

# Ontological Argument Revisited by Two Ottoman Muslim Scholars

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**St. Anselm's**<sup>[1]</sup> famous ontological argument has been disputed by many Western Philosophers to our day. However, this discussion seemed to have been limited to Western Philosophy until I have recently come across the opinions of two great Ottoman Muslim scholars. Since they were raised with a strong traditional Islamic education which taught rich philosophical and theological heritage of Islam, their accounts for the ontological argument are quite interesting. Their opinions are not known very much in the West, perhaps mostly because they wrote in Ottoman Turkish and Arabic. The objective of this article is to make their opinions available in English for those who are interested in this dispute.

First of the two Ottoman scholars is **Hamdi Yazir**<sup>[2]</sup> whose discussion of the ontological argument is taken from his comments in the footnotes of a book<sup>[3]</sup> he translated from French to Ottoman Turkish.

The second scholar is **Mustafa Sabri**<sup>[4]</sup> who criticized the ontological argument in his great book written in Arabic, **Mawqif Al-Aql**.<sup>[5]</sup>

## First, St. Anselm's famous ontological argument:

- God is a being than which no greater can be conceived, - He exists at least in mind, - But then it is possible to conceive a being existing in reality, greater than a being existing in mind only, - Therefore God exists.

## Gaunilo's criticism of the ontological argument:

St. Anselm's argument was criticized by **Gaunilo**<sup>[6]</sup> who claimed that by using the same logic of the ontological argument, it would also be possible to prove the existence of a lost perfect island (an island than which no more perfect island could be conceived). He also criticized the first premise above. According to him there is no such being in mind because it is not possible to know Him in Himself alone. It is not possible to have an idea of what He is by analogy either, because there is nothing like Him.

## St. Anselm's answer to Gaunilo:

"Do you mean that we cannot know God's essence? I agree. But so what? Would our inability to look at the sun mean that we are blind? Every imperfect being points to a perfect one. Therefore, the existence of a being than which none is more perfect is necessary."<sup>[7]</sup>

### Yazir's comment:

If taken literally, St. Anselm's answer looks as if he admits his critic's argument because he talks about the imperfect pointing to the perfect as this would mean to hint God's existence through the creation, instead of proving it through the reason only as the ontological argument was supposed to do. Gaunilo's objective was not to deny God's existence anyway, but to show the incorrectness of the argument. Therefore, St. Anselm's answer above cannot even defend an objective of his argument. Nevertheless, an interpretation such as the following, is possible: The concept of God can be obtained from the creation through comparison and likening because a likening does not have to be an equality or similarity in each and every aspect. Although everything in creation is imperfect, that imperfect points to a perfect by stripping off the imperfect attributes. If I saw and conceived something beautiful, that would not necessarily mean that it is nothing but a concept. On the contrary, it could be quite a real concept. Perhaps it could be the best (upper limit) of that imperfect beauty, not the essence of it. Yet, that limit of the imperfectness could well be sufficient for the ontological argument because I could not deduce all attributes from it though. But I could infer some of its attributes or at least its existence. This would be enough. There is no another sun in our solar system like ours, and I cannot look at it completely. Does that mean that my imperfect perception of the sun is nothing but a concept? Likewise, the concept of existence is as such. I obtain it from the existence of ephemeral things. If I drop the "ephemeral" and add the "eternal" (as to the past), I reach a real concept, not a concept consisting of a name only. If we suppose that existence is not a non-essential attribute nor a speculative concept but a general name, the case becomes clearer. Then, Gaunilo's island objection can be eliminated because that island could be a part of existence or it could be a part of non-existence. But, existence is always existence. It cannot be non-existent. In sum, if existence is considered the basis for the truth and reality and a total absolute category (our sufi thought is of this opinion), not a relative concept nor of the secondary qualities, then the concept of existence is unlike the other concepts. Non-existence is out of question for it.

With this line of reasoning then, we can claim that the inference of the ontological argument is a legitimate and inevitable deduction from the premises as in the correct syllogisms, not a question begging one. Furthermore, this way it is also possible to answer Kant's criticism. However, St. Anselm's answer above stopped short, perhaps because he could not see the issue clearly, even though he must have felt it.

As can be seen from its logic, the ontological argument is a kind of proof belonging to our **sufi** and **ishraq**<sup>[8]</sup> schools of thought. **Ibn Sina (Avicenna)**<sup>[9]</sup> too, proved the existence of the

necessary<sup>[10]</sup> Being from the concept of existence deductively, purely from reason, in his book Isharat, through a disjunctive argument, unlike St. Anselm's way.<sup>[11][12]</sup>

**Thomas Aquinas'<sup>[13]</sup> criticism of the ontological argument:**

As the proposition "The whole is greater than its part" is self-evident in itself, the proposition "God exists" is also self-evident in itself for those who can see him because the essence of God is His existence. However, since we cannot see Him, we cannot know Him in His essence but by His works.<sup>[14]</sup>

**Yazir's comment:**

**In our (Muslim) philosophical and theological literature, there are four main schools of thought about existence:**

Existence is the same of the essence of a being who is necessary and existence is something other than the essence of a being who is contingent. For contingent beings, existence is an addition to their essence, a general non-essential attribute which is of the secondary qualities.

This is the philosophers' school of thought.

Existence is the single truth for all things. It is not in different forms. Since the essence of the contingent things is in fact nothingness, their existence consists of the reflection of the necessary existence. Therefore, contingent things are essentially non-existent. There is no real existence other than the necessary existence. That existence is the same of its being. This is the Ishraq philosophers' and sufis' school of thought.

Existence of everything is itself, its own reality, even its own identity. Therefore, there are as many existences as there are reality of things. This is the school of thought of Ash'aris.<sup>[15]</sup>

Whether a being is necessary or contingent, existence is other than the true nature of it.

Existence is an addition, a common meaning and attribute for all beings.

In this context, there is one more opinion which might be considered the fifth school: Existence is of two kinds: special existence and general existence. Special existence is a reality in itself. It differs in all things. General existence is a meaning of abstraction and of the kind of secondary qualities. The divine special existence is a universal reality of all special existences. Now, the ontological argument would be correct if existence was taken as a single reality as in the sufi and Ishraq schools, not a secondary quality. However, St. Thomas, by siding with the thought of the majority of philosophers, accepted that Divine existence was the same of His true nature. Therefore, it is necessary to know His essence, His true nature, in order to know Him. As for the contingent things, their existence is other than necessary existence. It is a non-essential attribute for them. Therefore, according to him, we could not conceive the Divine essence from their existence. He means that it would not be possible to infer His existence

deductively and purely by reason unless the essence of reality is completely conceived. So, his argument shows that St. Thomas was able to apply the thought of his philosophical school in his criticism, in quite a scholarly way.

In fact, the real issue in this dispute is the truth of existence.[16]

#### **Kant's criticism:**

In an analytic proposition, if I reject the predicate while retaining the subject or reject the subject while retaining the predicate, undoubtedly contradiction results. But if I reject both subject and predicate, there is no contradiction. Therefore, if I reject them both in the proposition "God exists", why should there be a contradiction?[17]

#### **Yazir's comment:**

Kant calls the propositions where the concepts of subject and predicate are intrinsic in each other, as "analytic propositions". And he considers most of self-evident propositions of this kind. These kind of propositions are called literal propositions (qadhaya lafzhiyya) by Muslim logicians. For example, a proposition consisting of the combination of the definition and the defined is a literal proposition. In fact, here the analytic proposition should be the major proposition: God is the perfect being. **Descartes**[18] makes a conclusion, i.e. a logical deduction by adding a minor term to this proposition: Existence is a perfection. Therefore, Kant's objection cannot be applied to Descartes' proof, although it is applicable to St. Anselm's.

That is why Kant brings forward his second and third objections:[19]

#### **Kant's second objection:**

Existence is not a predicate. In other words, it is not something that can be added to a concept of a thing. It is merely a state of a thing. If it was not, there would have to be an additional attribute in an existing thing compared to a thing in mind. This is not possible because otherwise, what is in mind would not conform to what is a fact. There is nothing more in a real \$100 bill than a \$100 bill in mind.[20]

#### **Yazir's comment:**

Then, would it not be enough just to conceive in order to become wealthy? Therefore, there is something more in a real \$100 bill than a \$100 bill in mind. That thing is its existence. And the conformance of mind to fact is in terms of other things than its existence. Besides, what is the state of a thing? And are the different states of a thing not an obstacle to the mutual conformity above?[21]

#### **Kant's third objection:**

"God exists" is either an analytic proposition or a synthetic one. If analytic, the predicate does not add anything new to the subject. Therefore, existence of a thing does not increase its

concept. It means that you assumed it already existing and factual, thus making the proposition a repetition of your assumption, rendering your proof invalid. If the proposition is a synthetic one, how can one claim that the rejection of predicate results in contradiction as this is the case only in analytical propositions.[22]

**Yazir's comment:**

We cannot accept this argument because contradiction occurs directly in analytical propositions and indirectly in synthetic propositions. While the conclusion of a syllogism or a deduction can be a synthetic statement, the rejection of that conclusion or its predicate contradicts the premises. Therefore, it contradicts itself indirectly. Otherwise, no logical deduction could be possible. The claim that the real or synthetic proposition can only be supported through induction and that the conclusion of a syllogism is always analytic is skillfully refuted by Stuart Mill and explained by Alexander Bain.[23]

**Mustafa Sabri's criticism:**

We do accept that perfection cannot be conceived without the existence of a perfect being. A perfect being can only be conceived in mind, combined with its existence, even with its existence outside mind. In other words, it can be conceived with the concept of its existence outside, as the place of this combination is the concept where there is space for the existent and non-existent and two existing things mutually requiring each other or two non-existent things likewise. Yet, the occurrence of a perfect thing together with its external existence, in mind does not necessarily mean that that thing really exists outside. Our logicians maintained that there is no limit to the concepts in human mind. Human mind may feel compelled to adding the concept of external existence to the concept of perfection because God is conceived as a perfect being, then say that perfect being exists outside, without the combined existence of the existences in mind having to have an effect in reality..... [24]

Let me explain further what I said above: There is no doubt about the truth of the statement: "God is the being with perfect attributes". However, those who adopted this argument before and after Descartes are not aware of the fact that the statement above cannot be used to prove the existence of God. In other words, "God is the being with perfect attributes" though it is true, cannot be a premise to prove the existence of God. That is why it is true for all those who believe in His existence. But, this is not the case for those who do not believe in God. For them, He does not exist, nor does He have perfect attributes. Whoever attempts to prove the existence of God, should not assume His existence nor His perfect attributes until one comes up with a clear proof. We do not hesitate to attribute perfection to Him because first we believed in His existence through a proof other than the ontological argument then it became

obvious for us that the proposition "God has the perfect attributes" is true. The truth of that proposition depends on the existence of the subject, which is God, as this is a condition required by the old logic. As for those who do not know if God exists and do want to find out from His perfect attributes or who knows He exists and wants to prove it for those who do not know, with the proof of perfectness, they should know that the proposition "God is perfect" used in their proof is an affirmative one whose truth logically depends on the existence of its subject which they are trying to prove. Therefore, it is a question begging argument which is incorrect according to logicians.

How subtle the point of logic in requiring the existence of subject for the affirmative propositions while this requirement is not necessary for the negative ones! For example, the proposition "the bird phoenix flies" is untrue while the proposition "phoenix does not fly" is true. Since such a bird does not exist, anything said affirmative about it, is untrue while everything said negative about it, is true. This is one of the subtle points of logic, I mean, the old formal logic despite the belittling of logic by Egyptian intellectuals today.<sup>[25]</sup>

True that nothing is wrong in a proposition in dictionaries such as "Phoenix is a big imaginary bird". This does not conflict with what we said earlier about the logical rule which says an affirmative proposition cannot be true without the existence of its subject, because propositions in dictionaries are descriptive statements explaining the meanings of words. The logicians do not consider such descriptive statements as logical propositions. But if you insist that it is an affirmative proposition like other logical propositions which can be true or untrue, and that it is still true as a proposition despite the requirement of logic for the existence of its subject to be true, the answer is that the descriptive statement "phoenix is a bird..." in dictionaries is an assertion on the word "phoenix", as its the name of a bird. There is no doubt that the word "phoenix" exists in the language even if it is a name without the named object. Therefore, the assertion is still true as the subject (the name of the bird in this case, not the bird itself) exists.

In sum, thanks to logic and its subtlety, we have seen three points in this discussion:

- 1- Subject in affirmative propositions must exist while this is not necessary for the negative propositions,
- 2- There is no limit to human imagination without necessarily being true or real,
- 3- Descriptive statements are considered explaining things as existing or non-existing concepts for which there is no limit in human mind even if they look like affirmative propositions.

The second point above is the one that misled the proponents of the ontological argument

whereas the first point should have opened their eyes (to see the incorrectness of the ontological argument).[26]

## References

[1]Ecclesiastical leader and philosopher. He was born in 1033 near Aosta, Italy. He quickly rose to eminence after his study. He became the archbishop of Canterbury in 1093. He died in 1109.

[2]M. Hamdi Yazir "Küçük (little) Hamdi". He was born in Antalya (Turkey), in 1878. He memorized the Holy Qur'an when he was a little child. He continued his education in Istanbul. Then he taught in various institutions. He was elected to the Ottoman Parliament in 1908. He became the minister of religious endowments in the cabinet of Damat Fareed Pasha, in 1919. He died in 1942. May God have mercy on him.

[3]Matalib wa Mazhahib (Motives and Schools of Thought), 1341 (Roumi calendar), Matbaa-i Amira, Istanbul. It is a translation by Yazir, to Ottoman Turkish, from a book of Paul Janet. (Although there is a reference to Paul Janet in Larousse, I could not come across the original title of the book in French.)

[4]Mustafa Sabri was born in Tokat (Turkey) in 1869. He memorized the Holy Qur'an as a child. He completed his education in Istanbul. He taught Islamic sciences. He was elected to the Ottoman Parliament in 1908. He was appointed Sheikh Al-Islam (the highest religious authority) in 1919. He died in Egypt in 1954. May God have mercy on him.

[5]Mawqif Al-Aql wal-Ilm wal-Alem min Rabbil-Alameen wa Ibadihi al-Mursaleen (Position of Reason and Knowledge and World in Relation to the Lord of the Worlds and His Messengers) by Mustafa Sabri, 3rd edition, Dar Ihya at-Turath al-Arabi, Beirut, 1992.

[6]Benedictine monk of the Marmoutier Abbey near Tours.

[7]Matalib wa Mazhahib, p.226

[8]Ishraq (Illumination): A philosophical thought. According to it, every being is defined with light which is obvious. Everything emanates from the light which originates from the light of lights. The light of lights is God Himself.

[9]Famous Muslim philosopher, known as Avicenna in the West. He was born near Bukhara in 980. He memorized the Holy Qur'an as a child. He has great works on philosophy and medicine. He died in Hamadan in 1037. May God have mercy on him.

[10]Necessary being (wajib): a being whose existence is necessary. Its non-existence is not logically possible by definition.

Contingent being (mumkin) is a being or concept whose existence or non-existence is logically

possible.

A logically impossible being(mumtani') is non-existent. It can never exist.

[11]The book Yazir mentions is Al-Isharat wa'l-Tanbihat of Ibn Sina. (Directives and Remarks). Yazir does not give a clear reference to the argument in the book. The following argument I found in the book, is probably the one Yazir meant (with an approximate translation as Ibn Sina's style is very concise):  
Every existing being is either necessary or contingent. (Ibn Sina proves this premise in the previous pages)

A contingent being either needs itself to exist or another being other than itself. If a contingent being exists, there must be another being to prefer the case of existence for that contingent being, to the case of non-existence. Therefore, it needs another being in order to exist.

Then we have here a chain of cause and effects (regress), be it finite or infinite. Then there are two possible cases only:

Either all causes are also effects or not. In the first case, The chain needs a cause outside the chain. This is where the chain ends(backwards). In the second case, there is a cause without being the effect of another cause. That is the end of the chain.

Therefore, in either case, every chain ends with the necessary being (God). (Al-Isharat wa'l-Tanbihat, Ibn Sina, p.447-450, 1958 Dar al-Maarif of Egypt)

[12]Matalib wa Mazhahib, p.226-227 (footnote)

[13]Famous Catholic theologian. He was born in 1224 or 1225. In 1244 he joined the Dominican order. Then he went to Paris. He died in 1274.

[14]Matalib wa Mazhahib, p.227

[15]A theological school of thought in Islam.

[16]Matalib wa Mazhahib, p.228 (footnote)

[17]Ibid, p.254

[18]Descartes' version of the ontological argument:

God is a perfect being

Existence is a perfection

Therefore, God who is perfect, exists.

[19]Matalib wa Mazhahib, p.254 (footnote)

[20]Ibid, p.255

[21]Ibid, p.255 (footnote)

[22]Ibid, p.255



[23]Ibid, p.255 (footnote)

[24]I skipped a few lines where Mustafa Sabri criticizes two Egyptian intellectuals who adopted the ontological argument. Those lines have no bearing on his main criticism of the argument.

[25]Mustafa Sabri actually makes this remark in a broader context where he criticizes Egyptian intellectuals of his time.

[26]Mawqif al-Aql, vol.2, p.227-228