

Must the Cosmological Argument Depend on the Ontological Argument?

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I.

There is much debate over Immanuel Kant's argument that the cosmological argument (CA) for God's existence is dependant upon the ontological argument (OA).¹ According to Kant, the ontological argument is an invalid argument constructing an existence apart from experience, and his move to disprove the cosmological argument is to claim that the absolutely necessary being established at the end of the cosmological argument is none other than the transcendently necessary concept of *ens realissimum* (ER) - the "most real being" that can only derive its existence from mere concepts as a transcendental ideal of existence. The ontological argument also derives the necessary existence of a most real being by use of the *ens realissimum*, which cannot be known to exist with any certainty because it is derived by reason's thoroughgoing determination of objects, which only knows objects inasmuch as we experience them. Those who defend the cosmological argument concede that the ontological argument fails under Kant's criticism of what reason cannot accomplish, and scholars such as J. William Forgie² investigate whether Kant was correct when he concludes that the necessary being of the cosmological argument is the same as the *ens realissimum* of the ontological argument.

In his essay, Forgie's conclusion is that the "Dependency Thesis" (DT), the idea that the CA is sound only if the OA is sound since they both use the ER to establish their soundness, is false. Forgie argues that the CA is not dependent upon the OA even if the CA, as Kant claims, is

¹ The ontological argument for God's existence states that since it is possible to imagine an entity that is greater (or more perfect) than any other entity, then this entity must exist otherwise it would not be the greatest (or most perfect) entity. This "greatest being" or "most perfect being" is called the "most real being" in this essay. The cosmological argument for God's existence states that since every event has a cause, then we can imagine there to be a first cause, which we can figure to be God since this cause is uncaused and thus independent of any other entity.

The ontological argument relies on concepts independent of experience, while the cosmological argument is rooted in experience (cause-effect relationships) and concludes about something outside of experience. Thus the ontological argument is entirely *a priori* and the cosmological argument starts off *a posteriori* and ends *a priori*.

² Forgie, J William. "The Cosmological and Ontological Arguments: How Saint Thomas Solved the Kantian Problem." *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 89-100.

an argument from “mere concepts”. In this paper, I will defend Kant from Forgie’s criticisms by exposing misconceptions of the types of transcendental concepts they attack. What I believe to be Forgie’s flaw is his reliance upon St. Thomas Aquinas’s use of self-evident propositions to construct the necessity of God’s existence as an *a posteriori* truth. Thus, Forgie claims, it turns out that the CA is not dependent upon the ER because there is no reason why an Aquinian necessary being **must be** an ER, since the truth value of the CA’s conclusion only rests upon *a posteriori* knowledge, and not *a priori* propositions as asserted by the OA.

The structure of my paper is as follows: First, I wish to legitimize Kant’s transcendental method for establishing the concept of the ER, and what exactly the ER entails for concepts such as God. Through a careful exposition of Kant’s metaphysics, I hope to prove that *a posteriori* truths are not sufficient for proving God’s existence. Second, I will discuss Forgie’s interpretation of Aquinas, and why propositions that are self-evident in themselves (as opposed to self-evident to us) cannot be known through *a posteriori* means. From here, one can conclude that Aquinas does not present what Forgie calls a “principled refutation of the DT some five hundred years before it was first formulated”, (Forgie, 91) and that, given the groundwork laid out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, one cannot reject Kant’s criticism of the CA without rejecting the transcendental method itself.

II.

Forgie’s believes that an object which is absolutely necessary, such that without this absolutely necessary object **nothing** else would exist, is not just a matter of *a priori* propositions, but *a posteriori* ones as well. Thus Forgie’s objection is that Kant’s dependency argument unjustly assumes that absolute necessity is an existence determined “merely from its concepts,” (A601/B636) and that absolutely necessary objects can also be determined through essences *a posteriori*. However, I do not think Forgie is following Kant correctly, otherwise he would know that by “an existence determined merely from its concepts”, Kant is referring to an object determined without an intuition. According to Kant, the

only way to determine an object without an intuition is by the transcendental method, which would show the object is necessary to experience. Kant believes the only way to transcendently determine any ideal with existence as one of its predicates is through the ER, since the ER is the only concept that could possibly have being, or existence, as one of its predicates (A576/B604).³

Although the ER itself - *not* the concept of the ER - can only be assumed to exist as a transcendental object, that is, as a object necessary given that we experience things, this does not mean that the only way to tie the ER to Aquinas' absolutely necessary being is by unjustifiably asserting that the ER is the only way to determine absolutely necessary beings. Forgie believes the absolutely necessary being determined by the conclusion of the CA cannot be held to be the ER unless it is unjustifiably **assumed** that only the ER can determine absolute necessity. He holds that absolute necessity can be known by other means, which I believe to be a valid claim for most objects but insufficient for the existence of God: an abnormal object with unique properties different from objects we encounter in the sensory world. In future sections, I will explain why only a transcendental approach can derive necessity from outside the world of sense experience, and where Forgie goes astray. But first, I will clarify what necessity means for Kant and how it directly relates to arguments for God's existence.

Throughout the *Critique*, Kant shows various objects of experience to be necessary using transcendental proofs to find the conditions necessary for possible experience. He asks the question: "What are the qualities of the mind a person must have in order to experience things?" For Kant, in order to know something to be necessary, we must know it to be essential to how we experience the world - independent of sense experience - and thus for anything to be absolutely necessary it must be **without empirical content**. Kant believes that the contingency of our sense experience cannot provide any insight into how the world is *in-itself*. Consequently, empirical experience cannot show anything about the world to be necessary; Kant holds all *a posteriori* truths to be contingent. On the first page of the *Critique*, Kant outlines his conclusions on experience: "It [experience] tells us, to be sure, what is,

³ Kant later shows reason to err with the predication of existence on page A598/B626

but never that it must necessarily be thus and not otherwise.” (A1) Kant continues his thoughts on experience in the footnote: “We cannot infer to any necessity *a posteriori* if we do not already have a rule *a priori*. E.g., ‘If many cases are identical, there must be something that makes this agreement necessary’ presupposes the *a priori* proposition that everything contingent has a cause that determines its concept *a priori*.” (A1) For Kant, only *a priori* truths can be considered necessary since truths dependent only on experience are subject to the contingency of the empirical realm. *A posteriori* sensory data alone is unsatisfactory for finding necessities of experience, which is why any sort of necessary truth must be grounded independently from sense experience in *a priori* principles. If something cannot be proven *a priori*, then it is not necessary, according to Kant.

As a small aside, Forgie disputes Kant’s arguments concerning necessity based on the work of Saul Kripke in *Naming and Necessity*. Kripke separates the notions of ‘necessary’ and ‘*a priori*’ from each other in that there can be necessary *a posteriori* propositions. I believe Kripke’s work is insignificant on the issue of God’s existence. I will elaborate on this claim further later in the essay. For now, it is important to realize how Kant’s notion of *a priori* necessity impacted the construction of his transcendental concepts. I will argue later that God (an object outside of direct sense experience) has a status determinable only through *a priori* means. I accept Kripke’s general thrust, however, that some *a posteriori* concepts must be necessary in virtue of how *a posteriori* propositions are constructed.

When Kant derives the ER as a **transcendental ideal** from mere concepts, he means to say that due to the operational structure of how our cognitive faculties must operate in order to have possible experience, the ER is fundamental to how we experience things. One could only reject the concept of the ER by denying the cognitive operations that make experience possible. The object of the ER is an ideal that all of experience must be grounded within, even if it is impossible to discover what the ER is. Kant defines an ideal as “the idea not merely *in concreto* but *in individuo*, i.e., as an individual thing which is determinable, or even determined, through the idea alone”. (A568/B596) An idea can give the general sense of what a given object

should be, but an ideal is the most perfect representation of a given idea. Ideals are equivalent to Plato's forms, and because reason is the "faculty of unity of the rules of understanding under principles" (B356), our cognition will always seek to unite appearances under common principles. Thus the ER is an ideal that other ideas from experience (concepts) are compared with in terms of existence. The ER serves as the "most real being" for all other beings - hence its formal title, the "transcendental ideal" (A571/B579).

When Kant uses the phrase "merely from its concepts" pejoratively against the OA and CA, he does not mean something derived from mere concepts is invalid. Kant believes much of our world is known through pure concepts, so what we know in experience is known "from its concepts", but not "merely from its concepts". Kant criticizes the proofs for God on the ground that the transcendental concepts that they use are not able to construct something that is part of the world as it is in itself. In other words, Kant believes these proofs attempt to demonstrate the existence of an object that we do not experience **through the application of the same concepts** used to experience objects. Kant, who holds that existence is not a predicate, does not support the egregious use of transcendental concepts to determine the existence of something outside of the world of sense experience. Any personification of the ER into God is "hypostatized" (A580/B608), according to Kant.

One must first understand that Kant constructs the ER using the thoroughgoing determination of reason, in order to comprehend what he means by "existence" on the basis of "mere concepts" and to recognize why it is only possible to instantiate God as a necessary being beyond possible experience. To start, all objects are thoroughly determined. However, a thoroughly determined object is the object as it really is, a thing in itself, so thoroughly determined objects cannot be fully known. The thoroughgoing determination of reason also determines the ideal of anything, whether it is the ideal car or ideal love. A thoroughly determined object has "the synthesis of all predicates which are to make up the complete concept of a thing, and not merely of the analytical representation, through one of two opposed predicates; and it contains a transcendental presupposition, namely that of the material of **all possibility**, which is supposed to contain *a priori* the data for the

particular possibility of every thing” (A572/B600)⁴. A thoroughly determined object contains all possible predications of an object, both known and unknown. For any given object, in order for me to completely know what it is, I must know all the predicates the object has and what predicates the object does not have. To know anything about the object at all, I must know the relation of opposing predicates within the object. To take an example from Kant, a man blind from birth cannot know he is experiencing darkness, as he does not know the predicate of “darkness” because he has never experienced light (A575/B603). But to say something is thoroughly determined is actually a complicated expression. Let us say object *X* is thoroughly determined. Thus, of all predicates,

- (1) some predicates belong to *X*;
- (2) some predicates do not belong to *X*.

What is the epistemological status of *X*? That is, for all predication of *X*,

- (a) some predicates that belong to *X*
 - i. are known to belong to *X*;
 - ii. are not known to belong to *X*.
- (b) some predicates that do not belong to *X*
 - i. are known to not belong to *X*;
 - ii. are not known to not belong to *X*.

What we know about noumenal objects determines their relation **to us** as phenomenal objects. In other words, phenomenal objects are noumenal objects perceived and understood through an epistemological framework. For an object to be known completely, we must discover its thoroughly determined status. Kant claims this is impossible, since we only know objects as we experience them and never as the object actually is.

Since ideals are, by their nature, the individual embodiment of any given idea, they are also subject to the thoroughgoing determination of reason. Since the thoroughly determined status of any object is unknowable, all ideals are unknowable, except for one. The exception is the ER because the concept of the ER – its existence – is determined through itself as a **thing in itself** (A576/B604). Whether or not it is

⁴ My emphasis.

justifiable to claim the ER is the only necessary being,⁵ however, is beyond the scope of this paper. I do not need to show that all necessary beings are contained within the concept of the ER, but only any **absolutely** necessary being. After all, if the CA does not prove an absolutely necessary being, then the CA fails as an argument for God's existence, as God's existence is presumably a necessity to all possibilities, or an absolutely necessary being.

A thoroughly determined object is equivalent to a thing in itself, that is, a noumenal object. Complete knowledge of a thoroughly determined object requires knowledge of all the predicates of that object and all the predicates not contained by that object. The only way to determine the existence of an absolutely necessary being is to know if that being is an object of experience whose thoroughly determined status entails existence. Since the ER is the only concept we know to contain existence as one of its predicates (because its non-existence implies contradiction), any other claims for absolutely necessary existence are nothing more than the concept of the ER restated. Kant concludes that, since the CA is a claim for a being with absolutely necessary existence, the CA must be a case for the ER. That is, the entity proven in the CA can only be the ER since the ER is the only concept which entails its absolutely necessary existence. Thus if the CA uses the ER then it is nothing more than the OA in disguise, since the OA ultimately rests upon the ER as its cornerstone. Because these two proofs both use the same concept to infer the existence of God, we encounter the DT (and the controversy): if the OA can prove God then the CA can prove God also, but if the OA cannot prove God then neither can the CA. Some, like Forgie, are quick to point out that just because the OA and CA use the ER, does not make them the same proof nor entail their dependence on one another. The OA's failure is not sufficient reason to disregard the CA as a failure fail simply because they both happen to include an absolutely necessary being.

Kant reaches this conclusion because the OA starts with an *a priori* notion of existence and ends with an *a priori* absolute necessity, while the CA starts with an *a posteriori* notion of cause and effect to infer an *a priori* absolute necessity. Since Kant believes *a posteriori* propositions

⁵ Some people may hold that angels are also necessary beings, which aren't absolutely necessary

cannot be used to show the necessity of anything, he claims the *a posteriori* element of the CA is extraneous and that the CA “is really only the ontological proof from mere concepts that contains all the force of proof in the so-called cosmological proof” (A607/B635). Kant rejects the OA on the ground that existence cannot be inferred from mere concepts; therefore the existential claim of the ER is erroneous, which renders the CA erroneous. Kant does not believe the ER to be worthless but **merely** an ideal, a derivative concept whose use to reason is to form a bigger picture of other objects we experience (A578/B606). When we misuse the ER, however, to generate factual claims about the world we live in, we end up with the OA. So for the CA to have any validity, it must follow the same path as the OA, which means the CA is nothing more than the OA restated. This is why Kant declares the CA dependant upon the OA.

To summarize: Kant establishes the legitimacy of the ER’s inclusion of all of reality, using a transcendental proof. The ER includes all reality because it is where the thoroughgoing determination of any object completes itself, where “our reason is grounded on a transcendental substratum, which contains as it were the entire storehouse of material from which all possible predicates of things can be taken...” (A575/B603) In this quote, Kant uses ‘transcendental’ to signify the necessity for reason to produce the concept of the ER, given how we experience things. The only way to attack the ER as a flawed concept would be to deconstruct Kant’s notion of reason, a major transcendental concept central to most of Kant’s work, especially the *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, because the ER itself is not responsible for our experience, we cannot presume the ER exists other than as an ideal important for our conception of the world. The ER is a by-product of the cognitive faculties responsible for possible experience.

III.

Forge begins his argument against the DT with a citation from *Summa Theologiae*. Aquinas claims, in the following citation, that propositions can sometimes be self-evident to us and sometimes not:

A self-evident proposition, though always self-evident in itself, is sometimes self-evident to us and sometimes not. For a proposition is self-evident when the predicate forms part of what the subject means; thus it is self-evident that man is an animal, since being an animal is part of the meaning of man. If therefore it is evident to everybody what it is to be this subject and what it is to have such a predicate, the proposition itself will be self-evident to everybody. This is clearly the case with first principles of demonstration which employ common terms evident to all, such as ‘be’ and ‘not be’, ‘whole’ and ‘part’. But if what it is to be this subject or have such a predicate is not evident to some people, then the proposition, though self-evident in itself, will not be so to those to whom its subject and predicate are not evident. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, part I, q2 a1, quoted in Forgie: 95)

Why are propositions that are self-evident in themselves, but not self-evident to us, important? Forgie clarifies with another *Summa Theologiae* quote:

I maintain then that the proposition ‘God Exists’ is self-evident in itself, for as we shall see later, its subject and predicate are identical, since God is his own existence. But because what it is to be God is not evident to us, the proposition is not self-evident to us, and needs to be made evident. This is done by means of things which, though less evident in themselves, are nevertheless more evident to us, by means, namely, of God’s effects. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, part I, q2, a1, quoted in Forgie: 95)

This argument can be restated as: “God’s effects can show God to exist”. This is a weak position to purport. After all, the position does nothing to **show** God’s existence; it merely posits him within a theoretical framework attempting to explain something about the cosmos. There is no reason why this theory is a better explanation than some alternatives. For example, why assume there is a start to the casual chain? One

hypothesis is that the casual chain has always been around, and always will be, so there is no reason to suppose it had a beginning. Yet another hypothesis is that the universe has an author who is not God, but merely a divine intelligence acting on his own will, such as an angel. Forgie attempts to justify Aquinas' position, but I believe he fails.

Forgie sums up his problem as having to show how Aquinas, for any given proposition, can hold: "(a) it [the proposition] can be shown true by arguments starting with premises about such things as the existence of change and efficient causation in the world (God's effects); (b) though it can thus be made evident to us it is not self-evident to us; and (c) nevertheless it *is* self-evident in itself." (Forgie, 97) In approaching this problem, Forgie takes a contemporary interpretation of Aquinas by Alvin Plantinga, who defines a proposition that is self-evident in itself to be "necessarily true". However, the necessary truth of "God exists" must be shown through "God's effects", since God himself is unknowable, so the necessity must be an *a posteriori* truth. By this account, God demonstrates himself to us, and through this demonstration gives us his concept. This account satisfies conditions (a), (b), and (c), and supposedly gives Aquinas a defense against Kant's charge that the CA is at heart the OA, since Aquinas would never support any *a priori* propositions about God's existence. God can be shown only through *a posteriori* propositions.

Forgie's mistake is ignoring the reasons behind Kant's assertion that propositions that are necessarily true must be established *a priori*. As stated earlier in the paper, Kant held *a posteriori* propositions about the world to be contingent upon some other part of our experience, which is why Kant searched for truths independent of experience (*a priori* knowledge). Ultimately, Forgie's search for an essence independent of the concept of God is circular. He believes by "supposing he [Aquinas] has the Leibnizian idea of God's essence involving (indeed, for Aquinas, *being*) His existence" (Forgie, 99) we can determine this essence. Forgie never makes it clear that we know it is God's effects we are observing.

Although Forgie gives no definition for an object's concept and an object's essence, it seems that Forgie holds the object's concept to be determined strictly *a priori*, while an object's essence can be determined

through *a posteriori* means (Forgie, 100). I understand a concept to be defined, according to Kant, as “predicates of possible judgments” (A69/B94) and the form of a concept is “something always general, and something that serves as a rule” (A106). Defining essence in a Kantian context can be difficult, since Kant makes no explicit reference to essences in the *Critique*, but since Forgie uses Aquinas, I will define essence as the property that gives any object its defining qualities through *a posteriori* knowledge (Forgie, 99).

Forgie asserts that Kant’s failure to distinguish between concept and essence is how the DT fails. It is debatable whether any object of experience has both a concept and an essence, as Forgie maintains. Kant would present the argument that essence and concept are the same. Regardless of which position is correct, if we accept Forgie’s position, then the problem is that he gives no explanation of the determination of an essence apart from a concept that is **merely a concept**. Essential qualities are only part of the world **as we experience it via sense data**, which is why essential qualities, if they can give propositions a necessary status, are only going to be known *a posteriori*. Forgie does not realize that in trying to determine the essence of God apart from His concept, he is effectively trying to determine the essence of an empty thought. Since God is something we cannot sense, and thus not an object of sense-experience, He is only part of experience inasmuch as we infer Him on the basis of concepts. It may be possible to determine the essences of other objects of experience with empirical content apart from their concepts; however, for things that are only experienced as concepts (i.e. God), we cannot determine their essences apart from their concept. So even if Kant did hold that essences were distinct from concepts, he would not have had to consider the question of essence in the *Critique*, since he was only interested in determining the conditions necessary for possible experience, which are only *a priori* and thus a matter of conceptual knowledge. Furthermore, since objects that make experience possible are not empirical in character, we know the only way for these objects to be discovered is with a transcendental approach. This means the only way to know God as an absolutely necessary existence is through a transcendental proof.

What transcendental approach could be taken in an attempt to prove God's existence? Any transcendental proof of God would need to prove He is a necessary condition of possible experience. Such a proof's structure would be (a) given that we experience things, (b) God must exist. Kant sees conditions (a) and (b) satisfied with the thoroughgoing determination of existence, which completes itself as the concept of the ER. Since the ER is "the most real being", it is an ideal which serves as the ground of the possibility of all things (A579/B607). He concludes, "the concept of such a being is that of **God** thought of in a transcendental sense, and thus the ideal of pure reason is the object of a transcendental **theology**..." (A580/B608, original emphasis). Through Kant's philosophy, we know that points (a) and (b) prove God transcendently since the ER is the ideal that includes existence as one of its predicates.

Note, however, that Kant creates this argument in order to refute it. Kant says next of the transcendental proof of God that "this use of the transcendental idea would already be overstepping the boundaries of its vocation and permissibility" (A580/B608) since such a proof gives no object for us to behold; it still remains merely a concept. Kant believes that by refuting the only possible transcendental argument for God, he can lay all claims of God's existence to rest, since they all must use the ER to succeed.

With regard to Forgie's argument, even if it were possible to find the essence of an object apart from its concept and use these essences to generate *a posteriori* necessities, we certainly cannot establish the essence of an object apart from its concept that is only known to us *as a concept*. The assumption that God's effects will demonstrate His existence can only be confirmed by the assumption that we are, in fact, observing the effects of God – which relies on the concept of God being the author of the universe. Otherwise the causes of the effects we observe would be unclear, and we would not know if they were the effects of anything at all. Therefore, the CA would be no longer for God but just some kind of Aristotelian first cause⁶. A first cause - absolutely necessary and entailing its own existence (as Aquinas proposes) - is

⁶ That since every event has its cause, there must necessarily be a first cause that started all events. This cause does not have to be God.

nothing other than the ER in disguise. If this first cause is regarded as the ER, then the only other way to establish that the ER is God is by the OA, triggering the DT. The problem, as Kant realized, is that, since there is no way to empirically experience God, in order to know God *is* the absolutely necessary being of the CA, “I have to be able to infer conversely that whatever thing this concept (of the highest reality) pertains to, that thing is absolutely necessary; and if I cannot so infer (as I must admit, if I want to avoid the ontological proof), then I have come to grief on my new path, and find myself once again right back where I started [of trying to prove God’s existence]” (A611/B639). The logic is inherently vacuous; the CA merely attempts to disguise its runaround because propositions that are self-evident in themselves do not tell us anything about the subject other than empty tautologies.

Aside from a brief mention of Kripke, who argued for necessary *a posteriori* propositions that we could ground in experience, Forgie never justifies his rejection of Kant’s claim that everything known to be necessary must be known *a priori*. This is significant, since Kant believes that our limitations on what is possible for us to know *a priori* are what serve as the fundamental bounds of reason. Forgie attempts to dodge this issue by claiming his propositions were based on *a posteriori* knowledge, but there is no way to determine anything about the nature of God from *a posteriori* knowledge. This is because the question of how to determine an *a posteriori* necessity concerning an object **outside** of experience is left unanswered by Kripke, who was more concerned with naming schema than trying to make a systemic metaphysical system like Kant was, and Forgie, who appears to have simply never considered the problem.

Works Cited

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