**The Ground of All Possibilities**

In his *Beweisgrund*, Kant argues for the existence of the God of the philosophers – what in a previous essay in this series I called a materially necessary being – as the ground of all possibility. I have reconstructed and defended an argument inspired by Kant’s discussion in another essay.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this essay, I wish to explore the role of this materially necessary being in the role ascribed to it by the pre-Critical Kant, and argue that this justifies the exalted claims traditionally made about the metaphysical centrality of this being. Of course, Kant abandoned the central claim of the *Beweisgrund* in the *First Critique*, as well as the entire project of a material logic of modality, though, as has been noted elsewhere, he never publically repudiated either the *Beweisgrund* itself or wholly freed himself from its influence. Kant nevertheless reconfigured his account of material possibility and necessity in the Critical philosophy, applying these no longer to things of any kind, but only to actual experiences in relation to their transcendentally necessary conditions, i.e. the grounds of their possibility *as* experiences.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this account actuality is still the ground of possibility, since it is not the hypothetical possibility of experience in the abstract that concerns Kant, but rather the sort of experience that we actually have, i.e. of objects existing in space and time, subject to the laws of geometry and Newtonian mechanics. Kant’s transcendental account of material modality is an attempt to enclose the notion of real necessity within the limits of experience and its psychologically indispensable conditions. However, the results of this attempt are (as most Kant scholars admit) entirely unsatisfactory.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Problems with Kant’s Material Logic** Kant wants to limit our substantive, empirical knowledge solely to the objects of actual experience and our theoretical positing solely to the transcendentally necessary conditions for the sort of experience we actually enjoy. At the same representations are things in themselves – apparently a thesis he attributes to the Scottish realists like Reid, Beattie, and Oswald. Instead, he calls his view transcendental idealism, according to which all of the immediate objects of awareness are merely “appearances of representations” in consciousness. Since these objects are the only things that can be known, substantive knowledge can only be of appearances, composed of representations. Traditional philosophy, by adopting transcendental realism, creates many paradoxical and seemingly irresolvable theoretical difficulties that the Critical philosophy intends to dissolve and thereby avoid. On the basis of this insight, Kant scores his greatest success: by analyzing space and time as forms of intuition he is able to avoid having to declare that space is *either* absolute or merely constituted by relations between external bodies. He is able to find a way between these two views by treating them as forms of intuition, and thus as conditions internal to and necessary for experience rather than as something existing external to consciousness.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the same way, Kant avoids having to decide whether space is finite or infinite in extent by claiming that, since space exists only as a form of intuition, it is indefinitely extensible in experience and thus neither finite nor infinite in itself.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Kant is rather less successful in his attempts to extend this approach to the cases of the self and the external world. We normally suppose that the “I that accompanies all representations” and which is self-identical throughout experience *is* the “empirical self” that each of us is as experiencing subject. In that case, it is quite natural to take that self-conscious rational subject to be a substance – something constituted independently of the stream of consciousness of which is it is aware and thus existing as something in its own right “outside the mind” understood merely as a series of mental contents occurring in consciousness. In that case, the self-conscious rational subject that each of us is will be a substance, and thus a Kantian thing-in-itself.[[6]](#footnote-6) In order to avoid this Cartesian position, Kant must (and does) deny that this is the case, that the “I that accompanies all my representations” is not the “empirical self” after all. In that case, the empirical self is merely the representation (or perhaps just the appearance of the representation) of a conscious being and it is difficult to see how this “I” (so conceived) can be conscious at all.

In the *First Paralogism*, while Kant is forced to posit the transcendental self or “I” as the “I that accompanies all our representations” as a condition for the possibility unified experience in time, he nevertheless wants to insist that this “I,” though a necessary transcendental posit, is not the “I” that each of us takes ourselves to be, which he calls the empirical self.[[7]](#footnote-7) The “I” or empirical self in this sense exists for us in consciousness merely as a representation, or appearance of a representation of, rather than as the intuition of the transcendental “I.” It is thus a mistake to suppose that the empirical self that each of us experiences ourselves to be is a substance or thing-in-itself. Kant needs to draw this distinction and say these things in order stay within the strictures of his system, which denies that we can have knowledge of noumena such as the substantial self would be. However, Kant’s attempt to toe this line leads to insuperable difficulties.

A representation is a representation of some*thing* *to* some*one*, a mental content apprehended by a self-conscious rational subject. After all, I am only conscious if am a subject, and a representation is not a subject, but at best an object *for* a subject existing as the *content* of its mental act. However, if my empirical self – what is paradigmatically the “I” as what I refer to as *me* or *myself* – is merely a mental content, and not a conscious subject, it will be no more conscious in own right than any other mental content would be. In that case, forget the “I” – what about the *me*, the self-conscious subject I experience myself to be?

We face further difficulties if we attempt to *conceive* of the empirical self as a representation, and thus as an object of consciousness rather than a conscious subject. A representation cannot represent itself or be an appearance of itself to itself unless it is a subject existing in its own right and not just an object for a subject of this sort. If we suppose that it is an object for a noumenal or “transcendental” self, then we will have to conceive of that noumenal self as a being existing independently of me and as the subject that is aware of me of as its object through my being the content of its mental act. Such a subject will either have to be the conscious subject I experience myself to be, and thus no mere transcendental posit of which I can have no knowledge or, supposing it to be merely a theoretical posit, a thing in itself unknowable to me in principle because lying beyond the bounds of all possible experience. In that case, it will be a subject to which I do not have conscious access and thus whose consciousness is other than my own. At the same time, since only a self-conscious rational subject can be conscious in the way that my empirical self is conscious, if Kant’s account of that self is correct, consciousness, and thus experience itself, will thus be impossible for “me,” i.e., my empirical self. It seems, then, that if I try to limit my knowledge of myself to the realm of experience, or even possible experience, experience will be altogether impossible for me. Either the conscious subject of “experience” will be a noumenal self to whose consciousness I have no access, or the empirical self is a conscious subject in its own right, and thus more than merely a representation or the appearance of a representation in consciousness. In either case, Kant’s attempt to divide the transcendental from the empirical self, and thus stay within his self-imposed limits on human knowledge, does not succeed.

Indeed, given the foregoing, the mere fact that it *seems* to me that I am a conscious subject and thus capable of experience seems utterly incomprehensible if Kant’s account is true. How can I even be mistaken about this unless I am a conscious subject? How can Kant, obviously a self-conscious subject, persuade me that neither he nor I are self-conscious subjects, except on the supposition that we are precisely what he claims that neither he nor I could possibly be – a self-conscious rational subject? Kant can’t possibly even formulate such an argument, let alone persuade me that this argument is sound. We need only ask: who is formulating this argument, who is communicating it, and to whom, in an attempt to persuade that someone that he or she is not a self-conscious rational subject but merely the appearance of such a subject existing as an object for some further subject as the content of one of its mental acts?

Finally, there is simply no sense to be made of the notion that belief in the “I” *qua* self-conscious rational subject is an illusion, let alone a Kantian “transcendental illusion.” Illusions, delusions, errors in reasoning, and so on, are only possible as the states or acts of self-conscious rational subjects. For this reason, consciousness cannot be an illusion or a delusive belief, nor can belief in consciousness be the result of some sort of false inference or bit of “prescientific” theorizing. Consciousness, then, cannot be an appearance that we somehow mistake for reality. Neither can it be a *mere* appearance, like an hallucination, to which no external reality corresponds. These are facts to which any theoretical account of consciousness, including Kant’s, must accommodate itself.

Clearly, if I know anything at all, it is that I am a self-conscious rational subject; more than this, if this claim is not true, I can know nothing, nor even consider the truth of that claim in the first place. Indeed, if I can even *conceive* of my raising this question (“Am I a self-conscious rational subject?”) at all, the answer to that question is moot. As such, to the extent that Kant is successful in arguing that in order for unified experience to be possible that there must be an “I” that accompanies all my representations, and thus is constituted independently of those representations as something that both exists and is identical across time, the “empirical self” bids fair to be that thing, and thus a Cartesian *res cogitans*, in which case it will also be a substance or thing-in-itself. Kant’s attempts to evade this leave his doctrine of the self in a shambles. Only by admitting that, as self-conscious rational subjects, we have direct intuitive (and thus non-representational) knowledge of our own subjectivity in its conscious exercise can experience of any kind be possible. Once we admit this, however, Kant’s Copernican revolution is largely undone.

Similar difficulties plague the “Refutation of Idealism” in the second edition of the First Critique. Stung by the suggestion that the Critical philosophy was a form of Berkeleyan idealism, Kant proceeds to show that, while the self is completely unknown to us, a mere transcendental posit, we can prove that an external world must exist. According to Kant, idealists suppose that our subjective experience could be the same even if there was no external world; this supposition, however, is incorrect. In order for temporally ordered experience to be possible, there has to be an unchanging background in experience against which contents can be temporally ordered and change thus represented. While we posit the transcendental self, the “I that accompanies all my representations” as necessary for the possibility of unified experience, it cannot serve this function because it does not enter into experience as one of its contents. Because of this it is necessary that something else serve as the cosmic backdrop or cyclorama against which temporal experiences are ordered. Inner sense (temporally ordered experience), then, depends on outer sense for the very possibility of its unity as a stream of consciousness. This in turn, says Kant, requires that I be aware of something existing in space outside of myself. Unfortunately, it is here that the difficulties for Kant’s view begin. Space, as Kant has characterized it in the analytic, is merely a form of intuition, and thus only a feature of consciousness, not the intuition of an external, noumenal object. This suggests that awareness of something in space outside of myself is merely awareness of something that *appears* to be outside of myself but which is, in fact, spatial only as appearance. This however, will not rescue Kant from idealism; even Berkeley could accede to this. For this reason, Kant explicitly denies that the mere appearance of something external to myself could possibly fill the bill, since this would be to treat this cosmic backdrop as merely another appearance, and thus merely as one of the items of inner sense. Thus, it has to be the case that this cosmic backdrop is, in fact, something that exists, external to my conscious awareness of it, as something extramentally real. Otherwise, says Kant repeating a common objection to Berkeley’s view, there would be no way to distinguish between veridical and illusory outer experience.

The obvious problem with this claim, of course, is that if experience requires that this cosmic backdrop be present *in* experience as one of its elements, and not merely its appearance existing there as the causal product of its influence on consciousness, then the perceptual act does after all terminate in direct and immediate awareness of something that exists independently of my awareness of it. In that case, I apprehend the thing-in-itself in experience and, in so doing, know that thing-in-itself. Further, since I apprehend the thing itself, and not merely its appearance, that apprehension must result in intuitive, non-discursive knowledge of that thing-in-itself, and thus a sort of knowledge that Kant says is impossible for us to have. Further, the space existing outside of me as a thing-in-itself I apprehend must be some space other than that constituted by space as a form of intuition. In addition, this space must be both knowable by me and distinguishable by me from space understood as a mere form of intuition, in order that I may distinguish veridical from non-veridical experiences. This, however, will overthrow Kant’s solutions to the problems concerning space that we discussed earlier, since the space he is there talking about turns out to be merely a subjective space belonging to inner sense, whereas the space involved in constituting outer sense will be no mere appearance, nor even a form of intuition, but an independently existing physical space apprehended as a thing-in-itself. More than this, such a thing-in-itself cannot be classified as merely a phenomenon, because phenomena are appearances and, while this physical space does appear in consciousness, it does so through being immediately present to consciousness and thus without being represented there by a subjective mental content. As such, in this case my apprehension constitutes awareness of a noumenon, something whose existence and nature transcends sense experience. Alternatively, we could say that the foregoing utterly undermines the distinction between phenomena and noumenal as traditional Kant scholarship understands it.

Kant’s strategy in the refutation of idealism can only succeed at the cost of undermining almost every one of the distinctive claims of the Critical philosophy and the Copernican revolution it proclaims. Contrary to what Kant maintains the claim that we have direct intuitive awareness of a substantial self, not as an object of consciousness represented by a mental content but instead as an enduring subject that operates over those contents and knows itself through its own act, seems impervious to his criticisms. We correctly, then, affirm that the phenomenal self *is* the noumenal self, as present in and thus known through experience, and thus no mere theoretical posit. At the same time, Kant’s attempt to refute Berkeleyan idealism fails to show that his own transcendental idealism represents any advance over Berkeley’s position or possesses any resources for avoiding its subjectivism that do not require the abandonment of Kant’s core theses and distinctions. These difficulties, at least in part, are the consequence of his attempt to treat material modality as a matter of the necessary conditions for the possibility of experience, rather than as about things and their actual existence.[[8]](#footnote-8) We do not find the grounds for all possibility in these doctrines.

**The God of the Philosophers as the Ground of All Possibilities** We do well, then, I think, to return to the earlier, pre-Critical program of the *Beweisgrund* as the most likely source of a successful analysis of material possibility. According to this account, which Kant regarded as the only possible basis for a proof of God’s existence when he published the *Beweisgrund* in 1763, we arrive at God as the ground of all (material) possibility, the ultimate and absolute actuality in which all material possibility, including its own, is to discovered and explained. In this section, I will be both grounding and completing the account of material possibility I have been presenting in these papers.

The God of the Philosophers (hereafter “God”) is defined as a being that possesses all perfections, all positive properties that it is better to possess than to lack, in one simple nature. Thought of in this way, all of God’s attributes are internally related in such a way that none of them can be defined or analyzed independently of any the others. To say that God is a perfect being is not to say that God always possesses the highest degree of all degreed, value-conferring properties. Rather, God possesses these properties in a manner appropriate to his nature as a perfect being – some of them *formally*, as part of his essence or nature, others *eminently* as the dispositional power to produce these attributes in other things through the possession of a higher and better formal attribute. God is thus formally good but only eminently a stone, possessing the perfections of its nature eminently rather than formally.[[9]](#footnote-9) More than this, some of the attributes that constitute perfections in the case of finite beings do not belong to God because in his case for him to possess such attributes would require that he be less than perfect in some way. So, for a human being to possess courage is a perfection, but this is not so for God. Courage is the ability to master one’s fear and do what reason commands even in the face of extreme danger. For this reason, only a being that is vulnerable and finite could exemplify courage. God, however, is non-physical, immutable, and impassible, thus cannot know fear or experience any passional incentive that might conflict with his reason. God thus cannot possess courage, even in principle, because God is a perfect being. Indeed, if God could be courageous, even in principle, then he could not be a perfect being. Even if predicating a particular attribute formally would ordinarily be a perfection, this will not always be so in the unique case of God; there can thus be no mechanical principle of divine attribution. We will have to consider each proposed attribution on its merits and on a case-by-case basis.

At the same time, since God is Being Itself, the full, complete, and exhaustive actualization of activity-as-such, God is the being in which all the potentialities for existence-as-activity have been realized in a concrete reality. Since God possesses all attributes either formally or eminently, there is no positive, being-enhancing attribute that is not possessed by God in a higher and better way than it is in any finite being. Because of this, every finite being *participates* in what God is simply by existing and formally exemplifying that limited set of attributes provided by its nature. Thus, to the extent that any being other than God really exists, i.e. has actualized its potentiality and is thus actual in fact, realized in approximation to the ideal for its nature, it partakes of the divine nature and is its reduced image. Of course, since finite beings are such, they will possess both limitations by nature (absent from God) and also suffer privation insofar as they fail to fully realize the epitome of their natural kind. However, these are the consequence of a lack of being in the finite being, the first a lack of potentiality to be what one is not by nature, the second the lack of the good that should be there by nature but which, for one reason or another, is absent from that being. Each finite natural kind will admit of its own characteristic limitations and it is these by means of which each kind will be distinct from others; these limitation will, in turn, be grounded in the nature of that thing consisting in its essential, positive attributes. Only God will be entirely free of all limitations and thus be capable of encompassing within himself all perfections in a manner appropriate to his nature as perfect being.

Each positive predicate, then, can be attributed to God in a manner appropriate to his nature as a perfect being, so that God possesses all of those properties in that manner. Each of them is thus actualized in the divine essence as internally related to all the others. God is thus the ontological ground for all possibilities through his nature as a perfect being. These attributes exist primarily and in the most perfect way as part of the divine nature, in every possible world and in such a way as to be capable of existence in any and all circumstances as they are instantiated there. The divine essence/nature, then, is the ontological foundation for all possibility, of whatever kind; all other things that are possible, whether formally or materially, are so through participation in that nature.

For example, many of the attributes predicable of God in an eminent fashion cannot exist formally in one and the same being. God possesses both squareness and roundness eminently, inasmuch as God possesses a higher attribute, the power to endow any figure with either property. However, since squareness and roundness are contraries, it is formally impossible for God to endow any single being with both of these properties at the same time. The reason for this, as Kant notes, is that the natures of these attributes as they exist prior to our attempt to imagine them as coexistent in the same subject are mutually exclusive; this is precisely the manner in which they exist in the divine nature. The prior actuality that grounds and excludes this is to found in the nature of the God of the philosophers. The formal impossibility of a square circle, then, is ontologically grounded in God’s nature, where those attributes exist in such a manner that they coexist despite their opposed natures as different expressions of the same power to bring it about that things of various shapes exist. Conceived of in this way, it becomes possible to explain how each can be conceived of apart from the other, since both exist eminently in that nature and their formal juxtaposition in one and the same subject recognized to be impossible in principle.

In this way, we are able to resolve an apparently paradoxical consequence of Kant’s claim that even formal possibility is rooted in prior actuality. Nothing is even formally possible according to the *Beweisgrund* unless the incompatible attributes are individually conceivable prior to our attempt to unsuccessfully combine them in a single subject. Even impossibility, then, presupposes the prior actuality of those attributes as possessing their natures intrinsically. Yet accounting for this is difficult from the metaphysical point of view. These attributes do not appear to be, or be reducible to, anything that exists in the physical world; even if someone were able to suggest such a thing, this would still not explain how those things could possess any of those attributes intrinsically as opposed to accidentally or even randomly. At the same time, if we conceive of these attributes as abstract entities existing in some sempiternal realm like Plato’s heaven, we can account for the intrinsic character of their natures, but neither for their existence or their curious applicability to the realm of concrete objects. However, the difficulty is solved if these attributes and their natures are grounded in a being that is both concrete and such that all of its attributes *and their relations to each other* are intrinsic to them. This, of course, is the nature of God as the ground of all possibilities.

This suggests a further argument for the existence of the God of the Philosophers:

1. If anything is possible, then God exists.
2. Something is possible (e.g., myself as actual and thus as possible.)
3. Therefore, God exists.

Or, alternatively:

1. If anything is impossible, then something is possible.
2. Something (e.g., a square circle) is impossible.
3. If anything is possible (such as a square or a circle), then God exists.
4. Therefore, God exists.

**God and Possible Worlds** The semantics of modern modal logic uses the notion of possible worlds, understood as maximal states-of-affairs in which every proposition has a determinate truth-value, as its central notion. In the 1980’s, concerns about the metaphysical implications of this sort of talk came to the fore. Although some philosophers were inclined to suppose that possible worlds were merely imaginary objects or heuristic devices, the majority of philosophers fell into two main camps: *possibilism* and *actualism*. Possibilists tended to regard possible worlds as abstract objects, like numbers or propositions, and most Possibilists contended that possible worlds were collections of propositions, individuated by a unique combination of truth-values distributed through each maximal set of propositions constituting each world. Actualists, by contrast, tended to regard possible worlds as concrete objects as real as, but causally inaccessible from, the actual world – the possible world in which we exist.

Possibilism seems like a natural sort of view, given that Platonism about abstract objects has a long history and many distinguished adherents. However, the postulation of a sempiternal realm of abstract objects, somehow constituted independently of concrete entities, has troubled many philosophers. What exactly are abstract objects? What is their mode of being? What accounts for their existence and their applicability to the concrete objects of the actual world?[[10]](#footnote-10) These are questions that have no ready answer and seem to be associated with a general metaphysical picture of reality that privileges the abstract, the unchanging, and the tenseless over concrete reality. More than this, it appears to make possible worlds, so conceived, to be so different from the actual world that the latter hardly seems to count as one of their number, given that the actual world is a collection of concrete entities: things, events, and states-of-affairs. If the actual world is not plausibly thought to be a possible world, however, then much of the metaphysical import of possible worlds semantics is lost.

Actualism, by contrast, offers us at first glance a better way of accounting for possible worlds, though it too has evident difficulties. The semi-Actualism that regards possible worlds as actual but non-existent entities seems no more intelligible than Platonism as an account of the ontological status of possible worlds. It is indeed difficult to break the intuitive connection between actuality and existence. The full-fledged actualism of David Lewis, according to which other possible worlds are as actual as the actual world, only causally inaccessible from it, solves the problem of how the actual world can be a possible world, since on this view every world is an actual world. However, the extremely rich ontology entailed by this picture of things strikes most philosophers as too bloated to be justifiable on that score alone. I want to suggest that the view developed in these pages, one that also has a long pedigree in Christian Platonism going back to Augustine of Hippo, offers a better solution to these difficulties than either Possibilism or Actualism is able to muster.

We might begin by noting (as other philosophers have) that, in our own case, propositions are intimately related to our mental acts and the behaviors that flow from them. We speak of entertaining, believing, denying, asserting, suspending judgment about propositions. Such acts are themselves often referred to as *propositional attitudes* and treated as conscious mental *operations* over propositional contents of all kind, which remain the same regardless of what propositional attitude we adopt. Further, propositions have meaning, are intentional, and bearers of truths and falsity through corresponding to the non-mental facts about reality. It is through possessing these propositional contents that the mental acts that constitute propositional attitudes can likewise possess these features. It is thus natural to suggest that propositions exist primarily as the contents of those mental states characterized as propositional attitudes resulting from mental acts in relation to those contents. At the same time, such a view will not serve if we suppose that the only minds are those possessed by finite human beings. Indeed, there is an insuperable objection to this view, consisting in the observation that there are an infinite number of truths, and thus propositions expressing those truths, but only a finite number of finite human minds and of human mental acts that take propositional contents. Propositions, then, cannot find their ontological ground in the finite human mind or even in the total collection of such minds.

However, in the God of the Philosophers described above we have the perfect candidate for such a ground. This God, in knowing its own nature as perfect being, knows all other possible entities as participations in that nature. God thus possesses exhaustive, infinite knowledge of an infinite number of possible entities in directly intuiting his own nature by means of his intellect. God can thus know every possible state-of-affairs resulting from all compossible combinations of such beings. In this same way, God knows all maximal states-of-affairs, i.e. all possible worlds as well. Thus, for any such world and any proposition, God knows whether or not that proposition is true in that world. Thus, God knows, intuitively and exhaustively, the “book” of any possible world. The book of any possible world will be a *maximal* set of propositions (a set that assigns a determinate truth value to every proposition, such that for any proposition P, either P or Not P is true in that world) that exhaustively describes that world and thus models it in thought. God will thus know every possible world precisely as possible, i.e. as merely potentially existent, by means of his intellect, as grounded in his own nature as a perfect being. The actuality that grounds all possibility, then, is to be found in the divine nature itself which, through being perfect, possesses all perfections formally or eminently. Possible entities differ from the God of the philosophers through possessing only a limited stock of such perfections, possessing them imperfectly, and being shot through with privation, something completely absent from God, such that God’s only privation is to lack all privation. So described, the God of the Philosophers is the ground of all possibility.

**God the Ground of all Actuality** The God of the Philosophers is thus established as the supreme actuality that is the ontological ground of all possibility, including its own. God is so through being a materially necessary being in virtue of the fact that he is Being Itself. In turn, this is accounted for by reference to the fact that, in God, existence and essence are identical. Unlike materially contingent beings, God’s essence is simply the full expression of his act of existence, of activity-as-such when it is not constrained by a limiting essence and is allowed to develop in accordance with its own internal dynamic. God’s essence, then, having his act of existence as its principle, is not conceivable apart from his existence. God thus exists in such a way that the material possibility of its non-existence is impossible. God is thus Being Itself, existing in such a way that it the material possibility of his non-existence is impossible. In this sense, then, God is cause of himself by containing, within his nature, the reason or explanation for his existence.

Actuality precedes possibility, and the actuality of the divine essence is, as we have seen, the principle for all possibility. Through the divine intellect, which in comprehending the perfection of the divine nature comprehends all things as limited participations in that nature, all possibilities are likewise apprehended as well. The divine nature, then, is the ontological ground for all possibilities, for within it are contained all the perfections that creatures possess in limited degrees, in various contingently and externally related combinations in accordance with their natures, and through their external relations to other creatures. Each such being will, from the point of view of the Divine Intellect, be (as Leibniz would put it) fully determinate with regard to each perfection, each combination of such perfections in a given nature, and in relation to all possible combinations of other beings to which it could be externally related. Treated as maximal sets of all such determinations, possible worlds, and thus the totality of possibilities and of all combinations of such possibilities are also ontologically grounded in the divine nature as perfect being as apprehended by the divine intellect. Now, however, we have to ask, what are possibilities so conceived, i.e. *what are they possibilities for*?

The natural answer, considering possibilities abstractly, is to say that possibilities are possibilities *for* existence, for beings and their properties. Yet this answer still leaves a gap in our understanding, precisely at the point where we are most concerned to have an account of the matter. For what does it mean to say that something is a possibility for existence, or possibly existent, or a possible existent from the abstract point of view we were just entertaining? Possibility abstractly considered is indifferent to being or existence, but is thought of precisely as a kind of potency for existing. This, however, is absurd; a thing has no potency prior to its existence, and therefore cannot be conceived of as a possibility for existence in relation to itself.[[11]](#footnote-11) We must naturally suppose that the potency in question then is not a potency that exists in the thing as pre-existing itself, but instead of conditions that pre-exist that thing. Only here, it seems, can we find the answer to the question we are currently asking.

We seem to find the answer for individual things in the supposition that the potency in question is contained in the existence of prior the things and properties constituting the prior states-of-affairs responsible for bringing such things into existence in the first place. Indeed, for any thing existing in any possible world, we will always be able to specify a set of necessary and sufficient conditions such that if they are actualized at some time T in that world, that thing will come to be/begin to exist in that world at some time T+n. Since whatever comes to be is going to be a materially contingent being, hence one for which existence and essence are separable and thus separate principles in that thing, such a being will exist only for as long as the necessary sustaining conditions for its existence obtain. Following Swinburne, we can then consider the matter further by distinguishing the various sorts of explanations that might be relevant to the question we are raising here.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Depending on the extent to which we are concerned about these conditions, we can restrict ourselves to a merely *partial* explanation of the existence of that thing, focusing on its proximate cause and the most immediate sustaining causes for the existence of that thing. A *full* explanation, by contrast, will make reference to all of the relevant conditions and the contribution they make to both the coming-to-be and continuous existence of the thing. A *complete* explanation will be a full explanation of that same fact that terminates in a set of explanatory factors or conditions for which there are no further explanatory conditions obtaining at the time that those terminal conditions obtain. An *ultimate* explanation will be a complete explanation of the fact of the existence of something that terminates in a set of surd conditions for which no conditions of the same order can be given, either in the present or in the past. An *absolute* explanation would be an ultimate explanation for the existence of that thing that terminates in the existence of something or some set of conditions that are self-explanatory or logically necessary, thus for which no further explanatory questions could be raised even in principle.

Swinburne does not believe that an absolute explanation for the existence of a materially contingent thing is possible. Nothing, he says, can explain itself, and all actually existing things, even the theistic God, are logically contingent beings. He thus agrees with Hume that “God exists” is a contingent rather than a necessary truth. Nevertheless, on grounds of simplicity, Swinburne believes that to take the existence of God as an ultimate surd fact is preferable to taking the physical universe to be so. I will not dispute Swinburne’s claim here; if no absolute explanation for the existence of anything is possible, then it seems probable that the ultimate explanation that posits the least number of surd facts will be preferable to those that posit more. At the same time, however, we must note that the unrestricted dynamism of the human intellect will only finally be satisfied by an *absolute* explanation.[[13]](#footnote-13) Given the position developed in this series of papers, I claim that we are in a position to supply just such an explanation.

Indeed, I have already supplied part of this explanation in what I have said so far. The actuality of the God of the Philosophers as a materially necessary being provides an absolute explanation for all possibilities, whether formal, logical, or material through instantiating the nature of a perfect being as perfectly apprehended by the divine intellect. The same divine nature, considered not solely in relation to the divine intellect but also in relation to the divine will, will serve the turn in this respect as well as the creative cause of all actuality. To entertain this supposition is to sublate the God of the Philosophers just as such and instead affirm the existence of the personal, theistic God as the absolute being and first cause of all non-divine reality. In that case, Descartes’ claim that what is possible is determined by what it lies within the compass of the divine will to accomplish becomes, not merely an heuristic device or a thought-experiment, but the literal truth. What is possible, in the sense of possible for existence or possibly existent, is precisely what God could create.[[14]](#footnote-14) From this it follows that whatever God can create is *eo ipso* materially possible.

Further, as Hume and Swinburne admit, any explanation restricted merely to materially contingent beings, even if it is posited as a temporal series of such beings extending into an actually infinite past, will have to be a materially contingent thing. Further, as I have argued in an earlier paper in this series, neither can material things taken as a group nor even matter itself count as materially necessary beings. Given the principle of sufficient reason I defended in that earlier paper, it is not reasonable for us to rest with the positing of *any* surd fact as an ultimate and not further explicable fact about the universe, though we might be justified in so doing, at least at some particular point in time, if there were no conceivable alternative. However, there is and always has been such an alternative – the one we have been exploring here in this essay. Nowadays, of course, there are many who would rather embrace some form of skepticism or Kantian limitation on what we can know rather than to seriously entertain that possibility. Yet a natural response to the claim that “the physical universe is all there is, and it just exists, and there’s an end on it” is simply that, given the PSR, the physical universe just isn’t the sort of thing that *can* just exist, so that it simply *cannot* be the case that it is all there is. It has been my aim in this series of papers to suggest that the God of the *Beweisgrund*, the Ground of all Possibilities, is that something more, and that this God naturally reveals itself to be the traditional theistic creator God. At that point, we are well on the way to recognizing that theistic God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph as well – but I cannot take this up here.

Instead, let me conclude by completing the account of the relation of the theistic God to the created world. God knows all possibilities by reflection on His own nature, which is infinitely participable by creatures and all possible worlds by constructing the books for every such world, in a single, timelessly eternal act of intellectual intuition. God knows all possibilities, then, by means of the divine intellect independently of their actual existence as rooted in His own divine actuality. The theistic God, in addition, is the creator of all things that actually exist other than Himself. As such, it is the divine will, informed by the divine intellect that is the ontological ground for all actuality other than God. Gods knows all that is actual as actual, being the cause of what He knows through the decree of His will, in accordance with His antecedent will. This will, in turn, is informed (insofar as the divine will has sovereignly chosen, for good reasons, not to determine all events by means of a direct decree) by prior *conditional* decrees that will be actualized, in accordance with a prior divine will, in response to, e.g., free human choices. God’s knowledge of contingent events will be the result of his *scientia visionis*, through which His consequent will is realized in accordance with His conditional decrees, through God’s apprehension of His own act of creation as it terminates in its object as the cause of the entire positive reality of every created being. Further, since nothing except God is a materially necessary being, God’s initial act of creation has to be *ex nihilo*, out of nothing pre-existing God’s decision to create.

To investigate this further, however, would take us far beyond the limits of our topic here. Let me then just summarize the results we have reached in this series. First, following Kant in the *Beweisgrund*, I argued that the formal notion of possibility is neither primitive nor intuitively evident to us. I then proposed to develop a notion of material possibility rooted in a prior apprehension of actuality and to relate this notion to other forms of possibility of interest to philosophers. I then investigated the notion of material contingency as a form of contingency related to prior actuality as *realized* material possibility. I then contrasted this with the notion of materially necessary being, and argued that only an immaterial being not subject to the laws of nature could be such a being. Finally, I argued that in such a being we find the Ground of All Possibility (the object of the *Beweisgrund* proof) and the absolute explanation for all existence, including its own. There are no surd facts, and a clear and plausible answer to the question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” This at once establishes that this question is not meaningless and that it admits of an answer that corresponds to our unrestricted desire to know by giving us a final answer in we can rest and in the face of which we need not raise any further questions. In that case, let us rest content and put this discussion to rest as well.

1. See “Kant’s pre-Critical Proof for God’s existence”, also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a nice summary account of Kant’s account of real possibility within the Critical philosophy, see W. H. Walsh, *Kant’s Criticism of Metaphysics*, Chicago, Il., University of Chicago Press, 1976, 149-154. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is the judgment of traditional Kant scholarship represented the mainstream tradition of twentieth century Kant scholarship from Kemp Smith to Paul Guyer. For a consideration of more recent, and more sympathetic, Kant scholarship, see my “Kant and Theoretical Inquiry,” forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith, trans. and ed., New York, MacMillan, 1929, 67-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kant, *Critique*, op. cit., 396-402. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is, of course, absolutely essential for his moral philosophy as well. Only if *I* am a self-identical subject that exists through time (rather than merely being a collection of mental events occurring in time) will it be possible for me to be a moral agent at all. The empirical self, then, cannot be a mere representation, or in that case not *I*, but some inaccessible noumenal self will have to be responsible for my actions. In that case, neither can *I* as a mere appearance of a representation be subject to moral norms or such as to be under categorical moral obligation. Thus, moral agency becomes impossible for me *qua* self-conscious subject and resides solely in a noumenal self that *I* cannot apprehend, access, or control and which exists for me only as a theoretical posit. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith, trans. and ed., New York, MacMillan, 1929, 333-334 (A edition) and 368-72 (B edition). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I have considered a rather different account of the argument of the *Refutation of Idealism* in another paper, “Kant and Theoretical Inquiry,” forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. According to Descartes, God possesses all the perfections of creatures formally or eminently. See *CSM*, Vol. II, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, for example, Eugene Wigner, “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics,” in *Communications on Pure and Applied Mathematics*, Vol. 13 (1960), 1-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Indeed, the God of the Philosophers can only be so conceived due to the fact that his material non-existence is inconceivable, and thus cancels the formal possibility that he might not exist in relation to every moment of time and thus rules this out at every moment of time. This does not make God a temporal being, as I have explained in an earlier paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Second Edition, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, 23-26, 75-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Robert J. Spitzer, SJ, *Ten Universal Principles*, San Francisco, CA, Ignatius Press, 2011, 123-129 and references. The inspiration for this discussion, and the term “unrestricted dynamism of the human intellect are derived from Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, New York, Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1957, especially 328-342. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See *Meditation VI* in CSM, II, 54. Of course, Descartes goes on to spoil this in one of his later discussions of the notion of divine power in one of his letters, by claiming that God’s power is so great that there are no limits on what he can do, so that even logical contradictions are possible for God, though we cannot imagine how this could be the case – see *CSMK*, 235 – Descartes letter to Mesland. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)