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Andrew Chignell

Kant's Panentheism: The Possibility Proof of 1763 and Its Fate in the Critical Period

Introduction

For much of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, there was a story going around according to which Immanuel Kant, like Pierre Bayle and David Hume before him, tantalized pious readers with the occasional mention of God and faith, but was at bottom a fierce Enlightenment opponent of traditional religion. He devastated the ontological argument, laid waste to the other classical proofs, scorned revealed theology, denounced the *Schwärmerei* of the Swedenborgians, and developed a signature doctrine according to which we cannot know anything about supersensible beings like God and the soul. Any mention Kant does make of God (so the story goes) is either a half-hearted sop for pious commonfolk like his servant Lampe[1], or else a wink-wink-nod-nod diversion intended to keep Prussian censors happy.[2]

The past few decades of active research in this area[3] have revealed that this story is, if not entirely false, extremely misleading. In fact, Kant was raised a pious Lutheran and engaged in a great deal of constructive theological reflection during his sixty-year career—reflection that went far beyond the famous "moral proof" of God's existence on non-epistemic grounds. Inevitably, the *way* Kant thought about theoretical issues in theology evolved during those decades, as did his conception of what God is like. It is true that he develops his famous objections to the Anselmian-Cartesian ontological argument very early on: by 1763, he is already declaring that "existence is not a predicate at all" (*GP* 2:156.32). But he

1 This is Heinrich Heine's suggestion (1835 in 1921, vol. 3, 486).

2 Especially Johann Timotheus Hermes, the opinionated Lutheran pastor who was hired by Friedrich William II to vet all works on religion and theology.

3 The reevaluation began with Allen Wood's classic *Kant's Moral Religion* (1970) and continues, fifty years later, in his *Kant and Religion* (2020).

also *replaces* the traditional ontological proof with his own version based on the vision of God as the "material ground" of all real possibility. This conception of God—as the "most real being" (*ens realissimum*) that grounds all possibility—would play a key role in his metaphysical thinking for the rest of his career. It would also deeply influence subsequent German philosophy and theology. Hegel's Absolute, for example, plays a modal grounding role in his metaphysics that is analogous to the role played by Kant's *ens realissimum.*

The 1763 text in question is a book titled *The Only Possible Ground of Proof in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (hereafter *"GP"*). [4] Despite the title, the book contains the basis for *two* closely-related proofs—an *a priori* demonstration from facts about real possibility in general, and an *a posteriori* argument from the fact that the essences of things are "harmonious" in such a way that they fall under one elegant set of natural laws. The latter, "revised physico-theological" proof is intriguing but baffling; so far, it has not received much scholarly attention. [5] The first proof, however, has recently drawn a great deal of interest. It is typically referred to in the literature as Kant's "possibility proof."

Despite Kant's claims to originality, the main idea behind the possibility proof has its origins in the preceding German rationalist tradition. Leibniz states it in his *Monadology* of 1714:

> God is not only the source of existence, but also that of essences insofar as they are real—that is, the source of that which is real in possibility [...] without him there would be nothing real in possibles, and not only would nothing exist, but also nothing would be possible. (Leibniz 1714 §43 in 1875–90, vol. 6, 614 and in 1989, 218)

This passage (as well as various counterparts in Wolff[6]) shows that the main idea of the possibility proof—that modal facts must be grounded in some features of a necessary being—has a pre-Kantian history in rationalist thought (there are also scholastic and Augustinian precedents). This does not deter the younger Kant from making a few key adjustments to the modal theory and then declaring that his version is both new and also the *only* (*einzig*) possible basis for an *a priori* demonstration of God's existence.

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4 *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration Daseins Gottes* (1763).
5 Yong (2014) and Hoffer (2016) are important exceptions; they discuss this second proof and its connection to the first.
6 Compare Wolff: "[T]he understanding of God is the source of the essence of all things and his understanding is that which makes something possible (*der etwas möglich machet*), as it brings these representations before itself. Thus something is possible because it is represented by the divine understanding" (1720 in 1983, vol. 3, §975).

The main goal of Section 1 of this paper is to rehearse the pre-critical possibility proof and show that the being it delivers is not, or at least not obviously, the traditional perfect being of the classical monotheistic traditions. Rather, what emerges from the womb of Kant's proof, *malgré lui,* is something that he himself regarded as "monstrous" (*ungeheur*)—namely, a being that *contains* the universe rather than transcending it, and one that is thus at least partly extended in space and time (*OP* 21:50.53).

Ascribing a panentheistic picture to Kant would have been fighting words in eighteenth-century Königsberg.[7] But a few early commentators (such as Friedrich Jacobi) did openly remark on the Spinozistic logic of Kant's effort, and twenty-five years later (in the second *Critique* of 1788) Kant himself seems to acknowledge that his earlier argument could lead to a kind of Spinozism. The way to avoid the panentheistic result, he suggests there, is to adopt transcendental idealism (and empirical realism) about space and time. If space and time are not ultimately real, then the *ens realissimum* (most real being) whose features ground real possibility (including possible space-time locations) does not need to be *in* space or time. After considering this anti-Spinozistic move, I turn in Section 2 to a second way in which Kant's proof threatens to deliver a panentheistic result. This second threat is not so easily dispatched, I submit, even in a transcendental idealist context.

Over the past decade, there has been an impressive revival of interest in the possibility proof: scholars have reassessed its structure, strength, and soundness. One of the main items of debate has to do with *how* real possibility is materially grounded in the divine nature. I have argued in earlier work that from a philosophical point of view, the best candidate for ultimate explanans here is the categorical (i.e. non-intentional, non-modal) features of God. I still think that, but other commentators have offered alternative proposals regarding how God might play the grounding role. The main advantage of these alternatives is that they allow Kant's argument to evade what I am calling the second panentheistic threat. In Section 3, I survey these alternative readings, and then describe their benefits and (in my view prohibitive) costs.

In addition to improving our understanding of the proof itself, the active recent discussion has led to a deeper appreciation of how central its key moves are to Kant's thought generally, both before and after the critical turn. There are now entire books on Kant's theory of modality (Stang 2016, Abaci 2019) and I cannot hope to consider all the important moves and developments. The goal of Sec-

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7 See e.g. Kant's negative marks about Spinozism in his critical lectures on philosophical theology (*Lect. Rat. Theol. Pölitz* 28/2.2.1052.28–1053.20).

tion 4 is to look briefly at the role that the possibility proof plays in the critical period and make it clear what is at stake in that part of the debate.

1 The Proof: God as the Ground of Real Possibility

The possibility proof can be divided into two main stages. In the first stage, Kant argues that something *actual* has to be the "first real ground" of all "internal or absolute possibility" (*GP* 2:79.31–3). In the second stage, he argues that this actuality (*dasjenige Wirkliche*) that "furnishes the data or material element" (*GP* 2:79.11) of possibility is a necessarily existing *ens realissimum*—and that it is the God of classical Abrahamic/ Greek monotheism. I have reconstructed both stages at length elsewhere.[8] Here I will simply provide a sketch—abstracting from most of the textual considerations—and also highlight some of the key philosophical issues.

1.1 First Stage Summarized

It is useful to both write out the steps of the proof and offer some symbolization in this first stage, just so that the modal-logical situation is clear. Suppose we use 'F' to stand in for any really possible predicate [9]. So the set of F's include all the actually-instantiated predicates like *being fiery* and *being a body* as well as predicates that are really possible but *not* actually instantiated, like *being Lampe's twin.* Now let 'G_F' stand for the predicate of *materially grounding something's being F* (where "material grounding" is just the relation of "furnishing the data or material element" in real possibility (*GP* 2:79.11)—this will be further explained below). Finally, let '$G_F(r)$' express the proposition '*r* materially grounds something's being F.' With existential quantifiers expressing actual existence and the modal operators referring to real modalities, we can then state the first stage of Kant's proof as follows (I will go on, after stating it, to explain the key steps):

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8 The discussion here draws on (and modifies in places) earlier efforts in Chignell (2009, 2012, and 2014).

9 I will follow Kant in (rather confusingly) using 'predicate' throughout to refer to properties as well as what we would now call predicates (though without meaning to commit Kant to any particular position on what properties or predicates are). In *Ground of Proof*, Kant can often be found ascribing a "predicate" (*Prädikat*) to an object, but he also sometimes speaks of predicates as the constituents of concepts, in which they presumably *correspond* to properties (*Eigenschaften*) of the object of the concept (see *GP* 2:80.19 for example).

(1) It is really possible that there is something with feature F. $\lozenge(\exists x)Fx$ [Possibility Premise]
(2) If p is really possible, then p is necessarily really possible. $\lozenge p \rightarrow \square\lozenge p$ [axiom of modal logical system S5]
(3) So, it is necessarily really possible that there is something with feature F. $\square\lozenge(\exists x)(Fx)$ [1, 2, *modus ponens*]
(4) Necessarily, if it is really possible that there is something with feature F, then something exists and is the material ground of that modal fact. $\square(\lozenge(\exists x)(Fx) \rightarrow (\exists y)(G_F(y)))$ [Grounding Premise]
(5) If it is necessary that 'if p, then q' and it is necessary that p, then it is necessary that q. $(\square(p \rightarrow q) \,\&\, \square p) \rightarrow \square q$ [theorem of K]
(6) So, it is necessary that something exists and materially grounds the modal fact in question—i.e. the fact that it is really possible that there is something with feature F. $\square(\exists y)(G_F(y))$ [3, 4, 5]

Recall that F stands for any really possible predicate. So (6) says that, necessarily, something (or things) in *actuality* materially grounds all the facts about how and by what the F's can be exemplified.

The argument from (1) to (6) is deductively valid, (3) follows from other premises, and (5) is uncontroversial.[10] So the soundness of this first stage of the argument hangs on the truth of (1), (2), and (4). I will consider them briefly in turn, although (4) is where the real action is.

(1) says that it is really possible for there to be something that has feature F. Since we have already stipulated that 'F' picks out any arbitrary really possible predicate, it would be stingy not to grant this premise.

(2) is slightly more controversial: Kant did not have access to later developments in modal logic, of course, and so we want to avoid anachronism. But the idea behind the axiom of what we now call "S5" is intuitive: if something is really possible, then it is necessarily really possible. For if something's having F were really possible, but only contingently so, then there would have to be some sort of explanation of its impossibility in at least one world. But note that the *kind* of real modality that Kant is thinking of here is "internal or absolute and unconditional possibility and impossibility, and no other" (*GP* 2:78.5–6). This means that we are evaluating all and only the collection of predicates "internal" to a being—not its relations to other beings (this is what Leibniz would call "possibility *per se*"). It's

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10 K is the weakest system of standard modal logic; its characteristic axiom is the K-schema: $[\square(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (\square p \rightarrow \square q)]$. Premise (5) is logically equivalent to the K-schema.

hard to see how something could be really possible in that internal absolute way, but only contingently so.

From a textual point of view, one of Kant's summary characterizations of the proof suggests that he would accept (2): "anything whose disappearance would eradicate all possibility is itself absolutely necessary" (*GP* 2:83.6–7). If "all possibility" (which presumably means *each and every possibility*, see *GP* 2:79.20–1) were not *necessarily* possible, then some possibilities could be grounded in the predicates of contingent beings rather than those of something "absolutely necessary." So this passage suggests that for Kant the status of being really possible is itself necessary. He also says as much explicitly in a key reflection: "Since possibility in general is certainly necessary, so is what contains its ground" (R3712, *Notes and Fragments* 17:252.7–17).[11] If we interpret "possibility in generality" as referring to each and every possibility, then this looks like an explicit statement of (2). The fact that in these statements he means to invoke not just some possibilities or other but each one is explicit in this passage:

> *all possibility in sum and each possibility in particular* presuppose (*voraussetzen*) something actual, be it one thing or many. (*GP* 2:79.20–1, my emphasis)

And the fact that Kant is willing to say that "possibility [...] is itself necessary" should assuage worries about ascribing iterated modalities to him.[12]

(4) is the most substantial premise in the entire proof. It says that, necessarily, if it is really possible that some *x* is F, then some *actual* thing, *y*, grounds that fact. Note that this actual thing *y* could either be identical to *x* itself, or it could be something distinct from *x*. This allows God to be the ground of the real possibility of God's own predicates.

We have already seen that Leibniz (and Wolff) were sympathetic to this idea. So was Kant's influential predecessor Christian August Crusius: he distinguishes between "true" [metaphysical] possibility and merely "ideal" [epistemic] possibility, and says that "[a]ll true possibility has its ground in the connection of the possible things with certain existing things" (Crusius 1743, §14).[13]

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11 Abaci (2019, 121) cites this reflection and agrees that it entails the axiom of S5.

12 Maya Krishnan provided detailed feedback on this chapter in which she argued that it is not clear we should ascribe iterated modalities to the pre-critical Kant. I cannot engage all of her reasoning here, but I agree that the issue needs more discussion, and that it would be interesting to see if we could get to (6) without relying on something like (2).

13 I think we can assume that at least much of the time, the "connection" Crusius refers to will be of a grounding sort.

Kant is squarely in the early modern German tradition, then, when he says that "[t]he internal possibility of all things presupposes some existence or other" (*GP* 2:78.8–9). Again, by "internal possibility" Kant means the possibility something has in itself, apart from any "external" relations (such as whether it is part of the best world). So what makes it the case that Lampe could have had a twin, or that the cosmological constant could have been different than it is? The idea advocated by these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German philosophers is that the *ultimate* explanation of such possibilities will appeal to facts about what *actually* exists. This is a version of what we now call "actualism" about modality: facts about what is really possible bottom out in facts about what is actual.[14]

From a textual point of view, I think it is fair to ascribe actualism to Kant. But it is not entirely clear what his argument for it is. In the early *New Elucidation* essay of 1755, Kant endorses the "principle of determining ground," which is effectively his version of the rationalists' Principle of Sufficient Reason. That principle says that "nothing is true without a determining ground" (*NE* 1:393.23), and Kant makes it clear that a "determining ground" must ultimately bottom out in something actual.

In the *Ground of Proof* essay of 1763, Kant says that he is still willing to "subscribe" (*unterschreiben*) to the principle of determining ground (*GP* 2:158.8–9). But all he needs for the possibility proof is a version that applies to *modal* facts: the *ultimate* explanation or determining ground of facts about possibility must be found in some actual thing or set of things. Kant sometimes makes the point in hylomorphic terms: internal real possibility, he says, has both a "formal" and a "material" element. The formal element is just the consistency of the concept with the laws of logic. That does not require any actual existence. But the "data or material element" (*GP* 2:79.11)—the fact that the predicates are "given" (*data*) in a way that allows them to be jointly instantiated—does require a ground in what actually exists.

More precisely, Kant thinks that the material element of real possibility itself has (at least) two aspects. First, there are the facts about the "content" of the predicates of possibility—i.e. about which predicates are "given" or "thinkable"—i.e., available for instantiation. So, again using Kant's own example, if a "fiery body" is really possible, there must be something actual that grounds the fact that the predicates *being fiery* and *being a body* are individually instantiable (*GP* 2:80.15). But, second, there are also facts about the "harmony" or compossibility *between*

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14 The "bottoming out" relation here is meant to be neutral between any number of reduction schemes (causation, exemplification, logicism, etc.) For illuminating discussions of Kant's actualism, see Stang (2016) and Abaci (2019). For an argument that what we are calling "actualism" here has its origins in Aristotelian "potentialism," see Oberst (draft).

these predicates, and these too require explanation. In other words, there must be something actual that grounds the fact that *being fiery* and *being a body* are *jointly* instantiable rather than "really repugnant" in the way that, say, *being extended* and *being a mind* are, for Kant (*GP* 2:85.30–86.7).[15]

This point about the two aspects of a "material ground" will be important in our discussion of the second panentheistic threat. What we have so far, however, together with the uncontroversial theorem (in (5)), brings us to (6). This is a substantive interim conclusion: (6) says that, necessarily, and for any F, something actual materially grounds the real possibility of F being instantiated.

Although (6) is substantive, it is not yet sufficient to secure the existence of God. In order to do that, the argument requires a second stage. Here it is smoother to drop the formalizations.

1.2 Second Stage Summarized

(7)   Maximal positive predicates are really possible. [premise]
(8)   Fundamental predicates are really possible. [premise]
(9)   Necessarily, if something is the material ground of either a maximal positive predicate or a non-gradable fundamental predicate, then it exemplifies that predicate. (Exemplification Premise)
(10)   Necessarily, every really possible maximal positive predicate and every really possible non-gradable fundamental predicate is exemplified by some actual being or set of beings. [6, 7, 8, 9]

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15 This point about real harmony is controversial. I argued for it at length in Chignell (2012), and then tried to fend off criticisms by Yong (2014) and Abaci (2014) in Chignell (2014). The details are complicated, but I take solace in the fact that Abaci (2019, 114–15) now grants that at least one of the examples that I cite (the "real repugnance" of *being extended* and *thinking* at *GP* 2:85.30–1) is a genuine case of non-logical incompatibility. He also admits that "one would then think that freedom from such metaphysical incompatibility should be a condition of real possibility." He goes on to suggest, however, that my reading is still "impugned" by the fact that Kant draws an analogy to the way in which "opposing forces acting on a body" cancel one another's *effects* out, without making the body that has them impossible (*ibid.*). But the fact that Kant uses an imperfect analogy does not, I think, undermine the general point to which Abaci was initially sympathetic—namely, that some instances of non-logical "real repugnance" can "cancel" the subject as well as the predicates. An extended mind, for Kant, is really impossible. Yong (2014) and Hoffer (2016) grant the point about the need to ground facts regarding metaphysical harmony, but argue that God can achieve this by *thinking* various predicate-combinations together. I say more about that proposal in Section 3 below.

(11) Necessarily, there is a *unique* being, *ER*, that exemplifies every really possible maximal positive predicate and every really possible non-gradable fundamental predicate. [10 + sub-argument[16]]

(12) *ER* exists necessarily. [11 + sub-argument[17]]

(13) Necessarily, *ER* is immutable and eternal. [11 + *being immutable* and *being eternal* as maximal positive predicates]

(14) Necessarily, *ER* has an intellect and a will. [11 + *having an intellect* and *having a will* as non-gradable fundamental predicates]

(15) Necessarily, *ER* is divine (thus, God necessarily exists). [11, 12, 13, 14]

(10) and (15) are entailed by the other premises, so the steps to examine in this second stage would be (7)–(9) and (11)–(14). Here I only have space to focus on (7)–(9).

(7) Maximal positive predicates are really possible. [premise]

(7) requires a bit of terminological unpacking. A *positive* predicate is one that has (or is logically equivalent to one that has) some genuine content of its own—i.e. it is not merely a negation of the content of some other predicate. *Having the power to speak*, for example, is a positive predicate, whereas *not having the power to speak* is the corresponding negative predicate (*GP* 2:87.33–88.4). A *maximal* predicate is one that has the highest grade—the greatest extensive or intensive "magnitude" (*Größe*)—on a continuum of gradable predicates (one that is not a proper part of some larger continuum[18]). Thus *being omnipotent* is the maximal positive predicate on the continuum of predicates that ascribe powers to a subject.

(7) is not uncontroversial: there are complicated debates in the theological tradition (e.g. Ibn-Rushd, Aquinas) about whether maximal positive predicates like *being omnipotent* or *being omniscient* are coherent. (7) was uncontroversial in Kant's day, however: he refers to God's "absolute perfection" as a function of God's combined "realities" in the 1759 *Optimism* essay (2:30.31 and 31.1–10). In *Ground of Proof* he says that God is the "most real of all possible beings" precisely because God has the "highest degree of real predicates (*den größten Grad realer Eigenschaften*) which could ever inhere in a thing" (*GP* 2:85.22, *GP* 2:88.12). Given this textual background, we can grant (7) without further ado.

(8) Fundamental predicates are really possible. [premise]

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16 I lack room here to discuss them here, but see Chignell (2009) and (2012) for discussions of the key sub-arguments for (11) and (12).

17 See previous note.

18 Thanks to Colin Marshall for prompting this clarification.

A *fundamental* (i. e. "simple" or "atomic") predicate, in both the rationalist and empiricist traditions, is one that is both *positive* and *unanalyzable.* We have already seen what a positive predicate is. An *unanalyzable* predicate is a positive predicate that cannot be "constructed" or derived from other predicates via operations like negation, conjunction, disjunction, limitation, and so on. Kant follows Descartes, Leibniz, and others in the tradition in holding that in the process of analysis "you must eventually arrive at something whose possibility cannot be further analyzed" (*GP* 2:80.37–81.1). He also follows them in holding that *having a will* is one such fundamental predicate.

In his discussion of the ontological argument, Leibniz famously pointed out that all unanalyzable predicates must be positive, though of course not all positive predicates are unanalyzable. Kant follows him here as well. A *derivative* predicate, on the other hand, is one that is *not* fundamental: its possibility is "given as a consequence through another" (*GP* 2:79.26). An obvious way to generate a derivative predicate is just to negate a fundamental predicate: thus *not having a will* is a derivative predicate. But positive predicates can also be derivative. *Being a university* is positive but complex: it can be analyzed into simpler predicates.

The final thing to note here is the relationship between fundamentality and gradability. The example *having a will* shows that not *all* the fundamental predicates admit of maximal degrees or grades. For most of the philosophers in the early modern tradition, a mind either has an executive volitional capacity or it does not (see Descartes 1641, *Meditation* IV). So although all the fundamental predicates are positive, they are not all maximal (because they are not gradable at all).

Because derivative predicates can be analyzed into simpler ones, their possibility is grounded in the possibility of the latter. Thus, Kant does not think his proof shows that *all* the really possible predicates must be "given as a determination existing within the real" (*GP* 2:79.26–7). But he does think that the *fundamental* predicates (both the maximal ones and the non-gradable ones) must be so given, in order to satisfy (4). Thus:

(9) Necessarily, if something is the material ground of either a maximal positive predicate or a non-gradable fundamental predicate, then it actually exemplifies that predicate. (Exemplification Premise)

This Exemplification Premise, like the Grounding Premise, is one of the central and most controversial components of Kant's proof. I will say more about it below.

It follows from what we have so far that

(10) Necessarily, every really possible maximal positive predicate and every really possible non-gradable fundamental predicate is exemplified by some actual being or set of beings. [6, 7, 8, 9]

Kant goes on to complete the second stage in (11)–(15) with a series of arguments showing that the relevant predicates are materially grounded by a *unique* and *necessary* being—he calls it the *"ens realissimum"* and argues that it is also immutable, eternal, and personal. For the sake of space, I will pull away from further stepwise discussion and focus on the two-fold panentheistic threat as well as the fate of the proof in the critical period.

2 Panentheism and the Exemplification Premise

Panentheism is the doctrine that the spatio-temporal universe inheres in or is a property of God but does not exhaust God's nature. The term was coined by Karl Christian Friedrich Krause in the early nineteenth century, but the doctrine is old and was associated with Spinoza in Kant's day (on Krause, see Göcke 2018). In his lectures, Kant describes two kinds of "pantheism":

> Spinozism is a particular sort of pantheism, for I can say either that everything (*alles*) is God —that would be Spinozism—or else that space (*das All*) is God, that would be pantheism proper (*eigentlicher*) [...]. Pantheism is thus (1) Pantheism of Inherence—that would be Spinozistic [or] (2) Pantheism of the aggregate of many substances in connection, thus very different from the first kind. (*Lect. Met. Dohna* 28/2.1:692.3–10)

> Pantheism is either [a doctrine] about inherence, and this is Spinozism, or else one about aggregation [...]. Spinoza says the world inheres in God as accidents, and thus worldly substances (*Weltsubstanzen*) are his effects (*Wirkungen*) but in itself there is only one substance [...]. In Spinozism God is the Ur-ground (*Urgrund*) of everything that is in the world. In [aggregative] pantheism, he is an aggregate of everything in the world. (*Lect. Met. K₂* 28/2.1:794.35– 795.8)

In these transcripts, "Spinozism" is described as a special kind of pantheism: it says that the world is "in" God in the manner of an "inhering" attribute. This is what Krause dubbed "panentheism." The other kind of pantheism is "proper" pantheism—the view that the *aggregate* of all things in space just *is* God.[19] In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant rejects the latter "aggregate" picture as a "crude sketch" (*Schattenriss*) of the way in which the *ens realissimum* grounds real possibility

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[19] The lecture notes are a bit wobbly on this distinction: earlier in the same transcripts, Kant is quoted as associating Spinozism with the "aggregate" picture: "The concept of the *ens realissimum* represents God as an aggregate, as sum total [*Inbegriff*]—but we are thus easily led to Spinozism" (*Lect. Met. Dohna* 28/2.1:698.28–30).

(*CPR* A 579/B 607).[20] But it is clear that panentheism ("Spinozism") was also something Kant meant to avoid. Despite that, I think the proof threatens to deliver precisely that result, and in at least two distinct ways.[21]

2.1 The First Panentheistic Threat

The first panentheistic-Spinozistic threat, as we saw in Section 1 above, stems from the idea that spatial and temporal predicates are both really possible and irreducible to relations between things in space and time. In other words, *being extended in space* and *being extended in time* are fundamental gradable predicates (in fact "extension" is one the examples Kant explicitly gives of an unanalyzable predicate at *GP* 2:80.26). According to the Exemplification Premise in (9), this means that the material ground of real possibility must exemplify the maximal predicates on the two continua—namely, *being infinitely extended in space* and *being infinitely extended in time.*

Kant does not seem concerned about this threat in 1763, since in that period he was still inclined towards Leibnizean relationalism about space and time (and, accordingly, he takes back the surprising suggestion that extension is unanalysable a few pages later in *Ground of Proof*). As long as the *ens realissimum* exemplifies the maximal fundamental and non-gradable fundamental realities, the proof goes through. Derivative predicates, such as spatio-temporal relations, can be grounded in some other way.

By 1768, in his *Directions*, *Kant* decisively rejects the relationalist doctrine, partly on the grounds that it cannot make sense of incongruent counterparts (see *Directions* 2:383.14–20). So spatio-temporal features are no longer construed as reducible to the non-relational predicates of relata in space and time. But if the absolute containers of space and time are irreducibly real, then it becomes hard to see how they could be derived or constructed from anything non-spatio-temporal.[22] Moreover, as we have seen, because spatio-temporal predicates are lo-

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20 For other passages in which Kant rejects the conception of God as the aggregate "sum total", see *Lect. Met. K₂* 28/2.1:780.14–16, *Lect. Met. Dohna* 28/2.1:692.35–693.3 as well as *Prominent Tone* 8:405.36. Thanks to Maya Krishnan for pointing me to some of these passages, and for helpful discussion of them.

21 This is worth emphasizing. Although some commentators have associated my view with that of Boehm (2014) who suggests that Kant may have self-consciously *endorsed* Spinozism, my claim was always just that his argument seems to lead to it *malgré lui.*

22 Colin Marshall points out that Newtonian space could be derived from some higher dimensional space, or something sufficiently similar to space. This is not something Kant would have contem-

cated on gradable continua, this would mean (in keeping with the Exemplification Premise in (9)) that God must ground them by exemplifying the *maximal* versions at the infinite end of each continuum. In other words, if Newtonian absolute space and time are really possible, then God must exemplify them. Space must be "God's body." That is the first panentheistic threat. Uncoincidentally perhaps, at precisely the time (see *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, 1766) that Kant was dropping relationalism about space and time, he also became deeply skeptical about speculative metaphysics.

Two years later, Kant adjusts his view of space and time again: although he retains the broadly Newtonian conception of space and time as irreducible containers, he now claims that they are *not* ultimately real, but for a different reason. In the *Inaugural Dissertation* of 1770, he argues that they are non-relational but transcendentally *ideal* "representations" produced by the mind's transaction with other noumenal entities.

> *Time is not something objective and real*, nor is it a substance, an accident, or a relation. (*Inaugural Dissertation* 2:400.21–2)

> *Space is not something objective and real*, nor is it a substance, an accident, or a relation; it is, rather, subjective and ideal; it issues from the nature of the mind in accordance with a stable law as a scheme, so to speak, for co-ordinating everything which is sensed externally. (*Inaugural Dissertation* 2:403.23–6)

There are many further changes over the eighteen-year period between the *Inaugural Dissertation* and the second *Critique*, but obviously transcendental idealism survives. By 1788 Kant had also come to recognize more clearly the theological benefits of his signature doctrine. For if we want to be non-relationalists about spacetime but *refuse* to be idealists, Kant says, then we have to admit that the *ens realissimum* itself contains space and time among its "determinations":

> If the ideality of time and space is not adopted, nothing remains but Spinozism, in which space and time are essential determinations of the original being itself, while the things dependent upon it (ourselves therefore included) are not substances but merely accidents inhering in it. (*CprR* 5:102.45–6)

In other words, transcendental realism plus non-relationalism about space leads to panentheism. This is something that Newton himself might have endorsed. In a famous passage from *De Gravitatione* (1660) he says that "space [...] is not absolute in

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plated, but in any case his argument would then imply that God has to exemplify this higher dimensional space instead.

itself, but is as it were an emanative effect of God and an affection of every kind of being" (Newton 1660 in 2004, 21). Space is a divine emanation—something that inheres but does not exhaust the divine being. Thus "God is everywhere" and

> [s]pace is eternal in duration and immutable in nature because it is the emanative effect of an eternal and immutable being. (Newton in 1660 in 2004, 25–6)[23]

There is much to say about this argument, but not much more I can say about it here. In Section 3 I will suggest that it works against recent alternative readings of how the *ens realissimum* is supposed to play the role of the material ground of real possibility. But for now I propose to grant the *reductio ad Spinozum* argument here, and also grant that adopting idealism about space and time evades it. There is still, I submit, another way in which the logic of the proof threatens to deliver a panentheistic result. This threat is not so easily evaded, even on an idealist picture.

2.2 The Second Panentheistic Threat

Recall that the material ground of real possibility has two key functions: it grounds the *content* of the really possible predicates (i.e. it explains why *having an IQ of 120* is really possible) and it grounds the *compatibility and incompatibility* of various really possible predicates (i.e. it explains why *being Lampe's twin* is really possible and *being matter that thinks* is not). Recall, too, that the Grounding Premise in (4) says that the material ground of such facts about content, harmony, and repugnance must be actual. Finally, recall that the Exemplification Premise in (9) says that this actual material ground must exemplify the fundamental maximal and non-gradable predicates, and that this is what allows it to serve as the ultimate material ground of all the derivative predicates too (by way of negation, limitation, and combination).

But now a further turn of the Spinozistic screw: harmonies and repugnancies between predicates do not always arise at the fundamental level. Rather, they sometimes arise *between* derivative predicates that are really possible per se. For example: *being a dolphin* and *being Lampe* are individually possible derivative predicates, but *being Lampe, a dolphin* is not really possible. Kripkeanly put: *being water* and *having the chemical composition XYZ* are individually really possible, but *being water with the chemical composition XYZ* clearly is not. Kantianly put: *being extended* and *being a mind* are individually really possible, but *being an ex-*

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23 For discussion of Newton's views about God and space in *De Gravitatione*, see Jacquette (2014).

tended mind is not (*GP* 2:85.32). Schematically put: *being X* and *being R* may be really possible fundamental predicates, considered individually, but that does not guarantee that the derivative predicate *being X and R* is really possible.

The second panentheistic threat arises, then, because facts about what is really possible and impossible at derivative levels (including the spatio-temporal one) are not simply the "consequences" of fundamental predicates by way of simple operations like negation, combination, and limitation. A somewhat paradoxical way to put this is to say that a new kind of *fundamental* modal fact can arise at the level of the derivatives—facts about their real harmony and real repugnance. But according to the possibility proof, all fundamental modal facts about the predicates of real possibility (including, now, instances of the predicate-types *being really harmonious with* and *being really repugnant to*) require an explanation in reality. And, again, it is hard to see where that could be located other than in the "determinations" of the material ground of real possibility.

Thus, although Kant himself did not foresee and would not have embraced this conclusion, the logic of the proof seems to lead him back into the arms of Spinoza. The material ground must *exemplify* not just the fundamental and non-gradable predicates, but also *all* of the really possible predicates, including the derivative ones, in order to ground facts about *what is (in)compossible with what.* This has the benefit of showing why the ground of material possibility might need to be a *single* being (at step (11)), rather than a plurality—a point on which other interpretations struggle.[24] But it also leads to panentheism.

A still further turn of the screw: we have seen that all the derivative predicates must be exemplified by the material ground such that their distributions ground the new fundamental modal facts about which combinations of predicates are really compossible (and incompossible) with which. If the material ground is just *one* being (as in (11)), then that being will have to exemplify the predicates of possibility in some sort of furcated or siloed way. One furcation (the Spinozistic term, of course, is "attribute") would contain the really possible combinations of predicates of extension, another furcation would contain the really possible combinations of predicates of thought, and so on. Given that some of the repugnancies obtain between physical predicates, there might be even further furcations within the attributes.

I am not sure this picture is coherent in the end. But even if it is, the result looks decidedly "monstrous" from a traditional theological point of view. We have to abandon Kant's effort to refine the concept of the *ens realissimum* such

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24 See Yong (2014), Stang (2016), and Abaci (2019) for detailed discussions of this "plurality" problem.

that it exemplifies only the maximal and non-gradable fundamental predicates and grounds the derivative predicates in some other way (by negation, limitation, combination, etc.). Instead, God must somehow exemplify all of the compossible arrangements of predicates, including the derivative spatio-temporal predicates. Again, I am not suggesting that Kant himself saw (much less acknowledged) this second panentheistic threat to his proof. He clearly assumed that his *ens realissimum* is just the classical monotheistic deity (*GP* 2:89.4). But I think the threat is clear and present all the same.

Having reconstructed the proof and considered two ways in which it threatens to lead to panentheism, I now want to consider a few key efforts in the recent literature to resist the second version of the threat on Kant's behalf. I will suggest that there are both textual and philosophical costs involved in accepting these alternative readings. In Section 4 I discuss the fate of the possibility proof in the critical period.

3 Alternative Accounts of How God Grounds Real Possibility

The past decade of discussion, and in particular the desire to avoid a panentheistic result, have given rise to various alternatives to the Exemplification Thesis on Kant's behalf. It is important to emphasize again that all of us agree that, *for Kant*, God is supposed to exemplify all and only the traditional perfections (infinite power, infinite knowledge, infinite goodness, and so on). This is what allows God to be the ultimate material ground of the real possibility of *some* of the finite real possibilities (finite powers, finite knowledge, finite goodness, and so on). But these other commentators claim that exemplifying a predicate is *not* the only way in which God can be the ultimate material ground of a real possibility. If they are right, then we do not need to ascribe the really possible but *derivative* predicate-combinations to the most real being as "determinations," and can thus avoid the second panentheistic threat.

Here is a list of what I take to be the main options in the literature (by "basic facts about real modality" I mean modal facts about predicate-exemplification that cannot be explained by contingent beings):

> *Creation:* Some of the basic facts about real modality are ultimately grounded in God's non-intentional features, and some are ultimately grounded in acts of God's actual will.

Powers: Some of the basic facts about real modality are ultimately grounded in God's non-intentional features, and some are ultimately grounded in facts about what God can and cannot do.

Thinking: Some of the basic facts about real modality are ultimately grounded in God's non-intentional features, and some are ultimately grounded in the contents of God's thoughts.

Mysterianism: We naturally and properly represent the basic facts about real modality as ultimately grounded in God's non-intentional features, acts, powers, and thoughts. But the way that God ultimately grounds the basic facts about real modality is in fact none of these, and none that can be known to us.

Each of these involves rejecting the idea that was behind the Exemplification Premise in (9) above, namely:

Exemplification: All of the basic facts about real modality are ultimately grounded in God's non-intentional features.

Before going through these alternatives, it is worth making two general textual points. First, there is strong evidence that Kant thought that *ultimate* material grounding of possibility goes by way of divine exemplification. For he says, again, that fundamental predicates of possibility must be "given as a determination in the actual," of which the derivative predicates are mere "consequences" (*GP* 2:79.19). "Determination" (*Bestimmung*) is one of the terms that eighteenth-century German philosophers used for what we would call a "property": "[t]o determine is to posit a predicate while excluding its opposite" (*NE* 1:393.20–2). And "given" is the term that Kant uses throughout his career to render the Latin "*datum*"—as we saw earlier it refers to something that is available to be instantiated in actuality. So another translation of this passage (at *GP* 2:79.24–6) would be that the fundamental predicates of possibility must "exist as a property of the actual." That provides *Exemplification* with a clear textual basis.

Second, the second *Critique* passage about transcendental realism and Spinozism quoted above is hard to square with these alternative accounts of what it is to be an *ultimate* material ground of real possibility. Recall what Kant says there: if space and time are fundamental predicates, then they will have to be "essential determinations of the original being itself […] accidents inhering in it" (*CprR* 5:102.46). If Kant was already committed—as far back as 1763—to the view that some fundamental predicates can be grounded in divine acts, powers, or thoughts, then that option would *surely* have occurred to him in 1788. But in fact Kant says

that either space and time are ideal (and thus derivative "consequences" of more fundamental properties) or else God has to *exemplify* them in order to ground their possibility and actuality. The passage is complicated, to be sure. But it only makes sense, I submit, if Kant assumes that all the basic facts about real modality are ultimately grounded by being *exemplified.*

Having considered these two textual challenges that face all of them, let us now consider the alternative readings one-by-one. Each would allow Kant to evade the second Spinozistic threat to his proof; however, each comes at a significant philosophical cost, and none is explanatorily satisfying in the way that *Exemplification* is.

3.1 Creation

Creation as stated above divides into two:

> *Creation 1:* Some of the basic facts about real modality are ultimately grounded in God's non-intentional features, and some are ultimately grounded in features of the *actual* things God has created.

> *Creation 2:* Some of the basic facts about real modality are ultimately grounded in God's non-intentional features, and some are ultimately grounded in facts about the *possibilities* God has created.

Creation 1 says that the actual entities God creates can serve as the material ground of some real possibilities. *Creation 1* is not quite an endorsement of necessitarianism, since it allows that some of the predicate-combinations that actually exist can recur in other possible worlds. Thus in creating Joe the Camel, God made it the case that *being a camel* and *being hirsute* is a really possible predicate-combination. That in turn grounds the real possibility of hairy camels in other worlds.

Creation 1 fails, though, if we make the fairly trivial assumption that some predicates and predicate-combinations that are *not* actual are still really possible. Hume's missing shade of blue is not exemplified in actuality, but it is (let us assume) a really possible predicate. Likewise the predicate-combination *being a ten foot tall human being* seems really possible, even if it is and never will be actual. Leibniz explicitly says that the eternal truths include "truths about non-existent possibles" (1863, vol. 3, 586); it is hard to imagine Kant disagreeing with him here.

Creation 2 goes beyond *Creation 1* in arguing that among the things God *creates* are the possibilities themselves. In order to be different from *Creation 1,* the view must be that God creates the real possibilities *as* possibilities at the first logical moment of creation, and then subsequently decides to actualize some of them. Descartes subscribes to something like this two-moments-of-creation story regarding all the eternal truths. But assuming the view is coherent, we still want to know: what is it that explains the fact that God has created *these* possibilities rather than *those?* Perhaps the answer is that God surveys all the feature-combinations that are *possibly possible* and then decides to create some of them as *possible.* But then our inquiry can be restated at the next level up, about why those predicates are possibly possible … *ad regressum infinitum.*

If on the other hand we just stipulate that at some level God creates *these* possibilities and not *those,* then we end up with a Cartesian-voluntarist picture according to which necessary truths about real possibility are the brute result of an act of divine will. Such a picture will be unattractive to any Leibnizean rationalist, and in any case Kant openly repudiates it: "the [divine] will makes nothing possible, but only decrees [as actual] what is already presupposed as possible" (*GP* 2:100.24–6, see also *GP* 2:91.30, *Lect. Met. Herder* 28/1:134.23–39). This text alone makes it clear that neither of these two *Creation* myths can be what Kant had in mind.

3.2 Powers

Powers is the much more subtle, non-voluntarist picture that emerges from reflection on *Creation 2*; it was also a live option in Kant's context, having been explicitly endorsed by Crusius.[25] *Powers* says that some of the basic facts about modality are ultimately grounded in what God is and is not *able* to actualize. In Crusius's terms, what is possible must

> contain at least as much reality in itself that, for everything that contradicts neither itself nor other given truths, God at least is a sufficient cause if he were to make use of his omnipotence. (Crusius 1743, §56)

The idea here is not that there are some non-logical rules coming from outside the divine nature that constrain God, but rather that it is just a fact about God's essence that God has the power to create extended beings on the one hand, and minds on the other, and yet does not have the power to create extended minds.

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25 *Powers* was defended as an interpretation by Nicholas Stang in (2010), although he has since given it up. A version of it is still defended by Michael Oberst (draft), however.

The example, however, already shows that *Powers* suffers from much the same deficiency as *Creation.* What makes it the case that a detective matching Arthur Conan Doyle's description of Sherlock Holmes is really possible, on this reading? The fact that God can create just such a clever British detective. But what makes it the case that an omnipotent being can create Holmes? It seems like any non-voluntarist answer will have to presuppose that it is because Holmes is really possible. But then we are moving in a very tight explanatory circle indeed. Put another way: omnipotence is traditionally analyzed *in terms of* real possibility —it is the power to actualize any really possible state of affairs. It seems problematically circular to then try to ground real possibility in what omnipotence can do (compare Adams 2000, 438).

3.3 Thinking

Thinking has the weighty imprimatur of Leibniz and Wolff. The ascription of *Thinking* to Kant has also been defended in the recent commentary literature on the *Ground of Proof* essay by a number of authors, including Watkins, Fisher, Yong, and Hoffer. I focus here on Hoffer's version, which is the most recent and most elaborate.

Hoffer (2016) argues that God is the *ultimate* ground of at least some basic facts about modality not by instantiating all the really possible predicates, but simply by thinking "essences," which Hoffer associates with "Platonic ideas." Moreover, this "divine cognition [...] is at the same time the capacity to produce" objects that instantiate those essences (Hoffer 2016, 202). This formulation is puzzling, because it makes it sound like *Thinking* and *Powers* are just the same view. Elsewhere Hoffer (2016, 208n) clarifies that the ultimate ground of real possibility is God's "intellectual power, which is identical with being a subject of ideas" and that this is prior to God's "causal power that grounds actuality". So on *Thinking*, God's thought is logically prior to God's power.

But how does the fact that essences are the intentional objects of God's thought serve as the ultimate ground of the real possibility of the things that instantiate them? Hoffer writes:

> As an intuitive intellect, God does not merely represent independently given ideas, but generates their reality (though not as an act of will). Since in Platonic ontology the idea has the highest reality and all derivative instances have a lower grade of reality through limitations of it, God as the sum-total of all ideas is the most real being (*ens realissimum*). (Hoffer 2016, 202–3)

There are three main problems with this line of argument. First, it is unclear what would motivate Hoffer to say that God is the "sum-total of all [Platonic] ideas" or essences—the whole point of *Thinking* was to say that the ideas are the *intentional objects* of the divine mind, rather than identical to that mind itself.

Second, the view does not make sense of the second *Critique* passage. If Kant saw way back in 1763 that God can be the ultimate ground of the real possibility of certain basic modal facts just by thinking various essences, then he would presumably recognize that God could do the same for the transcendentally real containers of space and time (assuming that these, too, have "ideas" or essences). What Kant flatly says in that 1788 passage, however, is that if space and time are transcendentally real, then God would have to ground their real possibility by exemplifying them.

Third, *Thinking* still fails to answer the key question—namely, what makes it the case that God can think *this* rather than *that?* This is just a modal version of the Euthyphro dilemma: does God represent polka-dotted dogs, a detective who matches Doyle's description of Holmes, Lampe's non-actual twin, and the-cosmological-constant-being-slightly-different-than-it-is *because* these features, beings, and states of affairs are antecedently really possible? If so, then we still need an explanation of the latter facts, one which presumably takes us beyond the intentional objects of the divine mind. If not, then we are in a relatively unattractive table-pounding position: God *can* think some predicate-combinations and *cannot* think others, because God *does* think certain predicate-combinations, and *does not* think certain others.

Grasping the second horn of this dilemma is what Samuel Newlands recommends to Leibniz:

> To put it cheekily, Leibniz could be more of a Humean about 'modal laws.' In virtue of what is *p-and-not-p* not possibly true? In virtue of the fact that God doesn't think *that p-and-not-p*. To some, that answer gets matters backward. But the promise of a reductive grounding account of modality *should* be attractive to an advocate of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) like Leibniz. And we might well wonder, is a buck-stopping, table-pounding "God just can't!" explanatorily better off than a buck-stopping, table-pounding "God just doesn't!"? Certainly the latter answer seems more in the spirit of Leibniz's general project of providing theistic grounds for modal truths: base what God (and creatures) can and cannot do on what God actually does and does not do. (Newlands 2013, 169)

Newlands is arguing here that Leibniz's version of *Thinking* (in this case with respect to formal truths) is preferable to *Powers.* The idea is that although thoughts contain their objects in a merely intentional way, they are a more appropriate "reductive ground" than mere powers, since the latter contain their objects in a merely intentional *and* a modal way. This seems right: it should be more attractive to a

rationalist to "bottom out" facts about real possibility in something non-modal—a thought rather than a power.

But here is where I think the pre-critical Kant had a clear advantage over Leibniz and Wolff. Unlike *Thinking* (and *Powers*), *Exemplification* allows the explanation to bottom out in something that is *not only* non-modal but *also* non-intentional. To say that Lampe's twin is really possible because God thinks all his predicates together, but that there is simply no explanation of *why* God can or does think them together ('God just does!'), is not very satisfying. By contrast, to say that Lampe's non-actual twin is really possible because all of his properties are *exemplified* in a necessary being is much more satisfying. It is in effect to say that Lampe's twin is possible because, given some basic combinatorial principles, Lampe-the-second is *always already there* in the attributes of God. If you are a rationalist looking for a place to buck-stop and table-pound, there is surely none so satisfying as the non-intentional, non-modal, essential features of a necessary being.

Interestingly, Hoffer (2016, 202) agrees that "*Exemplification* seems to be based on the implication that actuality entails possibility. Therefore this account really explains modality away by reducing modal facts to non-modal facts about properties of God". That's a good synopsis of the view. He then goes on to object, however:

> But since the properties exemplified in God are not of a different kind than instances of exemplified properties in general, *Exemplification* does not clearly express what Kant seeks in his discussions of teleology and causality, namely, the explanation of the lawfulness exhibited by particular instances. According to my reading [i. e. *Thinking*], modal facts are explained as a relation of instances to universal essences, the kind of entities posited to explain the possibility of things as the type of things they are and their possible relations to things of other types. (Hoffer 2016, 203)

This is a complicated passage. However, Hoffer seems to be admitting that *Thinking* simply "posits" the "universal essences" as the object of divine thought in order to "explain the possibility of things" and their lawful relations to "things of other types." Again, however, that leaves us with the key question: *why* does or can God think *these* essences rather than *those?* In the end, it is hard to see how Hoffer ends up doing more than simply pounding Newlands' table ever harder.

3.4 Mysterianism

In his important book on Kant's metaphysics of modality (2016), Nicholas Stang abandons his earlier commitment to *Powers* (Stang 2010). Instead of embracing *Exemplification*, however, the later Stang punts to *Mysterianism* instead. His stated

reason for the change is textual rather than philosophical: he cites two "proof texts" in *Ground of Proof* where Kant supposedly rejects *all* competing accounts in favor of a view according to which "the way in which possibilities are grounded in God is literally incomprehensible to us" (Stang 2016, 118).

Stang's recantation is qualified, however: he combines this rejection of *Powers* with the claim that early Stang was correct to say that, for Kant, we must *think* of real possibility as grounded in God's powers, because only that will make the possibility proof valid (Stang 2016, 145–6). Thus later Stang finds in *Ground of Proof* a harbinger of the *Critique*'s distinction between our best conception of a metaphysical situation (which may still be dialectical) and the truth about the real beings and relations involved.

Mysterianism is an ingenious position. By Stang's own admission, the argument for it is almost entirely textual. But the case for his two proof-texts has been powerfully challenged in the secondary literature (see Yong 2017 and Abaci 2019), and I will not consider it here.

There are also some philosophical considerations, however, that work against *Mysterianism.* First, it is hard to see why the *pre*-critical Kant, an inveterate speculative metaphysician who says he is still willing to "subscribe to" the Principle of Sufficient Reason, would suddenly punt to mystery like this. Moreover, if he is willing to go mysterian here, then it seems like he might have expressed some mysterian tendencies regarding other assumptions we make about the nature of grounding, the "elements" of real modality, and so on.[26]

Second, it is even harder to see why the pre-critical Kant would think it is *legitimate* for us to conceive of the grounding relation *inaccurately* in terms of *Powers*, just in order to make his proof go through. Stang is openly projecting Kant's *critical* doctrines about noumenal ignorance and regulative "as-if" speculation back into the pre-critical period here. But in general the 1763 text reveals no such modesty about our powers of speculation.[27]

If what I have said in this section is correct, *Exemplification* is left standing as the most satisfying account of *ultimate* ground of the material facts of real possibility—both the facts about content and the facts about compossibilty and repugnance. In response to the question "Why is *this* possible rather than *that?*" the defender of *Exemplification* can say: "Because *this* and not *that* is exemplified in the non-intentional predicates of a necessary being." Even if there were no actual Dalmatians, dolphins, or Prussian servants, God's nature would explain why a polka-

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26 Thanks to Colin Marshall for this second point.

27 For more discussion of late Stang's (2016), see Chignell (2017) (on which this section of the chapter draws).

dotted dog is possible and a Lampe-dolphin is not. But this means, of course, that the second panentheistic threat remains.

4 The Fate of the Proof in the Critical Period

The possibility proof is of philosophical interest in its own right, but it is also important because of what happens to it in the critical period. This too is an item of disagreement among commentators. Here are a few of the data points on which most people agree:

(1) The possibility proof does not reappear in a clearly-stated way in the first *Critique.* But there are indications that Kant retained some kind of actualist commitment regarding the metaphysics of modality. In the Pölitz lectures of the 1780s, for instance, he is reported to have said that

> we have no conception of real possibility except through existence, and in the case of every possibility which we think *realiter* we always presuppose some existence; if not the actuality of the thing itself, then at least an actuality in general which contains the data for everything possible. (*Lect. Rat. Theol. Pölitz* 28/2.2:1036.13–18)

There is also the now-familiar comment in the second *Critique* according to which God would have exemplify spatio-temporal predicates unless we accept that the latter are transcendentally ideal.[28]

(2) In the "Ideal of Pure Reason" chapter in the first *Critique*, Kant develops what looks like a psychological/epistemological analogue of the proof. . He argues that our ability to *conceive* of finite possibilities presupposes the ability to *conceive* of a "storehouse of material from which all possible predicates of things can be taken." That "storehouse" is then united into the idea of a "thing in itself which is thoroughly determined"—one that has the positive member of every predicate-complement pair, and the maximal version of the positive predicates that are gradable. This, says Kant, is just the idea of an *ens realissimum* and it is also the "single genuine ideal of which human reason is capable" (*CPR* A 575–6/B 603–4).

(3) Despite the inevitability of this ideal conception, the critical Kant thinks that we cannot prove that there is a being that corresponds to it. He has by

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28 Krishnan is working out a picture according to which, for the critical Kant, space and time and thus many spatio-temporal features do not require grounding in the *ens realissimum*—it grounds noumenal possibilities. This is in the spirit of the second *Critique* passage, and would allow Kant to evade the second panentheistic threat.

now rejected the idea that the Principle of Sufficient Reason or any other rationalist principle can give us *knowledge* of the supersensible, and thinks that there are various other "illusions" and "subreptions" involved in moving from the idea of a "storehouse of material" for thought to the postulation of a corresponding being (*CPR* A 583/B 611). This is where anti-rationalist views like *Mysterianism* really do pop up: the way we inevitably and quite reasonably speculate about these metaphysical issues is no longer a good guide to how things really are. In Kant's words:

> The concept of a highest being is a very useful idea in many respects, but just because it is merely an idea, and it is entirely incapable itself of extending our cognition in regard to what exists. (*CPR* A 602/B 630)

All of this is fairly uncontentious. But there are also items of major disagreement. Some commentators (present author included) are survivalists (i. e. people who think that the proof still survives in the background of the discussion in the "Ideal" chapter). Others argue that the critical sundering of the order of ideas from the order of things means that the "Ideal" chapter does not invoke the possibility proof at all. Oberst (2020) and Krishnan (draft) plump for this sort of anti-survivalism about the possibility proof (Krishnan's term). That proof was about metaphysical grounding and limitation relations between God and really possible predicates, whereas in the *Critique* Kant merely discusses relations between our *concept* of God and our *concepts* of finite possibilities. So the "Ideal" is not even a representation—at the level of ideas—of the beings and metaphysical-limitation relations involved in the 1763 proof. In a memorable phrase, "a limitation of a representation is not a representation of a limitation."[29]

   Although knowledge of God's existence is denied in the Ideal, some survivalist commentators (again, present company included) argue that Kant remained open to "accepting" (*annehmen*) the existence of the *ens realissimum* as an item of doctrinal[30] Belief (*Glaube*) on the basis of the *Ground of Proof* reasoning (see Chignell 2009). In the same lectures from the 1780's he is reported to have said that of all the theistic proofs, the "one that affords of the most satisfaction is [my old] argument that if we remove an original being, we at the same time remove the substratum of the possibility of all things" (*Lect. Rat. Theol. Pölitz* 28/2.2:1034.11–13). Moreover,

> this proof can in no way be refuted, because it has its basis in the nature of human reason. For my reason makes it absolutely necessary for me to accept (*anzunehmen*) a being which is the

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29 See Krishnan, draft.

30 I capitalize "Belief" here to make it clear that it is the translation of the technical Kantian term *Glaube.*

> ground of everything possible, because otherwise I would be unable to realize (*erkennen*) what in general the possibility of something consists in. (*Lect. Rat. Theol. Pölitz* 28/2.2:1034.16–20)

Rational "acceptance" or "Belief" (*Vernunftglaube*) is the kind of assent that the critical Kant thinks of as warranted but not susceptible of "proof" or capable of being knowledge.

It is controversial, however, precisely why an "irrefutable" line of reasoning fails to count as a proof. My own suggestion is that the critical Kant has placed a modal condition on cognition and knowledge—one according to which we only know a proposition if we are in a position to establish whether the objects it refers to are really possible or impossible.[31] In the passage following the one just quoted from the *Critique,* Kant says, of the concept of God:

> The analytic mark of possibility, which consists in the fact that mere positings (realities) do not generate a contradiction, of course, cannot be denied of this concept; since, however, the connection of all real properties in a thing is a synthesis about whose possibility we cannot judge *a priori* [...] the famous Leibniz was far from having achieved what he flattered himself he had done, namely gaining insight *a priori* into the [real] possibility of such a sublime ideal being. (*CPR* A 602/B 630; compare *Lect. Rat. Theol. Pölitz* 28/2.2:1025.33–1026.2)

As a result, the proof is no longer a source of demonstrative knowledge but rather of warranted doctrinal Belief: "But even this proof is not apodictically certain; for it cannot establish the objective necessity of an original being, but establishes only the subjective necessity of accepting such a being" (*Lect. Rat. Theol. Pölitz* 28/2.2:1034.13–16).

Abaci (2019) agrees that the proof is still present in Kant's thought, but does not think it survives in the mode of Belief. Rather, he argues that it is "demoted" by way of a change in how Kant conceived of the "actualist principle" (what I was calling the "Grounding Premise" in (4)). According to Abaci, the principle

> no longer expresses an ontological condition of the absolute real possibility of things in general but only an epistemological condition of our cognition of (relative) real possibilities of empirical objects. (Abaci 2019, 228)

By contrast, anti-survivalists prefer to say that that the proof does not lurk behind the curtain at all in the critical writings, and argue that invocations of it in lecture notes are either unreliable or merely remarks on the views of others (Oberst 2020). Alternatively, they might say that, for Kant, reason naturally engages in *Ground of Proof*-style reasoning that has been shown in the "Dialectic" to be fatally flawed—

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31 For more on this condition, see Chignell (2021).

and so in that sense does not survive (Krishnan, draft).[32] Thus the debate about the fate of the proof in the critical period continues …

5 Conclusion

The publication of Kant's possibility proof in 1763 is the high-water mark of his speculative ambitions. The young Kant takes Leibnizian-Wolffian actualism about the grounding of possibility, adds what he regards as an innovative distinction between logical and real modality, and generates the result that the classical God necessarily exists.

I have argued here that the logic of the proof ultimately pushes us towards the more radical panentheistic conclusion that the *ens realissimum* is not the classical God, but rather a being that grounds *all* the really possible predicates and predicate-combinations by exemplifying them. Kant became aware of the version of this threat that is focused on space-time, I think, and later touted his brand of idealism as the only way to neutralize it.

He did not, however, see the second version of the threat—the one that invokes the need to ground new modal facts that arise from the combination of the fundamental predicates. We saw that recent commentators offer ingenious explanations of how the critical Kant might be able to evade this version of the second threat, but I argued that they run into a number of textual and philosophical problems.

Finally, we have seen that there are ongoing debates about whether and to what extent the possibility proof survives in the arguments of the "Transcendental Dialectic".

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32 There are obviously limits to how useful the "survivalist" vs. "anti-survivalist" contrast is going to be here, since there are many such positions in between.

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