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From Kant to Kierkegaard: On the Continuity Between Faith and Reason

Is God best conceptualized as a metaphysical entity or as a regulative metaphor, or both? The construct of God's reality, and our reality, is predicated and dependent upon the aforementioned thought as an abstract allegory or concrete actuality. I have, as of late, wrestled with this philosophical if not theological question; I have tried to delineate all of the factors and dynamic variable that provide confirming or falsifying evidence for either of these ideas. God, as an idea or an ideal, conjured by the human species merely serves the intellectual enterprise of humanity and seemingly has no anthropological ramifications. Contrarily, if we are to relegate God to a finite being, then we have forfeited the [non-finite] being of It. Paul Tillich concluded that God was the ground of all being, or better yet, Being Itself. Thus, with this existential dilemma—interwoven into the fabric of humanity—one must consider the role reason plays coupled with unmerited claims of faith in assessing the existence or nonexistence of God.

In Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s work Strength to Love, he classifies 'the other' by using a parable lodged in the Christian Testament. He begins to chip away at this waning quandary of identifying God temporally and spatially (in time and space), while being burdened with the difficulty of defining the neighbor. He concludes that the neighbor, which may be synonymous to the metaphysical representation of God, is not reducible to theological language, rather a life situation. In the same way that Richard Niebuhr speaks of the enduring problem and what Tillich calls the eternal message in relation to the current situation, King purports that God is identified in community as 'the other.' If we are to accept this depiction of God, first we must acknowledge that our efforts are futile at best, and that we engage in reductionism to suggest that the

sensorium reveals the true nature or essence of God as finite beings. Nevertheless, in efforts to distinguish the characteristics of God in form and being, one cannot give account for the ontological state of God. However, since we cannot comprehend the physical nature of God, perhaps we can come to know It or the hidden or otherwise undisclosed God through means of negation—what John Scotus Erigena, theologian of the scholastic middle ages, describes as the method of *via negativa*. Humanity can only speak to what God is not if we are to postulate that It is metaphysical and not metaphorical. For example, we cannot specify whether or not God is male or female, noting these are both anthropomorphic qualities projected onto Being. However, humanity can say for certain that God is not just male or just female because of the limitations placed on It. All things considered, and within the limits of reason alone, “Kant asserted that human knowledge is limited to what can be experienced with the five senses, and since God cannot be so experienced, we cannot know He [*sic*] exists.”¹ Hence, I find it necessary to examine the works of Immanuel Kant and Soren Kierkegaard to appropriate the existence or nonexistence of God, and the function that reason and faith plays in experiencing or knowing that Being.

If God is sheerly metaphorical, that is, if god is merely a regulative illusion or a projection of our reality onto the transcendent level—what then do we [humanity] do with faith? Faith being that unknown variable that attributes to humanity’s comprehension of phenomena/noumenal that is constantly seeking understanding. It was Kant who suggested “that it is necessary for one to suspend or limit reason in order to make room for faith.” The beauty of God being alluded to as a metaphor is that it gives humanity the opportunity to embrace the mystery

¹ Moreland, J.P. Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul. pp. 17

of God, as Rudolph Otto suggested, which is, in my opinion, an opportunity to discover the vast nature of self, community and the other.

As we broach the conversation of God juxtaposed as a metaphor or a metaphysical being, we must negotiate these two necessary ideas of faith and reason as given by Kantian thought and Kierkegaard. Traditionally, “faith and reason have each been considered to be sources of justification for religious belief. Because both can purportedly serve this same epistemic function, it has been a matter of much interest to philosophers and theologians how the two are related, and thus how the rational agent should treat claims derived from either source. Some have held that there can be no conflict between the two. That reason properly employed and faith properly understood will never produce contradictory or competing claims. Whereas others have maintained that faith and reason can (or even must) be in genuine contention over certain propositions or methodologies.”²

As it concerns metaphysics, Soren Kierkegaard, one whose name stands without introduction, is one whose writings concerning the unknown, the irrational, and as he posits—“the God,” do not necessarily reflect Christian orthodoxy primarily because they were established upon premises that presupposed the existence of Its being. It, he further stated in his work, *The Absolute Paradox*, does not suggest that by naming It God, it gives way to Its existence. The process of proving the existence of this God cannot be started, because of the fact that within the proof would be the presupposition that the God exists. Which is one of the greatest fallibilities associated with his argument. Kierkegaard’s thoughts and writings, adjacent to many philosophers of his time, were largely connected to the controversial subject matter of inquiry;

² Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy—*Faith and Reason*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/faith-re/>

consequently resulting in the revolt against the Eurocentric thought during the Enlightenment era. His works focused on the religious and ethical hypotheses which challenged the normative thoughts surrounding the nature of God at that time, and the ways in which humanity comes to understand such an essence. Central to that idea is existentialists' ideology which proffers that essence predates existence. Nonetheless, Kant maintained that neither reason nor empiricism were sufficient to attain such lofty knowledge. He contended "that both were transcendental conditions to achieve knowledge."

Kierkegaard says of proof, "Generally speaking, it is a difficult task to prove that anything exists..." (292). This particular quote speaks again to one of the existential questions of life for me, that being the question of the existence of reality. I am reminded of the Cartesian "dream argument", where Rene Descartes questions the state of reality by offering up the question of if reality is really a dream. For me, Kierkegaard speaks to the inextricable connection that man has to that which is beyond humanity, and how humans are always in a constant struggle to "insure" the realness of that connection.

Though Kierkegaard, who can be readily be identified as an apologist, and Georg Wilhelm Hegel—whom created a system by which philosophical systems seemingly trump theological dogma—were diametrically opposed with respect to developing a system to supposedly understanding the mind of God, he further alluded to the idea of the God being a creation of human consciousness when describing the difficulty of discerning the difference between the God and humans—which reduces God to a mere metaphor. In that humanity created the God and the God fashioned us in Its likeness. Kierkegaard holds that reason, at some point, must become confounded when it considers the nature of God, because it cannot sufficiently

comprehend nor fathom a being remotely close to it. Even in stating that the God is something that is absolutely different from humans is problematic because one is still “on the verge of disclosure” and reason uses itself as a primary point of reference to understand what is familiar and what is not. Although reason cannot fully negate itself to define what the God may be, it continues to develop some understanding of it in order to satisfy the “demands of passion.”

Perhaps Peter Abelard, whom is credited for introducing the method of doubt in theology, had it right when suggesting that doubt is not only necessary, but imperative for one to reason. He surmised that by doubting we come to enquire and by enquiring we reach truth. He saw reason as the arbiter to reconcile conflicting authorities and, if necessary, to decide between them.³ Reason alone cannot speculate the existence of God, he added. It is incumbent upon us, the inquirers, to ask the necessary questions central to understanding. One must sublimate their faith claims into concise, or better yet rigid interpretations, of truth to come to know reason by means of negation.

Therefore, Kierkegaard describes what can be understood as the creation of God in the likeness of humans. Kierkegaard affirms this notion when he states, “it is impossible to hold fast to a difference of this nature. Every time this is done it is essentially an arbitrary act, and deepest down in the heart of piety lurks the mad caprice which knows that it has itself produces the God” (Gardiner 296).

Immanuel Kant held the disposition, which was contrary to popular opinion on rationalism, that humanity ought never to depend solely on the sensorium (seeing, feeling, tasting, hearing and smelling) because of their fallibility. Hence, Montaigne provides

³Lane, Tony. A Concise History in Christian Thought. pp. 109

commentary furthering Kant's argument suggesting that one cannot, and will never know the depth or essence of a thing because of our finitude. For example, for those who claim to 'know' the essence, nature or substance of God (or a god)—which has to be infinite (transcendent), and non-existent—how does one make the said faith claim that they 'know' God? Are religious experiences relegated to the sensorium? And if so, can they be validated or hold veridical truth if not observed in community? Montaigne, in conjunction with Kant, suggests no. Beyond the various arguments—ontological, cosmological, physico-theological—proffered for the existence of God, the most fundamental question that Kant presses, consequently causing me to be an antagonist, is—what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for one claiming to know a 'thing' in and of itself? Kant also argues, while scrutinizing rationalism, that reason alone cannot provide knowledge; which was anathema for him render such a thought.

Kant classifies the proofs for the existence of God under three particular typologies, the physico-theological, the cosmological, and the ontological. Anselm proposed in his notorious ontological argument on the existence of God that:

“God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, or to put it more simply, is the greatest conceivable being. This being must exist. Were he [sic] not to exist, he would be inferior to an identical being that did exist, and thus would not be the greatest conceivable being.”

While Kant further developed his idea of the “moral argument,” it rests upon a set of claims about the functional, working relationship between one leading a “virtuous moral life” and the pronouncement of that person's desire for happiness. Central to these claims is that Kant gives to the notion of “the highest good” as the proper object for the moral (“practical”) use of human reason. Within the context of the moral argument, the “practical use of reason” consists in the exercise of our will to choose actions in view of — and solely in view of — their moral

rightness. In Kant's technical terminology, in such a choice we will our actions on the basis of a “categorical imperative.”⁴

I fundamentally refute and reject the idea that faith and reason must be divorced from one another as separate entities. Rather, they complement one another in achieving the highest form of good for humanity to become the God, in which they project themselves into being. It is obligatory for one to take such knowledge and utilize it as an ethic, or means, of liberation. Meaning if the God is reducible to a metaphor, or allusion through which we interpret our realities, we must forge a greater sense of being through that depiction. And if we are to accept the neighbor, as King perpetuated, as the metaphysical, then we must live our lives in such a way that reason and faith enhance the quality, or condition, of all of humanity. Perhaps this is why Kant offered “morality on its own behalf has no need of religion,” it is still the case that “morality leads inevitably to religion.” Such an idea makes God totally immanent within the human consciousness; albeit metaphysical or metaphorical.

⁴ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. *Kant's Philosophy of Religion*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-religion/#ArgForExiGodPreCriPer>