

# A Critical Examination on Kant's Religious Argument for God's Existence: Concerning Palmquist's Analysis

Kim, Juyong  
Sogang Univ.

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## ● I. Introduction

Despite the resolute declaration of the impossibility of metaphysical arguments for God's existence in *Critique of Pure Reason* (hereafter CPR), Kant did recognize the necessity of God in the practical realm. Broadly known is Kant's moral argument that we require God as a postulate for our practical world to be consistent. His argument depends on the idea of the highest good which Kant thinks we must pursue, for which we must expect the causal order of nature to be efficacious to pursue such state, that is, the correspondence between the highest virtue and the highest happiness. This leads to the idea of an entity that made the causal world as such, which is God.<sup>1)</sup> However, this abstract idea of God proved by moral argument does not seem to directly lead to God we serve in churches of historical religion. Stephen Palmquist suggests that there is a new argument, a *religious* argument for existence of God, which "goes well beyond the postulates" (2009:20). What differentiates the religious argument from postulates is that God's actual existence is required for the establishment of a concrete religious community.

What I shall do in this paper is to critically examine the religious argument. In the next chapter (II) I briefly describe the structure of the argument that Palmquist derives from the early passages of the Third Piece in Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason (hereafter Rel.). At the end of the chapter, it is made clear that the concept of *Gesinnung*<sup>2)</sup> plays a

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1) Evans, C. Stephen, "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God," (2014), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-arguments-god/> (accessed 2020.02.20)

2) The word "*Gesinnung*", which means "the first subjective basis for the adoption of moral

crucial role in establishing the argument, which leads to an examination of *Gesinnung* to clarify where it lies in the Kantian explanation of rational will (III). The next chapter points out that the private character of *Gesinnung* is philosophically problematic and such weak point is evitable (IV). I briefly point out that the private concept of it is philosophically problematic and an alternative, non-private understanding of *Gesinnung* is possible. Despite its vulnerable point, I emphasize the significance of this argument, comparing it with theoretical arguments (which Kant refuted) and the moral argument that Kant himself provided (V).

## ● II. The Outline of Kant's Religious Argument

Kant defines a concept of 'ethical state of nature', which is distinguished from Hobbes's notion of "juridical state of nature" (Rel., 6:95). In such a state, each moral agent themselves are the final authority of their moral law. In other words, the only principle that dominates in an ethical state of nature is "should makes good", a parallel of "might makes right" in its juridical counterpart (Palmquist, 2016: 256f). The ethical state of nature is the state of "incessant aggression against the good principle" (Rel., 6:97), in which evil cannot be fully overcome. Although in the first half of Religion Kant discusses the possibility of conversion, it cannot be a complete solution, for it still means that a converted person continues to struggle with evil in their action (Palmquist, 2016: 252). To be

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maxims" (Rel., 6:25), is in many cases translated to 'disposition', or rarely 'conviction'. But since 'disposition' in a usual sense stands for the natural tendency of action (from which Kant strictly differentiates *Gesinnung*) and the most translators have the latter for 'Überzeugung', I use the original German word in this article.

completely victorious against radical evil, human beings have to escape this ethical chaos and establish an ethical community.

Here is where Kant's four-step argument starts. Palmquist depicts the broad outline of the argument as follows. (1) Human beings as a species have a duty to promote the highest good as a common good. For we are rational beings, and for Kant, this duty is analytically implied in the concept of rational being (Palmquist, 2009: 12). (2) To achieve this end as a real common good, it has to be done by a unifying principle that goes through every principle of maxims in all individual human beings. This new community is different from any kind of political community that functions by external laws (Palmquist, 2009: 13). (3) Nevertheless, it is such a unique duty that we are not able to see how it could be possible. This step is supported by the fact that we cannot look through our hearts and thus cannot be certain whether every heart can be unified under one single principle (Palmquist, 2009: 14). (4) Therefore, the existence of a higher moral being who could be a lawgiver whose legislation unifies every rational being into one principle is presupposed (Palmquist, 2009: 14-15).

Kant represents God in several places as warranting the possibility of the Highest Good, and the religious argument also depends on the "ought implies can" principle. Indeed, Palmquist argues that denying the presence of God leads to an absurd conclusion that we have a duty to establish an ethical community that we are never able to achieve (Palmquist, 2009: 17). However, by introducing God as the unifier of individual human minds, it increases the danger of compromising the establishment of the ethical community as a moral achievement. Forming an ethical community is a duty to moral human beings and

thus must be possible for ourselves. However, even if Palmquist says that the argument still leaves space for human endeavors toward self-improvement (2009: 15), how one could regard it as our duty in a strict sense if it is not possible without the divine aid? “Ought implies can” says that we are only morally obliged within our capabilities, while the argument seems to require a duty that cannot be solely done by ourselves. It is the same problem that surrounds the idea of the Highest Good, the problem that we are required to fulfill what is beyond our power.<sup>3)</sup> Consequently, as Lawrence Pasternack rightly points, the argument entails “a danger of undercutting the imputability of moral achievement of God did some of the moral work for us” (2017: 462-463. original emphasis).

My main interest is to discuss this problem with respect to *Gesinnung*, because the type of divine power the religious argument attempts to prove is that of bringing our manifold *Gesinnungen* into a union. It must thus appeal to the inscrutability of individual *Gesinnung*, which states why forecasting the possibility of realizing our duty is impossible for a human level. The main ground for the inconceivability of realizing an ethical community is that “one cannot observe the maxims, not even always in oneself” (Rel., 6:20), which more accurately means “human individuals cannot see into the dispositions [Gesinnungen]” (Palmquist, 2009: 14). In short, the reason why we leave the possibility of the ethical community to the realm of beliefs is that we cannot see one another’s *Gesinnung*, which leads to the presupposition of God.

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3) See Pasternack (2017: 435-436) for a brief outline of the problem of the Highest Good.

### ● III. The Concept of *Gesinnung* in Moral Agency

As discussed above, *Gesinnung* has a great significance, functioning as a hinge to operate the argument (and in fact in many themes in Religion such as conversion, service to God, etc.). Before I move to the main problem, I would like to clarify the actual meaning of this concept and the role it plays in moral decision-making. *Gesinnung* plays a crucial role not only throughout Religion but also in works on practical philosophy such as *Groundwork on Metaphysics of Morals* (hereafter GMM). In *Groundwork* it is mentioned in relation to maxim. Kant says that “the essentially good in the action consists in the disposition [Gesinnung]” (GMM, 4:416), which has the same meaning as the following: “A good will is not good because of what it effects ... but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself” (GMM, 4:394). Also note the following phrase insisting that “their worth does not consist in the effects arising from them ... but in *dispositions* [Gesinnungen]” which is “*in maxims of the will* that in this way are ready to manifest themselves through actions” (GMM, 4:435, emphases added).

Now we are sure that *Gesinnung* is closely related to the ‘maxim of the will’ in a moral decision-making process (and therefore perhaps crucial to the process), but how it is related specifically? In *Religion*, in a footnote before the Comment chapter, Kant gives an explicit explanation for the clue for understanding *Gesinnung*. Here he introduces what seems to be an infinite regression of maxims which is resolved by it.

That the first subjective basis for the adoption of moral maxims is inscrutable can provisionally already be seen from this: Since this adoption is free, its basis ... must be sought ... always in turn in a maxim; and since this maxim must likewise have its basis, ... one is referred back ever further ad infinitum in the series of subjective determining bases. (Rel., 6:25)

This footnote clearly shows that Kant regards “the first subjective basis for the adoption of moral maxims” as an ultimate ground, without which one’s practical reasoning of choice would result in the infinite regression of maxims. Since maxims must be grounded by reasons (rather than causes) which are other maxims, there has to be a final grounding to truly justify our rational choice.

Caswell gives a clear and specific elucidation of this. According to Caswell, we can think of our practical reasoning as a hierarchical system of maxims, in which a specific maxim fits under a more general maxim (Caswell, 2006: 193). For example, suppose that a person yields her seat for a pregnant woman in the subway by a maxim “I yield my seat for who needs it more”. One can ask her the reason for her maxim and she states a more general maxim that “I put consideration for others before my benefit”. We can repeatedly ask why, and she answers the question by giving more and more general maxims. However, the answer cannot be given endlessly (or even if it can, it cannot be a rational principle in that it cannot be ultimately justified), then we presuppose we have *Gesinnung*, which is inscrutable in that “no deeper ground can be found to justify its adoption” (Caswell, 2006: 196). *Gesinnung* is the principle that is the final ground and justification of our maxim, which Caswell properly names

as “moral character” or “moral attitude” (Caswell, 2006: 195) determining the direction of all our moral actions.

However, this notion of *Gesinnung* is not only inscrutable in the sense that we can have no further justification of it, but also in that it is unknowable to others (and sometimes even to the moral agent themselves) (Rel., 6:20). Whether it is universally communicable is the feature that crucially differentiates *Gesinnung* from other kinds of *Überzeugungen* (Palmquist, 2015: 250).

## ● IV. Inscrutability of *Gesinnung* and an Alternative Model

So far, the preceding explanation gives us evidence to suspect that Kant is appealing to the privacy of *Gesinnung* in his religious argument. This impression leads to an interpretation that, just as Berkeley’s *esse est percipi* resolves itself into the presupposition of an omnipotent perceiver of the world, the Kantian conception of private *Gesinnung* calls the need for the perceiver of it, which is the main target of Wittgensteinian Private Language Argument. However, we have evidence against the suspicion that *Gesinnung* is an inner *mental episode* that only its bearer has privileged access. We can find an example of it in where Kant makes a distinction between phenomenal states of mind and *Gesinnung* in the second Critique:

The sensible life has, with respect to the intelligible consciousness of its existence (consciousness of freedom), the absolute unity of a phenomenon, which, so far as it contains merely appearances of the

disposition [Gesinnung] ... must be appraised not in accordance with the natural necessity that belongs to it as appearance but in accordance with the absolute spontaneity of freedom. (CPrR, 5:99, original emphasis)

As Kant himself points out, scholars emphasize that *Gesinnung* be distinguished from mere psychological (phenomenal) states so that it correctly understood as a suitable ground for moral reasoning.<sup>4)</sup> *Gesinnung*, considered as a mental state, cannot have a role in reasoning since it then would fall under the realm of mere empirical facts that could at most be a cause but not a reason for any moral action. Kant's passage above also fits well into Palmquist's remark that "even though an *ordinary* (moral or religious) *Gesinnung* may *not* be universally communicable, due to its inherently subjective character, the *correlate* of this mental state that accompanies an objective judgement is intersubjectively communicable" (Palmquist, 2015: 250-251, original emphasis).

Even if so, the inscrutability of *Gesinnung* still is a problem. Even if mental states as manifestations of *Gesinnung* remain communicable, they do not provide evidence for judging whether an agent is morally good or evil. They provide, at most, juridical evidence to find whether he or she is guilty. That we cannot tell any differences of moral character between people results in a more serious problem than we think, namely, we cannot help but be eternally skeptical about the moral characters of others. Of course this leads to one important claim Kant says in arguing the externally non-coercive feature of the moral law. However, if it is supposed that we

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4) For example, Peters (2018) differentiates Kant's *Gesinnung* from Aristotelian account of practical reasoning, which she regards as a typically psychological model. See also Palmquist (2015).

are not certain on one's true moral intention, then what does it mean to say that he or she is good or evil? Is it necessary to allow a skeptic to persist that someday everyone may turn out to be evil in their heart?

It is not a good solution to claim that Kant is appealing to a questionable metaphysical substratum in noumena, which is involved in another complicated question whether *Gesinnung* belongs to the foundational choice (close to Sartrean *projet fondamental*) or to the foundational personality of choice (close to Aristotelian *hexis*) (Allison, 1990: 138). I find Allison's interpretation convincing when he says that *Gesinnung* is a choice of "ranking or prioritizing" of "objective practical principles, both the moral law and the principle of one's own happiness or self-love", which belongs neither to the former model nor to the latter (Allison, 1990: 142-143). What I hold is that nevertheless there is no philosophical need to suppose *Gesinnung* as so mystical that nobody else can see one's true heart.

There is an alternative way to deny the private and incommunicable feature of *Gesinnung* above and at the same time to hold our view on it as described right above. Without presuming the perpetual uncertainty about other moral intentions, one can construe the fundamental adoption of maxims as it is by understanding it as playing a role of what Wittgenstein calls "hinges"<sup>5)</sup> in *On Certainty*. Now I shall attempt to briefly describe the important features that they have. Basically they are ultimate beliefs as rules that are presupposed in order to operate our language game. First, they cannot be categorized as a sort of knowledge, in that they cannot be

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5) Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *On Certainty*. Translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. § 341. 'Hinge propositions,' 'axis,' etc. These metaphors stand for the same kind of beliefs being stated below. Numbers with 'S' stands for the original paragraph number in *On Certainty*.

justified or refuted (Wittgenstein, 1969: §359; §655). Second, similarly, hinges are certain and cannot be erroneous or subject to doubt, since they are necessary conditions and standards to enable doubts and errors.<sup>6)</sup> Thirdly, Hinges are not in themselves hinges; they are themselves only in relation to other propositions that are not hinges, implying a sense of the historicity of them.<sup>7)</sup>

If we take this Wittgensteinian understanding of *Gesinnung*, then we are certain on other's moral convictions and safely justify the establishment of an ethical community, but without any need to appeal to the idea of a knower of everyone's true heart so as to escape the state of ethical anarchy. Nevertheless, this interpretation does not mean that the divine aid remains redundant in it. The relationship between the divine aid and human endeavors can be set differently, for example, as Pasternack suggested: He argues that we can think of God as aiding in various ways for those who tend to fall pessimistic on the possibility of the community. He can give a helping hand to them by revelations, moral exemplars in the Gospels, or sometimes miracles (Pasternack, 2017: 463). Albeit not directly providing the conditions of possibility for our moral achievements, he can be guiding us in the right direction in such ways. Also note that only God can still distribute the proportionate amount of happiness according to morality.<sup>8)</sup>

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6) "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty." (Wittgenstein, 1969: § 115) "In certain circumstances a man cannot make a *mistake*." (Wittgenstein, 1969: § 155, original emphasis)

7) Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of the channel. "It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid." (Wittgenstein, 1969: § 96)

8) For a detailed analysis, see Pasternack (2017, 448-449).

One possible objection is that it contradicts a Kantian distinction between the juridical and the ethical, which is briefly mentioned above. In another phrase of *Religion* Kant says: “for the political community to coerce its citizens to enter into an ethical community would be a contradiction (in *adjecto*), since the latter—in its very concept—carries with it freedom from coercion. ... [W]oe to the legislator who sought to bring about through coercion a [public] constitution directed to ethical purposes!” (Rel., 6:96)

If we confirm the non-sociality of *Gesinnung*, then we are clearly having a ground to differentiate morality from the socio-political domain. The nonsocial interpretation would call for a divine connective force for an ethical community. On the other hand, it does not knock down the competing version, the societally understood concept of *Gesinnung*. New streams of social and political philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (such as Foucault or Adorno) question the traditional division of morality and the socio-political domain, doubting the idea of a pure determination in a vacuum, free from social and political influences. Of course this, too, cannot wipe out its counterpart, since a mere interpretive difference would not formulate any sort of knock-down argument against each other. My aim is fulfilled as I showed that an alternative understanding of *Gesinnung* is *possible*, and that mere fact is sufficient to undermine the necessity of religious argument and expose its weak point.

## ● V. Concluding Remarks: The The Significance of the Religious Argument

Even if the religious argument is vulnerable to some objections, I

find that it remains as one of the original and convincing arguments that attempt to prove God. Indeed, it does have a considerable advantage compared to other types of arguments. According to Kant in Transcendental Dialectic of CPR, traditional metaphysical arguments are categorized into three types: physico-theological, cosmological and ontological argument. Kant's main point in the Dialectic is that these theoretical arguments attempt to attain knowledge about an idea that cannot in principle be given as an object to reason. Theoretical arguments fail since they exceed the bounds of human reason. But what I want to focus on is that they do not succeed even if the argument is found valid and sound. Even if they had achieved their objective, they would not successfully grasp the idea of God as he grounds our religious life as Christians. They cease as soon they reach an abstract metaphysical entity.

The [physico-theological] proof could at most establish a highest *architect of the world*, who would always be limited by the suitability of the material on which he works, but not a *creator of the world*, to whose idea everything is subject, which is far from sufficient for the great aim that one has in view, namely that of proving an all-sufficient original being. (CPR, A627/B655, original emphasis)

Kant is pointing that the argument fails to specify the concrete, *Christian* conception of God among far weaker, heretic<sup>9)</sup> ones. By the same reason, the cosmological and ontological argument at most prove some abstract concepts of the first unmoved mover or the most perfect being,

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9) Probably what Kant has in mind would be Platonic demiurge (demiourgos), an artisan god who gives things form to become physical objects from *given* materials.

without rich religious descriptions to specify the exact concept of God we aim. As Palmquist rightly pointed, “The traditional arguments, being theoretical, would not provide a suitable theological basis for religion, *even if they succeeded.*” (2009: 4-5, original emphasis)

The moral argument accomplishes far more than them, providing the moral implication of God, but also fails to give the *religious* implication. It remains too abstract to prove him as religious. This is where the religious argument has a distinctive advantage. That the community to be established is an ethical one makes the argument naturally include the moral connotation that Kant in the second *Critique* achieved, but it goes beyond the moral argument. The ethical community as introduced in the religious argument can be founded only with religious beliefs, otherwise individuals would remain skeptical to the true hearts of one another, thus eternally struggling against evil without hope of overcoming it. It requires a leap of *faith* to be successfully established. Therefore, the concept of God the religious argument reaches is necessarily God who gives the clue of redemption to people struggling against evil, providing a firm bridge between them. It might not be the ultimate solution but the successful argument to derive the existence of God in quite a proper (Christian) sense.

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## • Abstract

# A Critical Examination on Kant's Religious Argument for God's Existence: Concerning Palmquist's Analysis

Kim, Juyong  
Sogang Univ.

In this article, I critically examine the religious argument for the existence of God, which Palmquist formulated from Kant's Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason. After showing the structure of the argument, I point the problematic point of the argument and focus on the concept of *Gesinnung*. The privateness of *Gesinnung* is problematized in the analysis of it, and I briefly suggest that an alternative account of the *Gesinnung* is possible. Yet I emphasize the advantage that this argument has compared to other competing arguments.

## • Keywords

Ethical Community, *Gesinnung*, Kant, Proofs of God's Existence, will,

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