

Abby Letson

Dr. Miller

PHI 357

21 December 2018

### Kant's Critique of Pure Reason Applied to Maimonides

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* offers critiques for three different speculative proofs for the existence of god, namely, the ontological, cosmological, and physico-theological proofs. For the sake of this paper, the first two will be examined and later applied. Kant has, for many people, finally put the ontological argument to rest. The thorough critique that Kant offers in response to the ontological argument is at once logically sound and metaphysically aware, and those qualities serve him well in his second critique of the cosmological argument. In order to understand the ways in which Kant critiques the cosmological proof, it is first necessary to examine how he critiques the ontological proof, because he believes that the cosmological argument actually relies upon the ontological argument. After examining the interconnectivity of the two arguments and their respective critiques, I will turn to the works of Maimonides and analyze his theories. Maimonides attempts to prove God's existence with a cosmological argument, and also offers a negative theology whereby he proposes we learn knowledge of God not by affirming God's attributes, but instead by negating things said of God. Because Maimonides' negative theology relies on his cosmological argument, it would be of interest to see if the theories of Maimonides stand against or disintegrate under Kantian critique. That is, if the foundational argument (the cosmological proof) that Maimonides puts forth is flawed, then it would be reasonable to believe that his negative theology is foundationally flawed and possibly invalid.

Ontological arguments seek to prove the existence of God via pure reason alone, but Kant refutes this form of argumentation for a number of different reasons. In its simplest form, that argument would look something like: God is an absolutely necessary being. God's non-being is impossible. Therefore, God exists. One reason Kant refutes such an argument is concerned with how the argument puts forth the concept of God as an absolutely necessary being. The ontological argument says this concept can be understood through the definition of a thing "whose non-being is impossible" (Kant 564), but Kant explains how we learn nothing about the concept from this definition. That is, we still do not know what conditions are in place that make this being absolutely necessary. This is problematic for Kant, because he claims that we cannot have concrete knowledge of anything in reality without actually looking into the world and using our senses to collect data beforehand. For him, existence is a synthetic judgment, not analytic. We must use both our sensibility and intellect to form synthetic judgments, which are *a posteriori* and do not have the predicate contained within the subject. Merely saying that an absolutely necessary being is a thing whose non-being is impossible is only a tautology, and therefore constitutes an analytic judgment. In dealing with a tautology, the conclusion (that God's non-being is impossible) is inherently contained within the subject (God is an absolutely necessary being), and thus we have actually not said anything about the subject that we did not already know.

Yet, as Kant points out, defenders of the ontological argument use the claim "God's non-being is impossible" to say that he necessarily exists (without questioning the conditions that are necessary to deem whether or not he exists). Having reached such a conclusion, the arguers say that one cannot claim that God does not exist, because this results in a contradiction. However, Kant astutely notes that logically speaking, it is perfectly acceptable to negate both God as the

subject and existence as the predicate together, without resulting in a contradiction. By claiming “God exists” and then only negating “exists,” it is true that a contradiction arises. However, in negating “God” and negating “exists” altogether, there is no contradiction.

Kant also rejects the ontological argument on the basis of the fact that it illicitly transitions from claims about concepts to claims about things. For instance, we can conceive of a multitude of concepts of God, yet none of them will necessitate God’s existence as long as they remain solely theoretical, because, as previously stated, we must have conditions in order to deem things as existing. Kant explains this idea by using the example of a triangle, saying that it necessarily has three angles. If a triangle were to exist, it would, of course, necessarily have three angles, and yet this fact in no way necessitates the existence of a triangle. Thus, “The unconditioned necessity of judgments... is not an absolute necessity of things” (Kant 564), so we must utilize sensibility in combination with intellect in order to determine if something actually exists. In other words, we cannot infer from the concept of God as a necessary being that he actually exists.

Kant also points out that existence cannot be a predicate, because it does not add anything to the concept of God; i.e., saying that God exists tells us nothing about God at all. Instead, the claim that “God is” essentially misuses the word “is” by not relating it to a predicate. Thus, to say “God exists” only posits God in relation to the subject of God itself, but it does not necessitate God’s existence. As a result, “nothing is thereby added to the concept, which expresses merely its possibility” (Kant 567). If by saying “God exists,” there was something added to the concept of God, then that would mean that the actual, existing God must be different from the concept of God, or else, both the object and the concept would be the same.

Evidently, what we have in an ontological argument is a concept of God that contains within itself a definition of God, which in turn serves as the proof of God's existence. The ways in which Kant is able to point out the flaws of such argumentation show that it is not sound, and in fact supports Kant's claim that we must look out into the world to make synthetic judgments. The cosmological argument intends to do just that; namely, observe the world and our experiences of the world to form a proof for the existence of God. Yet, as will be explained, Kant critiques the cosmological proof as well, not on the basis of it looking out into the world and using sensibility to form judgments, but on account of the argument's deceitful slip into ontological-type reasoning.

The goal of the cosmological argument is to avoid the mistakes that the ontological argument makes, since it is trying to do something we are incapable of (*viz.*, determining the existence of an absolutely necessary being by way of pure reason alone). Thus, cosmological arguments take aspects of empirical reality into consideration for their proofs. The functioning of the universe—things such as space, time, and motion—all play a role in proving the existence of God. In doing so, it is thought that the proof of God's existence is thus based upon reality. Simply put, the argument is as follows: "If something exists, then an absolutely necessary being also has to exist. Now I myself, at least, exist; therefore, an absolutely necessary being exists" (Kant 570). The reasoning behind this claim stems from the Causality Principle, which claims that "everything contingent must have a cause" (Kant 570). This line of reasoning is supposed to prevent us from falling into the inconceivability of infinite regress, by claiming that there must be, and therefore was, a first cause. That first cause is God.

However, Kant claims that, despite the fact that cosmological proofs look at conditions in the world and use sensibility, they nonetheless unwittingly fall victim to the analytic judgments

that occur in ontological argumentation. By claiming that there *must* be a first cause (namely, God), Kant thinks that the cosmological argument has regressed into the ontological argument's fallacy of inferring existence from a concept. A demonstration of how this occurs is as follows: X, Y, and Z are things that clearly exist, because I can sense them in the world. But, something must have caused X, Y, and Z, because something cannot come from nothing. Therefore, whatever caused X, Y, and Z must also have a cause, and so on and so forth. Because the principle of causality demands that all contingent beings have a cause, there must be a first cause, because an infinite regress would be logically impossible. That first cause is absolutely necessary, or else X, Y, and Z would not exist. That first cause must be also be "most real being" (Kant 570), that is "maximally excellent...a being with all perfections including existence" (Reichenbach 1). (The being is "most real," because it is not dependent on anything else for its existence.)

At this point, Kant has enough in his logical armory to prove how the cosmological proof actually regresses into the ontological proof. Because they have started at the point of experience, cosmological arguers do not feel it is necessary to review how they arrived at the concept of a necessary being from the reality of things. If they conducted such a review, as Kant did, they would see that when they say the first cause is a "most real being" and conclude that such a being is absolutely necessary and therefore exists, they have once again inferred the necessity of a concept, and not the necessity of a thing, much less a thing's existence.

Thus, the cosmological argument attempts to escape the pitfalls of the ontological argument and prove the necessities of transcendental concepts by way of the Causality Principle. Even further simplified, the argument would say, "because I see X in the world, God must necessarily exist." However, although "seeing X in the world" constitutes empirical data, the

judgment that “God must necessarily exist” is nonetheless a concept of pure reason, even if it is inferred from a concept developed from sensibility. As a result, Kant is able to say that “The transcendental principle of inferring from the contingent to a cause, which has significance only in the world of sense, but which outside does not even have sense” (Kant 572). Kant further explains that the Causality Principle, though based upon empirical observations, is a:

“merely intellectual concept of the contingent that cannot produce any synthetic proposition, such as that of causality, and the principle of causality has no significance at all and no mark of its use except in the world of sense; here, however, it is supposed to serve precisely to get beyond the world of sense. (Kant 572)

Thus, the principle of causality is supposed to, in the cosmological proof, connect the real world to the transcendental. However, Kant believes that the Causality Principle is nothing other than an intellectual concept and therefore cannot give rise to any significance or meaning in the world other than the world of intellect and reason. Hence why the causality principle cannot take us from “the world of sense” to the realm of the transcendental.

Kant makes a number of other observations for why the cosmological proof fails, including how once the idea of a necessary first cause is established, the arguer ends the argument “by the fact that one finally does away with every condition” (Kant 573). However, those conditions are actually necessary to form any concepts of necessity at all, so once again an ontological-type mistake is made. Yet, the arguer ends his proof there simply because he cannot conceive of any conclusion other than a first cause. Kant also points out how cosmological proofs confuse uniting transcendental possibilities with logical possibilities of concepts concerning reality, because they try to make this union without considering that it “requires a principle of the feasibility of such a synthesis, but which one can only apply to the field of

possible experiences” (Kant 573). Kant’s most powerful point, however, may perhaps be his claim that just because infinite regress is logically impossible, does not mean that it is *actually* impossible. Our reason, he says, cannot extend the impossibility of infinite regress beyond the world of sense, and further it cannot justify the fact that we even created such a principle. This principle must necessarily extend beyond our space and time to account for *all* contingent things, and consequently attempts to account for things that we have not experienced, which as Kant dutifully repeats, is not possible.

Thus, despite the cosmological proof having its starting point in the empirical world, it succumbs to the fallacies inherent in the ontological argument. However, there are a variety of theories that arise out of speculative proofs for the existence of God, and for that reason they too may be subject to the same Kantian critiques. Such is the case for Maimonides, who offers a cosmological proof for the existence of God in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, and then offers a negative theology stemming from that proof. His negative theology also utilizes some ontological-type reasoning, and therefore he may fall victim to Kantian critique in both his cosmological argument and negative theology. The rest of this paper will be dedicated to determining whether or not this is the case.

Maimonides begins his cosmological argument by assuming Aristotelian propositions for the sake of his proof. The propositions contain clauses pertaining to the nature of substance, space, motion, time, corporeality and incorporeality, etc. Expounding upon any of these in detail is not entirely necessary here; suffice it to say that Maimonides determines in the propositions that because “substance consists of matter and form, and requires an agent for its existence” (Maimonides 148), there must be a motor, or a force, that first “sets the substance in motion, and thereby enables it to receive a certain form” (Maimonides 148). The Causality Principle enters

here as Maimonides decides that there must be what he calls a “Prime Motor” acting as the first cause that set things in motion. By way of other propositions, Maimonides concludes that the Prime Motor must be incorporeal, does not reside within something corporeal, does not move from its own accord nor accidentally, and is indivisible and unchangeable (Maimonides 151), and finally, he concludes that the Prime Motor is God.

Evidently, Maimonides in no way escapes the fallacy that Kant identified the cosmological argument commits. Maimonides insists upon the idea that “a moving agent must exist which has moved substance of all transient things and enabled it to receive Form” (Maimonides 149). By evaluating substance and form, he effectively uses his sensibility to examine empirical data. However, he illicitly infers from those observations the absolute necessity of a first cause, namely, God. As has already been established by Kant and explained above, such an inference is logically impossible. Maimonides posited the existence of God in reality without the necessary means of doing so, namely, conditions. Although he had conditions that allowed him to observe the nature of substance and form (among other things) he did not have the conditions to posit the existence of God as absolutely necessary given the Causality Principle, which is a principle of the intellect. Evaluating even only the first proposition above through the lens of the Kantian critique explained herein will serve to show how the proof in its entirety is flawed.

The extent to which Maimonides’ work is subjected to Kantian critique may not end with his cosmological proof however, because in his negative theology he offers some theories that are implicitly based upon his cosmological argument. Maimonides discusses, for example, how we can gain knowledge of God through negation; by saying what God is not, rather than what He is, because according to Maimonides, we do not have the ability to say what God is. In a section



discussing the ways in which an object can be described, Maimonides puts God into the equation to demonstrate why He cannot be described in the same ways. For instance, he says how an object can be described by its relation to some other thing, but God cannot be described in this way, because he has absolute existence while other things do not, and “whenever we speak of a relation between two things, these belong to the same kind; but when two things belong to different kinds though of the same class, there is no relation between them” (Maimonides 71). However, if we revisit Kant’s critique, we will see that it is logically impossible to conclusively say God has absolute existence (a claim which Maimonides derived from his cosmological proof), therefore, we also cannot prove that God cannot have relation to other things, since that claim is founded on the claim that God has absolute existence. Thus, Maimonides’ entire argument for the inability to describe God by relating him to other things is rendered invalid.

In a different section, Maimonides is discussing how God is a simple substance, without any other elements that He has and used to create the universe. Rather, Maimonides says that “He is a simple essence, without any additional element whatever; He created the universe, and knows it, but not by any extraneous force (Maimonides 74). Once again, however, it is not logically possible for Maimonides to conclude that God created the universe, since his did so in his cosmological argument on the basis of the Causality Principle. While our logic may demand a first cause and lead us to *believe* that God necessarily exists and created the universe, it does not make such a belief true. Thus, we may say that Maimonides likewise cannot conclude that God both created the universe and did so without any extraneous force.

There are a multitude of similar examples found in Maimonides’ negative theology that also fall victim to Kantian critique, and because his theology relies upon his cosmological argument for grounding, it is possible that the entirety of his theology may be suspect to the same

kinds of fallacies. However, that is only insofar as our logical needs desire for us to speak about God in a way that deals with him necessarily existing. If we accept that we cannot prove God necessarily exists, we may nonetheless talk about Him in a way otherwise unchanged. For instance, it would be unnecessary for Maimonides to change his theology in any way to avoid Kantian critique, so long as he would not mind not being able to prove God's existence. While it seems likely that he and others would mind, we can reassure ourselves of the role of faith in religion. There is a reason why "faith" is often times used synonymously with "religion." While we may not be able to prove within the logical confines of argumentation that God exists, we may nonetheless discuss Him as if He does. Thus, Kant provides critiques that are logically sound, and perhaps only logically sound. There are questions that transpire as we read Kant and various theologies; why do we have the ability to reason? Why do we exist? How do we exist? How trustworthy is our logic? These valid questions make it possible to say that, even though Kant's critiques are logically airtight, our ability to reason about the metaphysical mysteries of existence certainly provide ground to wonder—and talk about, even if not prove—what is going on in the transcendental realm.

## Works Cited

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W.

Wood. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Translated by M. Friedlander. Dover

Publications, Inc.

Reichenbach, Bruce. "Cosmological Argument", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of*

*Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

[plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/cosmological-argument/](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/cosmological-argument/). Accessed

21 Dec. 2018.

Rohlf, Michael. "Immanuel Kant", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018

Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/kant/](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/kant/).

Accessed 21 Dec. 2018