is worth, withdrawal of the monotheistic claim is particularly commendable not only for its intellectual integrity but also for its promise and potential for religious tolernance, for, after all, monotheism, whatever may have been its supposed merits, is certainly responsible for much of the zealotry, fanaticism, and bloodshed in the sad saga of the

talking, thinking, and philosophizing animal. Finally, what arguments for the existence of God really prove is that different people commit themselves a priori to different conceptions of God and not that any God exists at all.

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Notes

1. C. Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery*, Open Court, LaSalle, Illinois, 1965.

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2. G. Mavrodes, *The Rationality of Belief in God*, Prentice-Hall, N.J., 1970, p. 5.

3. A. Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1967, p. XII (emphasis added).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

5. N. Malcolm, " Anselm's Ontological Arguments ", *Philosophical Review*, LXIX, 1960, pp. 41–62.

6. A. Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1967, pp. VIII and 271.

DIALOGUE

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