

Kant on the question of the Existence of God: From Destruction to Affirmation.

1. Introduction

Our aim is to undertake a detailed study of Kant's engagement with the question of the existence of God. What sense did Kant make of these proofs? If he found fault with them, did that imply an end of the road for every meaningful discussion about the existence of God? Can Kant's engagement with the question of the existence of God be rightfully qualified as a movement from destruction to affirmation? Did Kant's judgment on the proofs destroy every idea of God or did he end up affirming his existence? If his position is that of affirmation, what kind of God can we say Kant's position left us with? These are the questions we shall strive to find answers to in the course of our study. But first, conscious of the diversity of the stages of the evolution of Kant's thought, we consider making a clear delimitation of our study very necessary for the sake of clarity and precision.

Among Kant scholars however, there seems to be consensus over a broader categorization that distinguishes the precritical Kant from the critical (mature) one. For our study, we intend to focus on the critical (mature) Kant. The first question that needs to be addressed is: "What are the distinguishing features of this period in Kant's evolution referred to as 'critical' or 'mature'?" Between the precritical Kant and the critical one, a fundamental shift in perspective took place. This shift in perspective was fundamentally epistemological in nature. However, it was a shift that defined Kant's entire philosophical enterprise from the moment that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was published.

Even though our study will focus on Kant's mature thought, we shall not completely lose sight of the fact that there exists some salient continuity between the precritical Kant and the critical/mature one. Our focus on the mature Kant does not and should not imply completely overlooking or ignoring some of his precritical positions that have a relevance that flows into his mature thoughts.

2. Kant's Critique of Traditional Proofs of the Existence of God

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's discussion of the proofs of the existence of God features in the section entitled *Transcendental Dialectics*. Prior to this section, he had already argued for what constitutes the legitimate conditions for and process of valid cognition. The operations of reason outside of this so-called legitimate realm of cognition gave rise to what Kant referred to as the antinomies. In the *Transcendental Dialectics*,

Kant demonstrates what obtains in the four antinomies of pure reason, showing how speculative reason, true to its nature, always tends to break the legitimate boundaries of cognition in its quest for the absolute, unconditioned ground of all determinations. Consequently, reason always makes an unwarranted leap from the given to the 'not-given'; from experience to the noumenal realm. It is against the background of the critique of the excesses of pure reason that the mature Kant engaged in his refutation of the traditional proofs of the existence of God, which he outlined as follows: "The first proof is the physico-theological, the second the cosmological, and the third the ontological proof. There are no more of them, and there also cannot be any more"¹.

2.1 Ontological Argument

There are different versions of the ontological argument cutting across diverse periods in the history of thought. Sève offers a comprehensive trajectory the proof passed through in the hands of different philosophers:

"L'invention en revient à saint Anselme de Cantorbéry; cet argument fut critiqué par saint Thomas d'Aquin, repris et transformé par Descartes, complété par Leibniz, critiqué et même détruite par Kant, réhabilitée (au prix d'un changement radical de son sens et de sa portée) par Hegel. »²

A brief exposition of the major tenets of the ontological argument given by St. Anselm, Descartes and Leibniz is necessary. St. Anselm, the acclaimed originator of this proof, posited his own proof within a faith context – that of a prayerful expression of his belief in and conviction of the existence of God. In his *Proslogion*, Anselm sets the stage for his argument with this faith declaration: "*Et quidem credimus te esse aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*"³ (We believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought). He then goes on to conclude that not only that this being greater than which nothing can be thought exists (both in the mind and in reality), but also that the thought of the possibility of its non-existence is absurd: "...this being so truly exists that it cannot be even thought not to exist."⁴

While St. Anselm's version of the ontological proof was pursued within the context of prayer, Descartes own version was realized within the context of his methodic doubt and the conviction that the indubitable clarity of the conviction of his own existence leads to the postulation of a being in whom the highest perfection subsists: "...the mere fact that I exist and have within me an idea of a most perfect being, that is, God, provides a very clear proof that God indeed exists."⁵

Leibniz's requirement for the validity of the ontological argument boils down to one thing: 'a proof that the concept of God is not contradictory'⁶. He found this proof in his definition of the substance. He was convinced that his idea of a substance which is the

¹ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A591/B619

² Sève, Bernard, *La Question Philosophique de l'existence de Dieu*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1994, p. 16

³ St. Anselm, *Proslogion II, cap.II*

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Descartes, Rene, *Third Meditation*, 51

⁶ Loewer Barry, "Leibniz and the Ontological Argument", *Philosophical Studies*, 34 (1), 1978, pp. 105-109

source of all changes, and which is so complete that it admits of no limit leads him to posit the necessary existence of God. This, in a nutshell, is his own version of the ontological argument which we find in his *Monadology*:

“Thus the final reason of things must be in a necessary substance in which the detail of the changes can be contained only eminently, as in their source. It is this substance that we call God. Now since this substance is a sufficient reason for all this detail.... We may conclude, too, that this supreme substance, being unique, universal, and necessary, and having nothing outside of it which is independent of it, and being a simple consequence of possible being, must be incapable of limits and must contain as much reality as is possible.”⁷

This brief exposition of the versions of the ontological argument in St. Anselm, Descartes and Leibniz shows that in spite of the inherent modifications in the different versions, one common feature runs through them all “...a definition of " God " is given from which, by the use of certain premises, the conclusion, " God exists ", is deduced.”⁸ In whatever version it is presented, the ontological argument ‘attempts to deduce the existence of God from an analysis of the conception of God, thereby showing that it is necessary that God exists.’⁹

Which version of the ontological argument was Kant addressing in his critical philosophy? Kant himself seems to have provided answer to this question. In the concluding part of the section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* where he devoted to the attack of the ontological argument, he mentioned Descartes and Leibniz as those whose argument and proof he had shown to be ‘only so much trouble and labor lost’¹⁰.

Kant addresses the issue of the concept of an absolutely necessary being which seems to be the basic presumption of the ontological argument. For him, ‘the concept of an absolutely necessary being [is] a pure concept of reason’.¹¹ He argues that the objective existence of such a being cannot be based on the mere fact that the reason needs to have it so. Logical possibility of the concept of an absolutely necessary being is not the same as real possibility; a jump from the former to the latter is not acceptable to Kant.

Kant’s major discontent with the ontological argument is clear: a rejection of any attempt to make existence deducible from mere definition or concept analysis. This is indeed consistent with the assumptions of his critical philosophy with all its ‘epistemological restrictions which are sufficient to bar the way to any pretended intuition of the true and immutable nature of God, and thus to any ontological proof’¹². Kant’s argument against the ontological proof of the existence of God was principally aimed at showing that one

⁷ Leibniz, Gottfried, Wilhelm, *The Monadology*, 38-41

⁸ Shaffer, Jerome, “Existence, Predication and the Ontological Argument”, *Mind*, 71(283), 1962, pp. 307-325

⁹ Gale, Richard, M., *On the Nature and Existence of God*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 201

¹⁰ Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A602/B630

¹¹ Ibid., A592/B620

¹² Wood, Allen, W., *Kant’s Rational Theology*, London: Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 123

cannot "define things into existence"; "that one cannot, by adding existence to a concept that has application contingently if at all, get a concept that is necessarily exemplified."¹³

2.2 Cosmological Argument

While the ontological proof 'proceeds entirely *a priori*'¹⁴, the point of departure of the cosmological argument is the 'contingency of the world'¹⁵. The cosmological argument in the way Kant presents it runs thus:

"If something exists, then an absolutely necessary being also has to exist. Now I myself, at least, exist; therefore, an absolutely necessary being exists....The necessary being can be determined only in one single way...it must be thoroughly determined through its concept. Now only one single concept of a thing is possible that thoroughly determines the thing *a priori*, namely that of an *ens realissimum*: Thus the concept of the most real being is the only single one through which a necessary being can be thought, i.e., there necessarily exists a highest being."¹⁶

The proof, as we can see, begins with a clause that, far from being *a priori*, is entirely based on object of possible experience: 'if something exists'. Kant relates the very name of the proof to the claim it makes to base its argument on experience: '...because the object of all possible experience is called "world", it is therefore termed the cosmological proof'¹⁷. However, even though the cosmological proof claims to derive its force from experience, Kant sees in it a leap into the same horizon of the highest possible ground, the unconditioned. He argues that the proof makes an unwarranted recourse to the ontological argument by virtue of this leap from experience to the unconditioned, from contingency to a necessary being whose existence is posited definitely. Instead of building up an argument for the possibility of such being on empirical grounds, 'reason says farewell to it entirely and turns its inquiry back to mere concepts'¹⁸. The basic presupposition that Kant rejects here is 'that the concept of a being of the highest reality completely suffices for the concept of an absolute necessity in existence, i.e., that from the former the latter may be inferred'¹⁹. It is the same inference based on analysis of concept that is seen in the ontological argument. Kant argues that, contrary to basing its argument on experience as it purports to do, the cosmological proof is rather based on and supported by the ontological argument:

"Thus it is really only the ontological proof from mere concepts that contains all the force of proof in the so-called cosmological proof; and the supposed experience is quite superfluous – perhaps leading us only to the concept of a necessary being, but not so as to establish this concept in any determinate thing."²⁰

¹³ Plantinga, Alvin, "Kant's Objection to the Ontological Argument", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 63 (19), 1966, pp. 537-546

¹⁴ Forgie, William, J., "Kant on the Relation between the Cosmological and Ontological Arguments", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 34 (1), 1993, pp.1-12

¹⁵ Kant declares that it was Leibniz who used this clause – *a contingentia mundi* – to describe the cosmological argument. (cf A604/B632)

¹⁶ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A604/B632

¹⁷ Ibid., A605/B633

¹⁸ Ibid., A607/B635

¹⁹ Ibid., A607/B635

²⁰ Ibid., A607/B635

Some writers disagree with Kant on this issue, arguing that the ontological argument does not in any way constitute any *force of proof* for the cosmological argument and that the denial of the claims of the ontological proof would not necessarily lead to the collapse of the cosmological argument. Caputo, for instance, argues that contrary to Kant's view, the so-called positing of the concept of the necessary being in the cosmological argument that leads to the postulation of an *ens realissimum* does not imply a recourse to ontological proof. His reason for making this claim is that while the ontological argument begins with a concept of the *ens realissimum* and then deduces from it the existence of its object, what the cosmological argument does is to begin with the existence of the object, i.e., the necessary being proven from the contingent existence of the 'I', and then goes on to determine its concept more explicitly. For him, 'the cosmological argument does offer, therefore, a distinct proof for the existence of God which is irreducible to the ontological proof.'²¹

While Caputo argues against Kant's apparent move to hinge the cosmological argument upon the ontological proof, West argues that Kant was simply judging the cosmological proof out of the context of its promoters and basing his condemnation only within the context of the assumptions of his transcendental philosophy which the proponents of cosmological argument are not however bound to accept:

"...in his response to the cosmological argument Kant simply asserts that this cannot be done by resting on the laurels of the presuppositions of his own system of Transcendental Idealism. Such an approach is, however, inadequate to show anything other than the fact that one who already accepts the first principles of Transcendental Idealism cannot consistently put forward the cosmological argument."²²

West's criticism quoted above seems to underline this crucial fact: within the presuppositions of his transcendental idealism, Kant was right in his attack of the claims of the cosmological argument, but outside of these presuppositions of his transcendental philosophy, his attack is null and void. Nelson re-echoes this thesis when he claimed that 'Kant has failed to show, *on grounds which do not presuppose his own Critical doctrine*, that no cosmological argument can succeed'²³ (emphasis mine). Hence, in my own estimation, these criticisms, instead of discrediting Kant, serve to underline his consistency. There is an implicit acceptance in these criticisms that Kant's attack of cosmological argument retains an unbroken line of consistency with his critical philosophy, and that is truly the case. Caputo admits, in spite of his criticisms of Kant, that "this first premise of the argument violates all of the basic strictures which Kant placed upon the use of the categories in the Transcendental Analytic."²⁴ Kant's critical philosophy rejects any form of unwarranted jump from the contingent to *a priori* postulation, and this, for him, is what the cosmological argument does.

²¹ Caputo, John, "Kant's Refutation of the Cosmological Argument", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 42 (4), 1974, pp. 686-691

²² West, J.L.A., "Kant's Attack on the Cosmological Argument", in Sweet, William ed., *God and Argument*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1999, p. 183

²³ Nelson, Herbert, J., "Kant on Arguments Cosmological and Ontological", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 67 (2), pp. 167-184

²⁴ Caputo, John, "Kant's Refutation of the Cosmological Argument", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 42 (4), 1974, pp. 686-691

2.3 Physico-theological argument

In the physico-theological argument, the proof of the existence of God is based, not on the analysis of *a priori* concept or on inferences drawn from contingent objects. The focus is rather on ‘determinate experience, that of the things in the present world, their constitution and order’²⁵. The whole argument of the physico-theological proof runs as follows: there is clear signs of order and purposiveness everywhere in the world; this order and purposiveness could not have been put in place by a ‘blindly working eternal nature’²⁶, because “Purposiveness in the effects always presupposes understanding in the cause”²⁷; thus, there exists such an intelligent cause reference to which the order in the world could be explained; hence, God is understood as that all perfect, highest cause - the architecture whose existence explains the order we see everywhere in the world.

Of all the traditional proofs of the existence of God, Kant did not hide his admiration for the physico-theological argument. According to him, “This proof always deserves to be named with respect. It is the oldest, clearest and the most appropriate to common human reason.”²⁸ However, despite Kant’s proclaimed respect for the physico-theological argument, he spared no energy in unveiling its inherent lapses which all revolve around departure from contingency to the positing of absolute necessary existence. First, the proof moves from the order and purposiveness in nature to the assumption of a necessary highest cause that must be the author of such order. And then again, from the assumption of the necessity of such a highest cause (a determinate concept) whose perfection qualifies it to be the all-encompassing reality that accounts for the order and purposiveness in the world, it postulated its necessary existence.

The very same dialectical jump that Kant accused reason of in the cosmological argument is repeated in the physico-theological argument where reason “elevates itself from magnitude to magnitude up to the highest of all, rising from the conditioned to the condition, up to the supreme and unconditioned author.”²⁹ This elevation of reason from the contingent to the unconditioned is realized when reason makes inference from the causality it sees in nature to the existence of something which the very contingency of the same nature has no explanation of. Such inference is not justifiable: “we cannot get from the analysis of the structure of experience and nature to a trans-empirical or transcendent creator acting as the cause outside the inter-relation of causes and effects”³⁰. Kant describes this process as the drawing of ‘analogy between natural products and those of human art’³¹. Anytime that reason trespasses what is given to it in contingent

²⁵ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A620/B648

²⁶ Kant rejects Hume’s position that it is mere fecundity in nature that produces harmony in its effects. For Kant, this amounts to claiming that it is blind accidents that give rise to the purposive order that is everywhere evident in nature. He finds this position unacceptable because the mere idea of purposiveness presupposes some workings of intelligence; hence, it can not be the fruit of some blind, irrational chance.

²⁷ Kant, I., *Lectures on Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, 28:1064

²⁸ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A623/B651

²⁹ Ibid., A624/B652

³⁰ Rotenstreich, Nathan, *Reason and Its Manifestations*, Frommann-Holzboog, 1996, p. 155

³¹ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A626/B654

experience and begins to make claims about absolute necessary existence, it has stepped away from grounds where valid cognition is possible to *obscure and unprovable grounds*.

2.4 Synthesis of Kant's refutation of the three traditional proofs

In Kant's refutation of the three traditional proofs of the existence of God, we can identify a continuous thread of commonality: Kant's indictment of reason for its boundary-breaking tendency! To understand Kant's critique of the traditional proofs of the existence of God, one must be mindful of the distinction he made between the phenomenal world where valid cognition is possible and the noumenal realm where reason may assert logical necessity but without any right to claim valid objectivity. For him, these two worlds must not be mixed together. In the ontological argument, this distinction is missed when reason asserts real existence from mere definition and analysis of the concept of an *ens realissimum*. In the cosmological argument, reason once again breaks the boundary of phenomenal/noumenal distinction by jumping from the existence of contingent object to the positing of the necessary existence of the highest ground of all possibilities. In the physico-theological proof, the same mixture of two different perspectives and boundary-breaking of reason takes place when reason moves from the purposive order in the material world to assert the real existence of a highest, intelligent cause whose perfection and intelligence explain the purposive order that is everywhere evident in the material world. Therefore, Kant considers every speculative attempt to arrive at a viable proof of the existence of God as an exercise in futility, mere fruit of the illusions of pure reason.

Following his attack of the three traditional proofs of the existence of God based mainly on the presupposition of his critical philosophy therefore, Kant is reputed to have completely destroyed all speculative attempts to prove the existence of God. However, far from closing the door to every theistic discussion and preoccupation with the question of God, Kant's refutation, by underlining the limitations of reason, only shut the door of any sustainable claim of theoretical or speculative proof of the existence of God, all with the aim of making room for the construction of another alternative. Thus, Kant 'devotes considerable effort to the task of showing how an honest revocation of the limitations of human reason leaves ample room for drawing affirmative theological conclusion concerning God's existence and nature.'³²

3: From Refutation to Construction: Kant's Affirmative Approach to the Question of the Existence of God

Kant's refutation of the traditional proofs of God's existence can be rightly described as an exercise in curbing the pretensions of pure reason. However, Kant insists that these transcendent ideas of reason are not devoid of some usefulness. The objectivity that is identified with the phenomenal world and the absence of such objectivity in the noumenal realm does not cancel out the usefulness of what reason posits in the latter. This is exactly how we need to understand Kant's attitude towards the claim of rational

³² Palmquist, Stephen, R., *Kant's Critical Religion*, Hants: Ashgate, 2000, p. 68

certainty about the existence of God implicit in the three traditional proofs he refuted. It is not that the idea of God makes no sense or serves no purpose; the bone of contention is on the validity we ascribe to reason's claim to apodictic certainty in this regard. Kant's overall aim in the refutations is not therefore solely negative; it has a positive dimension as well: "to provide reasons for believing without establishing any knowledge of God's existence."³³

The overall impression is that Kant allotted to practical reason, the possibility of all the things he denied to theoretical reason, including the question of the existence of God. Although practical reason and its function has enormous role to play in Kant's affirmative approach to the question of the existence of God, there is equally a theoretical as well as a judicial dimension to this affirmative approach.

3.1 Theoretical Perspective: God as a regulative idea of reason

The distinction Kant makes between the constitutive and regulative roles of reason shows that everything about pure theoretical reason should not be seen from this negative perspective. Reason, by its very nature does not admit of impossibility of explanation; it rather seeks always to reach the absolute or ultimate explanation which Kant calls the 'unconditioned'. The quest for the unconditioned is based on the presupposition that there exist principles that are absolute and universal and which do not stand in need of further explanation. Both in its logical and real use, the basic function of reason consists in the search for explanations through syllogisms ascending toward absolute unity or ultimate explanation.

Pure reason, in its quest for the unconditioned yields ideas that are not constitutive but rather regulative. Kant describes the regulative function of reason as 'excellent and indispensably necessary'³⁴. Here, what is crucial is to find out how this regulative function that Kant assigns to pure reason plays out in his affirmative approach to the question of the existence of God. In its quest for the unconditioned, pure reason generates ideas which, unlike the concepts of the faculty of the understanding, are not constitutive. Kant calls them transcendental ideas and places them under threefold classification:

"All transcendental ideas, therefore, can be arranged in three classes: the first containing the absolute unity of the thinking subject; the second the absolute unity of the series of conditions of appearance; the third the absolute unity of the conditions of all objects of thoughts in general. The thinking subject is the object of psychology; the sum total of all appearances (the world) is the object of cosmology; and the thing which contains the supreme condition of the possibility of all that can be thought (the being of all beings) is the object of theology."³⁵

Among all these three transcendental ideas, the one that is relevant to this research is the last, i.e. the object of theology - the 'being of all beings'. Reason arrives at the concept of such a being when it goes beyond the consideration of finite possibility of positive and

³³ Palmquist, Stephen, R., *Kant's Critical Religion*, op. cit., p. 91

³⁴ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A644/B672

³⁵ Ibid., A334/B391.

negative predicates of things that exist, to conceive of the possibility of totality that can be subject to a thoroughgoing determination. By this principle of thoroughgoing determination of all things, reason tries to conceive of something that has the unity of all positive predicates; “an unlimited something in terms of which our understanding of all the limited things is possible”³⁶. This is how reason comes about the concept of ‘a perfect being, with only positive predicates, without limitation’³⁷ – the concept of God.

In his affirmative approach to the question of the existence of God therefore, Kant identifies the regulative role of reason as an avenue through which we arrive at a concept of God that is purely rational and necessary. “[T]he concept of a supremely real being arises naturally and even inevitably”³⁸; it is natural to man because the very regulative process that leads to it belongs to the natural tendency of human reason. Yet, this concept of God is one for which we have no claim of objective certainty nor a proof that is conclusive theoretically.

Outside of its transcendental function, the idea of God drawn from the regulative function of reason offers us no proof of the existence of God. Kant seems to be committed to justifying the assumption that there is God without giving in to the conclusion that such assumption, though necessary, implies a proof. The ‘rational inevitability of the idea of God’³⁹ does not qualify as a proof of God’s existence because reason, in order to arrive at the former, soars into realm where claim of objective certainty is not possible. Kant’s position is that the necessity of positing God as a regulative idea of reason does not amount to any theoretical proof. Yet, it is an inference that reason is compelled by its nature to make.

3.2 Judicial Perspective: Purposiveness as basis for believing in the existence of God

The focus of the judicial perspective is to show how, from the judgment we make about the world, affirmative conclusions can be made about the existence of God. Even though it offers no defensible proof of the existence of God, Kant’s position is that the purposiveness in nature, which forms the major premise of the physico-theological argument, offers us enough grounds *to believe* (not to know) that there is God. In the judicial perspective, the focus is not on pure reason extending the concepts of understanding beyond their legitimate field of application but rather on the purposiveness that is evident in nature and how the idea of God as the supreme, intelligent cause is consistent with this purposiveness.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that making inference from purposiveness in nature to the positing of God is part of the regulative operations of pure reason.

³⁶ Altman, M., *A Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, Washington: Westview, 2008, p. 178.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 178.

³⁸ Wood, Allen, W., *Kant’s Rational Theology*, London: Cornell University Press, 1970, p. 62

³⁹ Ibid., p. 62

“...reason bids us consider every connection in the world according to principles of a systematic unity....This highest formal unity that alone rests on concepts of reason is the purposive unity of things; and the speculative interest of reason makes it necessary to regard every ordinance in the world as if it had sprouted from the intention of a highest reason....The presupposition of a supreme intelligence, as the sole cause of the world-whole, but of course merely in the idea, can therefore always be useful to reason and never harmful to it.”⁴⁰

The underlining phrase in the above quotation is ‘presupposition of a supreme intelligence’. Kant considers this presupposition highly necessary and goes on to clarify its ontological and epistemological status in the light of the basic assumptions of his critical philosophy, especially the Transcendental Analytic:

“...can we nevertheless assume a unique wise and all-powerful world author? Without any doubt; and not only that, but we must presuppose such a being. But then do we extend our cognition beyond the field of possible experience? By no means. For we have only presupposed a Something, of which we have no concept at all of what it is in itself; but, in relation to the systematic and purposive order of the world’s structure, which we must presuppose when we study nature, we have thought this being, which is unknown to us.”⁴¹

Kant’s position here amounts to saying that the assumption of a unique wise and all-powerful world author does not in any way imply a claim of objective knowledge about such a being. What is underlined here is strictly a mere presupposition that lays no claim to objective certainty. Just like he did in the arguments advance for the concept of God as regulative ideal of pure reason, Kant makes it clear that assumption of a supreme intelligent cause does not translate to a proof that such a being exists; it is only a presupposition that is ‘only in the idea as a ground for the harmonious use of reason’⁴².

Kant did not present teleology as providing a justifiable objective basis for theology as such. He argues that what the physico-theological argument leaves us with is only a physical teleology that is incapable of leading to any theological claims. The argument provides no convincing proof of the claim it makes about the concept of the intelligent cause of the world:

“It can indeed justify the concept of an intelligent cause of the world, [by showing that it is] for us the only suitable concept – i.e., suitable for the character of our cognitive power – of the possibility of those things that we can understand [only] in terms of purposes. But physicotheology cannot determine this concept any further, whether from a theoretical or a practical point of view, and [so] it fails to accomplish what it intends: to provide a basis for theology. It remains forever only a physical teleology.”⁴³

So, from the perspective of our judgment of the order of nature, Kant makes yet one more attempt to approach the question of God affirmatively. This affirmation is found in the admission of the usefulness of the concept of God as an intelligent cause that explains the purposiveness in nature. However, despite the usefulness of this presupposition of an intelligent being, purposiveness in nature offers no theology but only makes us *feel the need for a theology that would determine the concept of God sufficiently for the highest practical use of reason*.

⁴⁰ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A687/B715

⁴¹ Ibid., A698/B726

⁴² Ibid., A693/B721

⁴³ Kant, I., *Critique of Judgment*, §85, 5:437

3.3 Practical Perspective: From morality to the necessity of the existence of God

We have seen that from the perspective of its regulative function, theoretical reason has some role accorded to it in Kant's affirmative approach to the question of the existence of God. However, it is in the operation of the practical reason that Kant's affirmative engagement with the question of the existence of God could be said to have reached its climax. For Kant clearly confers on practical reason all the freedom that eludes speculative reason:

“...in regard to its practical use reason still has the right to assume something which it would in no way be warranted in presupposing in the field of mere speculation without sufficient grounds of proof;”⁴⁴

With such apparent declaration of the unlimited scope of practical reason, we can then understand Kant's position on the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason. This claim of primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason does not in any way imply a diminution of the objective knowledge with theoretical reason leads when the rules of cognition are respected. The primacy in question here concerns the extent of the scope that practical reason enjoys over the theoretical and how the wideness of this scope makes it possible for reason to meet up with its other interests that are not limited to only what we can know but rather includes what we ought to do and what we may hope for⁴⁵. Thus the whole spectrum of ethics and conduct fall under the umbrella of practical reason.

For Kant, the idea of the highest good is so crucial for morality that the threat to its impossibility must be overcome in order to ensure its attainability. As a matter of fact, Kant considers it absurd to think that the highest good is unattainable. He argues that the moral laws are inseparably linked to the idea of the highest good and that this in turn presupposes that the latter must be attainable:

“If, therefore, the highest good is impossible according to practical rules, then the moral law which commands us to further this good must also be fantastic and aimed at empty imaginary purposes, and hence in itself false.”⁴⁶

So for Kant, the possibility of the highest good must be assured. And this is achieved when reason postulates in the noumenal world the ‘conditions which render the possibility of the highest good conceivable to us’⁴⁷. These postulates, according to Kant, are those of *immortality*, of *freedom* and of *the existence of God*. For the purpose of our research, we are focusing however only on the last – the existence of *God*.

The link between the quest for the attainment of the highest good and moral laws lies in the fact that the latter make it imperative for us to seek for the realization of the former. “The moral law, though in itself without promise of Happiness, imposes upon us the

⁴⁴ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A776/B804

⁴⁵ Ibid., A805/B833

⁴⁶ Kant, I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:114

⁴⁷ Wood, Allen, W., *Kant's Moral Religion*, London: op. cit., p. 104

realization of this highest good as “the last object of all conduct.”⁴⁸ We cannot however seek the highest good if its possibility is not presupposed. Thus, for rational beings, it is both a need and a duty to presuppose the possibility of the highest good. Since this highest good is not to be sought in anything empirical, what is required is the postulation of its source in a reality outside of nature in which the ‘harmony of happiness with morality’⁴⁹ will be realized. Consequently, Kant maintains that “the highest good in the world is possible only in so far as one assumes a supreme cause of nature that has a causality conforming to the moral attitude”⁵⁰. This *supreme cause* that is assumed in order to ensure the possibility of the highest good and by so doing, give meaning to our moral commitment is God. Therefore Kant concludes:

“It was a duty for us to further the highest good; and hence we have not only the authority, but also the necessity linked as a need with duty, to presuppose the possibility of this highest good, which, since it has its place only under the condition of the existence of God, links the presupposition of God inseparably with duty; i.e., it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God”⁵¹.

In his work, *In Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, Kant pursues a line of reasoning that links together moral laws, highest good and the existence of God.

“...if the strictest observance of the moral law is to be thought as cause of the effectuation of the highest good, then, since human ability is not sufficient to bring about happiness in the world harmoniously with the worthiness to be happy, an all-powerful moral being must be assumed as ruler of the world, under whose providence this comes about, i.e., morality leads inevitably to religion.”⁵²

It must be noted that before making this link and arriving at the conclusion that follows, Kant had already declared at the very beginning of the preface to the first edition of the work that morality had no need of either a higher being or an incentive outside of itself to account for its binding power. This reflects the position Kant took in his *Lectures on Ethics* which we cited previously. Pursuance of highest good as an end which the moral laws command as a duty leads morality inescapably to the reference to God since it is only the assumption of the existence of God that ensures the possibility and attainability of the highest good. Such is the overall significance of the assumption of God’s existence to Kantian ethics. In his assessment of this significance, Rotenstreich observes that: “The existence of God is not a presupposition of morality, but, in a sense, its summit.”⁵³ It is like a chain reaction: take away God, the highest good loses its basis of possibility; and without ensuring the possibility and attainability of the highest good, a contradiction arises since moral laws cannot command as duty the pursuance of what is not possible and attainable.

At this juncture, we ask: Is the moral argument meant to be a proof of the existence of God? Of course, there is no where in the *Critique of Practical Reason* where Kant

⁴⁸ Seth Pringle Pattison, Andrew, *The Development from Kant to Hegel*, Edinburgh: William and Norgate, 1882, p. 108

⁴⁹ Kant, I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:125

⁵⁰ Ibid., 5:125

⁵¹ Ibid., 5:125

⁵² Kant, I., *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, 6, n32

⁵³ Rotenstreich, Nathan, *Reason and Its Manifestations*, Frommann-Holzboog, 1996, p. 122

explicitly claims that the moral argument can stand as a proof as such. In his assessment of the moral argument in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant was even more explicit about what the moral argument is meant to be and what it set to achieve:

“This moral argument is not meant to offer any objectively valid proof of the existence of God, nor meant to prove to the sceptic that there is a God; rather it is meant to show him that he must adopt the assumption of this proposition among the maxim of his practical reason if his moral thinking is to be consistent....Thereby it is a sufficient, subjective argument for moral beings”⁵⁴

Being a postulate⁵⁵ of practical reason, the whole idea of the existence of God is meant to provide a justification for our commitment to morality as rational agents. For Kant, the usefulness of the postulation of God’s existence to morality outweighs concerns for scientific indemonstrability of such postulation. As moral agents, it suffices for us to have a subjective, personal conviction that God exists:

“The moral agent does not ponder the possibility of God’s existence as one metaphysical option among others, deciding for or against it. Rather, the agent discovers through an examination of practical reason itself that the existence of God is presupposed in the very activity of moral agency.”⁵⁶

The inherent focus of Kant’s moral argument on subjective conviction of the moral agency makes it quite evident that Kant is not so much after scientific and objective proof of the existence of God. The emphasis for him rather is ‘on the practical, or self-involving, character of theistic belief’⁵⁷. Such is the subjectivism we see in Kant’s moral argument for the existence of God: “they are founded not on objective proof or evidence but on a personal, but rationally commanded, decision to adopt a morally upright course of life.”⁵⁸ From the perspective of the speculative power of reason, we can never objectively claim or deny the existence of God. However, our moral obligation as rational moral agents makes it imperative that God’s existence be postulated by practical reason. This postulation is not only legitimate; it is also very consistent with the duty placed on us as moral agents to pursue and attain the highest good. Thus, if speculative reason is unable to arrive at a conclusive proof of the existence of God, practical reason gives us the liberty to postulate this existence which has an indispensable value for morality.

One line of commonality runs through all of Kant’s affirmative approach to the question of the existence of God be it as a regulative ideal of pure reason, as an intelligent author of the purposive order in nature or the moral argument. This is the fact that Kant makes

⁵⁴ Kant, I., *Critique of Judgment*, §87, 5:450

⁵⁵ A ‘postulate’ does not mean the same thing as a ‘proof’. The difference between the two lies in the level of demonstrability that can rightly be ascribed to each. While ‘proof’ has high level of demonstrability, ‘postulate’ does not. However, not having a high level of demonstrability does not imply that ‘postulates’ are arbitrary assumptions. Sève gives us a very apt explication of how best to understand what ‘postulate’ stands for: “Le nom de ‘postulat’ dit bien le caractère indémontrable de la proposition théorique; mais il faut ajouter que le postulat n’a rien d’arbitraire ou de gratuit, tout au contraire. Le postulat est théoriquement indémontrable mais pratiquement (moralement) nécessaire.” (c.f. Seve, Bernard, *La Question Philosophique de l’existence de Dieu*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1994, p. 88)

⁵⁶ Michalson, Gordon, E. Jr., *Kant and the Problem of God*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 36

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 29

⁵⁸ Wood, Allen, W., *Kant’s Moral Religion*, op. cit., p. 34

it clear that legitimacy and usefulness of postulation of the existence of God do not translate into objective proof. Kant makes a very clear distinction between what we can validly claim to know and what we need to believe even when we have no objective certainty. Kant's insistence on safe-guarding objective knowledge from illusions by drawing a clear cut line for what counts as what we can know does not imply that he attaches less value to what we need to believe even when objective certainty is not assured. In the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant makes a declaration that underlines his readiness to sustain the relevance of belief: "Thus I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."⁵⁹

4: Kant's God: real or merely an improvised necessity?

In the light of these preceding discussions, what conclusion can we reach concerning the overall idea of God that the critical philosophy leaves us with? Having discussed at length Kant's refutation of the traditional speculative proofs of God's existence as well as the efforts he made to argue for an affirmative approach to the necessity of the postulation of this same existence, what overall status can we ascribe to the *God* that that critical philosophy leaves us with?

Palmquist observes that two senses of God can be identified in Kant's critical project: on the one hand, a God that is totally unknowable, and on the other hand, one that is *a living God*, immanent, real and necessary⁶⁰. What sense can we make of these apparently conflicting ideas of God that is unknowable and at the same time real and necessary? Is Kant's God a rational assumption we are obliged to have because our reason naturally leads to it, or is he just a postulation we make because his existence has practical implications for us even when reason has no way of assuring us that he exists?

So many questions can be raised about the theological implications of the positions that Kant took in his engagement with the question of God and his existence. Firestone identifies four different directions that traditional interpretations of Kant's philosophy have led to in the question of its implication for theology in general and the existence of God in particular. These include: anti-theology, atheism, non-realism, theological realism. He opines that none of these in isolation does justice to a proper understanding of the theological implication of Kant's position in his engagement with the question of God's existence: 'each appears to 'pick and choose' from among Kant's philosophical resources without taking full account of Kant's transcendental grounds for theology'⁶¹. What then are those *transcendental grounds for theology* which must be taken full account of in Kant's critical philosophy? Firestone's answer to this question is that when understood rightly, Kant's critical thought paves way for rational religious faith:

"...the noumenal and phenomenal are not two worlds but two ways of considering the same thing – and the ontological task as it pertains to freedom, immortality and God is delayed until reason unfolds fully into rational religious faith, then theology can find

⁵⁹ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxx

⁶⁰ Palmquist, Stephen, R., *Kant's Critical Religion*, op. cit., p. 9

⁶¹ Firestone, Chris, L., *KANT and Theology at the Boundaries of Reason*, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009, p. 8

substantial grounds within the transcendental recesses of reason in which to grow and flourish.”⁶²

It is in the unfolding of reason into rational religious faith that we discover the proper theological implication of Kant’s critical philosophy. For Firestone, Kant’s God is a product of reason, not in the sense that we can claim knowledge of him, but rather in the sense that the faith which leads us inevitably to the assumption of his existence is rational. It is this rational faith that constitutes the transcendental ground for theology in Kant’s critical philosophy.

Not everyone shares the theistic optimism that Firestones reads in Kant’s position. Some commentators hold the view that in his engagement with the question of God, Kant placed divine transcendence in complete subordination to the autonomy of reason, sacrificing as it were, proper theistic commitment on the altar of ‘the undeniable prerogatives of autonomous rationality’⁶³. This is the principal line of argument championed by Michalson in his book entitled *Kant and the Problem of God*.

Tracing Kant’s engagement with the question of God’s existence, Michalson identifies what he refers to as ‘two strikingly different moments’⁶⁴: the initial, negative moment of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the moment of apparent recovery of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The initial negative moment of *Critique of Pure Reason* was dominated by Kant’s complete rejection of every speculative attempt to prove the existence of God exemplified in his total rejection of the traditional proofs of the existence of God. The tonality of that work was predominantly negative with regard to the question of the existence of God. Contrary to the refutations and negative approach that characterize the first *Critique*, Michalson finds the second *Critique* to be a moment of recovery that ‘takes the form of Kant’s moral argument for the existence of God, sometimes referred to as the “moral proof”’⁶⁵. In this so-called recovery, Kant based on the legitimacy provided by practical reason to argue for the usefulness and necessity of that which speculative reason has no authority to prove decisively. To give meaning to our aspiration as rational moral agents, the concept of the highest good is posited and consequently, the existence of God is postulated since ‘the existence of God is rationally required for all the reasons associated with the necessity to preserve the possibility of the highest good’⁶⁶. Thus, the conditions that make the attainment of the highest good possible – God (and of course, immortality of the soul) – are postulated, all based on the legitimacy offered by practical reason in which Kant finds the grounds to overcome the restrictions placed on speculative reason.

Michalson contends that even though the moral argument with all its reliance on practical reason may be seen as recovering the positive cognitive relationship with God jeopardized by the *Critique of Pure Reason*, what it all boils down to is ‘the subordination of the divine will to the dictates of reason’s own conception of, and interest

⁶² Firestone, Chris, L., *KANT and Theology at the Boundaries of Reason*, op.cit., p. 167

⁶³ Michalson, Gordon, E. Jr., *Kant and the Problem of God*, op. cit., p. x

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 28

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 28

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 41

in, the highest good.”⁶⁷ In the practical philosophy, the primary interest of Kant, according to Michalson is not the existence of God as such.

“...he [Kant] has at no point made establishing God’s existence the explicit priority of his practical philosophy. Instead, the decisive and driving priority is the intelligibility of the insight that moral earnestness ultimately leads to a rational result, within the context of showing how it is that reason can be practical. God’s existence is both instrumental toward, and secondary to, this end....We might characterize the resulting situation by saying that the postulate of God’s existence is part of the larger plot concerning the intelligibility of the moral life and not itself the point of the plot.”⁶⁸

What this implies is that Kant’s moral argument for the existence of God is simply an exercise in postulating the existence of God to ensure the intelligibility and possibility of our aspirations as moral agents. Michalson argues that the God thus postulated in Kant’s moral argument gives no proper account of the attributes of God but is mainly concerned with how the idea of God is in accord with the requirement of autonomous human rationality. The end result of such postulation is nothing but “...theistic shrinkage and the subordination of divine existence to autonomy’s requirements.”⁶⁹ In a sense, the moral argument represents a desperate attempt to ‘smuggle’ God in through the back door after the stringent refutations of all speculative proofs of his existence carried out in the first *Critique*; and not just that God was ‘smuggled in’, he now becomes relevant only to the extent that the idea of his existence serves as an instrument of ensuring the meaningfulness of morality. For Michalson, Kant’s primary concern was to ensure the sustenance of our commitment to morality. The idea of God is only something that is evolved, not for its own meaningfulness as such but only as an instrument for the sustenance of moral commitment. In other words, the moral argument opts for a kind of ‘instrumentalization’ of God that puts God at the service of morality. Such ‘instrumentalization’, for Michalson, amounts to a diminishing of divine transcendence.

Without prejudice to these profound objections that question Kant’s theistic commitment, it is necessary to state that any interpretation of the mature Kant that judges him outside the overall presuppositions of his critical philosophy does not represent a fair assessment. We say this not with the view to engage in outright defense of Kant but rather to underline the fact that the epistemological presupposition of the critical philosophy provide the proper context and background against which Kant’s position can be judged or assessed. It may not be correct, for instance, to assess Kant’s theistic commitment based on a definition of divine transcendence that has no place in the critical philosophy. Wood cautions against assessing or judging Kant’s idea of God outside of what constitutes his primary interest and orientation

“Kant’s principal interest in the concept of God is not motivated by any concern with revealed theology, empirical anthropology, or comparative religions. Kant’s God is, most aggressively, the God of the philosophers.”⁷⁰

By remarking that Kant’s God is the God of philosophers, Wood was reechoing a distinction made by Blaise Pascal between the Christian God and the ‘God of philosophers’. For Pascal, the relationship between the Christian God and the believer is

⁶⁷ Michalson, Gordon, E. Jr., *Kant and the Problem of God*, op. cit., p. 21

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 45

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 48

⁷⁰ Wood, Allen, W., *Kant’s Rational Theology*, op. cit., p. 60

marked with such a direct impact, experience and connectedness that are not found in the 'God of philosophers or the learned'⁷¹

Kant's interest in the discussion about God, especially his affirmative approach to the question of the existence of God was not aimed at promoting the Christian conception of God. Kant was simply a critical philosopher, writing philosophy and not theology. Of course the influence of his Pietist background on his thought cannot be denied. As Moore rightly remarks, Kant 'never relinquished the fundamental moral outlook that had been instilled in him by his pietistic upbringing'⁷². However, we must avoid judging the nature of Kant's theistic commitment based on presuppositions of Judeo-Christian theology, as if the success or failure of Kant's idea of God and his existence depend on how much it accords with the Christian conception of God.

Could it rightly be claimed, however, that Kant's God has all the disconnectedness of the 'philosophers' God' implied in Pascal's distinction. Unlike Pascal's 'God of philosophers', Moore thinks that Kant's God

"...is not the subject of some quasi-mathematical theorem or of some quasi-scientific hypothesis. For Kant, belief in God is ...needed to play a hope-sustaining, sense-conferring, mist-dispelling role in each of our lives."⁷³

Sève agrees with this view that Kant's God, far from being disinterested in and disconnected from human affairs, is on the contrary, intimately connected to human existence.

"L'existence de Dieu telle qu'elle est postulée dans le kantisme n'est pas un élément étranger qu'il faudrait intégrer à l'ordre d'une existence humaine qui ne l'appellerait pas; elle est au contraire en connexion intime avec notre existence, elle a d'emblée et par définition un sens (moral) pour nous."⁷⁴

As a postulate of practical reason, Kant's God is characterized by a peculiar usefulness that satisfies the aspirations of moral agents. By virtue of this usefulness that serves the need of moral agents, it cannot be said that Kant's God is completely disinterested or withdrawn from the concerns of mortals. There is a 'communicative relationship'⁷⁵ between Kant's God and moral agents. The communication implied here does not refer to direct exchange or transfer of information as if God is a being we can have tangible interaction with. Kant's system does not admit of such direct interaction with God. The phrase - 'communicative relationship' - as used by Palmquist only refers appropriately to moral duties understood as divine commands. Moral agents do not become aware of these commands as direct theoretical legislation delivered by God through such mediums as revelation or vision. It is rather a communication that comes 'indirectly, through the mediation of our 'morally legislative reason'.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Cf. Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées*, Michel Le Guern (ed.), Editions Gallimard, 1977, p. 273

⁷² Moore, W., *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty: Themes and Variations in Kant's Moral and Religious Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 147

⁷³ Ibid., p. 164

⁷⁴ Seve, Bernard, *La Question Philosophique de l'existence de Dieu*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1994, p. 184

⁷⁵ Palmquist, Stephen, R., *Kant's Critical Religion*, op. cit., p. 308

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 308

Between Kant's ethics and religion, the recognition of the authority and autonomy of reason (will) plays a crucial connecting role. His theistic commitment is tied inseparably to his insistence on autonomous rationality, which, in turn, is the foundation upon which his entire ethics is constructed. For Kant, morality is the only legitimate pathway to religion. Kant believes morality leads inescapably to religion. We cannot separate Kant's religion generally and his engagement with the question of the existence of God in particular from the presuppositions of his ethics. For him, 'belief in God is somehow implicated in and hence justified by the authority of the moral law'⁷⁷. Notwithstanding the value he sees in the concept of God as an ideal of pure reason in its theoretical use, Kant declares explicitly in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that the concept of God belongs originally, not to speculative reason, but rather to morality⁷⁸. Kant's moral proof of the existence of God can be seen therefore as the highest expression of his theistic commitment. In this proof, it is morality and our commitment to it as rational moral agents that confers meaning on the concept – God.

“Nous pouvons dire “Dieu existe”, oui, mais toujours en relation avec l'exigence moral. Dieu est, pour ainsi dire, toujours sous le contrôle de la Loi morale... la moralité est la mesure de Dieu, non l'inverse. »⁷⁹

Hence, for beings that lack this consciousness of moral duty as rational moral agents, the idea of God would make no sense: “...the very word “God”, removed from the moral context that gives it life, is almost or quite without significance.”⁸⁰

It follows therefore that Kant's God is, a ‘Moral God’: “*le sage auteur moral du monde*”⁸¹. About this moral God, we have no theoretical proof. Yet, we are committed to holding a rational belief that he exists because as rational moral agent, the postulation of his existence is needed to make sense of our moral commitment. The rational moral faith upon which Kant's theistic conviction is built offers us enough objective ground to postulate the existence of God. Although such faith lays no claim to knowledge about God, the ground it provides for the postulation of the existence of God is qualified as objective because according to Kant, what constitutes the foundation of such faith is ‘morals, the whole system of duties, which is cognized a priori with apodictic certainty through pure reason’⁸².

Therefore, in place of dogmatic speculative theism, Kant favours what he calls moral theism and offers a precise definition of what defines a moral theist:

“...the moral theist asserts absolutely that it is impossible for speculative reason to demonstrate the existence of such a being [God] with apodictic certainty; but he is nevertheless firmly convinced of the existence of this being, and he has a faith beyond all doubt on practical grounds.”⁸³

⁷⁷ Wayne M. Martin, “*Transcendental Philosophy and Atheism*” in *European Journal of Philosophy*, 16:1, 109-130

⁷⁸ Cf. Kant, I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:140

⁷⁹ Seve, Bernard, *La Question Philosophique de l'existence de Dieu*, op. cit., p. 92

⁸⁰ Walsh, W.H., “Kant, Immanuel (1724-1804)”, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967, p. 317

⁸¹ Seve, Bernard, *La Question Philosophique de l'existence de Dieu*, op. cit., p. 113

⁸² Kant, I., *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, 28:1011

⁸³ Ibid., 28:1011

For the moral theist, the question is not knowledge of God and proof of his existence; it rather all about a rational faith that holds firmly to the belief that there is God. In other words, moral theism rejects every form of dogmatic claim to speculative knowledge of God. God, like every other postulate of practical reason is not a theoretical dogma but only a presupposition from a necessarily practical point of view⁸⁴. The fact that God is unknowable does not reduce God to an empty concept about which nothing can be said. Kant does not consider God to be an empty object of imagination merely postulated for convenience of thought. Even though Kant has no interest in positing a God that is an object of knowledge, his moral theism makes bold claims about the nature of this God:

“...the moral principle admits this concept as possible only on the presupposition of an originator of the world who has the highest perfection. He must be omniscient, in order to cognize my conduct even to my innermost attitudes in all possible cases and throughout the future; omnipotent, in order to assign to this conduct the appropriate consequences; likewise omnipresent, eternal etc.”⁸⁵

A question arises here: how do we reconcile between the unknowability of Kant’s God and all the attributes that Kant claims for this same God? Is Kant justified to talk of attributes of God when he had already concluded that we can know nothing about God? For Wood, the paradox is undoubtedly apparent:

“It may seem paradoxical that, on the one hand, Kant should have so strenuously insisted on a concept of God so precisely determined from the moral and metaphysical view as an ontologically perfect intelligent volitional agent possessed of supreme holiness, benevolence, and justice; while on the other hand he was so anxious to render this concept as empty, vague, and indefinite as possible by placing it beyond the power of our faculties to comprehend.”⁸⁶

On the face value, Kant’s assignment of attributes to God would seem to amount to a contradiction of his own principles that implies that nothing can be known about God. Palmquist however, absolves Kant from such contradiction insisting that Kant’s reference to the attributes of God does not negate his position about our ignorance of God’s essence. According to Palmquist,

“[Kant] is not contradicting his own theoretical principles by suggesting that we can know God’s attributes after all. Rather, he is urging that, despite our inherent ignorance of God’s essence, as necessitated by the perspectival nature of human rationality, it is legitimate for *practical* purpose to describe God, as long as we recognize the dependence of such descriptions on our own perspectives, and so use the resulting ‘knowledge’ only as an aid in coping with our earthly existence, especially with respect to our moral activity.”⁸⁷

‘Dependence of such descriptions on our own perspective’; this is the major element in the argument that absolves Kant from contradiction. The attributes his claims for God are not in themselves indications of what God is but only represent and anthropomorphic attempt to describe God with the highest expressions of ‘predicates taken from our own nature’⁸⁸. On the issue of anthropomorphism, Kant makes a distinction between

⁸⁴ Kant, I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:132

⁸⁵ Ibid., 5:140

⁸⁶ Wood, Allen, W., *Kant’s Rational Theology*, op. cit., p. 93

⁸⁷ Palmquist, Stephen, R., *Kant’s Critical Religion*, op. cit., p. 81

⁸⁸ Kant, I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:137

‘dogmatic anthropomorphism’ (which he rejects) and ‘symbolic anthropomorphism’ (which he accepts)⁸⁹:

“The former asserts that God actually possesses characteristics found in finite beings, while the latter limits itself to an “analogical predication of unlimited perfections of God, and “in fact concerns language only and not the object itself”⁹⁰

Kant’s acceptance of symbolic anthropomorphism follows from his argument that predication of qualities to God is admissible only one condition; and that is what Kant refers to as ‘the noble way of analogy’⁹¹. In *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, he argues that “in order to make suprasensible characteristics graspable to ourselves, we always need a certain analogy with natural beings”⁹². Such analogy, according to him serve as schemas for the purpose of elucidation but do not in any way carry out the function of object-determination for the expansion of our cognition. The latter would amount to dogmatic anthropomorphism which is unacceptable to Kant. He consistently argues that whatever predication we may ascribe to God by way of analogy does not translate to assertion of real properties to God. In such analogical predication, we can only ‘speak as if God had human-like attributes, to suppose that he actually does have them is to make an illegitimate leap beyond the critical boundaries’.⁹³ However, in his *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, Kant seems to veer off from the strictures imposed by the critical philosophy to make claims about God that goes beyond the way of analogy he had previously opted for. This claim has to do with God possessing the faculty of cognition. Here, Kant makes what sounds more like a dogmatic anthropomorphic declaration than just analogy:

“We have, however, a much stricter ground of proof that God has a faculty of cognition, namely a ground derived from the constitution of an *ens realissimum*;....We infer, namely, that an *ens originarium* that contains within itself the ground of the possibility of all things must have a faculty of cognition because it is the original source of beings which do have this faculty, e.g. human beings. For how could something be derived from a being unless this original being had it? Thus the original being of all beings must have a faculty of cognition.”⁹⁴

In this claim, the element of ‘*as if*’ that characterizes analogical statements is completely missing. On the contrary, Kant is making a bold declaration that has all the force of

⁸⁹ Cf Kant, I., *The Prolegomena*, 375

⁹⁰ Wood, Allen, W., *Kant’s Moral Religion*, op. cit., p. 165

⁹¹ Kant, I., *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religions*, 28:1023.

The reference to ‘analogy’ in the talk about God is not original to Kant as such but featured in medieval thinking as seen in such philosophers as Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas. In his work, *Kant on God*, Byrne shows how Kant’s argument for analogy and his preference for symbolic anthropomorphism have an intimate resemblance with the positions of Maimonides and Aquinas. For Maimonides, we speak of God by analogy with human beings, but only in order to signify something about his relation to us, specifically how the effects of his actions upon us can be marked. And for Aquinas, the positive descriptions we frame of God is fundamentally creaturely, since our experience of the relevant qualities is of their manifestation in creature. Thus these descriptions used of God are not ways by which we can comprehend Gods essence, or what he is in himself. (cf. Byrne, Peter, *Kant on God*, op. cit., p.71) Thus, Kant’s view on analogical can rightly be considered a reechoing of the view already expressed by Maimonides and Aquinas. However, Kant’s position is not wholesale repetition of the positions of these two thinkers. The added strictures required by the conditions set out in his transcendental idealism confer his position with some originality.

⁹² Kant, I., *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, 5:65n (85n)

⁹³ Ibid., p. 73

⁹⁴ Kant, I., *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, 28:1050

rationalist dogmatism that his critical philosophy rejects completely. On the premise that human beings possess the faculty of cognition, Kant jumps to the conclusion that God must have such faculty simply because it would be contradictory if such quality is lacking in the concept of the *ens ens realissimum*, a concept that embodies all perfection. What is at play here is nothing but a dogmatic invocation of the principle of contradiction and assumption based on mere definition, all of which Kant rejected in his arguments against the traditional proofs of the existence of God. One wonders what could have made Kant to make such declaration which, from all indication, deviates from the presupposition of his critical thought. For Byrne, it is simply a position that is irreconcilable with the rest of Kant's critical thought and his suggestion about what to do with it is simple: "There is nothing to be done, in my opinion with the ...discussion of God as having understanding other than set it down as an aberration."⁹⁵

The tendency by Kant to revert atimes to the making of claims that sounds too 'dogmatic' than 'critical' is considered by some commentators to be an indication that Kant never severed his ties completely with his rationalist background. It has been argued that even the moral argument he advanced after his rejection of the traditional proofs reveals a return to rationalist dogmatism and indicates the continued influence of Kant's earliest religious affiliation. On this issue, Russell notes that:

"...in intellectual matters he [Kant] was skeptical, but in moral matters he believed implicitly in the maxims that he had imbibed at his mother's knee. That illustrates what the psychoanalysts so much emphasize – the immensely stronger hold upon us that our very early associations have than those of later times."⁹⁶

Like Russell, there other Kant scholars who hold the opinion that Kant never gave up his earliest intellectual orientation; that it rather continued to influence his thought even in the mature period of his intellectual carrier. For instance, Byrne argues that even though the philosophical theology advanced in Kant's critical thought could be considered to be fundamentally different from that of traditional philosophical rationalism, yet, Kant did not escape the influence of the latter: "like that tradition, he is committed to regarding the world as a rational and teleological whole and to using the concept of God to articulate that commitment."⁹⁷ For Witherall, "Kant sought to circumscribe reason in order to make room for faith, but in the end he conceded a great deal to rationalism."⁹⁸

It may not be correct to qualify Kant's critical philosophy as a complete return to rationalism. Such a conclusion would simply be a myopic judgment that does not appreciate the inherent values and achievements of Kant's ingenuity which is even more evident in his engagement with the question of the existence of God. On the one hand, Kant holds reason suspect and rejects its unwarranted claim about access to knowledge of God. On the other hand, postulation of the idea of God is so crucial that we cannot but believe that he exists. Thus, the mature Kant's engagement with the question of the existence of God reveals an ingenious blend of reason and faith. Or better still, a

⁹⁵ Byrne, Peter, *Kant on God*, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007, p. 73

⁹⁶ Russell, Bertrand, *Why I Am Not A Christian*, London: Routledge, 1979, p. 19

⁹⁷ Byrne, Peter, *Kant on God*, op. cit., p. 172

⁹⁸ Witherall, Arthur, *The Problem of Existence*, Hants: Ashgate, 2002, p. 37

redefinition of faith that not only accommodates but also gives priority to reason. Although reason is incapable of arriving at speculative proof of God, yet, it is still the same reason which, by virtue of its pragmatic concerns in its practical use, that confers validity and objectivity to our postulation of the existence of God.

5. Conclusion

For Kant, belief in God is not just rational, it is indeed very pragmatic. It may be argued that by insisting on the usefulness of belief in God we have no knowledge of, Kant was driven by pragmatic moral concern to pay less attention to the need for theoretical clarity, and that no meaningful theology can grow out of such lack of clarity about who God really is. Such negative assessment of the value of Kant's rational theology however is countered by a more positive one that credits Kant with curbing the excesses of reason in order to protect theism.

"Kant's...position is disastrous only for types of theology that claim to establish *knowledge* of God's existence. Kant's critique puts such proofs in their proper place by showing how they can be pointers to an unknowable reality, even though we remain necessarily ignorant of whether or not what they point to actually exists. Such pointers must ultimately be grounded in moral belief in order to be convincing. In this way he actually protects theistic religion from philosophical sophisticates by insuring that the unconditioned reality we call 'God' cannot be apprehended as such by our limited powers of understanding and reason."⁹⁹

Kant's rational theology is more a theology of practical concern than of speculative curiosity. Consistent with the practical concern of such theology, Kant's God is a God whose existence we need to believe in because his existence makes a lot of sense to us as rational moral agents. Neither speculative proof nor its lack diminishes the apparent usefulness of assuming the existence of God. Such is Kant's unshaken position as his words reveal: "We must assume a God and we must believe in him even though our reason may not venture to assume his possibility and his existence *a priori*."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Palmquist, Stephen, R., *Kant's Critical Religion*, Hants: Ashgate, 2000, p. 439

¹⁰⁰ Kant, I., *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, 28:1027