Chapter IV

KANT : THE PHYSICO-THEOLOGICAL PROOF

Kant has called the argument from design the physico-theological proof. He discusses the theistic proofs in the Transcendental Dialectic part of the *Critique of Pure Reason.* More is known about Kant's criticism of the ontological argument, which he criticised on the principle that existence is no part of the content of an idea. His famous judgement was that existence is not a real predicate, i.e. a conception of something that is capable of being added to the conception of a thing. We add nothing to our conception which expresses merely the possibility of the object, by simply placing its object before us in thought, and saying that it is. The real contains no more than the possible. Kant can be taken to have shown conclusively, that it is not possible from the analysis of a conception to deduce from it existence as a predicate. But it less often mentioned by way of an objection that Kant's reasoning may hold of the idea of a particular thing, say a sum of money; the idea of God as the absolute Being is in a different position. On this ground Hegel tried to rehabilitate the ontological proof. But that is another story. Since Kant has shown also that all other theistic proofs collapse into the ontological, we propose to consider Kant's treatment of the ontological proof in a little detail before we set ourselves to discuss his critique of the argument from design.

I

The first question that we should ask is : How does Kant explain our coming to have the idea of God ? He gives the following answer. His introductory comments at A 567 - 91 and B 505 - 619 examine the doctrines expressed in the thesis of the fourth Antinomy. It seems that it is an inevitable and natural urge of reason to attempt to explain the contingent events of experience by reference to an original event or being that is 'necessary'. Reason attributes a large number of properties to the absolutely necessary being, thereby transforming it into a genuine 'Ideal of Pure Reason'. Having located the absolutely

necessary being, reason attributes to it properties of great moral and theological significance. We are encouraged to regard the absolutely necessary being as God, as omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, and so on. Such a theological illusion is nourished by arguments, i.e. arguments for the existence of God. Kant appears not to take into account that there could be many arguments for God's existence other than the three he mentions, for example, the argument from revelation or the argument from miracles.

Kant, in criticising the ontological argument has Descartes' version in mind, which is to be found in the fifth *Meditation*. It consists essentially in the claim that the notion of a non-existent God is self-contradictory, God by definition has every perfection, including existence. God is perfect and existence is a perfection, so God exists.[1]

Kant offers two main objections to the ontological argument in that form. One is an objection used later by Moore in "Is Existence a Predicate?', namely that existence is not a property, that 'exists' is not a genuine predicate. Although grammatically 'exists' is a predicate, it functions differently from such predicates as 'is round', 'is red', etc. We may inform others that something is round or red. There are important facts about it. But when we say that something exists, we do not add to any information or offer a further description of the thing. Kant was not alone in contending that "Being" is not a real predicate, i.e. it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. Hume had expressed a similar objection expressed in the *Treatise*. Hume says that to conceive of something and to conceive of it *as existing* are one and the samething and the same operation. "The idea of existence", he says, "is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent".[2] Russell used this idea in more than one occasion. Kant intends to argue that when I say that something exists I am not referring to a further property of the thing. I am rather indicating that there is in fact something that has the properties already mentioned. Hence one premise in the ontological argument is ill-formed. Since existence is not a genuine property it cannot be a perfection.

But what are the defining features of a property or a predicate, if 'exists' is not a genuine logical predicate ? Kant talks somewhat vaguely about the issue. He appears to suggest that learning of the properties of a thing is learning more about it, and learning about a thing's existence is not learning something more about it. Perhaps we cannot take Kant literally, for we do make the most important addition to a thing when we say that it exists. Existing chairs differ from non-existent chairs in the vital respect that they can be sat on. Even Kant concedes that one's financial position is affected by one's having or not having 100 real thalers. However incomplete Kant's notion of 'existence' may be, the fact stands that the ontological argument cannot prove that God exists.

Kant's other objection is more promising. The crucial passages are at A 594 - 8 and B 622 - 6. Kant argues that the proposition 'God exists' is either analytic or synthetic. Descartes held that it was as analytic as 'a triangle has three angles'. But Kant goes on to argue, if it is analytic, then it is a mere tantology. In either case we mere posit or assume the existence of God and then make his existence explicit. If existence is part of our notion of God, just as having three angles is part of our notion of a triangle, then the proposition 'God exists' does not show that there is anything answering to our notion of God. On the other hand, if the proposition is synthetic, then it can be denied without self-contradiction.

Is there a logical relation between the notions of God, perfection and existence ? Descartes thought there is. In that case the argument could be said to have the following form

Anything God - like is perfect

Anything perfect exists

God exists.

If the two premises are analytic hypotheticals, then the existential conclusion does not follow from them, even though the premises reveal the intimate logical connection between divinity, perfection and existence.

It is surprising that Kant is so pre-occupied with 'existence' that he overlooks the problem attending 'perfection'. Descartes' version of the argument refers constantly to perfection. Is 'perfect' a complete predicate in its own right ? It is not a complete predicate, for something cannot simply be perfect but must be perfect in a certain respect. When we talk of God's perfection we have a set of standards in view. God is perfectly moral, perfectly intelligent, perfectly powerful, and so on. So when the ontological argument treats existence as a perfection it is not obvious that an existing God is more perfect than a non-existent God. Antinomy runs as follows : "If anything exists, an absolutely necessary being must also exist. Now I, at least exsist. Therefore, an absolutely necessary being exists" (A604/B632). In more modern terms, if anything exists, it is contingent or causally dependent on something else, and that in turn on something else, and so on. Since the notion of an infinite series of contingent causes and effects yields an inadequate explanatory model, there must be a first, uncaused, cause in any series. At least one thing exists, so a first, uncaused, cause exists.

Kant rightly observes that the argument is not entirely *a priori* and so represents an advance over the wholly *a priori* ontological argument. It begins with an actual event and attempts to explain its occurrence by appealing to some antecedent cause, and then to a further antecedent cause, and so on until we reach a first cause, God. It should be noted that Kant's version of the argument is considerably different from Descartes' version in the third *Meditation.* Descartes appears to proceed as follows : there must be at least as much reality in the cause as in the effect, that is, there must be a perfect cause of this perfect effect. The only possible candidate is a perfect creator namely God. This argument is more difficult to handle than the one that Kant gives. There is a reference to perfection, and it does not merely hinge on the claim on the first cause of a causal series,but on the claim that effects of an exceptional kind must have causes of an exceptional kind.

Kant's objection to the cosmological argument surprises us. He suggests that the principle weakness of the argument is that it rests on the ontological argument, which is invalid. According to Kant, the cosmological argument rests on the ontological needing

to analyse the notion of an absolutely necessary being. It also needs to reveal that such a being has the properties such as omnipotence, omniscience, moral awareness, and so on. The ontological argument involves the same kind of *a priori* analysis of the notion of an absolutely necessary being. In purporting to be an argument from experience, the cosmological argument differs from the ontological, which is wholly *a priori* and analyses the notion of God independently of any experience. The cosmological argument, says Kant, uses experience for a step in the argument, to conclude the existence of a necessary being. "What properties this being may have, the empirical premises cannot tell us" (A 606 / B 634). To identify the properties of the necessary being we must resort to the ontological argument.

The crux of the ontological argument is this; divinity logically entails perfection, which logically entails existence. But it cannot prove that God exists for the simple reason that the argument cannot prove that there is an instance of any of those concepts or that there really is anything answering to the descriptions 'divine', 'perfection', 'existing'.

The cosmological is an entirely different kind of argument. It begins with an actual event, an instance of some concept. It then moves by way of a general causal principle to the conclusion that there must be a first cause.

If any event occurs, there is a first cause

At least one event occurs

There is a first cause.

How are we to discover the divinity of the first cause ? A similar problem faces us in the inference concerning God as the *nimittakarana* in the Indian classic *Nyayakusumanjali.* However, if we add a premise saying that any first cause is God - like, then we get the desired conclusion that there is a God. It may be gtrue that the ontological argument fails, and that the cosmological, as Kant says, rests in part on the ontological. But does it follow that the cosmological is infected with the weaknesses of the ontological ? The initial

existential assumption, a reference to an actual thing or event is missing from theontological. The cosmological is not a proof from mere concepts. It does not attempt to move from concepts to instances. Its conclusion does follow from its premises.

We may suggest the following about Kant's intentions. The cosmological argument seeks to conclude that there must be a first cause, and it is then claimed that the first cause has all the important properties normally attributed to the Christian God. This claim is false. It is one thing to concede that there is a first cause, and it is another thing to attach any theological significance to it. The first cause may be inert, a spontaneous movement of matter or a big bang. The cosmological argument rests on two assumptions. One, that every event is contingent, i.e. causally dependent on another, and second, that a causal series must have an absolutely necessary first member. The two assumptions cannot be held together. For it is thinkable that a causal series is infinite. Kant's own observations on the Third Antinomy (A 449/ B 477) could have weighed heavier against the cosmological argument.

III

Kant has treated the argument from design or the Physio-Theological proof, as he calls it, with greater respect, since it reflects the very natural awe we feel at the complexity and beauty of the world around us. We tend to seek an explanation of the order, beauty and complexity of things in the form of the argument from design. The world around us is law-governed, systematic, ordered and extremely complex. It is not possible to write off the evidence as a gigantic coincidence, or the result of an accidental conjunction of circumstances. The plausible explanation appears to be that the world is the work of a purposive intelligent creator who fashioned it and sustains it.

Kant has two objections to the argument from design. First, he avers that the argument cannot support the strong conclusion that there is an omnipotent creator. This is what is required by Christian theology. "The utmost", Kant says, "that the argument can

prove is an *architect* of the world who is very much hampered by the adaptability of the material in which he works, not a *creator* of the world to whose idea everything is subject."[3] To say that God is an architect is to reduce his status. We have our admiration and reverence only for a creator who makes his own rules as he goes along, who is really omnipotent.

Let us consider Kant's first objection. It demotes God from omnipotent creator to architect. Orthodox Christianity looks for a God who is an omnipotent creator. Such a creator is one who is able to create a world wholly according to his own wishes without any limitation by materials. A mere architect would not attract the same reverence. Looking at the issue in another way, it could be said that an architect deserves admiration if he can negotiate difficulties. An omnipotent creator is expected to do a good job. But an architect who succeeds in creating and sustaining a world despite restrictions deserves our praise. If God in the cosmological argument is an architect and not a creator as Kant suspects, then. He is perhaps not without any worth.

Kant's second objection is that the cosmological argument as a specific form in the argument from design, and *a fortiori* comes to rest on the ontological. The physico-Technological argument suffers from the weaknesses of the other arguments. It moves from evident effects to non-evident first cause, and then to the *a priori* analysis of the properties of the first cause or absolutely necessary being.

It is of course true that the argument from design is a specific version of the cosmological argument. It is also true that it appeals from certain evident effects to a non-evident first cause. From all these does it really follow that the physico-Theological proof is prey to the weaknesses of the cosmological ? It need not be necessarily true to say that specific versions are infected with the defeats of the general. It may be the case that the specific has important qualifications missing from the general argument. By that way it could make it stronger than the general. For instance the argument from design does not claim that any effect has to be explained by reference to a first cause. It makes the

impressive claim that a particular kind of striking effect, the order and coherence of the universe can only be explained by a particular kind of striking cause, i.e. the efforts of an intelligent and purposive creator.

The weakness of the argument from design lies elsewhere than Kant diagnosed. The central claim of the argument, the order and coherence could be a result of gigantic coincidence. No contradiction perhaps is entailed in saying that, what do we really mean by saying that the world is particularly ordered or systematic ? Our generalisations about the world is not necessarily significant, it could be trivial as well. The ecological disaster that we are about to face indicate that the world is not a very organised machine. The wars and the killings of the innocent people in ghastly way do not bespeak of a wise and merciful creator. The argument from design appears to be at variance with the problem of evil.

IV

Kant's critique of rationalist theology is on the whole right in showing that it attempts to make claims about objects that are not objects of a possible experience. But his criticism and discussion of the specific arguments are not always central. The theme of the Dialectic, that there should be no calling for an extension of our knowledge beyond all limits of experience is not very stringent in the discussion of God. The final thought of Kant on God lies in the claim that the idea of God may have an important regulative use.[4] We cannot have knowlecdge of a God, but it may well be to our advantage to act if there were a God. Kant goes on to indicate that "the only theology of reason which is possible is that which is based on moral laws or seeks guidance from them."[5] In the second *critique* the doctrine of the Dialectic can be glimpsed. Our Theological concepts, he says, are wholly parasitic on our etjhical concepts. We can only understand God as a perfect moral agent, as the giver of just rewards for virtue. The traditional view that Theology is prior to ethics, that moral

imperatives are the commands of God is reversed in Kant. The basic, autonomous concepts are ethical, everything Theological is secondary. The search for God is a search for a noumenal agent.

References

1 Descartes, R., *Philosophical Works,* ed. and trans. in two volumes by Halden and Roso, Cambridge University Press, 1911, I., p.181.

2 *Treatise of Human Nature*, 2.6.4.

3 *CPR,* A 627/B 655. (*Critique of Pure Reason* is abbreviated as CPR)

4 *CPR,* A 616 / B 644.

5 *CPR,* A 636 / B 664.

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Appendix to Chapter IV

KANT ON TELEOLOGY

The argument from design has often been considered in relation to the concept of teleology and the divine. The second part of the *Critique of Judgment* is devoted to teleology : the understanding of the ends of things. Here Kant expresses his ultimate sympathy for the stand-point of theology. Our sentiments of the sublime and of the beautiful combine to present an inescapable picture of nature as created. In beauty we discover the purposiveness of nature; in the sublime we have intimations of its transcendent origins. In neither case can we translate our sentiments into a reasoned argument : all we know is that we know nothing of the transcendental. But that is not all we *feel.* The argument from design is not a theoretical proof, but a moral intimation, made vivid to us by our sentiments towards nature, and realised in our rational acts. It is realised in the sense that the true end of creation is intimated through our moral actions, but it is seen that this intimation is of an ideal, not of an actual world. So we prove the divine teleology in all our moral actions, without being able to show that it is true of the world in which we act. The final end of nature is known to us, not theoretically, but practically. It lies in the reverence for the prime practical reason that legislates for itself alone. When we relate this reverence to our experience of the sublime, we have a sense, however fleeting, of the transcendental.

Thus it is that aesthetic judgment directs us towards the apprehension of a transcendent world, while practical reason gives content to the apprehension, and affirms that this intimation of a perspectiveless vision of things is indeed an intimation of God. This is what Kant tries to convey both in the doctrine of the aesthetic ideas and in that of the sublime. Kant follows Edmund Burke in distinguishing between the beautiful and the sublime. Sometimes, when we sense the harmony between nature and our faculties, we are impressed by the purposiveness and intelligibility of everything that surround us. This is

the sentiment of beauty. At other times, overcome by the infinite greatness of the world, we renounce the attempt to understand and control it. This is the sentiment of the sublime.In confronting the sublime, the mind is "the cited to abandon sensibility", says Kant.

Kant's remarks about the sublime reinforce the interpretation of his aesthetics as a kind of presumption of theology. He defines the sublime as "that, the mere capacity of thinking which, evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of taste." It is the judgment of the sublime that most engages our moral nature. It thereby points to yet another justification of the universality of taste, by showing that, in demanding agreement, we are asking complicity in a moral sentiment. In judging of the sublime, we demand a universal recognition of the immanence of a supersensible realm. A man who can feel neither the solemnity nor the awesomeness of nature, lacks in our eyes the necessary sence of his own limitations. He has not taken that 'transcendental' viewpoint on himself from which all true morality springs.

It is from the presentiment of the sublime that Kant seems to extract his faith in a Supreme Being. Teleology, for Kant, is the understanding of the ends of things.

Thus it is that aesthetic judgment directs us towards the apprehension, of a transcendent world, while practical reason gives content to that apprehension, and affirms that this intimation of a perspectiveless vision of things is indeed an intimation of God. This is what Kant tries to convey both in the doctrine of the aesthetic ideas and in that of the sublime. In each case we are confronted with an 'employment of the imagination in the interests of mind's supersensible province' and a compulsion 'think nature itself in its totality as a representation of something supersensible, without our being able to put this presentation forward as objective'. The supersensible is the transcendental. It cannot be thought through concepts, and the attempts to think it through 'ideas' is fraught with self-contradiction. Yet the idea of reason, God, is resurgent in our consciousness, now under the guise of imperatives of action, now transformed by imagination into sensuous and aesthetic

form. We cannot rid ourselves of this idea. To do so would be to say that our point of view on the world is all that the world consists in, and so to make ourselves into gods. Practical reason and aesthetic experience humble us. They remind us that the world in its totality, conceived from no finite perspective, is not ours to know. This humility of reason is also the true object of esteem. Only this is to be reverenced in the rational being, that he feels and acts as a member of a transcendental realm, while recognising that he can know only the world of nature. Aesthetic experience and practical reason are two aspects of the moral : and it is through morality that we sense both the transcendence and the immanence of God.

Notes : The standard English edition of the *Critique of Judgment* (Including both the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* and the *Critique of Teleological Judgment)*, is translated by J.C. Meredith, Oxford, 1928. All references are made to this book.

References

1 *Critique of Judgment*, 92.

2 *Critique of Judgment*, 98.

3 *Critique of Judgment*, 116.

4 *Critique of Judgment*, 119.

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