

KIERKEGAARD ON NAMES, CONCEPTS, AND PROOFS FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

Using the idiom of his day, Kierkegaard often described himself as a "dialectician." "Dialectical" problems absorbed his interest, and he tried to sort out "dialectical" relationships to solve them. This made it seem that he owed more than he admitted to Hegel, the most renowned dialectician of the day. Yet one can be a dialectician without being a Hegelian, and to find a more appropriate analog to Kierkegaard's brand of philosophy one has to look further backward—or forward—in time.

In the bright light of German intellectual achievements, the difference between holding a religious belief and holding a learned opinion had faded and Kierkegaard wanted to restore it. To do this a specialist of sorts was needed, one who knew how to draw distinctions. He therefore took Socrates, not Hegel, as his model, substituting the "either/or" of Socratic inquiry for the "both/and" of Hegelian dialectics. Instead of resolving conceptual differences, he tried to recover them, so that a confused amalgamation of Christian faith and philosophy might be avoided. Like Socrates, he sometimes used irony to accent a point of confusion and in this respect he resembles few other philosophers, past or present. Yet conceptual clarity remained his goal and, in this respect, he resembles no one so much as the linguistic philosophers of our own day.

Kierkegaard also resembles contemporary linguistic philosophers in another way. Not only did he attempt to clarify the meaning of problematic concepts, he also kept a studied eye on the nature and workings of language. Thus, in the modern idiom he was something of a "logician." In doing what he called "dialectics" he illuminated what we call the "logic" of Christian concepts. Yet at times he felt the need to go even further into dialectics, to address various underlying questions of logical *theory*. This, however, is a relatively neglected aspect of his thinking and it needs more attention. It needs more attention to pry Kierkegaard out of his commonly assigned

niche in 19th century romantic irrationalism and to give him his due as a philosopher. In what follows I'd like to show what I mean by taking a particularly illustrative case in point.

I

In his *Philosophical Fragments*—a playful “project of thought”—Kierkegaard pauses leisurely for several philosophical digressions. The longest of these involves a complicated discussion of necessity and contingency in relation to past events, but there is another, much shorter, discussion which deals with the possibility of proving the existence of God. Kierkegaard didn't think that this could be done. Here, however, instead of invoking his more familiar distinction between “subjective” truths of faith and “objective” truths of science or philosophy, he builds his case on an analysis of names, concepts, and existential inferences. The whole discussion is remarkably condensed and extremely difficult to follow in such a foreshortened form—difficult, that is, for the average reader. For an analytic philosopher already steeped in arguments of this kind, Kierkegaard's abbreviated remarks recall familiar issues and ideas.

A single point of logic anchors the whole discussion. The term “God,” Kierkegaard says, is not a name but a concept and for that reason the existence of God cannot be proved.¹ If one reads the footnote to this passage, he will see that Kierkegaard has Spinoza's version of the ontological argument in mind. But his argument applies to any attempts to prove the existence of God *a priori*; one can never derive an existential claim from a set of analytic judgments about the meaning of a concept. On this point Kierkegaard stands foresquarely on the side of Hume, Kant, and all their modern followers. And yet he develops the point in his own way. For by drawing the contrast between names and concepts in the way he does, he generates some leverage against *a posteriori* arguments as well. His strategy, in other words, is fairly simple: either “God” is a name or a concept, and either one attempts to prove God's existence *a posteriori* from His

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by David Swenson and revised by Howard Hong, second ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 51.

effects or *a priori* from His essence. But neither of these alternatives will work.

To untangle the threads of Kierkegaard's arguments, let us begin where he did, with the possibility that "God" functions as a name. Here Kierkegaard gives us little more than an analogy to go on, but it is an instructive one. Take the case of Napoleon and the problem of proving his existence from his deeds.

If it were proposed to prove Napoleon's existence from his deeds, would it not be a most curious proceeding? His existence does indeed explain his deeds, but the deeds do not prove *his* existence, unless I have already understood the word "his" so as thereby to have assumed his existence. But Napoleon is an individual, and in so far as there exists no absolute relationship between him and his deeds; some other person might have performed the same deeds... If I call these deeds of Napoleon the proof becomes superfluous, since I have already named him; if I ignore this, I can never prove from the deeds that they are Napoleon's, but only in a purely ideal manner that such deeds are the deeds of a great general, and so forth.²

This analogy obviously prefigures an attack on scholastic attempts to prove God's existence from His deeds or "effects" (creation, natural order, etc.). But it also helps to explain what Kierkegaard meant when he denied that "God" was a name. So much rides on this point that we need to spell it out more fully.

By a "name" Kierkegaard evidently meant a *proper name*. A name refers to an individual *as such*, not as an instance of a description which might just as well be filled by other individuals. That is why he said that there is no "absolute relationship" between Napoleon and his deeds; one can presumably know who an individual is without knowing his deeds. Or to put the same point in a better way, one can identify an individual without having to describe him: one can *name* him. Though he doesn't say so explicitly, I think Kierkegaard must have assumed that individuals could be named by ostension. For he does suggest that the connection between names and predicates is inessential (or synthetic in the technical sense), and this would

² *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

mean that one could identify the bearer of a name without having to cite any *definitive* predicates. Thus, nothing said about Napoleon and his deeds could be true *by definition*. Napoleon might not have done his deeds without destroying the meaning of his name.

Given just this much about Kierkegaard's understanding of names, one can easily see why Kierkegaard objected to scholastic attempts to prove the existence of the Judeo-Christian God from His effects. For if "God" is a name, then the existence of the individual so named—call Him "Jehovah"—could never be established. Even if one grants the questionable assumption that the natural order, or the world itself, is an "effect," one could no more show that Jehovah produced this effect than one could show that an individual named "Napoleon" performed certain military deeds. Given the deeds, we may have to attribute them to *some* great general, but it is logically possible that this great general be an individual other than the one named "Napoleon." And by the same token, given the natural order we may feel pressed to account for it *somehow*, but we couldn't say that it must have been caused by the individual named "Jehovah."

Of course, if the effects in question are implicitly understood to be those of Napoleon or Jehovah, then there is no longer any question of a proof. The thing to be proved (the existence of Napoleon or Jehovah) has been assumed from the outset, since Napoleon's victories or Jehovah's creation cannot be so described without presuming the existence of these individuals. Yet if we don't begin with such loaded descriptions, then we can never reason our way from observable effects to *particular* causes, i.e., causes which can be identified *by name*. At best we can only say that *something* capable of producing such effects must exist.

Kierkegaard, however, didn't really pursue his Napoleon analogy. Perhaps he thought that it was clear enough without any further elaboration. Or perhaps he didn't think that the point was worth pursuing because it was based on the assumption that "God" functions as a name, an assumption which he was willing to make only for the purposes of argument. In any case, he dropped the analogy and turned to the remaining possibility that "God" functions as a general concept. This in turn left him with the possibility that *a posteriori* arguments from effect to causes might succeed if they involved only a *God-concept*, not a named deity. After all, what is wrong with reasoning from effects to causes to show that *some* God-like being

must exist? If we can reason from effects to causes to show that some great general must have existed to have performed certain military deeds, what is to stop us from doing the same in the case of God?

To answer this last question one has to go beyond the Napoleon example. Yet the raw materials for an answer are there in Kierkegaard's analogy. In the case of military deeds we know that some great general must have performed them because we know that we are dealing with instances of leadership, strategic planning, and similar instances of human accomplishment. But in the case of cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God, the "effects" to be accounted for resist any easy characterization. Are we entitled to describe the world as something *created or designed*, or do we not build in unwarranted assumptions in these very descriptions. Here, how we *describe* the effects is the crux of the problem. For only if we already know that the world is a work of creation can we go on to assume the existence of a creative power, i.e., a God. Similarly, only if we already know that the world of nature represents a work of design can we go on to assume the existence of a Designer-God.

In other words, the argumentative steps used to derive the existence of God from works of Creation are relatively unimportant. For "the works of God are such that only God can perform them." God, that is, is *identified* by His works. Thus, if we are given the works of God *as such*, then we are *eo ipso* given God. The proof adds nothing which is not already assumed in the description of these works. So the difficulty, once again, centers in the description of the works, or "effects," to be accounted for.

The works from which I would deduce his [God's] existence are not directly and immediately given. The wisdom in nature, the goodness, the wisdom in the governance of the world—are all these manifest, perhaps, upon the very face of things?... From what works then do I propose to derive the proof? From the works as apprehended through an ideal interpretation i.e., in such as they do not immediately reveal themselves. But in that case it is not from the works that I make the proof; I merely develop the ideality I have presupposed... In beginning my proof I presuppose the ideal interpretation, and also that I will be successful in carrying it through; but what else is this but to

presuppose that the God exists, so that I really begin by virtue of confidence in him? ³

To prove the existence of God from an "ideal" interpretation, one simply recasts the need for some explanation into the form suggested by the *explicandum's* description. Indeed the force of *all* theistic arguments from effects to causes depends on the need for some explanation, but the degree to which the *explicans* can be specified depends entirely on the amount of specificity introduced by *description* in the premises. In effect, one draws up a bill of explanation in the way he describes the effects in question, and then he produces a proof simply by postulating something to fit the bill. In the case of Napoleon and his deeds, the bill of explanation is drawn up in such a way that only a great general could fit the bill. So as long as we know that there must be some explanation for the deeds in question, we can go on to say that some great general must have existed. Similarly in the case of God: if we draw up a bill of explanation in such a way that it can only be filled by a being of superhuman intelligence and power, we can combine this with the principle of sufficient reason to show, purportedly, that such a being must actually exist.

In sum, every argument which moves from *explicandum* to *explicans* through the principle of sufficient reason is the same in this respect: the conclusions we draw simply reflect the requirements built into the *explicandum* at the level of description. Thus, before one can get a recognizably *Christian* God-concept out of cosmological and teleological arguments, one has to describe the world in theologically loaded ways, i.e., through "idealized" interpretations. In other words, one has to describe natural effects as products of extraordinary, superhuman, planning in order to postulate a supernatural being as their cause. If one doesn't introduce any "idealized" interpretations in describing the *explicandum*, then one cannot arrive at anything this specific in the *explicans*. This is obvious when we're trying to prove the existence of an individual (Napoleon or Jehovah) whom we can identify *by name*, since the same general bill of explanation can be filled by any one of several distinctly identifiable individuals. But it is *also* true when we are trying to establish the existence of something which we can identify only by description. For unless the same des-

criptions used to identify this being are implicitly invoked in the premises, the bill of explanation will be too commodious. Several distinctly identifiable things could still fill it. E.g., if we describe nature simply as something which exhibits some order, rather than describing it as a work of planning or design, then we can only say that there must be something (we know not what) to account for this order. We could not advance a Designer-God as the *only* possible explanation.

Consequently, every attempt to prove the existence of God *a posteriori* runs into the same problem: either one begs the question by defining the bill of explanation too sharply, or one evacuates the conclusions by leaving every questionable and unwarranted form of description out of the premises. The difficulty in the first case lies with the anthropomorphic descriptions smuggled into the premises, and the failure in the second case lies with the lack of specificity found in the conclusion.

God, however, can be identified only through a set of definitive descriptions—or through his works, as Kierkegaard puts it. God is the being who created the world, who designed the natural order, who gave us the moral law, and so on: all these descriptions are used to tell us *who God is*. So if we cannot describe the world in terms of these works, works which only God could have performed, then we cannot get *this* God out of a proof. To draw back the Biblical God, one needs to cast his nets much further than neutral description will allow.

II

Kierkegaard is not opposed to that. To believe in God *is* to cast one's interpretive net over experience in ways which secular thinking does not allow. But more of that later. We still have to deal with the remaining possibility that the existence of God might be proved *a priori*, i.e., by a purely analytical argument such as the ontological proof. Kierkegaard associates this possibility with the proper view of "God" as a concept rather than a name, but he does so only to reject it.

By a "concept" Kierkegaard obviously meant some type of expression which does not designate its referent in any immediate way. Concepts acquire their reference only through some mediating des-

criptions, descriptions which identify what comes under these concepts. These descriptions define a concept by telling us what *counts* as its referent(s). That is why in speaking of concepts we also speak of *essences*, for essences are simply identifying descriptions taken as definitive properties in those things which fall within a concept's application. In other words, these properties satisfy the descriptions used to define the concept in question.

This is not exactly Kierkegaard's way of putting the point, but I think it comes close enough to his intentions. For the important thing about concepts is that some statements involving concepts are true *by definition*. Evidently Kierkegaard thought that statements about *named* individuals could not be true by definition; and this, I think, is false.⁴ But names are at least relatively independent of identifying descriptions, while concepts are much more tightly bound to essential definitions. Thus, when one says of a thing that it has one of its essential properties, without which it could not be identified conceptually in the way it is, then one produces a statement which is *analytically* true. And that is how it is with the concept of God; much of what we say about God serves to define the concept, to tell us who God is. So there is an "absolute relationship" between God and his works. God could not be God, could not be the being whom we call "God," without having performed these works.

Of course we can grant that God would not be God if he didn't perform certain works without thereby acknowledging his *existence*. To say that God must have performed certain works, or to say that he must satisfy any other descriptions, is simply to define the concept. It is not say that anything answers to this description in reality. Yet what if existence itself figures into the definition of God? Then it would seem that any purely analytical argument which establishes existence as an essential property of God would *eo ipso* establish his existence in fact.

But not so, says Kierkegaard. He dispatches the possibility of an "ontological proof" for God's existence in a confident, almost breezy, aside—in a footnote, in fact. No stranger to "dialectics" could have

⁴ Even ostensive definitions depend on a prior general understanding of the kind of use which a name is to have. In giving Christian names, for example, we assume that these names are to designate human beings. Since this is an established convention, it becomes analytically true to say of one so-named that he is a person.

written this note. It is a devastating critique, not only of Spinoza and the Cartesians (at whom it was aimed), but also of all those philosophers past and present who have tried to save the ontological argument from the death blows dealt it by Kant. Admittedly, the force of Kierkegaard's argument is little different from that of Kant, whom he had plainly read. But Kierkegaard makes the point, as I said earlier, in his own way. He says that Spinoza produces his "proof" by making *being* "an essential determination of content"—i.e., by making existence into the kind of property which distinguishes one thing from another. Once that step has been taken, one can construct an apparent proof for God's existence from a *definition*. God is by definition the sum of perfections; yet He would not be all perfect if He lacked *being* in all its fullness. For a perfect being cannot be lacking in any respect. So if God in his perfection cannot lack being, then God cannot fail to exist.

Now the usual Kantian objection to this is to say that "existence" is not a predicate. The existence or non-existence of a thing does not alter its *nature*, it does not add or subtract any of those distinguishing features which enable us to identify a thing. On this point Kierkegaard obviously agreed; simple existence does not constitute a "determination of content." But he also realized that Spinoza was not talking about mere existence or non-existence. Rather, Spinoza spoke of existence as something which one could possess to a greater or lesser extent—in degrees. And if this talk makes any sense, then we are dealing with "existence" or "being" as a genuine predicate. For a being which not only exists but possesses a *plenitude* of being would be distinguishable from an otherwise identical one which exists without this plenitude. God, of course, must possess the greatest possible plenitude of being to be the sum of all perfections, and if he possesses the greatest possible being, then he surely must exist. To possess being in the highest degree, in fact, God must have the property of *necessary* existence. For the more necessity a thing involves in its existence, the more perfect it is, and *vice versa*.⁵ That was how Spinoza argued, in any case, and the familiar objection that "existence" is not a predicate will not prevail against it.

Kierkegaard's complaint, therefore, is not that Spinoza misuses

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

“existence” as a predicate, but that he produces a mere “tautology.” Perfection and existence become so interdefined in Spinoza’s argument that the assertion of God’s existence takes on the character of an extended *definition* which doesn’t establish the actual existence of anything. For even if we grant that necessary existence must be included in the definition of God as a perfect being, we can still reject the actual existence of this God by rejecting the subject (God) together with all its predicates. This too is a Kantian point. Kant spoke of rejecting both subject and predicate here to draw attention to the hypothetical nature of any conclusion drawn from purely analytic premises (i.e., from definitions). All that such arguments show is this: that if there is anything which fits the definition given in the premises, and there might not be, then that thing must also fit the further predication found in the conclusion. Thus, if there *is* anything which is a perfect being, then that thing must also possess the absolute fullness of being—a necessary existence. But is there any such thing? That is the question, and there is nothing to prevent one from “rejecting both subject and predicate” by saying, “No.”

Or is there? Perhaps the use of “necessary existence” defeats both the usual Kantian objections. For not only does “necessary existence” function as a predicate, it also seems to suspend the hypothetical character of the argument. One can’t talk about a *necessary* being as something which might not exist, and so if this form of the ontological argument establishes necessary existence as a property of God, one cannot very well object by saying that the existence of this being is hypothetical. To do that one would have to argue something like this: “if God exists, and he might not, then he exists as a necessary being.” At first this may seem unproblematic. But in making objection we assume in the antecedent “if” clause that God might not exist, whereas the proof shows that God must be understood as a necessary being, one which could not fail to exist. Thus, in order to maintain consistency in speaking of God *as defined in the argument*, one cannot tacitly assume that God’s existence is a contingent matter. That is just what the predicate “necessary existence” rules out. So once the concept of God has been shown to include the idea of necessary existence as a definitive feature, we seem driven to admit that God exists. Since we cannot consistently speak of a necessary being as

something which might not exist, we lack a coherent means of denying that God actually *does* exist.⁶

Now for those who sense a sophistry in this last argument, the remainder of Kierkegaard's footnote reads like the return of daylight and good sense.

What is lacking here is a distinction between factual being and ideal being... In the case of factual being it is meaningless to speak of more or less of being. A fly, when it is, has as much being as the God; with respect to factual being the stupid remark which I here set down has as much being as Spinoza's profundity, for factual being is subject to the dialectic of Hamlet: to be or not to be. Factual being is wholly indifferent to any and all variations in essence, and everything that exists participates without petty jealousy in being, and participates in the same degree... *But the moment I speak of being in the ideal sense I no longer speak of [factual] being, but of essence.* Highest ideality has this necessity and therefore it is. But this its being is identical with its essence; such being does not involve it dialectically [logically] in the determinations of factual being... nor can it be said to have more or less of [factual] being in relation to other things. In the old days this used to be expressed, if somewhat imperfectly, by saying that if God is possible, he is *eo ipso* necessary (Leibnitz). Spinoza's principle [i.e., the ontological argument] is thus quite correct and his tautology in order; but it is also altogether certain that he evades the difficulty. For the difficulty is to lay hold of God's factual being and to introduce God's ideal essence dialectically into the sphere of factual being.⁷

This, I admit, may seem less than sun-clear to those who find the terminology too strange. Yet Kierkegaard's distinction between factual being and ideal being is just what we need to avoid the apparent inconsistency in the second Kantian objection. Instead of treating the existence of a necessary being hypothetically (by saying, "if there is a God, and there might not be..."), one can reformulate the point

⁶ For a fuller statement of this and other arguments in behalf of an ontological proof see Norman Malcolm's modern classic, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments," in *The Ontological Argument*, ed. Alvin Plantings (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1965), pp. 136-159.

⁷ *Fragments*, pp. 51-52.

by saying, "if God has any *factual* being, and he might not, then a being exists which possesses the highest necessity in its ideal essence." Here there is no inconsistency. God, whatever sort of being he may be said to have in his essence ideally defined, might not exist *in fact* at all.

Of course, some may say that anything having necessary existence in Kierkegaard's ideal sense (i.e., as a "determination of content") must also possess factual existence. But I don't think that this follows. For as long as "necessary existence" serves to define the kind of being in question, there is no contradiction in saying that the being so defined has no counterpart in reality. This doesn't have to be interpreted to mean that a being which *must* exist does not, *per impossible*, actually exist. One can make the same point in other ways. One can put it in this way, for example: "If the term 'God' *refers* to anything, and it might not, then it refers to a necessary being." Or one could say, "if anything in reality *answers* to the term 'God', and perhaps nothing does, then that thing is a necessary being." Here the apparent inconsistency of assuming something in the "if" clause which is incompatible with the corresponding idea in the "then" clause disappears. Yet the force of the objection remains. The ontological argument, even in its strongest form (where "necessary existence" replaces "existence" as the predicate in question), produces a mere "tautology." It fails to involve the ideality of God's nature "in the determinations of factual being."

III

With this last remark Kierkegaard leaves the question of an ontological proof aside and returns to the point he was making about *a posteriori* arguments. Neither sort of proof works without a logical leap: either one leaps from God's ideal existence to factual existence in a purely conceptual argument, or one leaps to a theistic conclusion by building it into the *explicandum* in a *a posteriori* argument. Before leaving the subject of proofs altogether, though, Kierkegaard adds one final observation. He compliments Socrates, whom he credits with the invention of the "physico-teleological" argument, for placing no confidence in this argument *as a demonstration*. Socrates, he says, "always presupposes the God's existence, and under this presupposi-

tion seeks to interpenetrate nature with the idea of purpose.”⁸ Instead of demonstrating the existence of God, in other words, Socrates used the teleological argument to show that belief in God and belief in the world's purposiveness are two different sides of the same faith. We don't first see the purpose and then find the God; we sustain the search for purposes *through* the belief in God. By believing in God one “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.”⁹ Nature frightens us with evil, suffering, and death—all of which threatens to undermine any thoughts of a higher purpose. But by holding fast in faith to the idea of a Creator God, the believer “interpenetrates” his world with meaning, endeavoring to trace some signs of purpose beneath the ambiguous surface of things.

So in the end Kierkegaard does attribute some importance to one “proof,” the teleological argument. But it neither instills nor demonstrates a belief in God. The leap remains. This otherwise unhelpful proof simply preserves the connection between the belief in God and judgments of purpose. Neither is ground or consequent for the other. The two go hand in hand, waxing and waning together. In short, one could say that the so-called leap of faith is a leap into a new *way* of thinking, having to do with judgments of purpose, and that the belief in God serves as an axiomatic principle for this further range of teleological judgment.

But we are now going far beyond our text. Kierkegaard simply leaves us with these last remarks and returns to his project of thought. Having flexed his dialectical powers, he turns them in another direction.

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⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*