

**God, Kant, and the Transcendental Object:
an Investigation into the Kantian Critique
of the Ontological Argument**

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God, Kant, and the Transcendental Object: an Investigation into the Kantian Critique of the Ontological Argument¹

Immanuel Kant spent a good amount of time attempting to clarify the status of the terms 'God' and 'transcendental object' within the framework of his critical philosophy.² Since then sympathetic commentators have tended to accept his arguments against the possible validity of an ontological proof for the existence of God as conclusive while concurrently finding his statements about the ontological status of the transcendental object difficult to understand if intelligible at all.

I sympathize with their predicament, for I have come to believe that Kant's arguments against the possible validity of an ontological argument for the existence of God are equally devastating when brought to bear against his own conception of the ontological status of the transcendental object.

This essay, limited in length though it must be, is an investigation into the above possibility. It is my purpose neither to argue for the validity of an ontological proof for the existence of God nor to attempt a final clarification of the Kantian thing-in-itself. Rather, I shall contend that to the extent that the usage of the Kantian phrase 'transcendental object' is clear, to that extent Kant's arguments against the possible validity of an ontological proof for the existence of God must be invalid, for the method by which Kant established the ontological status of the transcendental object is strictly analogous to that by which a theological ontologist might wish to establish the existence of God. Either the possibility of establishing the existence of a transcendental object must be susceptible to a disproof such as Kant offered against the possibility of an ontological proof for the existence of God, or the latter must be seen as possessing the possibility of an equal claim to validity (at least within the critical limits of this discussion).

¹ I wish to thank Frederick Olafson and Donald Dunbar for offering comments and criticisms on earlier drafts of this essay. Citations to Kant by page reference within the text and footnotes are to Norman Kemp Smith's translation of *The Critique of Pure Reason* (London, England: Macmillan & Company, Ltd., 1963).

² Throughout this paper I shall use the terms 'transcendental object' and 'thing-in-itself' as being *extensionally* equivalent (that is, having as their common extension that unknowable "something" to which Kant refers loosely as the "cause" of those representations (appearances) in our mind. (Page 358). I do not wish to imply that they are *intensionally* equivalent either to Kant or to myself, but only that any intensional differences that exist between them are irrelevant to the concerns of this essay.

Kant on 'Judgments'

Judgments, to Kant, were either analytic or synthetic, and either a priori or a posteriori. An analytic judgment is a judgment of the subject-predicate form in which the "predicate B belongs to the subject A, as something which is (covertly) contained in this concept A".³ The predicate of such a judgment adds nothing to what has already been thought in the act of expressing the subject itself. The function of the predicate of such a judgment, therefore, is not to add anything to the content of the subject, but rather to draw into sharper focus some particular aspect of the content of the subject. A synthetic judgment, in contrast, is a judgment in which the "predicate B lies outside the concept A, although it does indeed stand in connection with it".⁴ If the predicate of a judgment affirms of the subject something not thought in the act of expressing the subject, no analysis of the content of the subject itself could possibly yield the predicate. The predicate of a synthetic judgment, therefore, adds something to the content of the subject. To use Kant's own paradigm examples, the judgment 'All bodies are extended' is analytic, while the judgment 'All bodies are heavy' is synthetic.

An a priori judgment is a judgment whose truth can be known independently of experience. Such a priori knowledge is to be understood "not [as] knowledge independent of this or that experience, but knowledge absolutely independent of all experience".⁵ In contrast to this type of judgment are those judgments giving empirical knowledge "which is knowledge possible only a posteriori, that is, through experience".⁶ As convenient examples, 'All bachelors are unmarried men' would be a priori, while 'All bachelors are unhappy' would be a posteriori. The truth of the former judgment is dependent solely upon the meanings of its subject and predicate apart from any examination of the nature of the empirical world; the truth of the latter judgment is dependent upon just such an examination. (Or put another way, the truth of the former judgment entails the truth of no other empirical judgment [no other judgment, that is, concerning sensible experience], but is dependent solely upon either the truth of the judgments which constitute the definitions of its subject and predicate, or upon the truth of other a priori judgments. The truth of the latter judgment, in contrast, entails the truth of at least one other empirical judgment, namely 'At least one bachelor exists'.) Kant does give an empirical criterion by which to distinguish between a priori and a posteriori judgments: if a judgment is "thought as necessary", it is a priori.⁷ As the

³ Page 48.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Page 43.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

definition of 'a priori judgment' is not expressed in terms of this criterion, however, the judgment that 'All and only a priori judgments are thought as necessary' is itself empirical and non-a priori. Not wishing to become involved in the complexities of a non-necessary criterion based upon the concept of necessity, therefore, I shall disregard the criterion as non-essential to this discussion and accept Kant's definition of 'a priori judgment' as sufficiently clear for my purposes.

Given the above distinctions, an arbitrary judgment may at first glance appear to be potentially classifiable in one of four ways, analytic a priori, analytic a posteriori, synthetic a priori, or synthetic a posteriori. Kant, however, assures us that the second classification may be taken as empty,

. . . for it would be absurd to found an analytic judgment on experience. Since, in framing the judgment, I must not go outside my concept, there is no need to appeal to the testimony of experience in its support.⁸

I pose a question, however, to which I shall return later: If the concept of the subject of an analytic judgment includes the concept of 'experience' as part of its definiens, is this not in effect 'appealing to the testimony of experience in its support'? In short, if a subject of an analytic judgment is defined in terms of 'experience' itself, must we not call the judgment a posteriori (remembering that an a priori judgment is 'absolutely independent of *all* experience [italics EWC]')? One would not expect, of course, to find many subjects so defined. But as I shall contend below, perhaps the vagueness and consequent unclarity of the terms 'transcendental object' and 'God' are due precisely to such a definitional quirk. Perhaps an analytic judgment with either term as subject is a posteriori by definition.

How could this be so? and, if so, consequence? Let's look in turn, albeit summarily, at Kant's positions with regard to the 'transcendental object' and to the ontological proof for the existence of God.

Kant on the 'Transcendental Object'

All knowledge, to Kant, begins with experience, but our experience consists of representations. Representations, in turn, are representations either of other representations or of sensible appearances. But, by definition, an appearance is that which we experience through intuition of "something" that appears.

⁸ Page 49

Appearances are the sole objects which can be given to us immediately, and that in them which relates immediately to the object is called intuition. But these appearances are not things in themselves; they are only representations, which in turn have their object – and object which cannot itself be intuited by us, and which may, therefore, be named the non-empirical, that is, transcendental object = x.⁹

The transcendental object = x contains no determinate intuition, and is, as Kant himself insists, absolutely unknowable.

The object to which I relate appearance in general is the transcendental object, that is, the completely indeterminate thought of *something* in general. This cannot be entitled the *noumenon*; for I know nothing of what it is in itself, and have no concept of it save as merely the object of a sensible intuition in general, and so as being one and the same for all appearances.¹⁰

Yet, by 'unknowable', it is clear that Kant does not mean that the *existence* of the transcendental object is in doubt! Rather, I cannot know *what* it is, although I can be assured *that* it is. "Appearances are only representations of things which are unknown *as regards what they may be in themselves* [italics EWC]."¹¹ Indeed, to deny the existence of the transcendental object would be to distort the meaning of the word 'appearance', for by appearance Kant meant that element of sensible intuition viewed as 'receptivity' which has the transcendental object as its 'ground'.

. . . the same conclusion also, of course, follows from the concept of an appearance in general; namely, that something which is not in itself appearance must correspond to it. For appearance can be nothing by itself, outside our mode of representation. Unless, therefore, we are to move constantly in a circle, the word appearance must be recognized as already indicating a relation to something, the immediate representation of which is, indeed, sensible, but which, even apart from the constitution of our sensibility (upon which the form of our intuition is grounded), must be something in itself, that is, an object independent of sensibility.¹²

⁹ Page 137.

¹⁰ Page 271.

¹¹ Page 173.

¹² Pages 269-270.

Neither the *transcendental object* which underlies outer appearances nor that which underlies inner intuition, is itself either matter or a thinking being, but a ground (to us unknown) of the appearances which supply to us the empirical concept of the former as of the latter mode of existence.¹³

To deny the existence of the transcendental object, therefore, would also be a distortion of the meaning of 'sensible intuition' viewed as 'receptivity' and of the meaning of 'transcendental object' itself.

The faculty of sensible intuition is strictly only a receptivity, a capacity of being affected in a certain manner with representations. We may, however, entitle the purely intelligible cause of appearances in general the transcendental object, but merely in order to have something corresponding to sensibility viewed as receptivity.¹⁴

Any phenomenalist interpretation of Kant, therefore, must stop at precisely this point. For Kant was as concerned that his theory of knowledge be non – Humean as non-Leibnizean. The seeds of Kant's experiential world did not consist of 'impressions' defined solipsistically. Rather, they consisted of 'appearances' that were *defined* as that aspect of the thing-in-itself that we experience through sensible intuition. In Kant's view, therefore, we can offer by definition only one predicate of the thing-in-itself.

(1) the thing-in itself is that which gives rise to the appearances that we experience.

Another predicate, however, is entailed directly.

(2) Consequently, the thing-in-itself exists, for appearances – as the basic constituents of experience – exist.

We shall occasion to ponder (2) at greater length within the penultimate section of this essay ('The Alternatives').

(Note: I have not claimed that the Kantian thing-in-itself is either conceptually non-vacuous nor philosophically justifiable in any way. I am simply asserting that Kant intentionally defined 'appearance' in such a way that the concept 'thing-in-itself' is thereby entailed. To look upon 'appearances' in a Humean fashion is to distort that which Kant intended to mean. And, although Hume's view may ultimately prove to be more correct than Kant's in regard to the actual ontological situation of the physical

¹³ Page 352.

¹⁴ Page 441.

world (whatever that may mean), this is not the question under consideration. I wish to examine two of Kant's own positions, using Hume only as a useful philosophical foil.)

Kant on the Ontological Proof for the Existence of God

Kant's criticism of the arguments in support of an ontological proof for the existence of God is much simpler to understand than the proofs themselves. He begins by agreeing that a definition of 'necessary existence' is possible and indeed that it can be given with no great difficulty.

There is, of course, no difficulty in giving a verbal definition of the concept, namely, that it is something the non-existence of which is impossible.¹⁵

Earlier Kant had accepted as sufficiently determined a concept of the transcendental object as 'unknowable' whose content consisted solely of the predicate definition 'that which is the ground of appearance'. But in the case of the concepts 'necessary existence' and 'God', Kant is dissatisfied. The definition of 'necessary existence'

. . . yields no insight into the conditions which make it necessary to regard the non-existence of a thing as absolutely unthinkable. It is precisely these conditions that we desire to know, in order that we may determine whether or not, in resorting to this concept, we are thinking anything at all.¹⁶

To Kant, a concept of 'God' defined as 'that which necessarily exists' is empty,

. . . for I cannot form the least concept of a thing which, should it be rejected with all its predicates, leaves behind a contradiction; and in the absence of contradiction I have, through pure a priori concepts alone, no criterion of impossibility.¹⁷

For either the predicate of a judgment adds something to the subject, and hence no contradiction can result in denying the predicate, or else the predicate is contained in the subject, and 'the assertion is a mere tautology'.¹⁸

¹⁵ Page 501.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Page 503.

¹⁸ Page 504.

We must ask: Is the proposition that *this or that thing* (which, whatever it may be, is allowed as possible) exists, an analytic or a synthetic proposition? If it is analytic, the assertion of the existence of the thing adds nothing to the thought of the thing; but in that case either the thought, which is in us, is the thing itself, or we have presupposed an existence as belonging to the realm of the possible, and have then, on that pretext, inferred its existence from its internal possibility – which is nothing but a miserable tautology.¹⁹

Thus, the problem of using 'existence' as a predicate is not a problem concerning analytic judgments, but only synthetic judgments, and one is being 'unreasonable' if one holds a contrary view.

But if, on the other hand, we admit, as every reasonable person must, that all existential propositions are synthetic, how can we profess to maintain that the predicate of existence cannot be rejected without contradiction? This is a feature which is found only in analytic propositions, and is indeed precisely what constitutes their analytic character.²⁰

Having ostensibly excluded the possibility that the judgment 'God exists' is analytic, Kant then proceeds to show that existence cannot be employed as a *real* predicate within a synthetic judgment.

I shall not be concerned with Kant's latter observations concerning the usage of 'exists' as a predicate within synthetic judgments, interesting though they may be, for I can make no sense at all of the traditional ontological argument if the judgment 'God exists' is taken to be synthetic – and I believe that neither Anselm nor Descartes would have understood, either. The question therefore becomes: has Kant succeeded in showing that a 'miserable tautology' cannot serve those ends to which the ontological proof is directed? Again I must remind the reader that I am not now concerned with the conclusions of Kant's arguments against the proof itself from a neutral philosophical position. Rather, I wish to determine the limits of that which Kant can claim to have shown from within the framework of that system within which he also claimed to have sufficiently established the ontological status of the transcendental object. If the judgment 'God exists' can be established in an identical fashion to that by which the judgment 'The transcendental object exists' was established by Kant, then I believe either that Kant's arguments against the possible validity of an ontological proof for the existence of God must be seen as inconclusive, or else that the concept of the transcendental object must be seen as vacuous and the Kantian philosophy viewed as

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

strictly phenomenalist.²¹ In the following section of this paper I shall sketch the design of such an argument, using Kant's own definitions and method, in the hope of demonstrating that one or the other of the above alternatives must be taken to be the case.

The Alternatives

Within the Kantian system, "all knowledge begins with experience".²² Kant was, of course, principally interested in establishing the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments, but such judgments could not be said to be objective (that is, true of the experiential world) unless conforming to the appearances and representations that constitute our experience. (And, of course, it was Kant's favorite method of establishing the *categorical* status of a judgment to withdraw from experience all extraneous elements, leaving behind only those which he could then consider necessary to the possibility of experience in general.)

Within the Kantian system, therefore, the judgment 'I have experiences' may be taken to be analytic, for the concept 'I' (whether empirical or transcendental) cannot be thought except as a representation, and a representation is a constituent of my experience.²³ Earlier I remarked that Kant defined an 'a priori judgment' as a judgment whose truth was "not . . . independent of this or that experience, but . . . absolutely independent of all experience".²⁴ I do not understand, therefore, how the judgment 'I have experiences' could be said to be true 'absolutely independent of all experience', even if taken to be analytic, for the meaning of 'experience' itself is involved and hence dependence upon the content of at least experience-in-general seems to be inescapable.

I believe therefore that the truth of the judgment 'I have experiences' is fundamental to the Kantian enterprise and is indeed *analytic a posteriori* by definition.

- (1) I have experiences. (experience [by definition being] = that which I have)

²¹ Although Kant, of course, never used the sentence 'The transcendental object exists', I do not believe that I am distorting his position by using it. I am using 'exists' with precisely the same meaning that Kant intended when he remarked "There can be no question that I am conscious of my representations; these representations and I myself, who have the representations, therefore exist." (Page 356).

²² Page 41.

²³ See, for example Kant's extended note to the Preface to the Second Edition of the first *Critique*, reproduced on pages 34-36.

²⁴ Page 43.

It should now be noted that any analytic judgment entailed by (1) is likewise a posteriori by definition.

As indicated earlier, Kant looked upon experience as consisting of representations either of sensible appearances or of other representations, the former being the fundamental building-blocks of all experience as intuited through the sensible intuition viewed as receptivity. But the word 'appearance' was selected by Kant for a specific reason: its meaning entails 'something' that *appears*. Thus we have (2) by definition.

(2) appearances = [by definition being]

- (a) the fundamental constituents of experience; and
- (b) that of which the transcendental object is the ground.

By (1) and (2), therefore, the analytic a posteriori judgment (3) is entailed.

(3) The transcendental object exists. (or, 'There is a transcendental object')

Briefly summarized, if I have experiences consisting partially of appearances, and appearances entail by definition the existence of "something" that appears, then, if the "something" is by definition called 'transcendental object', the latter exists. (It must be remembered that Kant himself insisted that the only characteristic predicable of the thing-in-itself was its own definiens, but that this was sufficient to establish the concept as non-vacuous.)

I shall now specify an ontological proof for the existence of God. Since Kant remarked, "there can be no doubt that I am conscious of my representations",²⁵ I shall define 'consciousness', following Kant but with a slight addition of my own, as follows:

(4) consciousness = [by definition]

- (a) that in virtue of which experience is possible; and
- (b) that of whose possibility God is the ground.

[Note: 'God' is being defined *solely* as 'the ground of the possibility of consciousness'.]

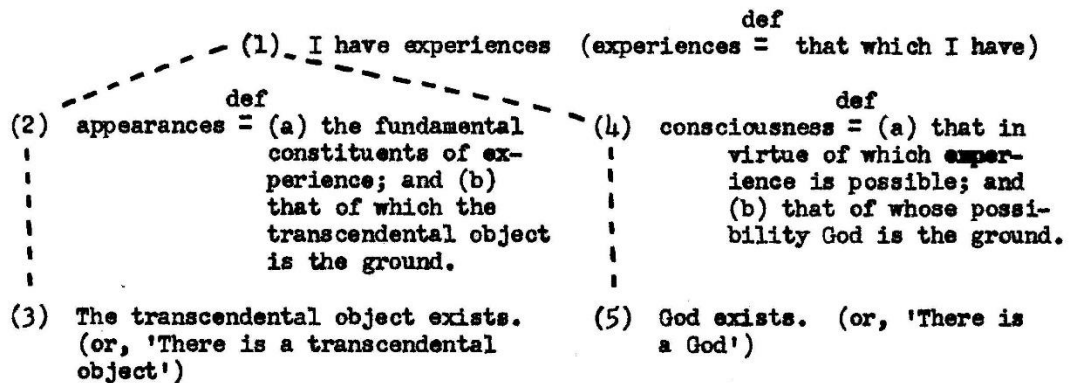
²⁵ Page 346.

(1) and (4), then, entail the analytic a posteriori judgment (5).

(5) God exists. (or, 'There is a God')

Briefly summarized, if I could not have experiences without being conscious, and I do have experiences, then, if being conscious is impossible without the presence of God by definition, the latter exists.

I make no claim, of course, that the God whose existence has been proven should be worshipped, feared, or indeed said to possess any other predicates than those defined. I have only claimed, as did Kant with the transcendental object, that the single characteristic predicable of the object is its own definiens, and that this is sufficient in the same sense and to the same degree to establish the concept as non-vacuous. The two proofs offered above are, I believe, strictly parallel in structure and method.



As with judgment (1), judgments (3) and (5) are most precisely characterized as being *analytic a posteriori*. They are a posteriori, for they depend for their truth upon the meaning of 'experience' itself. They are analytic, and hence necessarily true, for they are derived solely from a definition and a single analytic judgment in each respective case. In keeping with tradition, therefore, the God of (5) is an entity whose non-existence is strictly unthinkable. The proof is hence an 'ontological' demonstration in the classical sense.

Conclusion

I did not wish in this essay to argue either for the clarity or unclarity of the concepts of the Kantian 'transcendental object' and of 'God', or for their acceptability or unacceptability as philosophical tools or theological entities. Rather, I wished to demonstrate that the concept of 'God' as employed in an ontological proof could not be dismissed by Kant as being either vacuous or pertaining to nothing existing, unless he were also willing to place his own system of philosophy within the category of pure Humean phenomenalism.

I am well aware that the intricacies of the Kantian philosophy are many and varied, and that one must tread critically with great caution. The basic contention of this paper, however, arose out of a deepening sense of perplexity: I found myself unable to understand the Kantian 'transcendental object' except as a term contained within a 'miserable tautology' – which is precisely why Kant rejected the proposed analyticity of the judgment 'God exists' as being based upon a misunderstanding. Perhaps the confusion is mine alone; but, God and Kant for- give me, I don't think so.