

# Kant's ethical-theological argument for God's existence in Fyodor Golubinsky's rational theology

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**Abstract.** In the philosophy lectures of Fyodor Golubinsky (1797–1854) one can find among others the section “Ethical-theological Argument for God’s Existence according to Kant”. It is interesting that the Russian philosopher and theologian should take this ethical argument from Kant’s philosophy, seeing that it was unpopular at that time. Golubinsky goes as far as to shield Kant’s ethics from charges of egoism and prove that it is oriented against egoism. Kant’s argument for God’s existence is founded only upon his ethics since theoretical reason cannot prove God’s existence, but practical reason can. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant claims that God is a regulative idea of reason, which has special meaning as a postulate in practical reason. This postulate arises when we speak about the Guarantor that can satisfy the main human requirement – achieving beatitude and, through it, moral perfection. Kant proves this by reasoning from people’s experience, namely that virtue during a person’s lifetime is not rewarded with corresponding happiness. Therefore, the one who can achieve this must exist. Golubinskiy took this reasoning as a proof of God’s existence. At first, he gives a free account whose original source is unknown, and then he gives two quotes from Kant’s works. Here it is important to understand two things: 1) the adequacy of this reception and 2) the source of Golubinsky’s free account. It is necessary therefore to compare Kant’s arguments for God’s existence which are given in his three *Critiques* with Golubinsky’s free account and try to reach clarity on these points.

**Keywords:** Kant, Golubinsky, rational theology, God’s existence, moral argument, metaphysic, moral law, happiness

## 1 Introduction

The reflection of Immanuel Kant on the central metaphysical question – whether God exists, and how this can be proven using human rational powers – was an important landmark in the history of metaphysics. On the one hand, he comprehensively criticised the so-called traditional proofs for the existence of God – the ontological, cosmological and physico-

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theological arguments. On the other hand, he proposed his own moral argument. The Kantian proof and the criticism of rational theology attracted attention from the philosopher's contemporaries and succeeding generations of thinkers.

In Russia, Kantian philosophy elicited an equivocal response (*cf.* Krouglov, 2009). It took much time for the ideas of Kant to be embraced, understood and construed as a contribution to human thought. Surprising as it sounds, in the early stages of the Russian reception of Kantian philosophy, they stirred up particular interest at Theological Academies – educational institutions under the aegis of the Russian Orthodox Church. This happened despite Kant's views being very much at odds with the tenets of Orthodox Christian theology. The critical angle from which he viewed problems significant for the Christian doctrine, such as the existence of God and the soul's immortality, could not but raise concerns among members of Theological Academies. Yet for several academic philosophers Kant was a figure with whom a follower of Christian dogma could not fully agree but who, nevertheless, could not be ignored. One of those who considered Kantian philosophy a riveting presence in history, philosophy and epistemology was Fyodor Golubinsky.

This study uses the case of Golubinsky to demonstrate that Kant aroused strong interest among Russian academic theologians of the first half of the nineteenth century, and his ideas had an adequate reception in those circles. To achieve this goal, firstly, I will discuss Golubinsky as a thinker and outline the main themes of his philosophical reflection. Then I will analyse a section in Golubinsky's metaphysics entitled "Speculative Theology" (a version of rational theology), part of which is the "ethical-theological argument for God's existence according to Kant". To understand how different Kant's and Golubinsky's positions are on traditional rational theology, I will give an overview of Kant's treatment of traditional proofs of the existence of God. Finally, I will approach the cardinal problem of the study by conducting on the one hand a comparative analysis of Kant's ethical-theological argument as presented in Golubinsky's rational theology and, on the other, three versions of the Kantian moral proof from the famous *Critiques*.

## **2 Fyodor Golubinsky and his philosophical position**

Fyodor Golubinsky (1797–1854) was a philosopher, theologian, and professor at Moscow Theological Academy (MTA). Many of his peers and younger contemporaries stressed his vocation as a philosopher. Sergey Glagolev (1897, pp. 440-444), another professor at MTA, wrote that Golubinsky had familiarised himself with contemporary German philosophy, including that of Kant, as a young man. The Russian essayist and writer of the first half of the nineteenth century, Nikolay Stankevich, called Golubinsky in his letters an authority on Kantian philosophy (Krouglov, 2009, p. 212). Golubinsky was known to Schelling; the famous voyager, Baron von Haxthausen (1847, p. 83), described him as one of the most learned and educated clerics in Russia. Russian academia was also acquainted with Golubinsky. For example, Stepan Shevyrev, a professor at Moscow University, wrote warmly of him (*cf.* Vvedensky, 1897, pp. 484-487). Golubinsky emerged as a philosopher, and his philosophical views were formed under the supervision of his predecessor in the MTA Department of Philosophical Studies, Professor Vasily Kutnevich. The latter was a student of Ignaz Feßler, whose vision was dominated by Kantian philosophy (Nikitin, 2018). Although Golubinsky never published a book summarising his philosophical ideas, notes of his lectures on philosophy, which were kept by his students and endorsed by Golubinsky himself, survive to this day.

Golubinsky's philosophy has the form of a metaphysical system reminiscent of that of Christian von Wolff. Wolffian and Golubinsky's metaphysics differ significantly in their structure. This applies to all the parts except for ontology, which, in both cases, precedes the main branches of metaphysics. Wolffian metaphysics begins with subjects and their self-

reflection, continues with the world and finally explores the omniperfect being – God. In Golubinsky's metaphysics it is *vice versa*: rational theology antecedes rational psychology and cosmology. This is explained by the idea of the Infinite, essential to the Russian thinker's philosophy. He tests this idea, as it appears in the human mind, within ontology, which paves the way for metaphysics proper. A crucial link in Golubinsky's argumentation is the law found in human reason: everything finite and conditional should be matched to the Infinite and Unconditional (Golubinsky, 1884, p. 72). This law presupposes the idea of the Infinite (*ibid.*, p. 78) which is the foundation of Golubinsky's metaphysics. Moreover, the former determines the structure of the latter. All fundamental concepts of his philosophy were refracted through the prism of this idea. He tried to expound on the idea of the Infinite in the first chapter of his metaphysics – rational theology.

Golubinsky's speculative theology is built on the facts of the existence of humans and the world, which betray traces of the existence of God, and is very much in line with European traditional natural theology. In his system speculative theology consists of three congruent parts, preceded by a brief history of this branch of theology. In the first part Golubinsky considers arguments for the existence of God.

All arguments for the existence of God – the ontological, cosmological, physico-theological, ethico-theological and historical arguments – are based on the idea of the Infinite. Golubinsky (1886, p. 33) believes that the most important is the ontological argument. Yet he considers it precarious since it reasons from the action to the cause, i.e. from the idea of the Infinite in the human mind to the actual existence of the Infinite Being (*ibid.*, pp. 33-34). Despite the instability of the ontological argument, all the others are founded upon it. Golubinsky's cosmological argument is built entirely on the initial law of understanding – the principle of sufficient reason, which states that everything should have a sufficient cause. Therefore, in their search for the sufficient cause, people arrive at the Original Cause and do not progress any further (*ibid.*, pp. 44-45). As Golubinsky shows, the physico-theological argument is grounded in the order that humans witness in the world, as well as in purposiveness and beauty. Still, as in the case of the cosmological argument, one does not here attain to the idea of God and settles for the idea of the Wise Designer (*ibid.*, pp. 55-56). Thus, the cosmological and physico-theological arguments are effective only in conjunction with the ontological argument, which, in its turn, is based on the idea of the Infinite.

### **3 Kant's view of traditional rational theology**

Golubinsky devotes particular attention to the moral argument proposed by Kant,<sup>1</sup> who had adopted a special perspective on rational theology and traditional arguments of the existence of God. The German philosopher maintains that a theoretical construction of the existence of God is impossible since God cannot be an object of possible experience: formal conditions of possible experience (the a priori forms of sensibility, pure concepts of reasons, and elements of understanding), which have exclusively immanent applications, i.e. relate solely to the objects of empirical knowledge, do not appertain to Him. Attempts to apply principles of the pure understanding to God include Him in the string of objects of experience. This inevitably makes God a conditioned thing, which contradicts the concept of God. Kant calls the cognition of God and His essence, i.e. an object that cannot be attained through any experience, speculative cognition and concludes that "all attempts of a merely speculative use of reason in regard to theology are entirely fruitless and by their internal constitution null and nugatory, but that the principles of reason's natural use do not lead at all to any theology" (*KrV*, A 636 / B 664; Kant, 1998, p. 586). Consequently, the Supreme Being remains an ideal for pure reason. This ideal can be neither proven nor refuted (*KrV*, A 642 / B 670; Kant, 1998,

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<sup>1</sup> Golubinsky calls this argument ethical-theological.

p. 589). The question arises as to the very possibility of rational theology. Kant says it is possible if underpinned by moral laws (*KrV*, A 637 / B 665; Kant, 1998, p. 586). He builds his rational theology on practical philosophy, particularly morality, within which he offers a moral argument for the existence of God. Partially, Kant's vision of the possibility of proving the existence of God dates back to the pre-critical period, namely his work *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*. He demonstrates that "All arguments for the existence of God must derive from one or other of two sources: either from the concepts of the understanding of the merely *possible*, or from the empirical concept of the *existent*" (*BDG*, AA 2:156; Kant, 1992, p. 195). Although the Kantian position on rational theology and traditional arguments for the existence of God was very well known to Golubinsky, it did not in any way affect the attitude of the latter to Kant or his moral argument.

## **4 Golubinsky's reception of the Kantian moral argument**

In his philosophy Golubinsky presents the Kantian moral argument as follows: first, he gives a free account the moral argument (Golubinsky, 1886, p. 68); second, he paraphrases Kant without a reference to the source (*ibid.*, pp. 69-70); finally, he provides a comment on the argument.

The free account of the Kantian argument in Golubinsky's lectures has the following structure:

- the thesis: we recognise the moral law in ourselves, which demands that we fulfil our duty;
- the antithesis: we recognise the need for happiness in ourselves;
- the idea of synthesis: we recognise the need for the supreme good in ourselves; purest morality must be wed to perfect happiness;
- the contradiction in the idea of synthesis: the union of happiness and beatitude is equally independent of our freedom, whereas happiness is contingent on external phenomena which we cannot influence in any way; it is also obvious that virtue is not rewarded with deserved happiness in earthly life;
- the search for a necessary reason for synthesis: if it is beyond human power to wed virtue to happiness, there should be a being that wants to and can do it. This being is God.

Both in Kant's texts (e.g. *KU*, AA 05: 450; Kant, 2000, pp. 315-316) and in Golubinsky's account (Golubinsky, 1886, p. 68) the ethico-theological argument is based on three premises: 1) the necessity of the moral law; 2) the desire to be happy; 3) the concept of the highest good (the ideal of the highest good), according to which maintaining human requirements can be met – moral perfection and beatitude. The latter leads to the idea of a union of happiness and virtue. Human experience often puts the first two premises at odds with each other. Together, they act as the thesis and antithesis. The ideal of the highest good is not synthesis per se, but only the idea of their synthesis. Synthesis requires that the necessary reason for it should be found. The search for the necessary reason takes one beyond sensible experience and leads one to suppose a Being that can perform the synthesis of happiness and virtue. From here, the properties of this Being are conceived which rational theology attributes to God.

To understand how accurate Golubinsky's version of the ethico-theological argument is, Golubinsky's account should be compared with at least three versions of the Kantian moral argument as presented in the three *Critiques*. In so doing, an attempt will be made to identify the source of Golubinsky's account.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Comments on the table:

**Table 1.** The ethico-theological argument in Kant and Golubinsky.

Kant			Golubinsky
Critique of Pure Reason  ( <i>KrV</i> , A 806-814 / B 834-842; Kant, 1998, pp. 677-681)	Critique of Practical Reason  ( <i>KpV</i> , AA 05: 124-125; Kant, 2015, pp. 100-101)	Critique of the Power of Judgment  ( <i>KU</i> , AA 05: 450; Kant, 2000, pp. 315-316)	Rational theology  (Golubinsky, 1886, p. 68)
<b>1. Thesis</b>			
“I assume that there are really pure moral laws, which determine completely a priori (without regard to empirical motives, i.e., happiness) the action and omission [...] these laws command absolutely.” <b>(III)</b>	The moral law leads to morality. <b>(I)</b>	“The moral law, as the formal rational condition of the use of our freedom, obligates us by itself alone, without depending on any sort of end as a material condition; yet it also determines for us, and indeed does so a priori, a final end, to strive after which it makes obligatory for us.” <b>(I)</b>	“We recognise the moral law in ourselves, which demands that we fulfil our duty [...]” [tr. D.R.].
<b>2. Antithesis</b>			
“Happiness is the satisfaction of all of our inclinations [...].” <b>(I)</b>	“Happiness is the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence everything goes according to his wish and will, and rests, therefore, on the harmony of nature with his whole end as well as with the essential determining ground of his will.” <b>(III)</b>	“[...] the highest physical good that is possible in the world and which can be promoted, as far as it is up to us, as a final end, is happiness [...].” <b>(III)</b>	“[...] at the same time we recognise that we have the need to achieve the highest good” [tr. D.R.].

1. The table shows three variants of the moral argument for the existence of God from Kant's three *Critiques*, as well as one variant from Golubinsky's rational theology.
2. The way premises are ordered in the Kantian argumentation in support of moral proofs is similar to their arrangement in Golubinsky's lectures.
3. Roman numerals show the initial order of premises Kant used in his moral argument for the existence of God.
4. To simplify the analysis of the variants of argumentation, the premises are presented as follows: 1) thesis → 2) antithesis → 3) idea of synthesis → 4) contradiction in the idea of synthesis → 5) search for and identification of a reason for synthesis.

<b>3. The idea of synthesis</b>			
<p>“[...] everyone has cause to hope for happiness in the same measure as he has made himself worthy of it in his conduct, and that the system of morality is therefore inseparably combined with the system of happiness, though only in the idea of pure reason.” <b>(IV)</b></p> <p>“Thus happiness in exact proportion with the morality of rational beings, through which they are worthy of it, alone constitutes the highest good of a world [...].” <b>(VI)</b></p>	<p>“The same law must also lead to the possibility of the second element of the highest good, namely happiness proportioned to that morality.” <b>(II)</b></p> <p>“Nevertheless, in the practical task of pure reason, that is, in the necessary pursuit of the highest good, such a connection is postulated as necessary.” <b>(V)</b></p>	<p>“[...] a final end [...] is the highest good in the world possible through freedom.” <b>(II)</b></p>	<p>“We do feel this essential need for virtue to be rewarded with an appropriate measure of happiness” [tr. D.R.].</p>
<b>4. The contradiction in the idea of synthesis</b>			
<p>“[...] the necessary connection of the hope of being happy with the unremitting effort to make oneself worthy of happiness that has been adduced cannot be cognized through reason if it is grounded merely in nature [...].” <b>(V)</b></p> <p>The pragmatic law “is grounded on empirical principles; for except by means of experience I can know neither which inclinations there are that would be satisfied nor what the natural causes are that could satisfy them.” The moral law “abstracts from inclinations and natural means of satisfying them, and considers only the freedom of a</p>	<p>“Consequently, there is not the least ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and the proportionate happiness of a being belonging to the world [...].” <b>(IV)</b></p>	<p>“However, given all of the capacities of our reason, it is impossible for us to represent these two requirements of the final end that is set for us by the moral law as both connected by merely natural causes and adequate to the idea of the final end as so conceived. Thus the concept of the practical necessity of such an end, by means of the application of our own powers, is not congruent with the theoretical concept of the physical possibility of producing it if we do not connect our freedom with any other causality (as a means) than that of nature.” <b>(IV)</b></p>	<p>“Whether happiness is wed to virtue equally does not depend on us. What depends on our freedom is the constitution of our morality, whereas happiness is conditional on the course of things, which is beyond our powers. Therefore, experience shows that, for the most part, virtue is not rewarded with well-deserved happiness in our fleeting life” [tr. D.R.].</p>

rational being [...].” <b>(II)</b>			
<b>5. Necessary reason for the idea of synthesis</b>			
“[...] the reality of which can be grounded on nothing other than the presupposition of a highest original good [...].” <sup>3</sup> <b>(VII)</b>	<p>“Accordingly, the existence of a cause of all nature, distinct from nature, which contains the ground of this connection, namely of the exact correspondence of happiness with morality, is also postulated.” <b>(VI)</b></p> <p>“Therefore the supreme cause of nature, insofar as it must be presupposed for the highest good, is a being that is the cause of nature by understanding and will (hence its author), that is, God.” <b>(VII)</b></p>	<p>“Consequently, we must assume a moral cause of the world (an author of the world) in order to set before ourselves a final end.” <b>(V)</b></p>	<p>“If it is beyond human ability to unite virtue and happiness, there should be a different Being that <i>wants to</i> and <i>can</i> do this – namely, reward the virtue with commensurate happiness. This entity is God alone” [tr. D.R.].</p>

The above comparison shows that each *Critique* could have been the source of the free account of the moral argument given in Golubinsky’s metaphysics. A number of factors, however, point to what source may have priority.

Firstly, after recounting the Kantian moral argument, Golubinsky gives a quotation which is a paraphrase of the first two paragraphs of “The Existence of God as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason” from the *Critique of Practical Reason* (*KpV*, AA 05: 124-125; Kant, 2015, pp. 100-101) as a *different* formulation of the ethical-theological argument (Golubinsky, 1886, pp. 69-70). This indicates that the second *Critique* cannot be the source of the account. Thus, there are only two candidates left. Secondly, the order of premises in Golubinsky’s account coincides almost exactly with the moral argument given in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. One can safely assume that Golubinsky based his free account of Kant’s moral argument on the third *Critique*. It is also important to examine two quotations following the

<sup>3</sup> Earlier Kant wrote that the ideal of the highest good is the “idea of such an intelligence, in which the morally most perfect will, combined with the highest blessedness, is the cause of all happiness in the world, insofar as it stands in exact relation with morality” (*KrV*, A 811 / B 839; Kant, 1998, p. 680).

passage on the ethico-theological argument. The source of the first one was not identified. Probably, Golubinsky's students compiled several slightly inaccurate quotations that he cited in his lectures.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned above, the second quotation is a free account of two paragraphs from the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

The above comparison proves that Golubinsky was acquainted with at least two Kantian *Critiques* and had a mostly adequate understanding of the philosophical ideas expressed in these books. Golubinsky reproduced the moral argument in the way that Kant had repeatedly done it himself, albeit the order of premises was changed. When commenting on this argument, Golubinsky stresses its importance and effectiveness and criticised it at the same time. He does not agree that the Kantian argument is the only and exhaustive one. Moreover, it is particular and subjective, which, Golubinsky (1886, p. 71) writes, was acknowledged by Kant himself (*KU*, AA 05: 450n; Kant, 2000, p. 315n). Nor is the Russian philosopher satisfied with the Kantian concept of the highest good, which overlooks another major need of the soul – the cognition of the truth (Golubinsky, 1886, pp. 71-72). Finally, the ethico-theological argument cannot turn to experience since reasons for rewarding virtue cannot be deduced from experience (*ibid.*, p. 72). Nonetheless, Golubinsky defends Kant from those who believe that the moral argument is infused with egoism. The Russian philosopher emphasises that Kant gives priority to the idea of law and duty (*ibid.*, p. 71). Regardless of this criticism and his relatively low opinion of Kant's moral argument, Golubinsky integrates it into his metaphysics in the way in which it is formulated in the main works of the German thinker.

## 5 Conclusion

On the one hand, the accounts of contemporaries and the quality of Golubinsky's reflection suggest that he was a prominent figure in Russian philosophy in the first half of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the recent literature on the history of philosophy has grossly underestimated him. Although his ideas were in line with traditional European rational theology, which made him an antagonist of Kant, at least in regard to the possibility of rational theology, Golubinsky paid scrupulous attention to the Kantian moral argument for the existence of God.

The above comparison of the accounts of the Kantian ethico-theological argument given in Golubinsky's rational theology and in the three *Critiques* demonstrates that the Russian philosopher was well acquainted with the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of Power of Judgment*. Golubinsky accurately reproduces Kant's moral argument, calling it the ethico-theological argument, and shields it from erroneous interpretations. The reception of this argument in Golubinsky's rational theology shows that, as soon as critical philosophy was imported into Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century, the ideas of the German philosopher were successfully embraced by religious academia. Unfortunately, the Russian Revolution interrupted that dialogue with Kant that had been cultivated at Theological Academies. It has not been resumed in full, albeit many Kantian ideas remain as relevant for the religious consciousness as they were in the time of Golubinsky.

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<sup>4</sup> "The pure practical application of reason consists in the prescription of practical laws, whereas all of these lead to the idea of the highest good as long as it can be attained through the power of freedom. The freedom of moral beings, however, is not sufficient for achieving the highest good; it can actualise only one of its aspects – morality. On the other hand, the supreme happiness, which is commensurate with morality, relates not to human freedom but to nature. To find this happiness, reason has to embrace the highest and absolutely independent good. This good is necessary not for us to deduce the importance of the moral law from the motive of retribution but for the notion of the highest good to acquire objective reality (*realitatem*), so that it ceases to be a mere ideal" (Golubinsky, 1886, p. 69; tr. D.R.).

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