

# Kant defines god as simply the idea

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Kant defines God as simply the idea (in his technical sense of idea) or analogical image of systematic unity. As an existent, 'God' is a natural illusion. We can have no cognition of God or an underlying substratum because such concepts transcend the conditions of possible experience. In the phenomenal realm, God or the *ens realissimum*, an individual being containing "the sum-total of all possibilities" or all predicates of things in general - can be characterized only negatively. God is not an object and as such can be cognized only by analogy with nature. It is by means of this analogy that there remains a concept of the Supreme Being sufficiently determined for us, though we have left out everything that could determine it absolutely and in itself.

In his analysis of the conditions of the possible cognition of objects Kant distinguishes between different kinds of judgments. In doing so, he is examining what type of cognitions make up, or could make up, the concept of God or any other metaphysical consideration. Kant does not divide propositions, as traditionally done, into the empirical and the a priori. Instead, Kant talks about judgments, propositions that are held by a subject. Kant argues that all judgments are either analytic or synthetic, and either a priori or a posteriori. Analytic judgments are those in which the predicate inheres in the subject or is presupposed by it. Synthetic judgments are those in which the predicate is not in the subject.

A priori in the Kantian sense means held before experience, or what can be held without experience. A posteriori means dependent on and derived from experience. Kant's analysis of judgments has implications for the analysis of metaphysical concepts such as God. If metaphysics is at all possible, then its

judgments cannot be empirical or a posteriori. Nor can they be analytic, since this would be contrary to the very idea of going beyond what is given - something that metaphysics claims as its defining characteristic.

In its traditional guise, the cosmological proof is premised upon finite and contingent being or, more to the point, conditioned being. What is conditioned has conditions, and the mind is naturally led to infer condition from conditioned without limit. The only possible way to end this regress (and thereby to satisfy understanding) is by positing unconditioned being. Kant expresses the proof as follows: “ If anything exists, an absolutely necessary being must also exist. Now I, at least, exist. Therefore an absolutely necessary being exists”. Without absolutely necessary (i. e., unconditioned) being to end the regress of causes, there is no completeness to the series and no satisfaction for understanding.

On the otherhand, Hegel’s ultimate aim in discussing the proofs for the existence of God (viz., the cosmological, teleological, and ontological) is to remove what he calls the ‘ distortion’ evident in their popular exposition. Hegel takes this distortion to be the well-spring of Kant’s widely accepted refutation of the proofs. Hegel explains, “ our task is to restore the proofs of God’s existence to a position of honor by stripping away that distortion” Kant’s damning attack, then, is not directly met by Hegel.

The Kantian criticisms were, for Hegel, by and large warranted given his construal of the proofs. Hegel’s aim is rather to recast the nature of these proofs (and proof in general). Hegel accomplishes this end is quite naturally in light of his reformulation of metaphysics. His subsequent reintroduction of

the proofs is one that is able to avoid Kant's refutation - a refutation which Hegel thinks is based upon a mistaken view of human conception.

There is very little regarding Kant's analysis that Hegel finds objectionable given Kant's rendition of the proofs. Rather than refute Kant directly, Hegel is far more concerned that we see these proofs in their 'true and proper form'. According to Hegel, Kant "failed to recognize the deeper basis upon which these proofs rest, and so was unable to do justice to their true elements". In each case, Hegel agrees, the infinite is supposed to be reached from a starting-point which is finite. This transition, however, is not the static formal mediation Kant believes it to be. Hegel explains, This knowledge of God, is inwardly a movement; more precisely, it is an elevation to God. We express religion essentially as an elevation, a passing over from one content to another. It is the finite content from which we pass over to God, from which we relate ourselves to the absolute, infinite content and pass over to it .

Returning to the proofs themselves, Hegel finds that they evidence the progression of human thought itself. Kant was in part correct in his claim that the ontological proof is the battlefield on which the outcome of the war is to be determined. For Hegel, the ontological proof is the most profound achievement of spirit. It comes late in the historical play of appearances for this reason. For Hegel, furthermore, the deficiencies particular to each of the earlier proofs are very nearly the ones pointed out by Kant.

The cosmological proof has as its point of departure the nonsystematic cognition of the world (i. e., the world is not seen as Nature). "By the term world we understand the aggregate of material things." In this mode of

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proof, consideration is first given to the being of variety, flux, and contingency evidenced by this aggregate. " This is the kind of starting-point from which the spirit raises itself to God". This elevation, as already discussed, is impossible if one affirms this contingency. Further, to affirm the contingency of the world is to overlook its self-negating character.

This next proof is so similar to the first that it seems unnecessary to consider it in great detail. There are, however, also some distinctive insights worth mentioning. Again, the proof departs from an apprehension of finitude - in this case determinate finitude. " There is finite being on one side, though it is not just abstractly defined, or defined only as being, but rather as being that has within it the more substantial determination of being something physically alive". The negation of finitude is, again, at the same time an elevation and affirmation.

The ontological proof also finds its point of departure in finitude. In this case, finitude appears in the form of subjectivity. Progress is not to be had by affirming the finitude of the mere conception of God. Such an affirmation amounts to a reduction of all conception to mere representation. This finitude of consciousness (in which consciousness is construed as subject in contradistinction to object) must, of course, be negated. Conception must be cast in its true and proper light.

This final proof is the culmination of millennia of progress in the realm of consciousness for Hegel. " Only when spirit has grown to its highest freedom and subjectivity does it grasp this thought of God as something subjective and arrive at this antithesis of subjectivity and objectivity". It is natural that the earlier proofs should therefore fall short of their mark. This elevation fits

naturally into Hegel's larger system for understanding the history of religion, consciousness, being, and culture. Indeed, Hegel explains, " Even within the Christian era it was not accomplished for a long time, because it involves the most profound descent of spirit into itself".