**Kant’s Pre-Critical Argument for the Existence of God**

Most philosophers are aware that Kant criticized the main arguments for God’s existence in his *Critique of Pure Reason* and can probably give at least the outline of his critique of the ontological argument, upon which he believes the other main arguments for God’s existence depends. For most philosophers, that is Kant’s last word on the subject: there can be no proofs for God’s existence, which he avers is not necessarily a bad thing. The wings of reason must be clipped in order to make way for faith. Thus, whatever we may make of his attempts to justify belief in God on moral grounds, the notion that there might be a successful proof of God’s existence is something that, for Kant, must be regarded as a closed book. It will come as a surprise to many philosophers that despite the official doctrine of the First Critique, Kant was working himself, at one point in his career, toward a different, more Aristotelian account of being or existence, one from which a new and unique argument for God’s existence could be mounted. Kant did in fact offer his own proof for the existence of God, in one of his lesser-known works called *On the Only Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*. In my opinion, this argument deserves more attention than it has received in the literature and in this essay, I hope to provide some of that deserved attention.

In this essay, published in 1762, Kant presents essentially the same critique of the ontological argument that he presents in the First *Critique*, with the intention of challenging the reigning notion of possibility as *merely* logical possibility, for which the criterion is apparent coherent conceivability, which in turn reduces to *apparent coherent imaginability*.[[1]](#footnote-1) On this view, famously associated with Descartes and shared by all the major philosophers of the early modern period including Hume, for something to be possible is simply for it to be imaginable without contradiction. Certainly, square circles, two-sided triangles, things that are red and green all over at the same time or taller or older than themselves are impossible beings, because they are inconceivable, not just for us, but in and of themselves.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is therefore natural to assume that anything that is conceivable without contradiction must be possible. However, there are different senses in which this is the case, as comes to the fore when we investigate the connection between possibility in this sense and the notion of existence. In his proof, Kant was working his way toward an analysis of this topic that has both been neglected and that I believe can still be useful to us today.

Many philosophers will be inclined to dismiss the *Beweisgrund* (as it is called) as irrelevant to our understanding of Kant because it is a pre-critical work and one we suppose that Kant would have repudiated in light of his Critical “Copernican revolution” as a false start, perhaps to be excused as a bit of *juvenilia*. However, when we consult the historical record, this does not appear to be the case. Kant republished the essay: twice, in 1770 and 1794 as a separate book, and as part of a collection of his essays and occasional pieces, in 1798, without altering the text. Further, the doctrine adumbrated in the *Beweisgrund* also reappears in the First *Critique* and in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, recorded by students in 1783-4. The doctrine of possibility and actuality presented there both illuminates and is illuminated by the discussion of the categories of quality in the section entitled Postulates of Empirical Thought. He returns to the argument in the Ideal of Pure Reason in the First *Critique* and in the *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, in both places retaining the argument without, however, allowing that it is a demonstration of God’s existence. On the one hand, the strictures of the Critical Philosophy prevent him from affirming any substantive claims about noumena; on the other, he still finds the argument persuasive at some level. However, he is unable to determine how to make a place for it in the Critical philosophy, offering different accounts of its significance in different contexts. Throughout, Kant insists that we can have no other account of the nature of possibility (as he characterizes it) than the one provided by this argument, and that it is the origin of our idea of God as *ens realissimum*. He thus regards it in one place as stating a necessary condition for the very exercise of human reason and thus a “subjective” ground for belief in God. In another place he describes it as a transcendental argument, which falls short of proving God’s existence but which establishes that no thought about anything as existent is possible without presupposing God’s existence as the “ground of all possibility.” In yet another place, he treats it, like the apprehension of the teleology of nature in the Third *Critique*, as a “necessary illusion” of reason without which theoretical inquiry would be impossible for us.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Kant’s “possibility proof” for God’s existence remains a significant element of classical, pre-critical philosophy in Kant’s system, and derives directly from reflection on the Classical and Scholastic tradition summarized in the rationalist textbooks from which Kant continued to lecture his entire academic career. It both criticizes and critically appropriates elements from that tradition in an attempt to work out a better theory of possibility than that on offer in those books. The failure of Kant (and his successors down to the twentieth century) to justify the revolutionary claims of the “Copernican revolution” in philosophy permits those of us who embrace the Classical tradition in philosophy he rejected to allow Kant’s arguments to develop in accordance with their inner dynamism and reach the conclusions to which they genuinely lead. These conclusions will be a rather different set of conclusions than those reached by Kant himself, stunted and distorted as they were by his artificial limitations on what we can know using reason understood as a faculty of theoretical inquiry. Having removed Kant’s Humean blinders, we will find that much that is obscure, difficult and apparently inconsistent in Kant will disappear, not however without sacrificing much of what people have thought was novel and admirable in his thought. For this, I make no apology.

At the same time, I have not been able to reconstruct Kant’s argument as it appears in his texts as a valid proof or, at least, an argument that is both valid and plausible. This appears to be par for the course where Kantian argumentation is concerned. However, I remain convinced that Kant has interesting ideas about possibility and existence, somewhat unfamiliar to contemporary philosophers, that are worthy of being more widely known and from which a successful proof of God’s existence can be constructed. What follows is my attempt, using modern modal ideas, to construct such a proof; I make no claim to exclusivity in this endeavor, and invite other philosophers to explore this sort of proof in greater detail. However, before turning to that, let me discuss a distinction drawn by Kant in the *Beweisgrund* that is centrally important to the proof that I shall give.

**Two Senses of “Possible” in Kant** In the *Beweisgrund* and elsewhere, Kant distinguishes between two sense of “possible.” The first sense of “possible” is a familiar one, which we might call *formal possibility*.[[4]](#footnote-4) For something to be possible in this sense merely means for the concept of that thing to be conceivable without contradiction.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to Kant, nothing follows from possibility in this sense concerning the actual existence of anything. The main error of the Ontological Argument consists in its supposition that, if the idea of God as a necessary being is coherent, and thus possible in that sense, that conceptual analysis alone can arrive at the substantive claim that God actually exists. This does not mean, however, that the pre-Critical Kant believed that no conceptual proof of God’s existence was possible. However, the notion of possibility used in his proof is a different and more robust conception of possibility than that used in the forms of the ontological argument rejected by Kant. We might call this *material* or *“real”* possibility.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Furthermore, Kant puts an interesting spin on the notion of possibility. We often suppose that inconceivability, and thus impossibility, is the baseline notion, given that it seems to be intuitively self-evident that (to use Kant’s example) a four-sided triangle is formally impossible. Indeed, we often define what we might call formal possibility negatively in terms of formal impossibility, when we say that the possible is that which is conceivable without contradiction. However, Kant maintains that formal impossibility is not simple or unanalyzable in the way that the foregoing suggests. To the contrary, formal impossibility is parasitic on formal possibility, just as inconceivability is parasitic on positive conceivability. My judgment that a four-sided triangle is impossible is a consequence of my recognition that no plane figure can instantiate both the property of being a triangle and that of having four sides. My ability to recognize the incompatibility involved in a single plane figure exemplifying both of these properties thus requires that I clearly and distinctly conceive the natures of these properties as properties of plane figures prior to that recognition. In turn, this requires that these properties should be conceivable as formally possible prior to our recognition of their incompatibility in some other case. Indeed, the very fact that we typically define the formally possible as that which is not formally impossible, i.e. inconceivable, testifies to the fact that this concept is not further analyzable and thus the product of a basic, intuitive grasp.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Kant never gives a definition of possibility in this second sense, but it seems to be a consequence of his account of existence in part one of the *Beweisgrund*. Existence, says Kant, is not a predicate. Anything predicated of something else is posited relatively, in relation to something on which it depends and thus exists only in a derivative sense. However, when we posit something absolutely and thus not in relation to anything else, we use the existential “is,” which expresses a simple idea of positing not further analyzable. For a thing to exist, then, is for it to be the object of a true existential judgment; this is what it means for something to be or exist. To make this clearer, we may say that for something to exist is for it to be real or actual outside of its causes, although Kant would object that “real” and “actual” here are synonyms for “exists” in this context, and thus equally unanalyzable as the word exists itself. However, it will have to do, since Kant refuses to give us anything better.[[8]](#footnote-8)

If for a thing to exist is for it to be real or actual outside its causes, and thus to that extent self-subsistent, then material possibility can be specified as follows. P is materially possible if it is capable of being real or actual at T. In turn, P will be capable of being real or actual at T only if there is some specifiable set of conditions such that, if they were to obtain at T, would bring it about that that P is real or actual at T or some time subsequent to T. This is a very strong sense of the notion of possibility, which presupposes what I have elsewhere called metaphysical possibility but supersedes this notion.[[9]](#footnote-9) On my account, something is metaphysically possible if it is intrinsically epistemically possible (what I am here calling “formal possibility” and elsewhere have called logical possibility in the broad sense), extrinsically epistemically possible (i.e., not ruled out on logical or conceptual grounds by anything else we know) and physically possible (not ruled out by the laws of nature). What the notion of material possibility adds to this is the further specification that some set of circumstances, not already excluded by antecedently actual events, could obtain at T and, if those conditions did obtain, P would exist at T. I believe that it is this very strong sense of “possible,” where it roughly means, “could actually exist at T,” that Kant is relying on in his argument. Let us now consider an argument along Kantian lines with this notion of possibility in mind.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**First Stage of the Argument** I begin with a preliminary premises dependent upon modern modal notions unknown to Kant and thus anachronistic in the context of his original proof:

1. I exist.

2. If I exist, something exists.

3. Therefore, something exists.

4. If something exists, then it is logically possible that something exists.

5. It is logically possible that something exists.

6. Necessarily, it is possible that something exist.

7. Therefore, something exists in every world.

Kant would no doubt insist that any such proof must be a priori and thus cannot rely on any empirical claim. However, it is doubtful that any proof of the sort envisaged by Kant can actually succeed, so I have adopted a compromise. It is true that the claim that I exist is both contingent and synthetic; nevertheless, I do grasp that claim with extrinsic certainty *via* the Cartesian *Cogito*. As such, it can appropriately be used in this context. Although this spoils the purely *a priori* character of the proof, it introduces a much-needed factual element into the proof that will prove very useful as we proceed. The inferences realized in premises 1-3 and 3-5 are justified by *modus ponens*. Premise 6 follows from one of the standard axioms of S5 modal logic according to which if P is possible then P is necessarily possible. This axiom reflects the intuition that the modal properties of propositions are essential to them and thus invariant across possible worlds. Premise 7 simply translates 6 into the idiom of possible worlds, the semantics for modal logic. Thus, if it is true in any world that something exists, and thus true in every world that something exists, then something exists in every world.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Second Stage of the Argument**

8. No contingent thing exists in every possible world.

9. Further, it is perfectly conceivable that there exists a world in which no contingent

beings exist.

10. Therefore, it is logically possible that there is a world in which no contingent beings

exist.

11. Since it logically impossible for there to exist a world in which nothing exists, in such

a world, a necessary being must exist.

12. If a necessary being exists in any world, that being exists in every world.

13. Therefore, a necessary being exists in every possible world.

14. The actual world is a possible world.

15. Therefore, a necessary being exists.

At this point, I find it necessary to fill some gaps in Kant’s exposition of the argument in order to make it logically tight. Much of what I assert in premises 8-15 is anachronistic in the context of Kant’s philosophy. However, nothing that I say here is obviously contrary to Kant’s philosophical perspective, at least once it is shorn of its “Copernican” pretensions. At any rate, proving that a necessary being exists is clearly something that Kant has to argue if his proof is to be completed. This is my attempt to accomplish that end.

By definition, a contingent being is one that exists in some worlds and not others, such that it exists in at least one world and fails to exist in at least one world. As such, no contingent being exists in every possible world. At the same time, it seems perfectly conceivable that there exist a world W in which no contingent beings exist. At the very least, there is no contradiction in this supposition, so it is formally possible and thus logically possible so far forth. Further, in the case of the *non-existence* of a contingent thing, it seems that formal possibility will be sufficient for logical possibility, since the only thing required for material possibility in this case is the lack of the necessary conditions required in order for a contingent thing to exist. This is a condition that could conceivably obtain in any possible world in which that being is constituted as metaphysically possible but in which the necessary and sufficient conditions for its actual existence do not obtain at some particular time T.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Of course, such a world would not be conceivable if contingent beings were the only beings that could conceivably exist, since if that were the case then in W nothing would exist at all, and this as we have seen is impossible. However, there is another conceivable kind of being, namely a non-contingent or necessary being, one that exists in all possible worlds. If such a being were to exist in W, then something would exist in W even though there were no contingent beings in W. Thus, since it is apparently coherently conceivable that there exists a world W in which no contingent beings exist, and there is no contradiction in supposing this even if something exists in every world so long as a necessary being exists in W, W is a possible world. If that is so, then a necessary being exists in that world. However, a necessary being cannot exist in any world without existing in every possible world. Therefore, that necessary being exists in every possible world. Now the actual world is a possible world, so if that necessary being exists in every possible world, it exists in the actual world. Therefore, that necessary being exists in the actual world, which is to say, that necessary being exists.

**Third Stage of the Argument**

16. Whatever exists has a ground for its existence in virtue of which it is materially

possible.

17. That ground must either be in the thing itself of in something outside of that thing.

18. Only a necessary being could be the ground of its own existence.

19. It is not materially possible for the ultimate ground of a contingent being to be

another contingent being or series of such beings.

20. Therefore, only a necessary being could be the ultimate ground of a contingent being.

Again, this takes us beyond the limits of Kant’s own discussion. At the same time, something along these lines seems necessary to complete the full proof, so I have attempted to supply something to fill the gap. Since I have no Kantian provenance for this stage of the proof, it remains open to others to find alternate reconstructions of the argument.

Everything that exists is both formally and materially possible, as is proved by the fact that it actually exists, i.e. exists as something real or actual in the actual world. Therefore, the existence of anything in the actual world presupposes that the materially necessary conditions for its existence have obtained in that world. Such a being will not only be materially possible, but such that its material possibility has been realized or actualized as a real, actual, existing thing, event, or state-of-affairs. The notion of material possibility, then, presupposes that possibility in that sense is parasitic on prior actuality, and that this prior actuality both grounds the possibility of what exists, but also realizes it in actuality as something real and actual. Thus, the materially possible presupposes the actual as a necessary condition for the realization/actualization of its material possibility as something real, actual, or existent.[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, where material possibility is concerned, the PSR is undeniable – nothing can exist unless the necessary and sufficient conditions for its existence obtain. As realized in time, i.e. in an ordered temporal sequence, the PSR takes the form of the *causal principle*, according to which whatever comes to exist or occur in time has a sufficient explanation in terms of the operation of some prior thing, event, or state-of-affairs that produces it, makes it happen, or constitutes it as real, actual, or existing. As such, every event in any ordered sequence of real, existent, or actual events is an effect, and every effect has a cause.

Kant, of course, would deny that this applies beyond the bound of possible experience. However, that is only because he was held back from affirming the deliverance of his own reason by the demands of his “Copernican revolution” in philosophy, for which Kant gives no compelling arguments and which I believe does nothing but distort his philosophical vision. I, then, am fully prepared to follow Kant’s argument where it leads, without regard for his doctrine of the limits of reason. I believe that argument leads to an affirmation of the existence of God, or at any rate, that of the only God to which philosophical argument can lead us, the God of the philosophers.

Here’s how the argument proceeds. In the case of a non-contingent, or necessary being, the ground of its being has to be contained within its own nature in such a manner that it could never come into or go out of existence, even in principle. For example, if the classical ontological argument is sound, then there is a being for which it is inconceivable that it not exist, simply as a matter of conceptual analysis.[[14]](#footnote-14) In a like manner, if there is a being in which essence and existence are identical, then it will the essence of that being to exist, in which case its existence will once again be accounted for by that fact.[[15]](#footnote-15) Again, we may be able to conceive of a being such that the mere logical possibility of its existence entails its necessary, and hence its actual existence.[[16]](#footnote-16) In any of these ways, then, the existence of a necessary being would be grounded in the notion of its essence or nature, and thus capable of being exhibited by conceptual analysis, even if the proof for the existence of such a being, considered as such, may require a premise known *a posteriori*.

In the case of a contingent being, one by nature indifferent to existence, the ground of such a being must always lie outside its nature, and be such that it obtains prior to and independently of that which depends upon it. This will hold regardless of whether we are talking about a temporal or a non-temporal ground. Nor does it seem possible, on reflection, that we could account for the materially possibility, and thus the existence, of any contingent being, solely in terms of the grounds provided by other contingent beings. Since each contingent being requires that the grounds of its material possibility be realized prior to its existence, such a series cannot end in a first member, since in that case some contingent thing would have come to exist in circumstances in which the materially necessary grounds have not obtained and which are thus sufficient to prevent it from coming into existence.

At this point, of course, David Hume will object. How can we exclude the logical possibility that something comes into existence in W from nothing (i.e. from no set of independently constituted antecedent conditions specifiable in principle) for no cause or reason whatsoever? It seems perfectly conceivable, i.e. coherently imaginable, that such a state-of-affairs could obtain. I simply close my eyes and imagine something, e.g. an aardvark, just popping into existence out of thin air into an empty region of space. Further, the arguments against this supposition based on the principle of sufficient reason are all either circular or question begging. There is thus no incoherence in supposing that it is both possible that something exist in W and yet that nothing exist in W, and indeed, that nothing ever exist in W.

In Hume’s time, the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) was treated, by Clarke, Leibniz, and even (perhaps especially) Kant as a self-evident, *a priori* principle known by pure reason, even if indemonstrable. We cannot blame Hume for having attacked it this form, defying anyone to demonstrate that its denial was somehow self-contradictory. However, even if Hume is correct in his critique of the arguments for the PSR received by his contemporaries, we need only note in this regard that, as we have seen, mere lack of contradiction, i.e. formal possibility, is not sufficient for logical possibility in the full and proper sense. More is needed to explain why one contingent thing exists and another, equally coherently conceivable, fails to exist in any given possible world. Indeed, given the definition of contingent being presented above, there is an evident contradiction in the idea that a contingent being could just pop into existence for no cause or reason whatsoever. A contingent being is one that is by nature indifferent to existence, and thus can only exist when some set of independently constituted antecedent conditions specifiable in principle obtain, such that if those conditions exist or obtain then that being will exist, and if they fail to exist that thing’s existence will be excluded or prevented by that very fact. What Hume envisages is that something that can only exist on the supposition that prior conditions necessary and sufficient for its existence obtain *comes to exist anyway* despite the fact that those conditions have not been met, itself a sufficient condition for the prevention of that thing’s existence. That is a contradiction, surely.

Hume will naturally deny this, claiming that the account of contingent being that I have given begs the question somehow against his supposition. While I admit that it does have the logical consequence that Hume’s scenario is not logically possible after all, I do not see how this is sufficient to entail that I am begging the question against Hume. Perhaps Hume would want to evade this by proposing some alternate analysis of what a contingent being is that blocks my argument. For example, he might say that, on his view, a contingent being is simply one that exists at one time and not at another – after all, he might say, this is a logical consequence of your “definition” of contingent being – and then defy me to prove that such a being, so defined, cannot pop into existence from nothing for no cause or reason whatsoever. However, I am not sure that Hume really deserves a response on this score.

Suppose that someone claims it is logically possible that the interior angles of a triangle not add up to 180 degrees. I respond by giving him Euclid’s proof for this claim. In response, my opponent proposes that I am begging the question against him. Of course, if we are going to define a triangle as plane figure with three sides, then there is a contradiction in denying the conclusion of Euclid’s proof. However, he says, “I don’t define “triangle’ in that way. Instead, I define “triangle” as “a plane figure with at least one side” – after all, that is a logical consequence of your definition of triangle, right?” He then defies me to prove that the interior angles of a triangle, so defined, necessarily add up to 180 degrees. The fact that I cannot do this does not make me any less confident that what Euclid says is correct. The same holds in the case of the PSR, which is a principle that applies, not specifically to logical possibility, but instead directly to material possibility. At any rate, to define a contingent being as one that exists at one time and not another is hardly adequate, since it overlooks the possibility that something could be contingent yet exist at all times, something that Hume himself affirms and exploits in his writings. If that is so, then there is more to the concept of contingent being that what my hypothetical Hume is willing to concede in this hypothetical context. Further reflection on this point, I believe, will lead “Hume” (or his modern counterparts) to admit the justice of the analysis I have presented above.

Nor is Hume’s thought experiment sufficient to prove even the conceivability of the claim that something could come into existence out of nothing for no cause or reason whatsoever. As Jonathan Edwards would have pointed out (and more recently Bede Rundle has pointed out) it is impossible to conceive of a state of affairs in which nothing exists, if what this means is to imagine such a scenario.[[17]](#footnote-17) The best we can do, as Hume does, is to imagine something popping into existence in a previously empty space. Even this thought experiment, then, presupposes something given prior to and independently of that which is supposed to pop into existence out of nothing. The same holds for modern cosmologies that claim to show how the universe comes into existence out of “nothing.” Proponents of these views never really mean this – there always turns out to be something (e.g. a “quantum vacuum”) pre-existing the universe that is causally necessary for producing it in accordance the operation of some indeterministic physical law, which incidentally also pre-exists the universe as a necessary condition for its possibility. In Hume’s case, his claim to be able to imagine something popping into existence from nothing for no cause or reason whatsoever is mere stipulation. Given what we imagine in this scenario, we can at best infer that it is apparently coherently imaginable that some material thing pops into existence without any observable cause or reason of the same (or the usual) sort. That is far from proving that it popped into existence from literally nothing for no cause or reason whatsoever, or that in *imaging* this I have succeeded in so *imagining* this.[[18]](#footnote-18) There is, in fact, not enough data given in the scenario to assure us that it is even conceivable for something to come into existence without a cause. So far as the imaginative episode itself is concerned, we of course know that the cause of the imaginative popping of the mental image into Hume’s consciousness is Hume’s own will, which intentionally summons the image into the intentional field of his imagination. As such, even his own supposed demonstration of the possibility of something popping into existence from nothing for no cause or reason whatever belies what he supposes it to show. Hume will undoubtedly claim that I am begging the question against him, but I prefer to think that I am simply holding him to the impossibly high standards of demonstration that he requires of those who hold views contrary to his own. The claim that some contingent thing could pop into existence out of nothing for no cause or reason whatever seems to me obviously false and self-contradictory, something to be accepted only on the most compelling arguments, which Hume has failed to give and, in the nature of the case, could not possibly give. I have no qualms in rejecting his suppositions out of hand.

Nor will it do, as Hume does elsewhere, to postulate that there is no first member to the series, but that each member of the series of contingent beings is the product of an actually infinite set of prior contingent beings. I have presented the argument for this claim at length in another place; let me just summarize it here.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Pick any event in the series – call that event E. According to this suggestion, an actually infinite number of antecedents, each of which was causally necessary for its existence, preceded E. Since E is a contingent being, and did not always exist, there was a time prior to its existence at which it did not exist; call this time T. At T, some prior event upon which E depended for its existence was occurring; call this event E-n. If E-n is to causally produce E, then it must be possible to reduce the number of events linking E-n to E to zero by progressively producing them one at a time, with the result that E is finally produced and that will be the case only if the number of such events is a finite number. There is a problem with this. E-n is stipulated to be part of an actually infinite series of such events occurring prior to E. At whatever point in the series we have reached at T, only a subset of that actually infinite series will have been realized in actually. According to the standard account of infinity, however, no matter how many members we remove from an actually infinite set, or how many sub-tasks we complete in a supertask requiring that we perform an actually infinite set of sub-tasks in order to complete it, an actually infinite number of members remain, or remain to be completed. In that case, there will be no less members in the proposed series left to be realized at T than there were before T, so that an actually infinite number of such events will still remain to be produced prior to the production of E. Because of this, E-n will be no closer to realizing E than was any earlier member of that series and the envisaged act of production will not be possible even in principle. E, then, cannot be produced in this way and thus cannot exist in the envisaged scenario. We can iterate this same argument for each and every member of the series. This means that the same will apply to every member of that supposed actually infinite series, with the result that none of the members of that series could exist, since the materially necessary conditions for their existence could not possibly obtain. Since none of the members of that set can exist in the envisaged circumstances, neither can the series as a whole, *unless* that series has an external cause, not a member of the series, that produces it as a completed whole in a single, timeless act of creation.

However, since we know with certainty that contingent beings exist, since each of us is one such, we know that the materially necessary conditions for the existence of such beings have in fact been met. If they cannot be met on the supposition that they have only contingent grounds, then we must have recourse to the existence of a necessary being, which we have already proven to exist on independent grounds, as the First Cause of all things. Only such a being could provide the ultimate ground for the existence of all contingent beings.

To this it may be objected that we have not proved that there is only one such being; all this in good time, when we get back to Kant’s exposition in the *Beweisgrund*. For now, we need only note that this necessary being as First Cause is as yet merely a theoretical entity about which we know nothing. In this context, considerations of parsimony and simplicity dictate that we not multiply theoretical entities beyond necessity. We shall then proceed on the assumption that there is only one such being, with the proviso that if this should prove an inadequate hypothesis, we are prepared to revise this judgment. With this proviso in mind, let us now conclude the argument.

**Fourth and Final Stage of the Argument**

21. Only an *ens realissimum* could be ground of all material possibility.

22. There can be at most one such being.

23. Therefore, an *ens realissimum* exists.

24. Thus, the God of the philosopher exists as the *ens realissimum*.

Our long excursus has ended and we are now ready to rejoin the main line of Kant’s argument in the *Beweisgrund*. Leibniz had defined God as the *ens realissimum* – the “most real being.” Kant’s 1762 proof is tailored to this conception of God, identifying God as the ultimate ground of all possibility, by which I here take him to mean material possibility. In this case, we are relying on another version of the principle of sufficient reason, one to which Descartes also subscribes and upon which he bases his primary argument for God’s existence: *there* *cannot be more reality in the effect than there is in its cause*. Something cannot come from nothing, but that is precisely what would be the case if there were more reality, i.e. perfection, in the effect than in its cause. On that supposition, there could be no explanation for the overplus of being. So if we are to follow our hypothesis that there is but one necessary being serving as the ultimate ground for all contingent beings (such as I know myself to be), we must hold that this being possesses all the perfections that creatures possess either *formally* or *eminently*. If the ground of all possibility possesses a perfection formally, it does so by instantiating the highest degree of a perfection that comes in degrees and can be exemplified to a greater or lesser degree among its possessors. If the ground of all possibility possesses a perfection eminently, then it does so by possessing some greater perfection in virtue of which that being is capable of causing something to have that perfection.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The ground of all possibility, then, possesses all perfections in a manner appropriate to its nature and we should attribute them to that being on the same grounds that we attribute features to any theoretical entity. According to Kant, the necessary being conceived of in this way is necessarily singular.[[21]](#footnote-21) Considered merely as the God of the philosophers, and thus as a theoretical entity, we can defend Kant’s claim in the following manner. If there were two such beings, one would either have to be dependent on the other or independent of it. In the first case, its material possibility would have to be explained in terms of a ground more ultimate than itself and thus is would not be the ultimate ground of whatever it, in turn, makes materially possible and thus would not be the necessary being we have been describing. On the second option, either one would have to be more powerful than the other or they would have to be equally powerful. If one is more powerful than the other, then once again the weaker one would not be the ultimate ground of whatever it makes materially possible, since its operation could be overridden by the other, more powerful one and is thus the ground of those possibilities only by the sufferance of the other. If those two beings were equally powerful, then either they could interfere with each other’s operation or they could not. In the first case, neither would be the ultimate ground of anything material possible through their operation, since each would depend on the sufferance/noninterference of the other in order to actualize those possibilities. However, if we suppose that these beings are so equally balanced in power that neither was capable of interfering with the operation of the other in either its exercise or its outcome, we would have no reason for regarding them as two from the theoretical point of view. In that case, considerations of parsimony and simplicity behoove us to posit only one such being, a necessary being that is the ground of all possibility. Since we have seen no reason why we ought not to do this, nor derive any advantage from doing otherwise, we do best to simply posit a single necessary being serving as the ultimate ground of all material possibility. That, however, is precisely to posit that being as the *ens realissimum*, containing formally or eminently all the perfections we see instantiated in or exemplified by creatures. This, according to Kant, is the God of the philosophers.

We can thus conclude the proof as follows. Since I exist, then at least one material possibility has been realized or actualized in the actual world in the form of something that really or actually exists in that world. Since the real existence of anything requires that all of the materially necessary conditions for its existence obtain, that something really or actually exists in the actual world entails that those materially necessary conditions exist, occur, or obtain in that world as well. However, as we have seen, the existence of any such thing requires the operation of an *ens realissimum* serving as the ultimate ground of all material possibility, which in turn can only be a necessary being. Therefore, from the existence of anything at all we can infer that such a being exists. This *ens realissimum* is the God of the philosophers. Thus, if anything exists, then God (so described) exists. So, after all, there is a God.

This is the conclusion to which Kant was aiming in 1762 and at which he would have arrived had the baleful influence of Hume not led Kant to initiate his quixotic and wrong-headed “Copernican Revolution” in philosophy. Even so, Kant was convinced that this was the sole basis for a proof of God’s existence. Like many philosophers, he contends that he, and he alone, has proven this. On my view, Kant was surely wrong about this. There are many possible grounds for belief in God, and numerous different demonstrations of the existence of the God of the philosophers that can be established on their basis. However, that does not prevent Kant’s argument from being one among the many possible arguments for God’s existence, or without value simply because it is only one among many. I recommend this argument to the study of other philosophers, for it is a rich source of reflection on the issues it raises, and bids fair to shed further light on the question concerning just what we are asserting when we say “God exists.”

1. I will be at pains to distinguish merely logical possibility, the only kind known to Kant, which I here call formal possibility, from logical possibility in the full and proper sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the terminology I have developed elsewhere, here we have not just inconceivability in the conceiving, but inconceivability in the conception; in the latter case it is what we are attempting to conceive, rather than our conceiving of it, that is impossible. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For corroboration of these claims, see Allen Wood, *Kant’s Rational Theology*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1978, 70-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kant calls this logical possibility, see (e.g.) Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, Allen Wood and Gertrude M. Clark, trans., Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1978, 46-47. However, while my account of what I call formal possibility corresponds to and expresses Kant’s account of logical possibility, I reserve this latter term for the sort of possibility envisaged in contemporary modal logic, according to which logical possibility *de dicto* means “true in some possible world” and logical possibility *de re* means “exists in some possible world.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. However, we need to note in passing something not mentioned by Kant, i.e. for something to be conceivable without contradiction is not just a matter of what is apparently coherently conceivable. Something can be apparently coherently conceivable without its being the case that it is logically possible – witness the possibility that Goldbach’s conjecture is false. It is apparently coherently conceivable that that Goldbach’s conjecture is false. However, since Goldbach’s conjecture is a mathematical truth, it is either necessarily true or it is necessarily false. So, the mere fact that I can apparently coherently conceive of the possibility that Goldbach’s conjecture is false because I perceive no contradiction in that assertion is not enough to secure the even the logical possibility that Goldbach’s conjecture is false. It is sufficient only for what I have elsewhere called intrinsic epistemic possibility – see Duncan, *The Proof of the External World*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2008, . As such, apparent coherent conceivability, while sufficient for what I am here calling formal possibility, is at best necessary, not sufficient, for logical possibility in many cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kant uses this latter expression in the *Lectures*, op cit., 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As will emerge later, I regard formal possibility as a necessary condition for logically possibility, so that nothing that is formally impossible is logically possible, and whatever is formally possible is logically possible so far forth. However, formal possibility is not always sufficient for full-blown logical possibility, as is amply shown the example in footnote 3, as well as that just discussed above. How these two notions are related in a manner relevant to the current case will emerge in due course. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This account of existence from Suarez; see his *On the Essence of Finite Things, on the Existence of that Essence and their Distinction,* Norman J. Wells, trans., Milwaukee, WI, Marquette University Press, 1983, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Or, rather, it adds a dimension to the account of metaphysical possibility that I had overlooked in my 2008 discussion. I gratefully accept the correction, while retaining the notion of metaphysical possibility I presented there as useful in other contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Whereas the notion of logical possibility is a modal notion, that of material possibility is not; that something is modally possible in one world does not entail that it is modally possible across possible worlds. As such, we can only speak of material possibility in a world rather than across possible worlds. Nevertheless, since nothing can be materially possible unless it is logically possible, in a like manner, anything that is materially possible is also logically possible. How these two notions are further related will emerge as we continue to consider the argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This corresponds to Kant’s claim in the *Beweisgrund* that it is absolutely impossible for nothing to exist: see *Beweisgrund*, op. cit., 71. Thus, despite the fact that a possible world in which nothing exists is formally possible, hence logically possible so far forth, it is not after all logically possible, since its possibility is excluded by 7 above. It does not follow from this, of course, that there is some *particular* thing that exists in every possible world, only that *something or other* (not necessarily the same thing) exists in each world. Thus, as Bede Rundle argues, the foregoing claim would be true even if there were only contingent beings, so long as at least one such being existed in each world. So it is a mistake (of which Kant may be guilty) to conclude straightaway to the existence of a necessary being from the claim that necessarily, something exists. I attempt to repair this defect in the next stage of the argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. By the same token, and for the same reason, the inconceivability of the non-existence of something is sufficient to constitute it as necessary and thus as existent in all possible worlds. *Contra* Kant, this shows that the classical ontological argument is immune to his criticism. On this point, see the companion piece to this essay, “Kant’s Critique of the Ontological Argument: FAIL” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kant makes this point a central premise in his *Beweisgrund* proof. Where material possibility is concerned, possibility presupposes prior actuality; see the *Beweisgrund*, op. cit., 71-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kant, of course, rejects the classical ontological argument, but I find no reason to accept his arguments. See “Kant’s Critique of the Ontological Argument: FAIL” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I argued this in Duncan (2008) op. cit., chapters 7-10, without using the ontological argument as a stand-alone argument for God’s existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This is Plantinga’s ontological argument, the father of many versions of the argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Jonathan Edwards, “Of Being,” *Jonathan Edwards Selections*, ed. by Clarence Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, New York, Hill and Wang, 1962, 18-23, and Bede Rundle, “Why is there Something rather than Nothing?”, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2004, 111, 116-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Virgil C. Aldrich, “Image Mongering and Image Management,” (1962) *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 23 (1):51-61 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See “Why there can’t be a Self-Explanatory Series of Infinite Past Events” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As Aquinas says, God is formally wise and eminently a stone. As to formal perfection, Kant clearly endorses the traditional, neo-Platonic and later, Christian metaphysics of participation in his discussion of the categories of quality in the Table of Categories (see Kemp Smith, op. cit. 113-15), a passage usually passed over in silence by commentators. See also the discussion in Wood (1978), op. cit., 25-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See the *Beweisgrund*, 79 and 81 (page 80 contains the German original of which 79 and 81 are the translation.) However, Kant’s argument is, as usual, unpersuasive as given. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)