

God as a Postulate of Morality in the Kantian System

Pintu Bhar*

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Abstract: *This research paper explores into Immanuel Kant's philosophical exploration of freedom, morality and the existence of God. Kant challenges traditional proofs for God's existence emphasising the practical value of the concept of God despite the lack of empirical evidence. He scrutinises the relationship between freedom and deterministic natural laws, asserting the autonomous nature of free will governed by moral law. Kant underscores the significance of good will and duty in moral decision making, advocating for moral law's precedence over self-interest. Central to Kant's philosophy is his optimism for the harmonisation of virtue and happiness within a moral framework guided by God's grace. Through a critical analysis of Kant's views, this paper illuminates his distinctive contribution to ethical and theological discourse, highlighting the enduring relevance of his ideas in contemporary philosophical dialogues. Kant's emphasis on moral autonomy, duty and the ethical implication of God's existence offers valuable insight into the complexities of human agency and moral responsibility.*

Key Words: *Immanuel Kant, Freedom, Morality, Existence of God, Moral Law and Ethical Philosophy.*

*Assistant Professor, Dept. of Philosophy, Baruipur College, West Bengal.
e-mail: pintubhar83@gmail.com

Traditional proofs for the Existence of God:

There may be some kind of doubt among the critics whether Kant was a religious man or not, but there are some passages in his writings that are filled with clear and distinct religious flavor. One of these is his famous statement at the end of his second Critique, the Critique of Practical Reason— “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.”¹ An equally renowned passage we find that explains the core nature of duty: “Duty, thou sublime and might name, that dost embrace nothing charming or insinuating but required submission and yet seekest not to move the will by threatening... but only holdest forth a law which of itself finds entrance into the mind and gains reluctant reverence... what origin is worthy of thee?”² The third one is equally very relevant in this context: “O Sincerity! Thou Astraea, that hast fled from earth to heaven, how may est thou (the basis of conscience, and hence, all inner religion) be drawn down thence to us?”³

After a minute scrutiny of all these above passages, we will find that religion of ethics is the thirst area of his theological pursuits. Here Kant has given the full emphasis on good will rather than God’s will, and for this reason he does not turn to religion for divine guidance in the determination of duty; he turns instead to the moral law to determine our duty and to provide the only sound argument for the existence of God and the sole valid means of discerning His will. Kant says, moreover, that certain knowledge of God’s existence would destroy man’s freedom and reduce human experience to a show of puppets frantically currying the favor of the Almighty.

It is very much inherent in human reason that it always wants to prove the existence of the perfect being that is God. But Kant in his critical philosophy shows that there are some basic problems with such attempted proofs that were offered by various thinkers or philosophers. They attempted to prove all these things by means of speculative reason that was very much objectionable to Kant. All the possible proofs of the existence of God, according to Kant, fall into one of three classes, (i) Ontological, (ii) Cosmological, and (iii) Physico-theological; the first abstracts from all experience, the second argues from experience of existence in general, and the third argues from the specific nature of existence as it actually is.⁴

(i) The Ontological Proof:

Philosophical arguments are basically used to justify our belief in the existence of God. One of the arguments is the ontological argument that was developed by Anselm, one of the Christian Church’s most original thinkers. Anselm begun his argument by

describing his monotheistic approach about the conception of God by highlighting a formula: “a being that which nothing greater can be conceived.”⁵ It is very important to notice that the idea of the most perfect conceivable being is drastically different from the idea of the most perfect being that there is. According to him, God is the being who is so perfect that nothing more perfect can even be conceived.

The second phase of this ontological argument was opened by Rene Descartes (1596-1650), the father of modern philosophy. A single assumption was taken by Descartes that existence is a property or a predicate. And it was the starting point of his argument. He very openly accepted existence as a necessary predicate of God. Just as the three inferior angles of a triangle as equal to two right angles is a necessary characteristic of a triangle so also God without existence would not be the perfect being, that is, God, as existence is the mark of perfection. God, by definition, is the *ensrealissimum*, the being that possesses all reality.

According to Kant, existence is not a real predicate, ‘not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing’.⁶ Kant of course agrees that ‘exists’ is a predicate in the sense of occupying a grammatical predicate position, but logically it performs a different function. It is very much attracting that the same point is also raised by Bertrand Russell His *History of Western Philosophy* has highlighted this aspect of the theory of descriptions in a very concise form.⁷ According to Kant God is an idea, but the existence of God does not necessarily follows from the idea of God. According to Kant, the idea of God has its usefulness, but this concept is fully devoid of any knowledge that has the practical applicability in this phenomenal world.

(ii) The Cosmological Proof:

The next important attempt to demonstrate the reality of God was that of Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274). This argument followed the methodology that is fully polar to ontological argument. The ontological argument focuses on the idea of God and then proceeds to unfold its inner implications but the cosmological argument proceeds from the contingent to the necessary existence of God. If anything exists, an absolutely necessary being exists. This argument presupposed a hypothetical time when nothing existed.

The paper, on which I am writing, has to pass through various steps to have this identity of paper. All these contingent objects like paper points beyond itself to other things. Taking this logic we can say that there was a time when there was nothing in this cosmos. There must therefore be something that is not contingent, and this we call God, the omnipotent, omniscient and all-pervading reality that is a necessary being.

This proof of the existence of God is riddled with fallacies. The first and foremost absurdity of this argument, according to Kant, is that from this contingent world we can grant that there is a necessary being but from this we cannot get any sound basis from which we may infer that God exists. Both the above theories follow the principle of causality. But the principle of causality is only applicable to this phenomenal world. Outside this world the causality principle does not bear any meaning. If we want to explain anything that is related to this contingent world by the efficacy of God as it's the ultimate explanation, this explanation will not be finally satisfactory because we can have no knowledge of the existence of such a being and no knowledge of the way in which its causality would be exerted if it did exist.⁸

iii) The Physico-Theological Proof:

The Physico-theological proof of God's existence that is popularly known as design theory was renamed by Immanuel Kant. This theory is psychologically very effective than the others that we get normally for the existence of God. In this theory what we find is that in this cosmos there is a sign of an order and purposiveness. Everything that is going on is following some systematic and disciplined rules. By comparing with human wisdom we infer that there must be a wise cause that designs the universe by his mere super-intelligence.

This natural world is a very complex and intricate machine. If we look at our galaxy we will find that the rotation of all planets in the solar system is very intricate. The regular procession of the seasons and the cycles etc. Make us aware each and every moment that there is a designer in the universe.

The above arguments seek to prove the existence of God under a different description and on a different basis. But there is an another argument, that claims that ethical experience presupposes the reality of God. And this ethical experience always reminds us that we have an inalienable obligation to other human beings. This inalienable obligation evolves from the respect of our moral law. And this reverence implicitly connect oureevcs to a transhuman source. Thus, Kant argues that both immortality and existence of God are two basic "postulates" of the moral life that we will now discuss in our next chapter.

Postulates of Morality:

According to Kant, the knowledge of the original being or God is based on two alternatives-revelation or reason. On the basis of it we may distinguish rational theology from the transcendental and natural theology. Rational theology aims at

giving us knowledge of God based on mere reason. But the Transcendental Rational Theology does not share any empirical concepts to arrive at the notion of God but by a purely a-priori concept arrives at the notion of God, the original being or the being of beings. Natural theology, from a consideration of the order and harmony exhibited in the world, comes to the idea of a God who, through understanding and freedom, creates the world. Transcendental theology leads to deism and natural theology to theism. For the deist there is only a first cause of the world, but the theist requires an author of the world. Although for the deist the first cause is not further determined as intelligent or free, he may be allowed to believe in a God, but it is only the theist who believes in a living God.⁹ Kant is not a theist as he does not believe in a living God. But the question that will arise in this context is: is Kant really a deist? According to Kant a deist understands that there is an eternal nature that merely works blindly, and the original being or supreme cause is the root of all things. Kant is not in this sense a deist, because he thinks that our moral faith requires belief in a God who is alive, who knows and who wills.

Kant is not a deist in the above two senses and he is also not a naturalist because naturalism always transcends the limits of human insight just as supernaturalism does. The passage of Book 4, Part I of *Religion* will illuminate what is the true stand of Kant in this context. According to him: “Religion is the recognition of all duties as divine commands. That religion in which I must know in advance that something is a divine command in order to recognize it as my duty, is the revealed religion in contrast, that religion in which I must first know that something is my duty before I can accept it as a divine injunction is the natural religion. He who interprets the natural religion alone as morally necessary, i.e., as a duty, can be called the rationalist if he denies the reality of all supernatural divine relation he is called a naturalist; if he recognizes revelation, but asserts that to know and accept it as real is not a necessary requisite to religion, he could be named a pure rationalist; but if he holds that belief in it is necessary to universal religion, he could be named the pure supernaturalist in matters of faith.”¹⁰

Kant is, in the terms of this above passage, a pure-rationalist. But according to him, there are two aspects of religion— one is a purely moral, that is, the formal aspect; but as for the material aspect of religion, the sum of duties to God or the service to be rendered to Him, could contain particular duties as divine commands—duties which would not proceed merely from reason giving universal law and which would therefore be known to us only empirically, not a priori. In the final section, on religion and priest craft, Kant launches an all-out attack on external religious practices. He is arguing here that there is basic difference between true service of the church and counterfeit service.

According to him, one of the basic conditions that must be fulfilled by the church if it to be a true church is that its doctrines and practices must not contradict the principles of rational morality; it must be in that sense “within the boundaries of mere reason.” In his Lectures of Ethics he is telling “If man could be taught the habit of feeling in his heart the true reverence of God, this would be better than teaching him to recite a few hymns of praise—words and formulae which he utters but does not feel.”¹¹

Kant in this matter was very much confident that there is a basic difference between revealed and natural religion. And as Kant is on the side of natural religion, there will not arise any dichotomy between duty and the divine commandment. At this juncture if we say that the divine command is prior then the whole castle that we have made till now will collapse like cardboard. For that reason Kant argues that duty comes first not the divine command. And we all know that duty is fully related to morality. And Kant’s interest in man’s inner moral life does not possibly need any further comment. The ratio essendi of this moral life, as he finds it, is freedom. Now we will start our voyage towards this concept of freedom that is another pillar on which Kantian morality is strongly footed.

Man is a creative being as he could unfold himself in multidimensional forms through different states of his free existence. But though man is born free he is in chain everywhere in his surroundings. We can thus raise a question of G.B. Shaw, a household name of England and Ireland. “What is a perfectly free person?” According to him, “evidently a person who can do what he likes, when likes, and where he likes, or do nothing at all if he prefers it.”¹² If it is the definition of freedom then freedom is only a chimera. But if it is the destiny of human being to be in chain everyone then why does he irresistibly yearn and pine for freedom? The answer to this very acute question is given by Immanuel Kant.

Kant separated the problem of freedom from its legal and theological setting and asked simply how freedom can be compatible with the causal law which prevails throughout nature. According to Kant, “Everything in nature, in the inanimate as well as the animate world, happens according to rules, although we do not always know these rules. Water falls according to the laws of gravity, and the locomotion of animals also takes place according to rules. The fish in the water, the bird in the air move according to rules. All nature actually is nothing but a nexus of appearances according to rules; and there is nothing at all without rules when we believe that we have come across an absence of rules, we can only say that the rules are unknown to us.”¹³

In Kantian philosophy we find two types of nature— one external and another internal. In external nature every change is called an event, and an event can be

explained in terms of nature's mechanics by connecting it to another event as its cause. Yet some of the events exhibit some such qualities and characters as cannot be explained in terms of natural cause and natural effect. For example, 'Tsunami devastated Marine Beach' but the 'Mother Bomb' devastated 'Afganistan'. Both are events and both have their natural causes and conditions. Yet, qualitatively the second event is different from the first one. One is man-made devastation because it depends on human decision. And in this context we can raise a question whether this decision is a good decision? But the points of good-bad, just-unjust, proper-improper are fully nonsensical to the nature's mechanics. We deliberate, we debate, and we question the goodness or moral appropriateness of the decision of human being because whatever decision I am taking depends on my freewill. Freewill, according to Kant, is equivalent to an autonomous will and so under moral law. This equivalence must be established by stating what freedom is. Kant wants to give an acceptable definition of freedom or of freewill.

In this context especially when we are discussing this freewill from his *Second Critique*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, we can say that Kant has not made any claim to prove that a rational agent as such must be free because the theoretical knowledge of it is beyond our human limitations. We might however, be able to show that a rational agent as such can act only on the presupposition that he is free. And according to H.J. Paton the establishment of such a necessary presupposition would be enough to justify the moral law and so to complete our task as moral philosophers.¹⁴

It is the second presupposition, the immortality of soul that was always regarded by Kant very important but he had never given any theoretical proof for it. We know that according to Kant the moral law is a categorical imperative rather than a hypothetical imperative. Imperative means a command or order. A hypothetical imperative is a contingent command, one that we ought to follow given our desires. But the categorical imperative binds us no matter what our desires are. We should tell the truth, even if it is unwelcome, and so on. This is the nature of morality— obligations bind independent of our desires; they are grounded in reason. For this reason, if we want to follow the verdict of categorical imperative, then it is necessary to presuppose that there is soul and that soul is immortal. In the Preface to the second edition of first *Critique*, Kant says that the belief in immortality is based on a "notable characteristic of our nature, never to be capable of being satisfied by what is temporal (as insufficient for the capacities of its whole calling)."¹⁵

In Kantian ethics, categorical imperative is the highest law of morality. It makes its demand and this demand is very much valuable in our human life. This highest law instructs us to be holy. But what is the meaning of being holy? According to Kant to be holy is to follow the highest law of morality, the categorical imperative that instructs us to avoid all pathological demands.

In this section we will analyze another postulate, the idea of God that has no theoretical objectivity. In our earlier discussions we have tried to show that God is such an entity that could not be theoretically proved. Human mind has some restrictions and for these restrictions we could not get any knowledge of God. But though God is not accessible to theoretical reason He is accessible to practical reason. The concept of summum bonum will be inaccessible to human mind without the postulation of the Idea of God and the summum bonum is the promise made by the law itself.

Summum bonum or highest good has two wings— happiness and virtue. Virtue is strictly grounded in disposition that helps us to fulfill our duty. On the other hand happiness is an ‘idea’ of which we lack experience especially in this phenomenal world. Happiness then, for Kant is the maximum satisfaction as a whole of our needs and desires as rational but finite beings, creatures of need and not merely rational or moral agents.

Keeping these definitions in our mind we can get two interpretations of what the highest good might be. The first is that the highest good is a world with a system in place in which virtue results in happiness. But this thought creates a difficulty because virtue does not invariably bring happiness with it. Now this apparent impossibility of attaining the highest-good threatens the very foundations of morality. And on the second sense highest good might be is a world in which everyone is virtuous and everyone is happy. It is not like the utilitarian because the utilitarianist always seeks the highest percentage of happiness for the highest persons.

The above two interpretations may be distinguished as more ambitious and less ambitious. Morality requires us to believe in the possibility of the highest good and it is much more ambitious than the actuality of the highest good that is used in the less ambitious sense.

Another question will arise here, when and where the rewarding of virtue is supposed to take place. We will here speculate that the rewards will start now on earth but continue in an afterlife. Kant says that it is not impossible that the morality of intention should have a necessary relation as cause to happiness as an effect in the sensuous world; but this relation is indirect, mediated by an intelligible Author of nature.

But the bare fact is that this world is inhabited by many people who are not committed to moral goodness because some time it causes misery. On this view, the highest good in the less ambitious sense starts in this life. The highest good in the more ambitious sense should be an ideal for us, something we should strive for and whose prospect should inspire us. Here we find a close relation of Kantian thought to Greek

culture. We human beings are imperfect but we strive for perfection. Our journey is like that of the Sisyphus; we are trying our level best but ultimately we are not getting the highest in this phenomenal world. We should expect to get a partial hint of it, as we see cases of apparent goodness and apparent happiness allied. But its full realization may be chimera in this contingent world, yet Kant is very much optimistic that one day virtue and happiness will mingle. And this balance of the two extremes will be done by God's grace if human beings follow the moral order that is inherent in him or her.

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