

The critique of pure reason, defenders of faith and argument

Final essay for Kant's first critique at Leiden University

by

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The Critique of Pure reason¹ is a much discussed book, filled with unusual terms and layered with ambiguity, it is difficult to find a consensus on the ideas presented in it. In fact, even the aim of the work is often called into question. Numerous scholars claim the critique to discuss metaphysics, though whether Kant's attempts were to save- or destroy-it is still often debated. Other scholars claim the critique to be concerned with scepticism and how to avoid and defeat it. There are sections in the critique inclining us towards either of these interpretations, among others. This essay will primarily look at those sections regarding free-will, God, faith and religion. We shall delve into the secondary literature, analysing which scholars seem to have a firmer grasp on Kant's system as a whole, and on the transcendental ideal specifically.

Kant claims in the preface to the B edition that one of the aims of the critique is to: "*deny reason to make room for faith*" (Kant, 1998, Bxxx). In doing so, Kant creates a system in which God's existence cannot be proven through arguments traditionally used to do so. However, before we get to the arguments for God, we shall investigate Kant's concept of God itself.

For any thoroughly determinate object, which is an object of which we know all the properties, we know that for every pair of predicates, one applies to it. A pair of predicates being the predicate of a property and its negation. As such, for this document you are reading, it can be said that within the pair of "white paper" and "not white paper", only the predicate of "white paper" applies to it.

For the faculty of reason, it is only natural to construct the idea of a being to which all positive predicates apply. This idea is the only idea that comes forth from reason itself because it is determined only by the sum total of possibility. The ideal, being the subject that conforms to this idea, would be the most real being. Nevertheless, from the idea of this being, all predicates flow forth, thus it may also be called the absolute being or God. However, whether such a being actually exists is left unknown.

In the third chapter of the Transcendental Dialectic (A567,B595), Kant discusses (among other things) three proofs for the existence of a most real being. According to Kant, only three such proofs exist, all others somehow being contingent on- or reformulations of-the three he discusses.

These three, Kant calls the physico-theological-, cosmological and ontological-proof. The

¹Henceforth simply "the critique"

first calls upon something in the world to prove the absolute being. Usually, the theologian calls on the natural order, harmony or fine-tuned nature of the natural world. The second or cosmological argument, starts from the existence of a certain object from which the existence of God is inferred. The ontological- and arguably most fundamental-proof attempts to prove Gods existence through His concept alone. It attempts to show that a conceptual contradiction occurs if God were to be non-existent.

These three are the only possible proofs because they encompass all possible starting positions.

“[they either] begin from determinate experience [...] or else they are empirically grounded on an experience that is only indeterminate [...] or, finally, they abstract from all experience and infer the existence of a highest cause entirely a priori from mere concepts. [...] There are no more [paths], and there also cannot be any more.”

Kant starts by discussing the ontological proof for the existence of God where we abstract away from all experience (Kant, 1998, Section 4). The ontological proof states that God is a perfect being and that a perfect being would have “exists” as one of its predicates. For a being that is perfect but does not exist is surely less perfect than an otherwise equal being that does. Then, since God is (by concept) the most perfect being, he must exist, otherwise we would encounter a conceptual contradiction. For instance, if we posit a triangle, which conceptually has three sides and three angles, and then posit that it does not have three angles, we would contradict our concept. Kant points out however that *“The above proposition does not say that three angles are absolutely necessary, but rather that under the condition that a triangle exists (is given), three angles also exist (in it) necessarily.”* (Kant, 1998, A595/B623). Extending this line of reasoning to God, the being cannot be non-existent. However, at this point we have only we have not

If the claim “(The existing) God exists” is an analytic statement then, we have uttered *“nothing but a miserable tautology”*. If, on the other hand, the claim is synthetic, then we can simply deny the entire proposition without contradiction because synthetic propositions are never purely conceptually true.

Furthermore, Kant claims that “existence” is not even a real predicate. After all, “exists” does not add anything to substance to the object *“not the least bit gets added to the thing when I posit in addition that this thing is”* (Kant, 1998, A600/B628).

When it comes to the cosmological argument, Kant has admittedly less to say than on the ontological proof. This is primarily because Kant argues that the cosmological proof actually relies on the ontological proof, which he has already proved insufficient.

The cosmological proof states that

“If something exists, then an absolutely necessary being also has to

exist. Now I myself, at least, exist; therefore, an absolutely necessary being exists” (Kant, 1998, A605/B633)

Kant does not necessarily disagree with this argument. However, he does not believe that the absolutely necessary being is the absolute being. As a matter of fact, One can only claim that the absolute being is the/a necessary being through the

The third, physico-theological proof is the last to be addressed by Kant. This argument, which attempts to infer the existence of an absolute being from the complexity, harmony and/or intricacy of the world, is one Kant does not entirely disagree with. In fact, Kant seems to believe that this so-called argument “*establish[es] a highest architect of the world*” (Kant, 1998, A628/B656). After all, he does not bring any argument against the first predicate of the argument

“Everywhere in the world there are clear signs of an order according to determinate aim, carried out with great wisdom” (Kant, 1998, A625/B653)

And claims even that

“we have nothing to object against the rationality and utility of this procedure” (Kant, 1998, A626/B654)

However, when it comes to claiming that this “highest architect” is the absolute being, Kant states that one would go beyond reason in doing so. We have no reason to believe that the architect Furthermore, the mere architect would not be singular, omnipotent, infinite or timeless, at least not necessarily, and therefore, it would not be a God. To claim that the architect is the absolutely necessary- or absolute-being, is to invoke the ontological argument once again.

Not being able to prove God’s existence through argument, leaves religion in an interesting position within Kant’s system. As mentioned earlier, Kant felt that he had to to “*deny reason to make room for faith*”. In other words, religion is left to be, by definition, irrational because

“Knowledge that God exists is in principle impossible and it follows that we could never have a good reason for claiming to know God exists.” (Byrne, 1979)

Therefore, religion is based only in faith, restricting its field purely to practical reason.

As mentioned earlier, Kant does not believe that the physico-theological argument² proves the existence of God. He does believe however, that this argument proves the existence of a creator, an architect. This architect would not have the typical properties of a God, the architect is not omnipotent or eternal and is not concerned with morality. However, philosophers like David

²Also called the “argument by design” or “watchmaker analogy”

Hume argue that not even such an architect is proven by the argument (Hume, 1907). Hume lays out three main criticisms to the argument by design.

First³, Hume addresses the argument in a similar way to Kant. Saying that even if it gave reason to believe in a designer, this designer would not necessarily be (a) God (Hume, 1907, PART V). However, from Hume's other criticisms, his doubt of the argument's ability to do even this becomes evident.

For instance, Hume points out that we have no knowledge whatsoever of world-making. In his view, whatever we claim to know, we derive through induction from our previous experiences. As such, we can claim a watch to require a watchmaker, because we have seen watches before, and they have all been made by a watchmaker. When it comes to the universe however, we have no prior knowledge, nor any other universe to compare ours to.

Third is Hume's criticism of the analogy in general. It states that because two objects share certain attributes, they must be equal in all other attributes as well. Specifically, in the world we see complexity, just as we do in intelligently designed objects. Therefore, since these two objects share one attribute, that being complexity, they must also share the other, that being intelligent design. To claim this is to open oneself up to numerous ridiculous statements. Any complex object would be exactly equal to any other, all humans would be indistinguishable, in fact, everything made from atoms would be the exact same thing. For if an object shares one trait, it must also share the others. It is of course possible for one to claim that this property of trait-sharing only applies for the predicates "complexity" and "designed intelligently". However, to prove this, an external argument would be required (Hume, 1907, PART II).

Religion in Kant's system is, as mentioned before, based only in faith, not in reason. However, not everyone agrees that this is even possible. According to theologian Peter Byrne (Byrne, 1979, 336), the assertion "I believe that God exists", which is based according to Kant in faith, can be criticized on two levels. Either it could give a false account of what I believe, in which case I would be lying. Or it could give a false account of the state of the world. Byrne explains his conviction with an example of someone who believes it to be raining.

"'I believe it is raining' is both a statement of what I believe and a more or less tentative answer to the question 'Is it raining?'"

Reading further, I believe it to be clear that Byrne has not understood Kant's conception of faith.

"For me to decide to believe or think that it is raining is indistinguishable from deciding that it is raining." (Byrne, 1979, 336)

"If knowledge of God is impossible then one cannot have grounds for believing or thinking that God exists either." (Byrne, 1979, 337)

In my opinion, the terms "decide to believe" and "grounds for believing" show exactly where

³A different order is used from the one in Hume's work in this essay for the purposes of clarity and comparability with the critique.

Byrne misunderstands Kant. Byrne wants to base faith within reason, and therefore seeks to ground his beliefs in knowledge. (Byrne, 1979, 336) Kant's however uses faith to exactly mean something outside of knowledge, something one does not decide on and which is not grounded. Instead, faith belongs to practical reason as opposed to theoretical reason.

“Here I content myself with defining theoretical cognition as that through which I cognize represent

On this point, Byrne once again disagrees, stating that asking “what ought to exist?” is paramount to asking if we should “act as if something exists?” (Byrne, 1979, 337-8). Byrne finishes this section by stating that “*acting 'as if' does not amount to faith*” (Byrne, 1979, 338).

I think Byrne has a point here, but only within his malformed expression of Kant's ideas. If we instead if know nothing about God's existence, yet we act as if he exists regardless, then we truly have faith. If one that is simply recognition of the facts.

Furthermore, I think that to correlate “what ought to exist” with “acting as if it exists” is not Kant's original intention. The term “ought” indicates that this is a moral question. Therefore the question “what ought to exist?” amounts to “would it be good for God to exist?”. Then, drawing on Kant's ethical system where “the good” is defined as a prevalence of right acts (Kant, 1949), we can ask “will God's existence motivate more right acts?” and if so, then we must believe that He exists exactly because we are moral people. However, to call back once more to the difference between faith and reason,

“I must not even say ‘It is morally certain that there is a God’, but rather ‘I am morally certain’” (Kant, 1998, A829/B857).

It is this fundamental distinction which Byrne seemingly fails to grasp.

Recent Kantian scholars such as Stevenson, Chignell and Pasternack (2003; 2007; 2011), recognize that faith, even when read as “holding-to-be-true”, is driven by practical reason. In their eyes, Kant means to say that our moral interests dictate it to be good to believe in God's existence. When determining the epistemological position of faith, Stevenson (2003) calls upon St. Thomas Aquinas (McGinn, 2014) who places faith between “scientia (rational knowledge derived from first principles) and opinio (uncertain or probabilistic belief about matters of fact)” (Stevenson, 2003). With this distinction in mind, we can come back to Byrne's example of a belief that “it is raining” (Byrne, 1979). This belief differs epistemologically from a belief in God. For a “belief” that it is raining, falls in the category of opinio, while a “belief” (faith) in God holds a very different position. We do not have faith that it is raining, because there is no moral force behind such a belief.

Schopenhauer included an extensive appendix to his work “The World as Will and Representation” (Schopenhauer, 2010) discussing, praising and critiquing Kant's general philosophy. While he generally sees Kant's critique as a work of pure genius, he barely hides his disdain for

the section of the dialectic discussing God.

“I have no doubt that Kant was compelled only by his passion for architectonic symmetry to include this strange chapter, a chapter that was unworthy of him” (Schopenhauer, 2010, 603)

It seems that Schopenhauer particularly disagrees with Kant on the notion that the idea of God is necessary and natural for reason.

“Flying in the face of all truth, the notion (we must say grotesque notion) of a sum total of all possible realities is made into an essential and necessary thought of reason” (Schopenhauer, 2010, 603)

Naming God as a necessary, reasonable idea (in the platonic sense) was Kant’s way of explaining “what else but a perfect being could give us the idea of a perfect being”. By putting reason in this position, Kant evaded certain arguments used by the Cartesians. The argument being that only a perfect being could leave the impression (or idea) of a perfect being in our minds, thereby proving the existence of God, something with Kant deems impossible. Schopenhauer recognizes the root of this evil to be the way Kant divides the world. In the critique, Kant claims that to discern an individual by starting from the whole of all possibility. Schopenhauer disagrees with this assessment stating that our thought starts “*from the particular and being broadened into the universal*” (Schopenhauer, 2010, 603). Aside from thinking Kant’s assessment in this section is wrong, Schopenhauer claims that this “*piece of philosophical buffoonery*” also “*contradicts his [Kant’s] own doctrine*” (Schopenhauer, 2010, 603). What would, to Schopenhauer, be more in line with both reality and Kant’s established doctrine, which is praising indicates he thinks are one and the same, would be a position akin to Sextus Empiricus’ in *Adversus Mathematicos* (Empiricus, 1967, IX, § 88) where God is inferred from the ceaseless chain of superiority in the natural world. Since humans are superior to all animals, yet humans have faults also, there must be a higher, most perfect being in existence. This process, starting from an individual and abstracting away from it, does seem to fit Kant’s idea of how reason operates better than starting from a concept everything. The aforementioned Chignell (2007) formulates the method of reason quite well in his work “Belief in kant”

“first there is sensory or pure intuition, then conceptualisation in accordance which categorical rules, and, ultimately, cognitive experience.”
(Chignell, 2007)

The worry for Schopenhauer seems to be that the most real being is a concept, not a sensory intuition meaning that it cannot be our starting position.

In this essay, the views of various authors on the transcendental ideal have been highlighted. Most of the authors disused here have voiced their disdain for the arguments giving in this section. In my personal opinion, Byrne (1979) has shown the least grasp of Kant’s system as a

whole as well as his views on faith and religion. Wherever Kant tries to separate faith from reason, Byrne complains that doing so is unreasonable. Schopenhauer on the other hand presents a firm grasp and thorough admiration for Kant's work. I however do not believe him to be entirely correct in claiming that

“Kant was compelled only by his passion for architectonic symmetry to include this strange chapter [the transcendental ideal]” (Schopenhauer, 2010, 603)

I believe Kant included this chapter as a preparation and introduction to the critique of practical reason. Ultimately, Kant wanted his readers to have faith in God, to be moral people and to follow the teachings of Christ. This chapter seems largely misplaced however because faith does not belong to theoretical reason. However, the discussion of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, most definitely belongs to the critique of pure (theoretical) reason. After all, Kant believes that the proofs for the existence of God overstep the bounds of theoretical reason. If he had not discussed these proofs whatsoever, he might have been criticized for publishing an incomplete critique by those scholars who believe that proofs for the existence of God are reasonable. Besides, Kant exactly achieved the goal which he set out in the preface “*to deny reason to make room for faith*”. His aim in the critique was not to prove faith, only to make room for it. In this sense, the discussion of the proofs is yet more setup for the critique of practical reason.

When it comes to Kant's actual refutation of the proofs, I believe that Schopenhauer, Stevenson, Chignell and Pasternack (2010; 2003; 2007; 2011) all firmly grasp his arguments and largely agree with them. When it comes to Kant's belief that the physico-theological argument can prove the existence of an architect of the world, I believe that Hume (1907) elegantly points out why Kant is wrong. However, Kant's belief in the proof of the architect seems to me more an of-handed remark than an actual, well thought-out belief.

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