

Sören Kierkegaard

The Absolute Paradox

from Philosophical Fragments

Kierkegaard rejects the idea of a proof of God's existence.

The idea of proving the existence of anything is absurd; one always starts with existing things and then attributes properties to them; not the other way around.

It is a difficult matter to prove that anything exists; and what is still worse for the intrepid souls who undertake the venture, the difficulty is such that fame scarcely awaits those who concern themselves with it. ... Thus I always reason from existence, not towards existence, whether I move in the sphere of palpable sensible fact or in the realm of thought. ... The procedure in a court of justice does not prove that a criminal exists, but that the accused, whose existence is given, is a criminal.

This is the fallacy in the attempt to infer the existence of God from his attributes – that is, the argument from design. Such a proof would always be open to doubt, for “even if I began I would never finish, and would in addition have to live constantly in suspense, lest something so terrible should suddenly happen that my bit of proof would be demolished.”

But [perhaps] between God and his works there exists an absolute relationship; God is not a name but a concept. Is this perhaps the reason that his *essentia involvit existentiam*? The works of God are such that only God can perform them. Just so, but where then are the works of God? The works from which I would deduce his existence are not immediately given. The wisdom of God in nature, his goodness, his wisdom in the governance of the world – are all these manifest, perhaps, upon the very face of things? Are we not here confronted with the most terrible temptations to doubt, and is it not impossible finally to dispose of these doubts?

There is the implication in this that the belief in God is a leap of faith. In other words, you just know that God exists. Knowing that God exists, one proceeds to interpret one's experience in terms of that existence – not the other way around.

Even in a rational (deistic) proof of God's existence, then, there would be a leap of faith. The faith might manifest itself in a conviction in the logic of the argument. Prior to



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completing the argument, you are in doubt, after making the final step, you attain to certainty, between the two stages there is a gap, and that gap is bridged by faith.

Whilst this article does not discuss this point explicitly, it implies that logic cannot be taken as a given. Even the validity of logical arguments needs faith. So everything begins with faith. Faith is not some kind of supernumerary extra that is tagged onto the bulk of knowledge, a superfluous addition that we can well do without. Why place one's faith in logic? Why not directly in God?

And how does God's existence emerge from the proof? Does it follow straightway, without any breach of continuity? Or have we not here an analogy to the behaviour of these toys, the little Cartesian dolls? As soon as I let go of the doll it stands on its head. As soon as I let it go – I must therefore let it go. So also with the proof of God's existence. As long as I keep my hold on the proof, i.e., continue to demonstrate, the existence does not come out, if for no other reason than that I am engaged in proving it; but when I let the proof go, the existence is there. But this act of letting go is surely also something; it is indeed a contribution of mine. Must not this also be taken into account, this little moment, brief as it may be – it need not be long, for it is a *leap*.

Admittedly, this passage is opaque, but it appears to be saying that belief in God is a leap of faith, and that leap of faith is not conditioned by anything given in experience or thought. If you doubt of God's existence, you will doubt the logic that leads you his existence; if you believe in God, the leap of faith is all that is required.

Kierkegaard hints that the whole idea of starting out from a position of doubt (as Descartes claims to be able to do) and then proving God's existence is insincere.

Whoever therefore attempts to demonstrate the existence of God (except in the sense of clarifying the concept, and without the *reservatio finalis* noted above, that the existence emerges from the demonstration by a leap) proves in lieu thereof something else, something which at times perhaps does not need a proof, and in any case needs none better; for the fool says in his heart that there is no God, but whoever says in his heart to men: Wait just a little and I will prove it – what a rare man of wisdom is he! If in the moment of beginning his proof it is not absolutely undetermined whether God exists or not, he does not prove it; and if it is thus undetermined in the beginning he will never come to begin, partly from fear of failure, since God perhaps does not exist, and partly because he has nothing with which to begin.

The argument here is not wholly exact. The main point lies in the previous remark, that all proofs require an act of faith. The essence of Kierkegaard's approach to God is to



deny any privileged status to a certain system. Science, for example, does not hold a privileged status of knowledge; pure reason and logical deduction require justification. Every system of belief, or individual creed, requires a leap of faith. The whole essence of the attack on faith, and the demonstration that it is a superfluous psychological reaction, is based on according another system a special status.

If no other system has such a special status, then the attempt to hold such a system up and work from there *to* the existence of God is either insincere or superfluous. The faith you repose in the system that proves God's existence is equivalent to the faith you have in God – the two stand and fall together. Therefore, if you advance such a proof, either you start with “nothing”, in which case no proof is possible, or you start with the assumption that God does exist, in which case the proof is circular, or you are possibly doing something else – such as develop the concept of God, which may be equally unnecessary.

The correct procedure for Kierkegaard is to start with the belief in God, and then interpret experience in the light of that faith.

A project [of proving God's existence] would scarcely have been undertaken by the ancients. Socrates at least, who is credited with having put forth the physico-teleological proof of God's existence, did not go about it in any such manner. He always presupposes God's existence, and under this presupposition seeks to interpenetrate nature with the idea of purpose. Had he been asked why he pursued this method, he would doubtless have explained that he lacked the courage to venture out upon so perilous a voyage of discovery without having made sure of God's existence behind him. At the word of God he casts his net as if to catch the idea of purpose; for nature herself finds many means of frightening the inquirer, and distracts him by many a digression.

Note: original article from *Philosophical Fragments* translated by David F. Swenson – Princeton University Press, 1936, Chapter III, pp 31-35; and quoted in Hick, *The Existence of God*



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