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God, the Highest Good, and the Rationality of Faith: Reflections on Kant's Moral Proof of the Existence of God

In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant dismisses the notion that belief in God's existence in any way constitutes the motivational force of morality. Kant claims that "the pure representation of duty and the moral law in general [...] has, by way of reason alone [...] an influence on the human heart so much more powerful than all other incentives" (*GMS* 4:410). This so-called 'purity thesis' is reasserted in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in which Kant states that "respect for the moral law is the sole and indisputable moral incentive" (*KpV* 5:78). Kant was convinced that people somehow recognize that they have moral duties and that these moral duties can 'move' them to act, simply by virtue of being moral agents; he further argued that people are moral agents simply by being the kind of rational creatures they are.¹ However, despite his acknowledgement that reason can be practical in and of itself and can determine a person's will, Kant did not sever any ties between morality and religion. Kant did not forget the notion that people are embodied moral agents who have claims to happiness in the natural world; indeed, he establishes that people are essentially obligated not only to do their duty but also (though not in terms of duty) to pursue their own happiness. Despite the overriding nature of the moral law, it is not plausible to assume that people can fully renounce their claim to happiness, as it is a fundamental component of what it means to be an embodied moral agent. Thus, Kant conceives of the necessary object of the moral will in terms of a "highest good" – that is, of a good somehow 'higher' than the 'supreme' and unconditioned good of virtue, as it, according to a principle of distributive justice, also contains happiness: the happiness that people have made themselves worthy of by their virtue. Therefore, the highest good is the perfect, complete, or entire good (cf. *KpV* 5:110).²

In the Dialectic of the second *Critique*, Kant argues that, if we are to have assurance that the highest good can be achieved, we must postulate that God exists

¹ Cf. Pinkard 2002: 60.

² In a nice formulation by Kant, the highest good is "a happiness of rational beings harmoniously coinciding with conformity to the moral law" (*KU* 5:451). On the notion of the highest good, cf. Watkins 2010, O'Connell 2012 and Pasternack 2014: 31–54.

and that the soul is immortal. Dismissed from the motivational aspect of morality, the reference to God thus reappears on its teleological side. The notion that it is somehow morality that gives rise to religion, and not the other way around, is further pursued by Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790),³ again in relation to the possibility of the highest good. In §87 of this work, he presents what he calls a “moral proof” for the existence of God, through which he shows that, as embodied (imperfect) moral beings, it is rational to assume that God exists. The aim of this paper is to examine this proof and to assess the doxastic status of the belief that it grounds, in light of a series of qualifications that Kant introduces after having formulated the proof. Ultimately, the proof is based on one’s practical commitment and has an effect on conviction only in relation to one’s self-awareness as a moral being. This allows the claim that the rationality of the belief that God exists is in line with one’s rational efforts to make sense of the world on the basis of one’s moral commitments. Kant’s view, as developed in the final sections of the third *Critique*, is understood to be that a belief in God’s existence is an essential ingredient in consistent moral activity and a self-conscious commitment to the demands of the moral law.⁴

A more commonly used expression these days, a ‘belief in God’, refers to an attitudinal faith as a faith *in* some being; attitudinal faith is “partly *a state of the will*”.⁵ Having faith in God entails taking as true that God exists and certain other propositions about Him (e. g., as in Kant’s case, that He is an omnipotent and omnibenevolent, and at the same time a just, eternal, and omnipresent, original being, cf. *KU* 5:444).⁶ Attitudinal faith, as Robert Audi notes, implies instances of propositional faith – faith *that* – concerning the same object, but faith is not reducible to belief. Propositional faith often does not embody a belief in the proposition that expresses its content. Audi states that “it may be non-doxastic”.⁷ I will

3 That, according to Kant, ethics does not inevitably lead to religion is shown by Dörflinger 2004. For a short and clear reconstruction of Kant’s ideas on the topic, cf. Förster 2000: 118–47 and Tafani 2006: 79–115.

4 In this paper, I do not consider the other ‘ingredient’ of fully motivated moral conduct, namely the belief that our soul is immortal. However, Kant himself scarcely mentions it in this context (cf. *KU* 5:468, 470). It is worth recalling that, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the postulate of immortality is directly connected not to the commitment to the highest good but to the complete fulfillment of the moral law (cf. *KpV* 5:132), which, on the other hand, is a necessary condition of the highest good.

5 Audi 2011: 56. I borrow the expression ‘attitudinal faith’ from Audi 2011: 53, 55.

6 I use the expression ‘taking a proposition as true’ in the sense of accepting it. In this sense, it does not imply the belief that the proposition is true, but rather something like forming an intention to take it “as a basis for conduct or to use it as a basis of inference” (Audi 2011: 70).

7 In such cases, Audi refers to it as *fiducial faith* (Audi 2011: 64, 71).

try to show that Kant's view is akin to this. While having faith in God presupposes His existence, according to Kant, this kind of presupposition, although a 'taking as true', does not entail a belief that God exists in the sense of a truth-valued or full-blown doxastic attitude. In spite of the fact that they usually go together, Kant distinguishes between the mental state of holding that 'God exists' is true and the mental state of taking 'God exists' to be true in one's practical reasoning when the question whether God exists becomes salient. Having faith that God exists and has settled the world so that the unification of nature with the final end, which the moral law imposes on rational beings, is possible, is to have a positive disposition towards the obtaining of that state of affairs: that is, towards the truth of the proposition stating it. However, Kant's moral proof is not an argument for the truth of the proposition that God exists (and has settled the world in a certain way); these matters are "inaccessible for theoretical cognition" (*KU* 5:471). This, however, does not mean that Kant denies that there are also theoretical considerations that support assent to that proposition and make it rationally acceptable.

Kant opposes the physico-teleological proof of the existence of God (cf. *KrV* A620–30/B648–58; *KpV* 5:138–40), now referred to as 'the argument from design'; however, he thinks that the organization exhibited by the world offers ample material for physical teleology and invites the notion of a divine order (cf. *KrV* A685–6/B713–14; *KU* §75, §78). In his view, one's self-understanding as a moral being intertwines with a vision of the world as purposively structured – to such an extent, he claims, that "the inner moral vocation" of our existence directs us "to conceive of the supreme cause, for the final end of the existence of all things" (*KU* 5:447). It is no coincidence that §87 opens, as if to frame the moral argument within a world-view that includes nature in the moral order of things, with observations on moral teleology and physical teleology and on how these combine into a view that fosters the presupposition of an intelligent cause of the world. The assumption is that these teleological considerations are meant to support assent to the existence of God, though they offer no objective ground for it. As we will see, according to Kant, it is only in the epistemic attitude of moral faith that we hold as true the proposition that God exists.

This paper will begin with some observations on moral teleology and physical teleology because a consideration of both types of teleology and of their relation to theology helps us to understand and evaluate Kant's moral proof in §87. The proof will then be presented, and a discussion of Kant's qualification of its scope and aim will follow. Finally, the paper will clarify the nature of the belief grounded by the proof.

1 On Physical Teleology, Moral Teleology, and Theology

At the very beginning of §87, Kant compares physical teleology and moral teleology in relation to theology. Physical teleology and moral teleology are different kinds of teleology and have different domains. Physical teleology concerns the natural world. According to Kant, physical teleology might direct us to consider nature as if it were the product of a supersensible intelligence (cf. *KU* §§73–5); additionally, it might give our theoretically reflecting power of judgment a sufficient basis to assume the existence of “an intelligent world-cause” (*KU* 5:447). However, physical teleology cannot produce a theology in the strictest sense (cf. *KU* 5:440); that is, it cannot raise the notion of an intelligent cause of the world up to the concept of God.⁸

As for moral teleology, Kant notes that it is a teleology that we find “in ourselves, and even more in the concept of a rational being endowed with freedom (of its causality) in general”. Moral teleology concerns us “as beings in the world”; more precisely, as he adds, it concerns “the relation of our own causality to ends and even to a final end that must be aimed at by us in the world, and thus the reciprocal relation of the world to that moral end and the external possibility of its accomplishment” (*KU* 5:447–8). I will return to this characterization of moral teleology; for now, it may be enough to recall that, according to Kant, it is this kind of teleology that “compels” our rational judging to seek “an intelligent supreme principle” (*KU* 5:447–8). He further suggests that even in a world that gives no trace of organization and offers no hint of a physical teleology, reason would still find in its moral ideas sufficient ground to produce a theology (cf. *KU* 5:478–9). Kant claims that in a world of this kind, moral teleology would be adequate “by itself” to refer “the world to a supreme cause, as a deity” (*KU* 5:444–5) because it does not argue from given natural facts to that supreme cause but from those moral ‘facts’ that are the moral ends of rational beings (cf. *KU* 5:436). However, in Kant’s view, the world we come across does not simply reveal the “effects of a mere mechanism of raw matter” but also exhibits an organization that offers ample material for physical teleology (*KU* 5:478) and even for connecting this teleology and moral teleology.

Indeed, Kant intersects these two forms of teleology when he shifts from the consideration of organized beings to the notion of nature as a purposive whole

⁸ Kant speaks of physicotheology as “a misunderstood physical teleology”, admitting that it is usable only as a “propaedeutic” to genuine theology (cf. *KU* 5:442). About physical teleology, he claims that it could guide the mind “on the path of ends in the contemplation of the world, and thereby to an intelligent author of the world” (*KU* 5:478, 484).

(cf. *KU* 5:379, 454). In fact, to consider nature in these terms, he needs to identify its ultimate end – that is, something that can be at the top of a hierarchy of ends, so to speak (cf. *KU* 5:429). Kant claims that the only eligible candidate for this position is the human being because humans are the only beings capable of forming a concept of ends for themselves and making a system of ends out of an aggregate of purposively formed things (cf. *KU* 5:426–7).⁹ Nonetheless, Kant also argues that human beings are entitled to keep this position only on the condition that they somehow go beyond nature (cf. *KU* 5:431). This is because in nature *as* nature, there is no end that is not also a means to something else. In order to be the ultimate end of nature, human beings must provide some kind of barrier against a possible regress into the context of the means-ends relation.

Kant expresses this condition, claiming that human beings can be the ultimate end of nature (*letzter Zweck*) only if they give to nature and to themselves a relation to “a final end [Endzweck]”. Furthermore, since he conceives of the final end as an end that “can be sufficient for itself independently of nature” (*KU* 5:431) and that needs no other end “as the condition of its possibility” (*KU* 5:434), he could identify it with the morally good (cf. *KU* 5:454). By making the idea of an ultimate end dependent on the notion of a final end, which is not “an end of nature (within it)” (*KU* 5:443) but is provided by practical reason, Kant ends up intertwining physical teleology and the moral order of ends. In his view, these purposeful orders correspond with different concepts of an end: specifically, with the concept of the end of nature (and of the theoretical reflecting power of judgment) on the one hand, and, on the other, with the concept of the end of freedom or of pure, practical reason.¹⁰ However, Kant also claims that these teleological orders converge in the human being, who is both the ultimate end of nature and its final end, though no longer as a member of nature, but “considered as noumenon” or as “the only natural being” in which we can cognize “a supersensible faculty (*freedom*)” (*KU* 5:435).

In §87, Kant recalls these reflections on the position of the human being within nature, though he interestingly rephrases them in terms of value. He claims that a world with no rational beings “would have no value at all, because there would exist in it no being that has the slightest concept of a value” (*KU* 5:449). Thus, he offers a background for projecting moral teleology, which is, in any case, independent of physical teleology, onto a wider vision of the world as a purposive whole. This is, after all, required by the very concept of a moral teleology. In fact, according to the passage quoted above, moral teleol-

⁹ For a clear reconstruction of Kant’s argumentation for this claim, cf. Höffe 2008.

¹⁰ Cf. Brandt 2007: 484–5.

ogy has two aspects: the first concerns the relation of our own causality to both the conditioned ends and a final end; the second concerns the relation of the world to the final end and its accomplishment.

As for the first aspect of moral teleology, the double reference to the conditioned ends – which all, in Kant’s view, ultimately refer to happiness – and to the final end roughly corresponds with the double role of the moral law in relation to the will. The moral law concerns the suitability of the subjective principle of the will to be recognized as objective or as valid for the will of every rational being; since every act of the will must have an object or be directed towards an end, however, the law also affects the ‘material’ aspect of the will. With regard to this, the form of universality functions both as a limiting or restricting condition and as a reason to add an object to the will, which Kant identifies as the *highest good* in the world (cf. *KpV* 5:122).¹¹ This means that the moral law not only commits practical judgment to subordinating conditioned ends, related to the desire for happiness, to moral conditions, but also promotes, through the notion of the highest good, the creation of an order or a systematic unity among the ends of a rational, finite being that is consistent with its moral vocation. One is thereby provided with a teleological context within which one can orient and understand one’s morally motivated activity.¹²

As we have seen, the second aspect of moral teleology concerns the relation of the world to the final end and its accomplishment. While morality depends on us, the possibility of happiness “is empirically conditioned, i.e., dependent on the constitution of nature” (*KU* 5:453). Therefore, we need to conceive of the world as a place in which the highest good can be attained. It becomes clear why there seems to be no other way to cope with this question than to resort to theology if we consider how Kant conceives of the relationship between the elements of the highest good. In fact, he views the dependence of happiness on morality as constitutive of the highest good, but he conceives of happiness and morality as heterogeneous factors with heterogeneous principles, which precludes their relationship’s being either conceptual on the one hand, or synthetic and causal (at least in an empirical sense) on the other. In his view, virtue and happiness are independent concepts that are “contained in another concept” in such a way that they are parts of the whole that contains them – that is, the highest good – and not identical with it (*KpV* 5:112).¹³ He also denies that happiness is

11 On the reasons why the highest good must be an object of the moral will, cf. Watkins 2010: 156 ff.

12 On this, cf. Watkins 2010: 163–5 and O’Connell 2012.

13 This is the reason why he rejects both the Stoic and the Epicurean conceptions of the highest good (cf. *KpV* 5:112–13).

an effect of virtuous actions in the familiar physical sense of the word ‘effect’, since virtue belongs to the reasons for, not to the (empirical) causes of, our actions.¹⁴ However, though the relationship between virtue and happiness is not causal, since happiness depends on the constitution of nature, any alignment between them, as Adrian Moore notes, “must have something to do with the actual working of the world”.¹⁵ As things stand, it seems that either we consider the relationship between virtue and happiness completely accidental, thereby rendering the highest good a matter of chance rather than the final end of our actions, or we go “beyond the world” and seek an intelligent, supreme principle “in order to represent nature as purposive even in relation to the morally internal legislation and its possible execution” (*KU* 5:447–8). Since the former is a perspective that an impartial reason cannot accept (cf. *KpV* 5:110), moral teleology takes the latter path. The scene is thus set for the proof of the existence of God. However, before shifting to Kant’s argument, it is worth briefly pausing on the notion of a final end. As we will see, the commitment to the final end is the true premise of the proof, but there seems to be an ambiguity in that notion.

¹⁴ This may be disputed since Kant seems to suggest that the relation between virtue and happiness is causal: “In the highest good [...] virtue and happiness are thought as necessarily combined [...]. Now, this combination [...] must be thought synthetically and, indeed, as the connection of cause and effect, because it concerns a practical good, that is, one that is possible through action” (*KpV* 5:113). As a practical good, the highest good should be “made real” through action; it should be a possible effect of our actions. However, it is not easy to conceive of the relation between virtue and happiness as a causal connection. Kant’s claim that happiness depends on virtue certainly means that it somehow has to be a consequence of virtue, but that the dependence in question is causal seems hard to believe. To assume that the virtue-happiness relation is one of causal dependence would, very roughly, be to hold the conditional that if a person is virtuous then she is happy, and if she is not virtuous then she is not happy. Unfortunately, things do not go this way, and Kant does not seem to assume the contrary (cf. footnote 19). Maybe there is room for not interpreting literally the “must be thought synthetically and, indeed, as the connection of cause and effect”. According to Kant, the relation between virtue and happiness is a relation of “being worthy of”: virtue does not make a person happy but rather makes her worthy of happiness. In a sense, it is relevant to, but not responsible for, the happiness of a person since it does not generate the factual conditional ‘if a person is virtuous, then she is happy’. If the connection between virtue and happiness is not *stricto sensu* a causal relation, Kant’s suggestion that we should conceive of it according to the model of a causal relation may be meant to convey the idea of a kind of necessary connection. This does not take causality out of the scene. Causality is indirectly involved in the connection between virtue and happiness. The idea of a dependence of happiness on virtue might be expressed by the thought of a condition of which virtue is a part that is sufficient for happiness while virtue by itself is not. Another part of this condition is a noumenal cause, namely God, by which, as Wilhelm Vossenkuhl glosses, “virtue is indirectly connected with happiness” (Vossenkuhl 1988: 185).

¹⁵ Moore 2003: 161.

2 On the Final End and the Existence of God

I have mentioned that Kant introduces the notion of a final end in the discussion of nature as a purposive whole. In that context, he considers the human being “the final end of creation” (*KU* 5:435, 443). However, he also conceives of the final end of creation as “that constitution of the world” which corresponds with “the final end of our pure practical reason, insofar as it is to be practical” (*KU* 5:454–5) – that is, as a constitution of the world in which the human being’s final end, namely the highest good (cf. *KU* 5:450), is realized. These two conceptions seem to be different: according to the first, a particular being in the world is considered its final end; according to the second, however, a condition or a state of the world is considered its final end.¹⁶ Nonetheless, they are not inconsistent. A world in which the human being (as a moral being) is the final end should also be a world in which that being’s final end can be realized. Be that as it may, it is worth noticing that, in the eyes of Kant, the notion of the final end seems to have theological implications. This is evident, for instance, in the title given to a section devoted to that notion (§84): “On the final end of the existence of a world, i. e., of creation [Schöpfung] itself” (*KU* 5:434).

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant does not commonly refer to the products of nature as creatures, or to the world as creation.¹⁷ The reference to ‘creation’ in this title is therefore significant. Still more significant is the fact that, in the body of §84, Kant claims that if there is a “productive understanding”, then “the final end” for which the world exists should also be “the objective ground” that could have determined an intelligent cause to create it (*KU* 5:435). Since Kant had previously argued that the human being, as a moral being, is the final end and that, through what one does “purposively and independently of nature”, one can give life a value such that “even the existence of nature can be an end” (*KU* 5:434n.), he can now claim that, at least insofar as the human being qualifies as a moral being, his existence is also the ground that “the highest reason would require” for the creation of nature (*KU* 5:436n.).¹⁸ But if the existence of a moral being is the objective ground for the creation

¹⁶ I owe this point to Cunico 2008: 325–6.

¹⁷ These terms occur, e.g., in *KU* 5:367, 372, 376, 426.

¹⁸ In §87 he restates the point, claiming that “only of the *human being under moral laws* can we say, without overstepping the limits of our insight, that his existence constitutes the final end of the world” (*KU* 5:449n.).

of a world, than the world cannot but have a constitution which corresponds to the final end of pure, practical reason.¹⁹

Obviously, Kant does not assume here that such a “highest reason” exists. Kant’s reasoning is hypothetical. He simply suggests that if there is an intelligent cause of the world, or a God, the existence of a moral being, namely of an objective supreme end, is the ground that He would require for creating the world. Given the traditional concept of God, this claim might be justified even in the eyes of someone who thinks that there is no God. That such an author of the world exists is what the moral proof proposed at the core of §87 tries to make rationally acceptable. As we will now see, what Kant proposes is an argument that, rather than constituting a proof in the strictest sense of the word, is better interpreted as part and parcel of a rational attempt at making ethical sense of things from the perspective of a morally committed person.

Kant’s Moral Proof of the Existence of God

Kant had already hinted at there being a question of a moral author of the world in a passage in the “Remark” at the end of §86, offering a preview of the proof. In that passage, he hinted at the paradoxical situation in which the moral agent finds herself, since she feels forced by the moral law to strive for the highest good, while “at the same time” she judges herself and nature to be incapable of attaining that end – that is, a synthesis of virtue and happiness. In light of this disconcerting situation, Kant maintains that we have “a pure moral ground of practical reason” to assume an intelligent world-cause (*KU* 5:446), thereby hinting that the real premise of the moral proof of the existence of God is the commitment to the highest good on the one hand and the recognition that we

¹⁹ I use the terms ‘world’ and ‘nature’ in a rather loose way, thereby glossing over their possible double reference to both the empirical and the noumenal world. Kant, in fact, seems to presuppose this double meaning of the terms. In a sense, he needs it because, while on the one hand he states that the “final end [...] can become actual only in nature and in accord with its laws” (*KU* 5:196), on the other he observes that nature does not pay attention to a person’s worthiness to be happy (cf. *KU* 5:452). This suggests that the accord between nature and the moral order, required for the connection between virtue and happiness, is possible only in the noumenal world. However, if this is the case, the question arises how we can consider the highest good as a practical idea, namely as a possible aim of our actions (for otherwise we cannot be committed to it). As we will now see, Kant resorts to God as the moral author of the world to answer precisely this question. Cf. Ricken 2004: 167–72.

are not capable of attaining it on the other. Roughly, the proof as he formulates it in §87 runs as follows.²⁰

Kant starts from the double assumption that the moral law determines for us, a priori, a final end, namely “the highest good in the world possible through freedom”, and that it makes it “obligatory for us” to strive after that end (*KU* 5:450). This double assumption articulates the first premise of the proof. Kant then unpacks the content of the final end and distinguishes within it both a subjective and an objective condition, corresponding to the two elements of the highest good. He states that the subjective condition under which we can set a final end for ourselves under moral law is happiness. Hence the highest (physical) good that we have to promote as a final end, “as far as it is up to us”, is happiness, although only “under the objective condition of the concordance of humans with the law of morality, as the worthiness to be happy” (*KU* 5:450).

As a second premise of the proof, Kant reiterates what he had already claimed in §86: “Given all of the capacities of our reason”, it is impossible for us to represent the two requirements of the final end “as both connected by merely natural causes and adequate to the idea of the final end as so conceived” (*KU* 5:450). Given this impossibility and our moral commitment to the highest good, he concludes that, in order to set this end before ourselves, we must assume a moral cause of the world (an author of the world) that guarantees its attainability.²¹

In the next section, we will consider more closely how Kant qualifies his proof. First, however, two points are worth noting. The first concerns the second premise of the proof, namely the non-representability claim. Interestingly, Kant does not make an empirical point in this regard: he does not merely observe, for instance, that morally good people often suffer and evildoers often enjoy undeserved happiness. Rather, his point seems to have both an epistemic and a metaphysical character. His claim is that we cannot understand how the two conditions of the highest good, namely virtue and happiness, can be connected in the context of the causality of nature. Furthermore, Kant establishes a sort of incongruity between the concept of the moral necessity of the final end and the concept of the (physical) possibility of producing it. This incongruity, which somehow also concerns the fabric of the world, must be resolved if we are to

20 For a more detailed interpretation, cf. Cunico 2008: 316–20.

21 Kant’s argument goes along the same lines as that for the postulates of God and immortality in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. As we will see, though Kant makes little use of the term ‘postulate’ in these sections of the third *Critique* (cf. *KU* 5:470, 479), the assent based on the moral proof clearly has a doxastic status akin to that of the postulates. On Kant’s postulates of practical reason, cf. Ricken 2004, and, for an excellent discussion of their meaning and epistemic standing, Willaschek 2010.

conceive of the world as a place in which the final end is to be realized. As we have seen, it is precisely the need to deal with this question that drives reason to shift from moral teleology to theology.

Secondly, it is worth noting that Kant refers to his argument as a ‘moral proof’. Presumably, the reason for this is that the proof requires a moral point of view, which also indicates that the necessity of the conclusion is of a moral kind. This latter statement should be qualified. The argument actually operates under the premise that it is morally necessary for us to aim at realizing the final end in the world. However, the sense of ‘must’ in the statement ‘we must assume a moral cause of the world’ is not the sense in which we must do our duty. That the proof is established from a moral premise does not entail that the conclusion also has this character, namely that it is morally necessary to assume that “there is a God” (*KU* 5:450). This would turn the affirmation of God, which, as an assumption of existence, is a theoretical proposition, into a moral duty, but it does not seem that we can take something to be true at will even if practical reason would seem to require it (cf. *KU* 5:455–6). What, then, is the source of the necessity expressed by the ‘must’ that leads to the conclusion that God exists? The series of observations made by Kant in the second part of §87 and in §88 (commenting on his proof) help us to answer this question and to clarify the kind of validity he attributes to his argument. As we will now see, the existence of God is assented to in view of a coherent and functioning commitment to morality.

3 The Reasonable Moral Person and the ‘Incoherent’ Atheist

Having formulated his moral proof, as if he were distancing himself from it, Kant goes on to contemplate the possibility of a person who is firmly convinced that there is no God. At first glance, this might appear strange. Since the aim of proofs is to convince, to consider such a figure is to somehow allow for imperviousness to the moral proof that God exists. However, Kant is not suggesting that the proof falls short of the rigor required for convincingness; rather, he is making clear that it is not the aim of his argument to *produce* a conviction or, more precisely, a logical or theoretical conviction (cf. *Logik* 9:72, 73n.). The moral proof, he claims, “is not meant to provide any objectively valid proof of the existence of God, nor meant to prove to the doubter that there is a God”; what it means to prove is that “if his moral thinking is to be consistent, he must include the assumption of this proposition among the maxims of his practical reason” (*KU* 5:450–1n.). Even if the moral argument cannot have an effect on the theoretical convictions of a doubter, it might well have it on her practical convictions.

Kant's admission that the moral proof cannot prove the existence of God to the doubter comes as no surprise. A (theoretical) conviction is an assent to a proposition for which the subject has sufficient objective grounds, namely, grounds that indicate "with a moderate-to-high-degree of confidence" that the proposition is true.²² Therefore, a proof can have an effect on (theoretical) conviction only if its basis is an objectively valid ground or what Kant calls "a logical ground for cognition" (*KU* 5:461).²³ As a matter of fact, the moral proof, resting on our commitment to the final end, lacks such a basis, and therefore it cannot have an effect on theoretical conviction.²⁴ However, this weakness does not particularly affect it since it aims not at knowledge or theoretical conviction but at practical conviction.²⁵

These considerations suggest that the necessity expressed by the 'must' that grounds the conclusion of the moral proof, though connected to the form of the argument, does not have a merely logical character. I postulate that it originates from the feeling that we have no alternative but to assume that "there is a God" (*KU* 5:450) when making sense of the moral necessity of aiming at the highest good. However, before I corroborate this claim, there is a further point related to the necessity of the conclusion of Kant's argument that is worth noticing.

Kant endorses two ideas. On the one hand, he states that, insofar as this final end is necessary, it is also necessary, "in the same degree and for the same reason", to assume that there is a God. On the other hand, he is careful to distinguish the necessity of acknowledging the validity of the moral law from that of assuming the existence of God. Kant clearly wants to avoid the argument that "whoever cannot convince himself" that God exists might judge himself "to be free from the obligations" of the moral law. All that would have to be surrendered, he claims, is "the aim of realizing the final end in the world" (*KU* 5:451). This statement is revealing. It suggests that the moral necessity of the highest good does not have "the same degree" as that of the moral law. Modifying the conception that he endorsed in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant has now loosened the direct connection between

²² Chignell 2007: 326. According to Chignell, this is just one of the features of an objective ground.

²³ "We have conviction about a thing when we cognize it as true with the consciousness that our judgment is objective" (*Log-DW* 24:735).

²⁴ This is not a specific fault of such a proof. According to Kant, no logical ground is possible in the case of the existence of God. It is no coincidence that, in his illustration of the person firmly convinced that there is no God, Kant connects that person's conviction partly to "the weakness of all the speculative arguments" aimed at proving that God exists (*KU* 5:451).

²⁵ According to Kant, a practical conviction is what "can be called a belief in the proper sense" (*Logik* 9:73). As we will see in the last section of this paper, it is precisely as a *Glaubenssache* for pure practical reason that the moral argument proves the existence of God.

the moral law and the highest good. He still claims that the highest good is an end imposed upon us by the moral law; however, he does not deem a commitment to it to be as practically necessary as duty itself. Therefore, he has no need to postulate God in order to assure us that the object imposed by the moral law is attainable and the law that prescribes it is not chimerical (cf. *KpV* 5:114, 119, 122). By turning the highest good into an object of the practical power of reflecting judgment,²⁶ Kant can reaffirm that we are forced by the moral law to strive for the highest good while also claiming that the moral law is binding, even if one is agnostic about the realizability of the highest good or, in the worst case, considers it an impossible state of affairs. Why, then, doesn't he leave God outside of the moral scene?

Kant discusses this possibility, evoking the case of “a righteous man (like Spinoza)” who takes himself to be firmly convinced that there is no God but who will nonetheless unselfishly “establish the good” to which the moral law “directs all his powers” (*KU* 5:452). This seems a perfectly rational position in the sense that it is consistent with reason. Indeed, there is nothing contradictory in the idea of the highest good: it is a logically possible state of affairs according to the course of nature. The point is that our reason is not able to conceive of its real possibility without assuming divine intervention. Kant claims that if morality and its rules “can very well exist without theology”, surely the final purpose imposed on us by the moral law “cannot exist without theology, for then reason would be at a loss with regard to that final end” (*KU* 5:485). If the highest good is to be not only logically but also practically possible, we must be able to make it an end of our actions, which, as Marcus Willaschek notices, in turn requires “that we can understand how we might be able to realize” it through our actions.²⁷ And since the only way we can understand this is by appealing to God, the Spinozian attitude may appear, to borrow an expression from Audi, not completely consonant with reason.²⁸ Therefore, while Kant does not consider atheism to be fatal for morality, as the motivational force of the moral law does not depend on theological assumptions, he views a Spinoza-like moral attitude as untenable; it is not the kind of attitude that might be expected from a reasonable person – a person governed by reason – if consistency, or at least the attempt to avoid incoherence, is a condition of having reason. A person committed to the moral law, Kant argues, must assume the proposition ‘God exists’ to be among the guiding principles of her practical reason if her moral thinking “is to be consistent” (*KU* 5:451n.) – that is, if she wants to avoid the embarrassing

²⁶ Cf. Brandt 2007: 486–7.

²⁷ Cf. Willaschek 2010: 192–3.

²⁸ Cf. Audi 2011: 7–8.

situation of holding two incompatible beliefs, namely that the moral law imposes upon her a final end as a duty, and that the world in which that final end should become real is such that its realization is impossible (cf. *KU* 5:458).

Actually, the situation of the righteous atheist, as Kant depicts it, is rather paradoxical. As a well-intentioned person who conforms to the moral law, she has the final end in view and aims at it in her moral conduct. However, to the extent that she is convinced that God does not exist, hers is a standpoint from which it is impossible rationally to conceive of the attainability of the highest good – that is, of the aim pursued in moral actions, the possibility of which she might already doubt on the basis of a consideration of the injustice of the world and the contingent way in which events harmonize with that end. Consequently, as Kant has already noted, she should refrain from consciously aiming at it. Why shouldn't we make this move and settle for a more modest aim?

This appears to be a possible (and also rational) move. However, it is worth recalling that the highest good is not really a particular state of affairs that we can make the end of our actions, as we do with other objects. As an object of the practical power of reflecting judgment, it is somehow the unifying aim of our moral life and, furthermore, the aim which also gives expression to our sense of justice, namely to the feeling that “it could not in the end make no difference if a person has conducted himself honestly or falsely, fairly or violently” (*KU* 5:458).

Though Kant's doubt about the Spinoza-like moral attitude may have a pragmatic ground,²⁹ I am inclined to think that it is deeply related to this feeling. Kant might have viewed a Spinoza-like moral attitude as untenable because it requires us to give up the idea, deeply connected to our reflection “on right and wrong”, of an “inner vocation” of our mind. In fact, if the “ordinary course of the world” is regarded “as the only order of things”, it is hard to reconcile that vocation with an “outcome” of unrewarded virtue and unpunished wrongdoing. Kant is convinced that reason resists this view, and the way it “straightened out” that “irregularity” and “thought up” a principle of the possibility of the unification of nature with the “inner moral law” of human beings was the representation of a “supreme cause ruling the world in accordance with moral laws” (*KU* 5:458).

Kant thinks that his moral proof simply offers a logical articulation of an argument laid down “in the human faculty of reason” (*KU* 5:458), which suggests that, in his view, it may be difficult for a person committed to morality to make

²⁹ Kant could have thought that, since we are not pure moral beings but embodied moral beings, giving up the final end as impossible would inevitably weaken the moral disposition. In Kant's view, given the kind of beings we are and the nature of our reason, faith that God exists has a “reactive relationship” (Insole 2008: 350) with our sense of obligation and moral motivation. On this cf. also Pasternack 2014: 52–4.

ethical sense of herself and of the world without assuming “an author and ruler of the world who is at the same time a moral legislator” (*KU* 5:455), namely a God, or without at least articulating her worldview in religious language. Kant seems to think that the set of beliefs of a righteous person should also include the belief that God exists. But is he really thinking of what we now call a belief in this case? Beliefs are a kind of cognitive commitment and are truth-valued. I propose that Kant is presumably thinking of what we could more appropriately consider a kind of faith: a faith that has a cognitive or propositional content, to be sure, but one that does not entail belief. With regard to this, it is revealing that Kant qualifies as subjective the necessity of assenting to the conclusion of the moral proof.

4 Moral Proof, Belief, and Faith

As we have seen, Kant claims that his moral argument for the existence of God cannot prove to the doubter that there is a God. To emphasize that this argument has a limited kind of validity, he repeatedly points out that the reality of God is “adequately established merely for the practical use of our reason” or “for the practical power of reflecting judgment” (*KU* 5:456). Kant therefore makes clear that the moral proof establishes the existence of God from a practical point of view only, namely, as he explains, “in order to form a concept of at least the possibility of the final end” that is prescribed to us by morality (*KU* 5:453). He also hints at the fact that such an assumption, made in the interest of consistent moral thinking, does not determine anything with regard to the existence of God from a theoretical point of view. The moral proof is not a performance of the determining power of judgment, and the ground that it provides for the conclusion that God exists, though it affords us something necessary for comprehension, has a *non-epistemic* character; that is, it does not directly indicate that this conclusion is true.

This is made clear by Kant’s claim that his argument “proves the existence of God only as a matter of faith [als Glaubenssache] for practical pure reason” (*KU* 5:475). Faith (*Glaube*) is a kind of “holding-for-true” that he qualifies as assent to a content that is only subjectively sufficient and at the same time held to be objectively insufficient (cf. *KrV* A822/B850). To approximate, in Kant’s view a subject’s assent to a proposition is objectively sufficient if and only if the subject has sufficient objective grounds for assent, namely, grounds that provide evidence based on experience or on reason about the object of the proposition (cf. *Logik* 9:70). On the contrary, the ground relevant to faith is non-epistemic. Faith is assent to a proposition that is only subjectively sufficient, that is,

based on a ground that has sufficient non-epistemic merit for the subject who assents to the proposition.³⁰

Therefore, by claiming that his moral argument proves the existence of God only as a matter of faith, Kant states that it offers only a subjectively sufficient ground for assenting to the existence of God. If he might still call it a “proof”, it is because, offering such a ground with regard to an aim in accordance with the moral law, it can count as subjectively sufficient for *every* moral agent (cf. *KU* 5:451), and, as such, it might make “a sufficient claim of moral conviction” – that is, conviction from the point of view of the interests of each subject committed to the moral law (*KU* 5:463). It is in this sense, and not in any idiosyncratic sense of the word ‘subjective’, that the moral proof “is a *subjective* argument” (*KU* 5:451), which incidentally means that such a qualification does not deprive the belief/faith that God exists of objectivity. It is objective, at least, in the broader sense of ‘objective’ that, as Andrew Chignell points out, “applies to any assent that is rationally acceptable for someone in the assenting subject’s position”.³¹

In the light of these considerations, it might be argued that, though the moral proof does not offer evidence for the existence of God, it nevertheless establishes the rational acceptability of the belief that God exists. It does this by showing that, for everyone who is committed to the demands of the moral law and is interested in having a coherent moral self-understanding, assenting to the proposition that God exists has the non-epistemic value of allowing him or her to avoid a sense of practical incoherence.³² This incoherence can take the form of a chasm in the use of reason between the practical necessity of the highest good and the epistemic impossibility of reason’s representing morality and happiness as both connected by merely natural causes and adequate to the idea of that final end.

With regard to this, there is still another point I wish to mention. In enumerating the final end as a commanded effect among the matters of faith (*res fidei*) (cf. *KU* 5:469–71), Kant states that faith (*Glaube*) “(simply so called) is trust [ein Vertrauen] in the attainment of an aim the promotion of which is a duty but the possibility of the realization of which it is not possible for us to have insight into” (*KU* 5:472). Trust

30 I have followed Chignell 2007 both in characterizing objective sufficiency (cf. Chignell 2007: 328) and in using ‘merit’ to designate a property of assent “that makes it valuable or desirable for a particular subject given his or her goals, interests, and needs” (Chignell 2007: 333). On the epistemic standing of belief/faith cf. also Ameriks 2008.

31 Chignell 2007: 337. Obviously, the grounds that justify faith that God exists are subjective (and not objective) because, though they are valid for every moral being, “they still do not provide insight into reality” (Beiser 2006: 609).

32 Cf. Chignell 2007: 333–4.

is an important element in faith. We cannot have faith in something we do not trust, but we may have faith that something is so while doubting it to a degree that prevents us from believing that it is so. Usually, the closer we are to being sure that something is so, the less appropriate it is to say ‘I trust that’.³³ Kant speaks of “trusting the promise of the moral law”. However, he does not mean that the moral law itself somehow contains a promise. Rather, it is the moral subject that ‘put the promise’ into the law on the grounds that a final end cannot be commanded by any law of reason “without reason simultaneously promising its attainability” (*KU* 5:471n.). The trust Kant speaks about is primarily trust in reason itself (cf. *Logik* 9:69n.). The way reason promises the attainability of the highest good is by permitting assent to the only conditions under which it can conceive of it, namely the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

If this is correct, then to have faith that God exists is to trust reason itself and its coherence. The fiducial element present in faith, emphasized by Kant’s equation of faith with trust, is above all a trust in reason. Therefore, faith that God exists is not only rational but also consonant with reason. And this is what the moral proof ultimately shows.

5 Conclusion: Faith, Belief, Acceptance

In this paper, I have considered the context, aim, and reach of the moral proof of the existence of God as formulated by Kant in §87 of the *Critique of Judgment*. We have seen that Kant’s moral proof offers a ground for a subjectively sufficient holding-for-true of the proposition that God exists. What Kant does, in a sense, is to put in the form of an argument the idea that, if we do not assent to this proposition, it may be hard for us to conceive of ourselves as rational agents self-consciously committed to the end imposed on us by the moral law. To Kant, there is apparently no other way for our reason to conceive of a constitution of the world which corresponds to the final end imposed upon us by the moral law than to turn to the idea of a moral author of the world. Therefore, he thinks that we must believe that God exists if we are to be consistent in our self-conscious commitment to the moral law. Such a faith plays what could be called a “sense-conferring” role in our life.³⁴

The strength of Kant’s moral proof is clearly at one with the epistemic fact that all other possibilities for conceiving of the attainability of the highest good seem out

³³ On trust and faith, cf. Audi 2011: 71–2.

³⁴ Cf. on this Moore 2003: 164.

of reach for our reflecting judgment. However, our apparently having no alternative but to affirm that God exists when it comes to conceiving of the attainability of the highest good does not entail the truth of the proposition ‘God exists’. As Moore observes, it might be that the absence of alternatives prevents us from converting into agnosticism the recognition that the truth of that proposition is theoretically indeterminate,³⁵ but the possibility that it is false remains. According to the interpretation suggested in this paper, the moral proof, as a subjective argument, is not an argument for the truth of the belief that God exists. It does not help us to close the gap between our having to assent to the proposition that God exists and the truth of the assertion of His existence.

In Kant’s view, this does not affect the rationality of the holding-for-true grounded by the moral argument. The attitude here is that of moral faith rather than knowledge; therefore, the justification for the assent is different in kind from that required by knowledge. Kant claims the rationality of a theistic worldview without presupposing its truth. That God exists is not an incoherent thing for us to believe (in the Kantian sense), and this not only because ‘God exists’ is a logically possible proposition that we cannot theoretically refute. Rather, the point is that, for a subject committed to morality, belief in God may have non-epistemic merit since such a belief plays a role in her efforts at making sense (or a certain sense) of her engagement with the demands of practical reason. It is required by reason on pain of practical incoherence. Accordingly, although belief in God is not strongly justified, since the assent is only subjectively sufficient, it is nevertheless supported by reason. It has appropriate grounds: grounds for faith, that is, non-epistemic advantages, which by their nature do not dissolve theoretical uncertainty about the objective reality of the concept of God. Therefore, although it is rational, moral faith in God is compatible with a degree of doubt; “*dubietät* [Zweifelglaube]” (*KU* 5:472) can be reconciled with a positive attitude towards, or fiducial acceptance of, the proposition that God exists.³⁶

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³⁵ Cf. Moore 2003: 167.

³⁶ I am grateful to Carolyn Benson, Thomas Höwing and Wilhelm Vossenkuhl for comments that greatly helped me to improve my paper.

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