

God is Being-Itself: Exploring Tillich's Concept of the Ultimate

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Abstract: *This paper will probe into the philosophical locus of the concept of the ultimate concern as discussed by Paul Tillich in his substantial writings. It appears that the concept is to be situated in the problem concerning the attributes of God, in particular, God's infinitude. The idea of the infinitude puts us on guard not to predicate of God anything, including 'existence', for that would be limiting the unlimited. This is one specific problem with which philosophers have grappled with. Can we say, 'God exists?' Some say, we can, what is more, we can adduce arguments for God's existence. Others say that we cannot and they too adduce arguments for God's non-existence. Tillich belongs to the latter group, but without being an atheist. This insight of Tillich is the study-focus of this paper. Apart from the question, if existence is a predicate, his answer here has a deep significance to analytical and language philosophy. Tillich believes that the question of God can neither be asked nor answered. Hence the answer, too, be it the affirmation or the negation, implicitly negates the nature of God. Paradoxically, for Tillich, both the affirmation and negation of God constitute forms of atheism.*

Keywords: Being-itself, Existence, Transcendence, Theism, Atheism

1. Introduction

For Tillich the statements, 'God exists' and 'God does not exist' mean the same thing, namely, the irrelevance of the question of God's existence. The two statements, one tends to think, constitute theism and atheism respectively. Tillich, however, argues that not only the denial of God, but also the affirmation would amount to the repudiation of the infinitude of God. The question therefore is not whether the term, 'God', refers to any reality. Rather, if the reality, to which the term refers, is like any other finite realities that we encounter. Its ultimacy refers, not to its being the first or to its being the highest, but to its being the ground or the source of all beings. Tillich, in stating that 'God does not exist', is only restricting the use of the word 'existence' to the finite world, at once safeguarding thereby God's unique nature. This is Tillich's novel way of reinstating the Scholastic thesis that one cannot say that the creator and the creature exist in the same univocal sense. This line of thought is explored in this paper and the discussion pivots around two crucial issues. Firstly, the reason why Tillich asserts that the concept of existence is incompatible with the concept of God as the ultimate concern has to be critically examined. Tillich's statement, 'God does not exist', is liable to be misunderstood in more than one way. Hence it is to be explicated with reference to the concept of infinitude, the traditional arguments for God's existence and Tillich's responses thereto and, above all the irrelevance of both atheism and theism. Secondly, the philosophical foundational of Tillich's assertion 'God is Being-itself' has been closely scrutinized in the general background of the concept of an ultimate concern, which is the presupposition of all discussion on God, of approximation to ultimacy and of Tillich's agreement and disagreement with the Scholastic understanding of God's existence.

2. God's Infinitude

In Western thought the term God is usually associated with the Judaic-Christian concept of God. A basic characteristic attributed here to God is infinitude or 'illimitability'. The concept as such is negative and existence is the positive side of the same concept. The problem of God's existence, then, lies with the nature of his infinitude. The division in this matter is between those philosophers who interpret God pantheistically and those who interpret God theistically, especially of the Judeo-Christian persuasion to whom God wholly transcends the world. According to the pantheistic group of thinkers, the world, being divine, is also infinite (even if particular things and persons reflect its 'infinity' in a limited degree). Spinoza is one of the protagonists of this view, as elaborated in his work *Ethics*. (1985) Having posited a single substance, he affirmed that it must be infinite both in its essence and in its attributes. God must be infinite in his essence because if he were finite we could suppose the existence of something else by which he is, so that he could not now be the sole reality. His attributes must also be infinite, because if his essence is infinite, there must be an infinite number of ways in which it can be conceived. This view is in opposition to the theistic understanding which holds that the world is finite as created, and only God, as the creator, is infinite. It asserts that all perfections pre-exist in God eminently. But the mode of their existence in God is determined by the infinity, which God does not share with any creature. God's infinity, speaking negatively means 'not-finite'. In other words, God is free from the limitations which affect every other being. There are two fundamental limitations affecting the finite being in contrast to the infinity of God. First, every finite being is a mode of existence, for instance a man exists in one way and a dog in another. But, in contrast to this, God is existence *per se*. Second, if God is existence 'in-itself' then he must be self-existent and that he does not derive his being from any other source. Again, in contrast to this, all beings depend continuously on the creative act of God who alone is said to be. Both these aspects of the finitude of the created finite being are affirmed

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by the Scholastics in the dictum that the existence of the finite being is limited by (or proportionate to) its finite essence. Likewise the two aspects of God's infinity are affirmed by the Scholastic dictum that in God essence and existence are identical. (Aquinas, 1952) The finitude of any being other than God consists in the lack of this identity at both points mentioned above. Its essence limits its existential act, and this limitation follows from its dependent character. It exists as 'this' or 'that' by its derivation from Being who is the necessary existence.

3. Arguments for God's Existence

The demonstration of the existence of the theistic God is the concern of the many arguments for the existence of God. The prominent ones in this regard are the ontological and cosmological arguments. The former argument proceeds from the 'idea of God' to its necessary existence. St. Anselm spoke of God as a being greater than which nothing else can be conceived. (1965) In other words, God is so perfect that nothing more perfect can ever be conceived. This God exists in reality because if this most perfect conceivable being existed only in the mind, we should then have the contradiction that it is possible to conceive of a yet more perfect being, namely, the same being existing in reality as well as in the mind. Anselm further goes on to argue out not merely the existence but the necessary existence of God. Since God as infinitely perfect being is not limited in or by time, the possibilities of God's having ever come to exist or ever ceasing to exist are alike excluded, and thereby God's non-existence is rendered impossible. We may note, here, that existence in this argument is taken to be a necessary quality of God and it is predicated of God. This was clearly stated by Descartes, who claimed that existence must be among the defining predicates of God as argued in *Fifth Meditations* (1901) and *Principles of Philosophy* (1984). Just as the fact, that the sum total of the internal angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, is a necessary characteristic of a triangle, so is existence a necessary characteristic of a supremely perfect being. A triangle without its defining properties would not be a triangle, even so God without existence would not be God. But the ontological argument of Anselm was not philosophically invincible. For such a proof for the existence of God, on the basis of existence as a necessary attribute or predicate, was challenged and severely exposed by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1990) and later by Bertrand Russell in his theory of description (1946).

The cosmological argument, on the other hand, starts from some general features of the world around us. It argues that there could not be a world with the particular characteristics that, as a matter of fact, it has, unless there was also the ultimate reality which we call God. Thomas Aquinas is the best representative of this view. He outlined three main arguments for God's existence in *De Potentia Dei* (1952). The first statement of the argument shows that, since the act of being is central to all existents, there must be one universal cause of all and this cause is God. The second argument starts from the fact that all beings in our experience are imperfect and are not the source of their

actual being. The reasoning concludes from these contingent features of the world to the existence of the most perfect, the original source, a prime-mover that moves everything but itself remaining unmoved. The third argument implies reasoning from the composite nature of finite beings to the necessary, simple or pure existence of a primary being in which essence and the act of existing are identical. In this way Aquinas thought he had successfully argued for the existence of the reality of God as the universal cause, by which all other beings are brought forth into actual being. But the problem with such a method of arguing through a conclusion is that it restricts God to the finite realm. (Tillich, 1968) It contradicts the idea of the infinite God. Every argument derives its conclusion from something that is given to something that is only sought to be proved. In the arguments for the existence of God, the world is given and God is sought. Some characteristics of the given world make the conclusion of 'God's existence' necessary. Thus, God is derived from the world. This of course does not mean is dependent on the world. However, it means that, if we derive God from the world, he cannot be that which transcends the world infinitely. It does violence to the nature of God as infinite. God is the 'world', a missing part of that, from which he is derived as a conclusion. This contradicts the idea of God, his infinitude, in particular.

4. Tillich's Position

When we speak of God's being Tillich observes that we have to focus on the ultimacy implicit in the concept. For Tillich, God is the ultimate concern. Ultimacy refers here to God's infinitude. The theistic philosophers thought it necessary to associate God's infinitude with God's existence. In other words, since God is infinite, since God is perfect, he *must* exist. This is the point of disagreement between Tillich and theistic philosophers. Tillich too holds that God is infinite, conditional and limitless. But unlike the others, it is this insistence that 'God is infinite, or unlimited', which led Tillich to assert that we should not even say that 'God exists', since this would be a limiting statement. He writes, "The 'existence of God' contradicts the idea of a creative ground of essence and existence. The ground of being cannot be found within the totality of beings, nor can the ground of essence and existence participate in the tension and disruption characteristic of the transition from essence to existence. The Scholastics were right when they asserted that in God there is no difference between essence and existence. But they perverted their insight when in spite of this assertion they spoke of the existence of God and tried to argue in favour of it. He is being-itself, beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exist is to deny him." (1968, P. 127) The phrase 'beyond essence and existence' in this context does not mean *without* it. God, as the ground, rather embraces both, though in an infinite way. It does however mean not being determined by it in the way in which the finite beings are determined. (Kegley and Bretall, 1952) Tillich's definition of God as 'Being-itself' means that God is not *a* being. Therefore, to say that 'God exists' is wrong, because only *a* being exists; only finite beings exist. In other words, existence is a characteristic of specific entities that can be isolated either by observation or by

thought. Existence is properly attributed to individual entities that are necessarily limited by others. God, who is being-itself, and not a being alongside other beings, cannot therefore be said to exist. This is precisely the reason why Tillich believes that the concept of existence is incompatible with the concept of God. The difficulty lies in that, when one uses existence with regard to God, God is being qualified in the way finite beings are. (1968, P. 127) Such a God is a being besides others, and as such becomes a part of the whole finite reality. He is of course considered as its most important part, nevertheless, a part of the created totality. He ceases to be the ground of all beings. Yet, he is supposed to be beyond the ontological elements and categories, which constitute reality. But, then, every statement about him subjects him to them. He is seen as the 'self', who has a world, an 'environment' pitted against him, as a cause which is separated from its effect, as having a definite space and time distinct from eternity. Tillich's non-acceptance of God's existence is rooted in the rejection of such demeaning presupposition. (1968, P. 261)

Tillich believes that the being of God cannot be understood in terms of existence, because it would then imply a contradiction in the nature of God, namely, the distinction between God's essential and existential being. In other words, the statement, 'God exists', entails that God has an essence distinct from its act of existence. If he is existence he cannot be essence. Thus, the quality of existence, when used in reference to God, becomes a limiting concept. Essence, as used in the finite reality, denotes the potentialities of existence, and this essence also has being. This split is seen in the conflict between potentiality and actuality. Within reality there are structures, which have no existence and likewise, within reality there are things which have existence on the basis of those structures. 'Treehood', for instance, does not exist, although it has being, namely potential being. But the tree in the physical world exists. It stands out of the mere potentiality of treehood. But it stands out and exists, only because it participates in that power of being which is treehood, that power which makes every tree a tree and nothing else. Thus there is a clear differentiation between essence and existence, which are two types of being, and this structural truth characterizes everything in the finite realm. Therefore, if we say that 'God exists', we make God a being, whose existence does not fulfill his essential potentialities, being and not-yet-being are mixed in him, as they are in everything finite. God ceases to be God, as the ground of being and meaning. It was this logical fallacy in the idea of God's existence that Tillich was pointing to.

5. The Problem of Theism and Atheism

It can be said that, in religious terms, Tillich rejected the existence of the theistic God because it makes God a supernatural deity. Supernaturalism is something that Tillich opposed no less than naturalism. His rejection is loud and unconditional. In describing his own intellectual orientation, Tillich refers to his rejection of supernaturalism and names this attitude elsewhere as the 'self-transcending realism'. Theism makes God a transcendent object, the creation an act

at the beginning of time, the consummation a future state of things. To criticize such a conditioning of the unconditioned, even if it leads to atheistic consequences is more religious because it is more aware of the unconditional character of the divine than a theism that bans God into the supernatural realm. (1948, P. 82) Against the supernaturalism of theism which, Tillich believes, obviously conditions being-itself, he justifies atheism as the right response. When the traditional atheist says, "God does not exist", it can be a reaction against theism, against the belief in a divine being besides the other beings. In making God an object besides other objects, the existence and nature of which are matters of argument, Tillich argues that theology supports the escape to atheism. (1968, P.245) In many of his statements, Tillich seems to be suggesting that 'God does not exist' is the right answer to the question of the arguments for the existence of God. And, this is the reason why many critics have labeled him as an atheist. For anyone who closely follows the thought of Tillich, however, this accusation stands on unfounded ground. Firstly, because Tillich by taking his stand against theism does not in any way reject God. Secondly, because it is his own special way of preserving God's unique nature. When Tillich defends atheism, he is defending it against theism. It is right only in the context of the literalism of theism and its validity goes only as far as it is a refutation of unguarded theism. Tillich sides with atheism because, in comparison with theism that transforms the ultimacy of the ultimate concern to the contingency of finite being, atheism is more aware of the unconditional character of the divine. But for this, the questions of atheism are as irrelevant as those of theism.

In the context of his doctrine of God as being-itself, Tillich rejects not only theism but also atheism. The question of the existence, as well as non-existence, of God for him can neither be asked nor answered. (Tillich, 1968, P.217) If asked, it is a question about that which by its very nature is above existence. Therefore the answer, whether negative or positive, implicitly denies the nature of God. It is therefore as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it. God is being-itself, and this God, for Tillich, is above existence. So both the answers, 'God exists' and 'God does not exist', deny God by denying the nature of God. The unwanted consequences of the theistic assertion are already indicated. Theism, by attributing existence to God, brings him down to the level of a being: John exists, the Himalaya exists, the Qutab Minar exists, so too, God exists. This is because only a finite being can exist. In this way theism, in affirming God, denies the nature of God as being-itself. This denial is clear and straightforward. But how do we understand the atheistic denial, 'God does not exist'? The atheistic denial is straightforwardly absurd. Let us replace the word 'God' in the statement, 'God does not exist', with 'being-itself'. The resultant statement would read now as, 'being-itself does not exist'. The God, of whom the predicate, 'does not exist', is stated, is being-itself, the God who is said to be beyond existence. Atheism, it may be pointed out, talks of God in terms of negation of something, a something which is not God's nature. To put it differently, atheism denies the existence about God, which is, in the first place, not a quality of (or attribute or related to) God at all, as of things in the finite realm. That is, existence is denied of

God, when it does not concern God at all. To understand the manifest absurdity of the position of atheistic denial, let us consider the statement, 'Man does not have wings'. In the statement 'wings' are denied of man, but, then, wings are not ever a part of man's nature, his physical make-up. So, this statement denies the nature of man, because it presupposes (or rather is based on the ground) that 'Man has wings'. In much the same way, the atheistic denial talks of God in terms of his existence, (though the negation of it), thus denying the nature of God.

6. God's Being: The Presupposition of Existence

After removing the tag of existence from God, Tillich thinks it is possible to properly understand the meaning and the nature of God – God is the answer to the question implied in man's infinitude. God is the answer to the question about the being and meaning of human life. The metaphysical question has now descended to human ontology, therefore to religion. Correspondingly, the debates of the classical philosophers will have to be revisited with a new perspective. Tillich opines that the so-called arguments for the existence of God should be looked at from an altogether different perspective. Even though he denies their validity as arguments, he accepts them as expressions of the human situation, or predicament, from which the question of God arises. They are valid in so far as they present an analysis of reality, which indicates that the question of God is unavoidable. They are however, wrong, in so far as they claim that the existence of a high being is the logical conclusion of their analysis. He states, "The arguments for the existence of God are neither the arguments nor the proofs of the existence of God. They are expressions of the 'question' of God which is implied in human finitude. The question is their truth; every answer they give is untrue...It must deprive them of their argumentative character, and it must eliminate the combination of the words 'existence' and 'God'. If this is accomplished, natural theology becomes the elaboration of the question of God, it ceases to be the answer to this question...the arguments for the existence of God analysis of the human situation in such a way that the question of God appears possible and necessary." (Tillich, 1968, P.228)

From the above statements we can note two points. Firstly, the question of God is a necessary and legitimate question. Secondly, this question is not, and should not be taken as the question about the existence of God. The reason why Tillich considers this question as necessary is clearly on account of the ontology he elaborates. The question is the result of the way man is, and he cannot be otherwise. We must not miss here the features of human ontology subscribed to by Tillich. The distinctive way that man is includes an immediate awareness of God. Tillich writes, "The question of God is possible because an awareness of God is present in the question of God. This awareness precedes the question. It is not the result of the argument but its presupposition. This certainly means that the 'argument' is not argument at all. It shows that an awareness of the infinite is included in man's awareness of finitude. Man knows that he is finite, that he is excluded from an infinity which nevertheless belongs to him.

He is aware of his potential infinity while being aware of his actual finitude." (Tillich, 1968, P.228) An immediate awareness of God, however faint, is part of the structure of human nature. Man may even be 'unconscious' of it, but the unarticulated awareness cannot be denied. Man knows that he is conditioned, and this points to his awareness of the unconditional element in reality. The unconditional is Being-itself, the true God. Being-itself is that which is not a special being or a group of beings, not something concrete or something abstract, but something which is always thought implicitly or sometimes explicitly is something is said to be. (Tillich, 1968, P.163)

Therefore, God as the Being-itself is the presupposition of any claim that something exists, but it does not mean that Being-itself exists. Its self-validation, to Tillich, is logically irrefutable. He writes, "You can deny any statement, but you cannot deny that being 'is'. You can deny anything particular whatsoever, but not being, because even your negative judgments themselves are acts of being and are only possible through being." (1967, P.80) When we consider a specific being such as a mountain or a fountain, we may affirm its existence or deny it. Tillich holds that it is in the possibility of such determination of beings that we affirm the reality of Being-itself. For being is the presupposition of ever affirmation and negation. We do not affirm it by consciously thinking about it; rather, in the very act of dealing with the question of the existence or non-existence of particular beings, we presuppose its reality. We presuppose the reality of that which is not a particular being, but that which accounts for there being something rather than nothing. Being-itself accounts for the fact that human beings exist, for their ability to raise question of finitude. Being-itself is not a specific entity. It is not a being, not even the highest being, necessary or perfect being. It is not a limited or contingent being that exists alongside others. It is the ground of there being anything at all. It is not the sort of entity that could conceivably exist. The Scholastics reasoning tends to limit God, by applying the word 'exist' to him. Any specific being is limited by the mere existence of other beings. Other beings are what it is not.

About the Being-itself that is God, the unconditioned, which is the presupposition of everything that is, Tillich writes in his *Systematic Theology*, "The unconditional element appears in the theoretical (receiving) function of reason as 'verum ipsum', the true-itself as the norm of all approximations of truth. The unconditional element appears in the practical (shaping) function of reason as 'bonum ipsum', the good-itself as the norm of all approximations to goodness. Both are manifestations of 'esse-ipsam', being-itself as the ground and abyss of everything that is." (P.229) The above statement is suggestive of Tillich's remarkable sensitivity to the philosophy of Scholasticism, despite his differences elsewhere. For, here, Tillich talks of being-itself as it is manifested in the realm of knowledge and morality. He is in agreement with the Scholastics here. In another passage he talks of being-itself in terms of transcendence and immanence, "As the power of God transcends every being and also the totality of being – the world, Being-itself is beyond finitude and infinity, otherwise it would be conditioned by something other than itself, and the real

power of being would lie beyond both it and that which conditions it. Being-itself infinitely transcends every finite being. There is no proportion or gradation between the finite and the infinite. There is an absolute break, an infinite 'jump'. On the other hand everything finite participates in being-itself and its infinity. Otherwise it would not have the power of being." (Tillich, 1968, P.263) Thus, we see that, for Tillich, like the Scholastics, both transcendence and immanence are reconciled in the concept of participation. The finite beings participate and have their being in being-itself, but they do so in a limited way, hence, being-itself transcends them infinitely. The above analysis of God's being is consistent, because Tillich spoke of God existentially as the transcendent object of man's ultimate concern. He maintained that we would not know of our ultimate concern without participation in being itself.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, one may have noticed by now that there is a certain presupposition, which is implicit in Tillich's vigorous argument that 'God does not exist'. He presupposes the meaning of 'existence' to be 'as we exist'. To exist 'as we exist', of course means to owe our whole reality to accidents and our continuance in existence to the favorable conditions of our environment. So, if to exist means 'as we exist', then, God does not exist. If 'existence' refers to something which can be found within the whole of reality, then, no divine being may be said to exist. But, then, we can surely raise the question as to why 'to exist' must mean 'as we do'? Tillich does not clarify this. This indeed is the objection against him, as adduced by William L. Rowe, "The paradox in Tillich is that in spite of his claim that existence is incompatible with the nature of God he nevertheless talks of God in such a way (as) to imply or presuppose that God exists. It is obvious that he cannot have it both ways." (1968, P.83) What Rowe is suggesting here is that Tillich wants to talk of God in such a way as to suggest that he exists, but, at the same time, to preclude the semantic possibility of raising the question of the existence of God. The question is how statements about God, which Tillich takes for granted, can be considered as true, if the statement, 'God exists', is false. To this criticism we can only reply that, firstly, Rowe is mistaken, if he believes that Tillich somehow implicitly suggest that God exists. 'God does not exist' is a statement most emphatic in Tillich's works. There is no ambiguity on this issue. However, the statement, 'God does not exist', does not mean that Tillich denies the reality of God. He does affirm that 'God is', although he denies that 'God exists'. Secondly, Rowe is mistaken, because Rowe takes such of those statements of Tillich as are made by him about God in the literal sense. Tillich never meant them to be literal statements about God. Rather they are symbolic expressions of being-itself.

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