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## The Idea of God in Kantian Philosophy

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### Abstract

The issue of existence and justification of the Supreme Being is constantly approached by Immanuel Kant in his entire work. For Kant, the ultimate goal of the nature created by God is man as a moral being: the world was created according to man's moral needs. This is why it is said that, after Kant, teleology leads to a moral theology, one that is not about the possibility of proving rationally God's existence but which is about stating that moral life is possible only if God exists. Under these circumstances, though the "idea of God" is presupposed in most Kantian works, we insist, below, particularly on what is debated when appealing to *practical reason*. In the theoretical philosophy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the idea of God as Unconditioned, as a being that is absolutely necessary, is seen as a transcendental ideal determined through an idea as a prototype of perfection necessary to everything that is contingent and determined in our sensible world: what we can do to conciliate sensible experience with the Absolute Being is to presuppose an extra-phenomenal reality designated as transcendental object: we presuppose its existence but we cannot get to know it. Later, in *Critique of Practical Reason*, God is postulated (together with *soul's immortality*) as a condition of the supreme value of moral life, the *Sovereign Good* (union of virtue with happiness). Since in the sensible world moral conduct does not warrant proportional happiness, the virtuous ones have strong reasons to believe in the reparatory intervention of a superior power: God, as moral ideal and warranty of moral order. "Morality leads, inevitably, to religion, through which it (morality) extends over a moral Lawgiver" claims Kant. Under these conditions, religion, understood as the belief in the existence of a supreme Lawgiver, has, for Kant, an exclusively moral substance. In the last part of the present study we insist on the work *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, we attempt at arguing the possibility of discovering some elements of "philosophical Christology" in Kant's practical philosophy: first, because, for the philosopher of Königsberg, Christian doctrine provides the only concept of *Sovereign Good* that meets the exigencies of practical reason; and second, because we consider significant Kant's debates on *God's Son as impersonated idea of the Good*, the *Perfect Man well-pleasing to God*, *Moral Personality*, noumenal archetype originating in mankind, etc.

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The issue of existence and justification of the Supreme Being is constantly approached by Immanuel Kant in his entire work. For Kant, the ultimate goal of the nature created by God is man as a moral being: the world was created according to man's moral needs. This is why it is said that, after Kant, teleology leads to a moral theology, one that is not about the possibility of proving rationally God's existence but which is about stating that moral life is possible only if God exists. Under these circumstances, though the "idea of God" is presupposed in most Kantian works, we insist, below, particularly on what is debated when appealing to practical reason.

In the theoretical philosophy of the Critique of Pure Reason, the idea of God triggers reason through a few major themes: antinomies of pure reason, the theme of transcendental ideal and then the possibility of thinking transcendental ideas that name the unconditioned, the significance of the transcendental object and the transcendental argument. In the thesis of the fourth antinomy of pure reason, God is seen as a being that is absolutely necessary, unconditioned, thinkable, a being that faces the sensible world, the only world that can be investigated. Advancing in the cognitive process, the unconditioned appears as a transcendental ideal, a case in which "God is, for the individual humans who are imperfect, the ideal or the prototype of perfection with which humans compare themselves in knowledge and action. Though, comparing, we can generally operate a few corrections, human beings are aware of the fact that they will be never able to reach – in knowledge and action – the ideal of perfection represented by the Absolute Being." [Croitoru, 10]. Then, taking into account the so-called "dialectic reasoning of pure reason" in connection with the ultimate principles of reason, i.e. with transcendental ideas (psychological idea, cosmological idea, and theological idea), Kant mentions that reason, in its attempt to cover the entire world, makes connections in accordance with the principle of the systematic unity which makes us act as if everything originated in an Absolute Being acting as supreme and self-sufficient cause. This is what Kant himself says: "Now, although we must say of the transcendental conceptions of reason, 'they are only ideas', we must not, on this account, look upon them as superfluous and nugatory. For although no object can be determined by them, they can be of great utility, unobserved and at the basis of the edifice of the understanding, as the canon for its extended and self-consistent exercise – a canon which, indeed, does not enable it to cognize more in an object than it would cognize by the help of its own conceptions, but which guides it more securely in its cognition. Not to mention that they perhaps render possible a transition from our conceptions of nature and the non-ego to the practical conceptions, and thus produce for even ethical ideas keeping, so to speak, and connection with the speculative cognitions of reason. The explanation of all this must be looked for in the sequel." [Kant: 2010, 227]. It is only that we cannot reach the Absolute Being through experience knowledge alone: what we can do to conciliate sensible experience and God is to presuppose an extra-phenomenal reality designated as transcendental object of which we cannot say what it is in itself. We need to mention that, for Kant, transcendental object has an objective meaning: it is established by consciousness so that the world is not a simple world of representations without objective substratum. Deducing the unconditioned necessary existence from the insufficiency of the contingent existence is called transcendental argument. According to its Kantian significance, the principles of reason and, hence, the idea of God, are true since systematic knowledge of nature is possible, necessarily and univoquely, only if we admit them. "The following is, therefore, the natural course of human reason. It begins by persuading itself of the existence of some necessary being. In this being, it recognizes the characteristics of unconditioned existence. It then seeks the conception of that which is independent of all other things – in other words, in that which contains all reality. But the unlimited all is an absolute unity, and is conceived by the mind as a being one and supreme; and thus reason concludes that the Supreme Being, as the primal basis of all things, possesses an existence which is absolutely necessary." [Kant: 2010, 342].

It is at this level of discussion that intervenes Kant's critique of rational theology, deist theology that turns the transcendental ideal into a real object, particularly through the so-called "ontological argument." For the German philosopher, the ontological argument of God's existence consists in the passage from the concept of perfect being to its existence. Descartes had already said that God, as a perfect being, existed necessarily because the idea of perfect being also contains the attribute of existence. Kant shows that the ontological argument does not go beyond the strictly logical framework. The perfect being can be thought of because it does not involve any contradiction, but the logical possibility is not the real one. The latter involves the agreement with the conditions of being which differ from the conditions of thinking. Second, existence is not a simple predicate, a concept contained within other concepts. Then, Kant considers we can think of a relationship between concept and existence in two ways: analytically and synthetically. In the first one, existence is deduced from the concept as part of an entity, a situation

in which existence has the same nature as the concept. The concept exists only in the man's spirit, hence the existence resulting from it is purely ideal, an "idea of existence", not existence itself. In the second one, we can, of course, think of existence as an addition to the concept following a synthetic relationship. There is, in the human spirit, a faculty that allows a relationship between things that are absolutely heterogeneous. This is how experience is born. However, says Kant, admitting a synthetic relationship between the concept of perfect being and its effective existence is impossible because the perfect, absolute being would cease to be as such. The weakness of rational arguments concerning God's existence does not prove, according to Kant, its inexistence. The only valid conclusion to draw here is that the existence of the Supreme Being is beyond the power of human reason. Human reason cannot prove God's existence but – this is not less important – it cannot prove its inexistence either. To also note that pointing out the illusory character of deist arguments does not mean giving up the project of a religion based on reason.

In the third antinomy of the pure reason, one that can be solved, says Kant, through the distinction between phenomenon and object itself, the philosopher opens a path between theoretical reason and practical reason through causality: the thesis of this antinomy is "there is causality through freedom in the world!" It is through such causality through freedom that man becomes a being belonging to two worlds: a world of phenomena with its specific features and supposing natural causality, and a world of noumena considered only possible so far, since, as a rational being, it belongs to the intelligible world, i.e. to the realm of freedom. In *Critique of Practical Reason*, God faces no longer human intellect whose imperfection counteracts it, but human reason that acts through will. Man's will should be able to face antinomic tendencies towards moral law enforced by reason, on one side, and the happiness desired by sensibility, on the other side, which is impossible to do by man through his own forces. Under these conditions, Kant invokes the idea of Sovereign Good that human will should follow as supreme value of moral life. Since Sovereign Good is understood as a synthesis of virtue and happiness, and their premises are God's existence and soul's immortality, Kant postulates them so that "In this manner, the moral laws lead through the conception of the summum bonum as the object and final end of pure practical reason to religion, that is, to the recognition of all duties as divine commands, not as sanctions, that is to say, arbitrary ordinances of a foreign and contingent in themselves, but as essential laws of every free will in itself, which, nevertheless, must be regarded as commands of the Supreme Being, because it is only from a morally perfect (holy and good) and at the same time all-powerful will, and consequently only through harmony with this will, that we can hope to attain the summum bonum which the moral law makes it our duty to take as the object of our endeavours." [Kant: 2011, 133]. But we need to mention that the necessity of postulating God's existence as intelligence and will at the same time, as cause of the nature and of the possibility of the Sovereign Good is only subjective, meant to maintain the hope for union of virtue and happiness: if we act as well as we can, we can hope what we cannot do will come from somewhere else no matter if we know or not how. For it to be an objective necessity, it should be given as a duty, which is impossible. It is a subjective necessity since he who follows the moral law and acts more and more because it is his duty wishes (and deserves) to be happy. Or, as it is known, in the sensible world, moral conduct does not warrant proportional happiness. This is why virtuous people have the strongest reasons to believe in reparatory interventions from a superior power. This power should be omniscient to avoid mistaking everybody's right to happiness, omnipotent to be able to distribute happiness proportionally and constantly, and sacred to be able to do that without mistakes. We are, thus, lead towards the idea of a Supreme Being as a moral ideal and warranty of moral order. "Morality thus leads ineluctably to religion, through which it extends itself to the idea of a powerful moral Lawgiver, outside of mankind, for Whose will that is the final end (of creation) which at the same time can and ought to be man's final end." [Kant: 1960, 14]. Christian doctrine, says Kant, even when not considered a doctrine based on revelation but a moral doctrine, provides the only concept of "sovereign good" that meets the exigency of practical reason: its name of God's Kingdom. Thus, the moral law of duty leads, through the concept of sovereign good, to religion, where duties are acknowledged as divine orders.

Religion, in a Kantian context, has an exclusively moral substance. He who follows moral imperatives only to be rewarded and for fear of penalty in afterlife is not a moral subject for Kant. Since God's will is determined by moral law alone, acting against His will is acting according to the prescriptions of pure practical reason through categorical imperatives. This is the meaning of characterising religion as acknowledgement of all our duties as divine orders. Opposed to what Kant calls "cultic religion", i.e. the religion where duty is seen as a man's duty to God and

the promise of never-ending happiness is seen as a reward for virtuous life on earth, in “pure moral religion” fulfilling one’s duty is a man’s duty to himself as rational being. We need to mention that the philosopher of Königsberg did not oppose happiness to strict observance of moral duties. Maintaining that moral philosophy should teach us not how to be happy but how to deserve happiness, Kant considers that, by doing one’s duty, man will not have to give up his natural goal, happiness: “according to my theory, the only goal of the Creator is neither man’s morality itself, nor happiness for itself, but the agreement of both.” [Kant: 1922].

In *Critique of Judgement* (1790), approaching the idea of goal as a regulating principle from the perspective of which one can understand world’s unity and harmony, Kant emphasises that the ultimate goal of the nature created by God is man as a moral being: the world was created to meet man’s moral needs. “Teleology leads, thus, to theology, to a moral theology (...) where we do not have to prove God’s existence rationally but to state that moral life is possible only if God exists.” [Colțescu, 141]. Due to moral laws, man is bound to aspire to a supreme universal goal: we can consider that we act in accordance with the final goal of a possible intelligent cause of the world, a cause that our practical reason can admit on moral grounds. This idea configures the moral argument of God’s existence according to which we need to admit a supreme cause of morality, God, to assume that, according to moral laws, there is an ultimate goal. As for invoking God as the “intelligent cause of the world”, we cannot support this by appealing to the intellect of a sensible-rational human being since it is the object of moral faith: “Faith (as *habitus*, not as *actus*) is reason’s moral way of thinking in the affirmation of that which is inaccessible for theoretical cognition. It is thus constant fundamental principle of the mind to assume as true that which it is necessary to presuppose as a condition for the possibility of the highest moral final end, on account of the obligation to that, although we can have no insight into its possibility or into its impossibility.” [Kant: 2000, 335-336].

In Kant’s next work, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), he emphasises strongly that religion without moral grounds would meet only its outer side (the one concerned with cultic activities) as well as morality without religious postulates could not provide the human being with the hope of moral finality. Here he also considers “reason religion” as nucleus of Christian tradition and the rest of the Scripture content as “support for the teaching of religion.” In the case of ecclesiastic faith contained by the Scripture, says Kant, only what God did to support human weakness is taken into account, while pure moral religion aims mainly at what we should do to deserve Divine help. We need to mention that, in this work, Kant strives to point out, in relation to Christian tradition, the meanings in harmony with the imperatives of moral laws. In fact, he considers the Bible as writing with a huge power of moral guidance. Referring to cultic-religious practices, Kant acknowledges, for instance, the prayer, if it helps consolidating moral convictions, but he rejects it if its goal is to accomplish selfish wishes. He also acknowledges the sacrament as a symbol of the unity of moral community, but he rejects it as warranty of salvage under priestly control. Kant also admits “Investigation into the inner nature of all kinds of faith which concern religion invariably encounters a mystery, i.e., something holy that may indeed be known by each single individual but cannot be made known publicly, that is, shared universally. Being something holy, it must be moral, and so an object of reason, and it must be capable of being known from within adequately for practical use, and yet, as something mysterious, not for theoretical use, since in this case it would have to be capable of being shared with everyone and made known publicly.” [Kant: 1960, 206]. Kant reiterates that, for us, God in Himself, how He accomplishes what He accomplishes and how He cooperates to our moral fulfillment is still a mystery; what matters here is to understand what God is to us as moral beings.

In everything that follows, we attempt to show that, in his work about religion, *The Personified Idea of the Good Principle*, Kant also suggests elements that could be ranged under philosophical Christology. In his philosophy of religion, Immanuel Kant interprets what results from the record of “ecclesiastic belief”, into the record of rational belief and of moral progress. The problem that appears is that of settling the idea of the “perfect man, beloved by God” (naming the Verb through which all things were created, the noumenal archetype, the human archetype in God, but also what is “present from origins in humanity”, “coming from Him”) with the one of the “descent” of the Son of God: “This union with us may therefore be regarded as a state of abasement Son of God, if we conceive of that divinely minded human being-an archetype for us-in the way in which he, although himself holy and as such not bound to endure sufferings, nonetheless takes these upon himself to the greatest extent in order to further the world’s greatest good (...).” [Kant: 2009, 67-68].

Kant names the moral Christian religion as “a disposition of the heart to respect all the humanly duties” – from the perspective of the relation with God -, refusing its understanding as a religion with doctrines and prescriptions. It

is affirmed here, unequivocally, the separation of his position from the dogmatic theology. “In the moral religion (and from all the known religions, only the Christian one deserves this name), there is a fundamental principle that each of us must do everything in our power to become better and only when man has used, to become better, the primitive disposition towards good, he is allowed to hope that a superior cooperation will fulfil what does not rest in his power (...). It is no essential for us, and thus not necessary, to know what God can do or what He has done for our salvation, but to know ourselves what we have to do to deserve His help” [Kant: 2009, 59]

How does the Son of God appear from the perspective of this “moral religion”? In the above-mentioned work, Kant proceeds by reasoning in two different directions that are not easy to settle. On the one hand, the Idea Christi is underlined, and has its base exclusively in reason (what Kant underlines repeatedly): the personified idea of Good, the idea of the perfect man, liked by God. This “archetype” is represented or symbolised in expressions of the religious language, like the Only Son of God, the Verb (from the prologue of evangelist John), the eternal Son; all being “monograms of reason” (Xavier Tilliette). We are dealing here, in fact, with a moral reinterpretation of the religious speculation. The Verb descends from the sky; He “took the face of humanity”, descending “into the point of suffering and death” and showing through this that perfection within Good asks efforts and any possible sacrifices. This symbolic-rational lecture sets aside the historical side of Christ’s embodiment. On the other hand, “the Lord of the Gospel”, “the wise founder of Christianity”, is also named “hero of an illuminating history”: He appeared at a certain point in history only that, for Kant, this historical point must be submitted to the universal criteria of morality not to history’s trial.

In harmony with John the evangelist, Kant underlines that Christ, is in God for eternity. “This human being alone pleasing to God, «is in God from eternity»; the idea of him emanates from God’s essence, he is to that extent not a created thing but God’s only begotten Son, ‘the Word through which all other things are, and without which nothing exists that has been made’ (Since for its sake, i.e., for that of the rational being in the word, as this being can be true according to its moral vocation, everything has been made)” [Kant: 2009, 66-67]. Besides, “in Him, God loved the world and only in Him and by adopting his attitudes can we hope ‘to become the sons of God’ (...)” The Son of God, “this man with divine intentions”, wanted to serve as a model for us, “descended from the sky to us, enveloping humankind” with all His true holiness. Many considerations of Kant refer to the patristic discourse regarding the “human face of God”, the “human archetype of the Son, from God”, or what Gregory of Nyssa understood by Christ – as “prototype for humanity”, humanity being considered itself a “Son of God”. Immanuel Kant insisted in liberating from the mystical shell the representation of the Son of God and to see in Him only the “ideal of the humanity liked by God”. For the philosopher of Königsberg, the noumenal archetype is placed, in the beginning, in humanity; and Jesus, as a messenger of God, “a person that came from heaven”, has the mission of reminding man exactly this thing: the archetype within “God-Himself” is actually the archetype within us “that forms a single practical idea”. This archetype functions, thus, as “an a priori from where, if we start, we can deduce transcendentally the destinies of man as a moral being.” [Xavier, 216].

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