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AN ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE OF IMMANUEL KANT'S "CRITIQUE OF ALL THEOLOGY BASED UPON SPECULATIVE PRINCIPLES OF REASON"

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"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold back the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest to them, for God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes are clearly seen from the creation of the world..."¹

From the time of the apostles natural theology has played a role in Christian theology. Paul seems to refer to it in this passage in Romans, it was developed extensively by the philosopher/theologian Thomas Aquinas, and it continues to be used today.

Deep in the bowels of Immanuel Kant's² first critique, *Critique of Pure Reason*, lies a significant examination of this approach to knowing God. It is entitled "Critique Of All Theology Based Upon Speculative Principles Of Reason".³ It is a largely negative critique, in that Kant concludes that natural theology does not provide any veridical knowledge of God. Kant's discussion is stimulating, but, I will contend, vitally flawed. The thesis of this article is that Kant's arguments in his "Critique Of All Theology Based Upon Speculative Principles Of Reason" do not fatally undermine the enterprise of natural theology.

I. ANALYSIS

A. Definitions

Kant begins his critique of speculative theology by defining some terms which are significant to the topic and essential to his discussion. He takes great care to specify exactly what it is that he is opposing, devoting three and a half out of the seven pages of his discussion to definitions. Careful attention must be paid to these definitions in order to understand the remarks which follow.

Kant defines the goal of theology as "knowledge of the original being".⁴ This knowledge can be obtained two ways; through revelation, or by the use of reason.⁵ The latter is what Kant is interested in discussing here; Kant does not address the former in this discussion.

The knowledge of the original being which is derived from reason can be divided into two types: transcendental or natural.⁶ Adherents to a transcendental theology believe that it is possible to infer an original being as the (potentially impersonal) *cause* of the world, but that further knowledge of such a being is not possible. This is the position of the deists.⁷ Transcendental theology can be divided into two types, characterized by differing methodology: 'cosmo-theology' and 'onto-theology'. Cosmo-theology seeks to infer the existence of the original being from "an experience in general".⁸ Onto-theology seeks to know the original being through concepts alone.⁹

Adherents to natural theology (or at least those adherents who attempt to obtain knowledge of the absolute being by applying reason) believe that it is possible to infer an original being as the *author* of the world, implying personality. This is the position of the theists.¹⁰ This approach attempts to infer the existence and properties of the original author from the constitution, order, and unity of the world. If the inference is made from the natural order (the laws of nature) it is called "physico-theology". If the attempt is made from moral order (laws of freedom) it is called "moral theology".¹¹ Because most persons understand "God" to refer to a personal being (the theistic conception) rather than merely a (potentially impersonal) force, Kant limits himself to addressing the former concept, the concept of natural theology, in this discourse.¹²

Having thus analyzed the concept of original being, Kant turns to an analysis of the other main component of his definition of theology: knowledge. He defines the term "theoretical knowledge"¹³ as "knowledge of what is."¹⁴ Theoretical knowledge may be speculative, dealing with objects or concepts which cannot be known empirically, or it may be experiential, dealing with things which can be known empirically.¹⁵ Theoretical reason is the instrument for obtaining *a priori* theoretical knowledge.¹⁶

B. Arguments¹⁷

Kant begins the polemical section of his discussion by criticizing the methodology of natural theology. The stratagem employed by natural theology is to infer the existence of God as the ultimate cause of the world. Cause and effect are properties of the empirical realm. Kant argues that the author of the world is to be treated as an item of speculative theoretical knowledge, that God is not an empirical object. It is not possible, regarding an item of speculative theoretical knowledge, to infer a cause or effect of that item, since cause and effect are properties restricted to the empirical realm. Therefore, Kant argues, it is not possible to infer from the world (or anything else, presumably) the existence of a

cause which is an item of speculative theoretical knowledge. Thus it is not possible to infer, from the world or things known about the world, the existence or attributes of the original being. Kant concludes that the employment of speculative theoretical reason in studying nature yields no theological knowledge.¹⁸

Furthermore, effects are proportional to their causes. Kant states that no finite empirical effect is of sufficient scope to indicate a cause of the magnitude of God.¹⁹

Kant observes that transcendental questions demand transcendental (*a priori*, non-empirical) answers.²⁰ He concludes that physico-theological proofs are inadequate to provide theological knowledge²¹ and relegates them to the role of lending additional weight to other kinds of proof.²²

After criticizing the strategy employed in natural theology, Kant points out the epistemological problem at the root of the 'speculative theoretical' approach to theology. He asserts that the question of the existence of a supreme being is synthetic; it necessitates the extension of knowledge beyond the limits of empirical experience to the realm of ideas.²³ Synthetic *a priori* knowledge is a description of the formal conditions of an empirical experience.²⁴ But God (according to Kant) is not experienced empirically (but is rather to be treated as an object of speculative theoretical knowledge). Therefore God cannot be known synthetically, through synthesis of empirical experience nor through the synthetic *a priori*.

Having successfully, Kant believes, thwarted all attempts at natural theology using theoretical reason, he concludes that it is not possible to gain knowledge of an original being using any method which is akin to the ways people know the other things that they know.²⁵ What theoretical reason *is* useful for is correcting knowledge of the supreme being derived from other sources, and assessing the internal consistency and external coherence of such knowledge. This Kant sees as an important, though largely negative, use.²⁶ Finally, Kant grants that his arguments against the human ability to prove the existence of a supreme being also indicate an inability to prove that such a being doesn't exist.²⁷

II. CRITIQUE

A. Kant's Definitions

Kant begins his discussion, commendably, with a detailed discussion of the meanings of the terms he is going to be using. Defining one's terms is essential to effective discussion and to the dialectical advancement of philosophical issues. But Kant's definitions are useful beyond their role as an introduction to his discussion of theology. In his definitions Kant makes some significant distinctions that fine tune the ideas of/approaches to

theology. Kant specifically wants to critique the attempt to use theoretical reason to apply the method of natural physico-theology to obtain speculative theoretical knowledge about the author of the world. He does not attempt to critique revealed theology, deist theology, or moral theology in this discussion.

Several weaknesses appear in Kant's series of definitions. He asserts that the result of transcendental theology is deism, and that deists believe that it is possible to know the existence but not the attributes of the creator. This is probably not true of all deists, and does not seem to be a logical necessity; it seems conceivable that the author of the world could be entirely transcendent but still have knowable attributes, of which transcendence itself may be one.²⁸ He also asserts that the result of natural theology is theism, and that theists believe that it is possible to know both the existence and at least some of the attributes of the author of the world. But it seems at least conceivable that a theist might believe in an immanent and personal God who is hidden from human knowledge either by His own choice or by some limitation of human ability. Furthermore, it seems possible that a study of natural theology could result in conclusions favorable to a transcendental, deistic theology, perhaps emphasizing the lack of Divine intervention to prevent evil while still affirming the necessity of an original cause of the world. But these weaknesses do not detract significantly from Kant's main purpose in this discussion. Perhaps they are merely the result of permissible generalizations. Over all, his definitions are useful.

B. Kant's Arguments

In his first argument, Kant points out that natural theology relies on cause-effect relationships to infer the existence and attributes of God from empirical evidence. Kant asserts that cause and effect apply only to the empirical realm and therefore cannot be used to infer anything about a transcendent God. But Kant does not substantiate this assertion limiting cause and effect to the empirical realm. He asserts that God is not an empirical object. But in describing God as "the original being" Kant implies that his concept of God includes viewing God as the cause of all else, including the empirical realm. Therefore cause and effect is not strictly limited to the empirical realm, since the transcendent God is viewed as a cause.

In his second argument, Kant states that causes and effects are proportional to each other. He argues that no finite empirical effect is of sufficient scope to indicate a cause of the magnitude of God. But it is entirely possible that the material universe is of infinite scope. Time may be of infinite duration, and some theists have argued that God is the cause

of it. Furthermore, God could be inferred as the cause of some finite item which cannot be explained by reference to any other cause.²⁹

Furthermore, Kant does allow a transcendental approach to speculative theology in what he calls "moral theology" (see footnote 9). If moral theology operates using cause-effect relationships (Kant does not say that it does, but neither does he suggest another mechanism), it stands as a counter-example to Kant's assertion concerning the problem of cause-effect inference and non-empirical entities.

A more significant argument comes from Kant's observation that transcendental questions demand transcendental answers. This problem has troubled many theologians, and is the main point of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.³⁰ The difficulty of describing a transcendental subject using man's empirically-oriented speech has led to the widespread use of anthropomorphisms when trying to describe God. Such descriptions have only limited success. But limited success is not failure.

Kant seems to believe that the most basic problem facing attempts at constructing a natural theology is epistemological: knowledge of the original being necessitates the extension of knowledge beyond the limits of empirical experience to the realm of ideas. Synthetic *a priori* knowledge is a description of the formal conditions of an empirical experience.³¹ But God (according to Kant) is not experienced empirically. Therefore God cannot be known synthetically, neither through synthesis of empirical experience nor through the synthetic *a priori*.

In response to this, it need only be hypothesized that the original being is the penultimate condition of any empirical experience, not merely as the author of the world, but also as the cause of the world's continued existence (a doctrine which many theists hold). A God who is active in the world would be empirically knowable through His actions. This argument is similar to Kant's first argument (from cause and effect), and the response is similar as well.

Kant's suggestion, that theoretical reason is useful for correcting knowledge of the supreme being derived from other sources and for assessing the internal consistency and external coherence of such knowledge, seems accurate. His acknowledgement that his arguments against the human ability to prove the existence of a supreme being also indicate an inability to prove that such a being doesn't exist is perhaps gracious, but since his arguments are not up to the first task, they are not sufficient for the latter either.

CONCLUSION

In this discussion on natural theology, Kant seeks to examine the use of theoretical reason in obtaining speculative theoretical knowledge of the type he calls "natural physico-theology." He argues, successively, that the original being cannot be known from the natural world because cause-effect relationships only apply to empirical entities; that an infinite original being cannot be inferred from a finite natural world because of the proportional correspondence between causes and their effects; that empirical data cannot provide answers to transcendental questions; and that it is impossible to know a transcendental being by means of a synthetic *a priori*. Based upon these arguments Kant concludes that the use of theoretical reason in the undertaking of natural physico-theology does not provide any veridical knowledge of the original being.

Kant's arguments have been examined and found wanting. His "Critique of All Theology Based Upon Speculative Principles of Reason", while stimulating reading, is vitally flawed. It does not significantly undermine the enterprise of natural theology.

ENDNOTES

¹Romans 1:18-20, my translation

²Far from being trivialized in this "post-modern" age, Kant has become a spring-board for a variety of 'relativisms' and is still very widely read in university classrooms. Therefore it is important that the Christian apologist be familiar with Kant's arguments on philosophy of religion.

³Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 525-531.

⁴Ibid, 525.

⁵Ibid, 525.

⁶Ibid, 525.

⁷Ibid, 525.

⁸Ibid, 525. This phrase is ambiguous, but is not essential to Kant's thesis.

⁹Ibid, 525.

¹⁰Ibid, 525.

¹¹Ibid, 526.

¹²Ibid, 526.

¹³As opposed to "natural knowledge", which is knowledge of what ought to be. Ibid, 526.

¹⁴Ibid, 526.

¹⁵Ibid, 527.

¹⁶Ibid, 526. "Speculative or theoretical reason forces us to transcend the limits of experience and think the unconditioned." C. Stephen Evans, *Subjectivity and Religious Belief*, (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1978),

¹⁹For Kant, "practical reason" is the instrument for obtaining *a priori* practical knowledge.

¹⁷Kant's arguments in this section appear in different formulations elsewhere in his first critique, eg: "For how can any experience ever be adequate to an idea? The peculiar nature of the latter consists just in the fact that no experience can ever be equal to it. The transcendental idea of a necessary and all-sufficient original being is so overwhelmingly great, so high above everything empirical, the latter being always conditioned, that it leaves us at a loss, partly because we can never find in experience material sufficient to satisfy such a concept, and partly because it is always in the sphere of the conditioned that we carry out our search, seeking there ever vainly for the unconditioned - no law of any empirical synthesis giving us an example of any such unconditioned or providing the least guidance in its pursuit." Kant, *Pure Reason*, 518.

¹⁸Ibid, 527.

¹⁹Ibid, 527-8.

²⁰Ibid, 529.

²¹Kant does allow a transcendental approach to speculative theology in what he calls "moral theology", "...the only theology of reason which is possible is that which is based upon moral laws or seeks guidance from them." Ibid, 528-9. In his preference for moral theology and aversion to

natural theology Kant echoed the popular sentiment of the Enlightenment, see G.E. Michaelson, *The Historical Dimensions of a Rational Faith: The Role of History in Kant's Religious Thought*, (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), 55ff.

²²Kant, *Pure Reason*, 529. Kant does not explain how physico-theological proofs can lend weight to other proofs if physico-theological proofs are not sound in themselves.

²³H.W. Cassirer, *Kant's First Critique: An Appraisal of the Permanent Significance of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1954), 313. This is nicely rephrased by Cassirer, "...reason actually begins with common experience, i.e. something existing; and it concludes that, if the latter is to preserve any stability at all, it must be made to rest on the absolute necessary." Hegel is almost poetic, "The deduction of the categories, setting out from the organic Idea of productive imagination, loses itself in the mechanical relation of a unity of self-consciousness which stands in antithesis to the empirical manifold, either determining it or reflecting on it. Thus transcendental knowledge transforms itself into formal knowledge [i.e., knowledge of the identity of form only]. G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (NY: State University of New York Press, 1977), 92.

²⁴Kant, *Pure Reason*, 529.

²⁵Ibid, 530.

²⁶Ibid, 530.

²⁷Ibid, 531.

²⁸Wood points out that "Kant's definition of "deism"...is idiosyncratic" and suggests that it was "a device to deflect reproach from Kant's own heterodox views." Wood in Philip J. Rossi and Michael Wreen, eds., *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1.

²⁹This Kant himself seems to observe in a later work, "Purposiveness in the effects always presupposes understanding in the cause." Immanuel Kant, *Lectures On Philosophical Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood and Gertrude M. Clark (London: Cornell University Press, 1978), 101.

³⁰David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980). Kant is believed to have been familiar with this work; Clement C.J. Webb, *Kant's Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), 52.

³¹Kant, *Pure Reason*, 529.