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Kelsey Kats
Trinity College

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Skepticism Leads to Faith

Kelsey Kats

It seems that there is some aspect characteristic of all human experience that inspires mankind to seek something transcendent on which to stabilize life, which leads us to ask the question “does God exist?” and attempt to affirm that he does. Many individuals maintain that answering such a question is impossible because it is beyond human conception; however, others believe that there is an answer and strive to prove that their responses are the correct ones. Important thinkers throughout history have posited theories regarding the existence of God, yet no singular argument has been particularly successful. Kant and Descartes are two frequently referenced philosophers regarding the existence of God because of the radical explanations they proffer concerning divine existence. Descartes writes that the existence of God is an objective truth manifest in us and that it would be impossible for humanity to exist unless God did. Kant asserts that it is impossible to know, accurately, that God does or does not exist. He perceives Descartes’ colossal mistake to be his attempt at proving God’s undeniable existence, which he reasons is as futile an objective as an atheist disproving God’s existence. Kant suggests that human’s only option is to regulate life in accordance with a personal faith that there is a divine presence without submitting oneself to the Cartesian illusion that God really exists.

Kant’s views of human understanding and reason lead him to make the conjecture that the locus of our belief in the existence of God is found in our capacity to reason. Kant defines understanding as the human cognitive capacity to comprehend the entire realm of our knowledge of the experienced world. Everything that we know with objective certitude occurs within the realm of understanding. Kant interprets reason as everything existing outside the limits of our empirical experiences. Reason in the human world is a drive—it is a force that allows us to transcend what we know and reconcile the things we do not apprehend. Kant’s characterization of reason evokes Plato’s portrayal of *eros* in his *Symposium*. Plato expresses Aristophanes’ account of how the human situation is incomplete and that our desire to remedy our incompleteness is *eros*. We are beset by our deficiencies, and strive to overcome our shortcomings in order to become whole. Kant understands reason to be a mobilizing agent that allows humans to pursue completeness. Our ability to reason allows us to become more unified and total beings. Although reason assists us in our search for answers and completes us, reason is merely speculative and seeing that it transgresses the phenomenal world it can never serve as a source of objective truth. Socratic *aporia* is more generalized than Kant’s limitation of incompleteness. The threat of reason in our human lives is that we respond to it as if it were actual knowledge, and disregard that it is speculative and not a sound basis for truth.

The threat of reason, which Kant terms dialectic, is the illusion that arises when we take an object that we can conceptualize and act as though it were objective knowledge in the phenomenal world. Kant claims:

All the pure cognitions of the understanding are such that their concepts can be given in experience and their principles confirmed through experience; by contrast, the transcendent cognitions of reason neither allow what relates to their ideas to be given in experience, nor their *theses* ever to be confirmed or refuted through experience. (81)

When we think about things such as an immaterial soul, God, and free will we are reaching out into the supersensible realm. These things, freed of their anchorage to experience, become what Kant terms the “Ideas of Reason”. Although we can think of these supersensible objects we can in no way be authorized to *know* them. Kant distinguishes the ideas as psychological, cosmological, and theological; and each one of these categories advances their own version of the dialectic in varying ways. The principal conflict in each of these attempts has to do with the fact that each of these objects under contemplation is transcendent. Although we can think of the soul, God, and free will as objects, these ideas lack objective reality. These metaphysical entities become sources of potential illusion and deceit because they provide us with misguided interpretations of “knowable objects.” This dilemma persists because of the assumption that speculative reason provides an understanding of a transcendent object (namely God) which it is allowed to contrive *a priori* knowledge about. Kant refutes that we can possess theoretical knowledge about God through reasoning, (in the non-Kantian sense) yet he maintains that conceiving the idea of God is one of humans’ greatest endeavors.

Our metaphysical drive for completeness is manifested in the idea of God, as an absolutely vital and supremely real being. Kant classifies the concept of God as *ideal*, because our inclination to reason “best squares with the concept of an unconditionally necessary being” (A586). This Ideal is grounded intrinsically within our nature and is not simply arbitrary; we are compelled to cogitate about the idea of God, which is why this idea is the utmost manifestation of reason’s demand for the completeness of knowledge. Similarly, Descartes argues that the idea of God is innate, however the justification being that God places the idea within us. When we think of the potentiality of all things in general we are inevitably drawn to the idea of a supremely real being; reason posits such an idea in its efforts to determine everything because in order to do so we must think about the totality of all reality.

God is identified as being that contains all reality, however in order to deduce this, God’s necessary existence must be proved. Kant maintains that existence is not a real predicate or determination of reality. Kant partitions the entire dialectic of pure reason into the paralogism, the antinomy, and the ideal of pure reason. His methodology allows him to confirm that all arguments designed to prove the existence of God are implausible by exposing the errors inherent in each argument. The central problem is that the definition of a being that contains all reality provides the idea of a transcendental object and attributes concepts to it in a determinate way. The very idea of God’s existence is misapplied because we are dealing with an object of pure thought, whose existence by definition cannot be known. Seeing that the existence of God is an idea of reason, and none of the ideas can be either corroborated or refuted, then the existence of God can never be proved or disproved. The existence of God is a transcendental idea that expresses the occupation of reason, “namely to be a principle of the systematic unity of the use of the understanding” (101). The means of employing the ideal of pure reason without falling susceptible to the dialectic notion that we know God exists, is by employing the idea of God as something merely regulative and not constitutive.

Despite Kant’s rejection that God exists, he also recognizes reason’s profound desire to rationalize nature’s uniformity and design. Kant distinguishes between employing reason as either regulative or constitutive, but maintains the view that reason’s

proper use is perpetually regulative and never constitutive. An idea of reason is constitutive when it provides concepts that correspond to the ideas as if they were real objects. If we view the ideas of reason as constitutive we are treating them as if they are objects we can know and therefore falling susceptible to the dialectic. Kant suggests that we should regulate our lives in accordance with our faith in the ideas of reason. We need to think about ideas of God, free will, and the soul “because only in these things, as things in themselves, does reason find completion and satisfaction” (106). We should conceive ideas about God, however we must regulate our belief in a divine presence without affirming that it does indubitably exist. If we regulate the ideas which our reason produces then we can utilize our reasoning’s conjectures as orienting points that direct our explanations and in accordance with our theories gradually succeed in finding systematic unity within our world. Our empirical inquiries arise from the issues presented to us by the ideas of reason; the ideas themselves represent the intellectual completeness towards which we aspire and investigate in empirical studies. The idea of God is beneficial insofar as it lends itself to intellectual inquiry and strengthens our completeness; however, when the idea of God or for that matter any idea generated by reason is treated as objective certitude it becomes dangerous.

Descartes’ postulates that knowledge of God’s existence is intuited from our idea of a supremely perfect being whose existence is necessitated; this theory drastically contrasts with Kant’s thinking regarding the existence of God. Descartes’ attention to his seventeenth century audience forces him to present his version of the ontological argument in a way that denies his true intentions. Descartes argues that we cannot think of an omnipotent (perfect) being without presupposing that it exists; any variation of the “ontological argument” is a particular anathema to Kant. Descartes’ theory is designed to demonstrate that such a candidate exists, namely God, and that his “necessary and eternal existence” is one of his many divine attributes. There is a present tension between the potentiality that such a being possesses and its necessary existence. Kant cites that our reason directs us to conceive of an absolutely necessary being, however our understanding makes it impossible to distinguish any one agent as such. Kant is concerned with the logical issue of whether or not existence is a predicate; Descartes dismisses the typical subject-predicate logic in his method of rationalizing God. Descartes provides an ontological argument for the existence of God which Kant readily refutes; however, Descartes’ real proof of the existence of God rests in the notion that God is ultimately understood through intuition, and whether or not the idea of a supremely perfect being can be clearly and distinctly conceived.

Descartes’ thought is that ultimately attaining knowledge of God is feasible through clearly and distinctly recognizing the idea of his necessary existence. Descartes’ methodology restricts only those things that he can know clearly and distinctly as truthful. He constructs an analogy between his ontological argument and geometry that is intended to advance the notion that to some God’s existence is readily manifest; they experience God’s existence as something comparable to an axiom in geometry, while some individuals must work more intensely to attain a clear and distinct perception of God. Both groups of individuals ultimately attain an understanding of God’s existence by clearly and distinctly perceiving that necessary existence is inherent in the idea of a supremely perfect being. Descartes asks, “For what is more manifest than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists?”

(25). Once someone achieves the perception of God as a supreme being and understands his properties then God's existence will become apparent and self-evident. Descartes views the idea of God as something innate in the mind and not invented, whereas Kant perceives the idea of God to come from our own individual reasoning and faith.

Kant's theory on the existence of God objects to many aspects of Descartes' thinking. Descartes presents the argument that the existence of God is self-evident and that it is known by the intuition of the mind, and as such it can be assumed that there are no questions to be begged. This is not the case: Descartes' explanation for the existence of God rouses many objections and criticisms. Kant views Descartes' very attempt at establishing the existence of God as frivolous and futile and that his methodology is the embodiment of dialectical thought. Kant's theory invalidates any attempt of either proving or disproving God's existence as verifiable. Both philosophers purpose drastically different examinations of the existence of God and its appropriate use, yet neither is able to successfully answer the pressing question "does God exist?". This question and our subsequent struggle in striving to answer it is an innate characteristic of human wonder. Seeing that there is no definitive answer to this question, we are forced to take a 'leap of faith'. Roughly a hundred years succeeding Kant the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard posited that believing in God must also account for the possibility of his lack of existence, and therefore trusting that God exists is an act of pure faith. So, in a sense he's a Kantian to? The best that we can do to reconcile our understanding of God's existence is to examine the information presented to us and make our own rational suppositions and conclusions. We may not be able to know that God exists but we are all capable of having faith.

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