G. W. Leibniz: On Proving Divine Existence (1678-1679 (?))

[A VI 4, p1390]

I have observed that while the majority of arguments advanced by exceptional men to prove divine existence do indeed contain something excellent and solid, they are generally imperfect, and as they always lack something they do not deserve to be called complete demonstrations. And there is a big gap between a paralogism and an imperfect demonstration, for although neither is convincing, the latter can be perfected by new reinforcements while the former contains an irremediable defect.

There is an argument of the Scholastics, already mentioned by Thomas and revived by Descartes, which holds that existence belongs to the concept of the most perfect being, that is, to the concept of that than which a greater cannot be conceived, on the grounds that otherwise it would lack a certain perfection or a certain degree of reality, contrary to the hypothesis.¹ But if existence already follows from the concept or definition of the most perfect being, that is, God, then existence can be truly predicated of it, and hence God exists. This argument is imperfect, for it assumes that there is some concept of the most perfect being, that is, that the most perfect being is possible. But those who will want to contest this can respond that perhaps the most perfect being implies contradiction, just like the fastest speed, the greatest circle, and other such things. Nevertheless, this argument contains excellent things, because it shows that God’s existence follows from his possibility alone, which [A VI 4, p1391] does not hold true of other things. And the same thing can be concluded more briefly from another definition of God already received among the Scholastics, that God is a being through itself, that is, a being existing through its own essence, or a necessary being. For as the essence of each thing is the same as its possibility of existing, consequently to say that God’s existence follows from his essence or concept is the same as saying that if God is merely possible then undoubtedly he exists in actuality. Therefore it remains to be proved that the most perfect being is possible. Once this is supplied, the demonstration will be serviceable. But it seems to me that to make good this defect there is need for a deeper metaphysics than the Cartesian.

The reasoning of the most renowned man Erhard Weigel that he shared with friends far and wide seems to me to contain not a few excellent points, yet because it concerns the human race that the demonstration of such an important conclusion is completed with the utmost rigour, so that it cannot be contradicted any more than can mathematical demonstrations, it will be worthwhile to note down what seems to have been lacking in it thus far.² And if I have remembered correctly, the force of the argument comes down to this: that all things which do not exist through their own essence, that is, which are not eternal, are transitory, that is, formed and reproduced anew at any moment. Indeed, that every world, and everything included in a world, is nothing than its own present position, which is different from the past and present one. But if, therefore, there are transitory things, it is necessary that there is something eternal, for things destroyed at any moment must surely persist in the state of nothingness unless they are reproduced by something eternal.

¹ The original argument can be found in Anselm, Proslogion seu alloquium de dei existentia, II-III, and his Liber contra insipientem, seu Apologeticus adversus librum precedentem. It was discussed by Aquinas in Summa theologiae, I, q2, a1, ad2. Descartes’ version of the argument can be found in the fifth of his Meditations; see René Descartes, The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoof, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 45-47.

² Erhard Weigel had circulated his proof to friends prior to its ultimate publication in his Philosophia mathematica: theologica naturalis solida, per singulas scientias continuata, universae artis inveniendi prima stamina complectens (Jena, 1693). See for example Leibniz’s letter to Weigel of September 1679 in A II 1, 745-748. Leibniz would later discuss Weigel’s argument in §384 of his Theodicy.
This is the excellent man’s argument, which the Scholastics even anticipated when they said that conservation is a continuous creation and that present existence is independent of preceding existence, and consequently that things will not persist unless they are recreated by God. But the following points come to my mind as lacking in it. First, I shall certainly allow that motion, time, and other beings of this kind, which the Scholastics likewise call “flowing,” are transitory, but that continuous flux has not yet been sufficiently proved with respect to the substances, mind and body, and certain attributes that seem enduring, like extension and power of acting. For although time flows, and the same body does not exist at this moment of time and at that moment, yet it does not therefore follow that it is continually destroyed and formed anew. Nor also do I grant that a thing is the same as its present position, but rather [A VI 4, p1392] it is necessary that a thing be distinguished from its own position. But if someone urges that surely it is another existence of a thing by which it exists today and by which it existed yesterday, and hence that there are as many existences of a thing as there are moments of time, I shall indeed grant that, but shall nevertheless contend that it can be applied to eternal things too, for surely even God’s existence of today is not his existence of yesterday, for his existence of today is coexistence with Paul and his existence yesterday is coexistence with Peter, but coexistence with Paul is different from coexistence with Peter, assuming Paul and Peter do not exist at the same time but the former today and the latter yesterday. Therefore the reason for the distinction must be produced, for why the same as what is said here about created things cannot be said about God. For it cannot be denied that God endures, that is, that he has existed, exists, and will exist; and that in no way is existence the same yesterday and today, not even with respect to God: to say something else is only to play with words. Certainly it is true that God, who exists through himself, also endures through himself, but things endure only if God conserves them; but even though this is true, it still needs to be demonstrated. Others say that a thing which once exists continues in existence by its own power until a reason for its destruction emerges. They also say that not only is God eternal but matter is too, and Epicurus will also contend that the parts of matter are eternal atoms. They must be convinced that all these are in fact falsehoods by an accurate demonstration, which would surely be given if it were proved that things are produced anew at every moment.

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