

## God, Powers, and Possibility in Kant's *Beweisgrund*

Abstract: This paper proposes a novel reading of Kant's account of the dependence of possibility on God in the pre-Critical *Beweisgrund*. I argue that Kant has a theistic-potentialist conception of the way God grounds possibility, according to which God grounds possibility by his understanding and will. The reason is that Kant accepts what I call the Principle of Possible Existence: If something is possible, then it is possible that it exists. Furthermore, I explore the connection between causal powers and possibility, the influence of Crusius on Kant, and the significance of the distinction between internal and external possibility.

Keywords: Metaphysics, Rational Theology, Possibility, Pre-Critical philosophy, Crusius

Kant is most famous for rejecting all attempts at proving the existence of God in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Notwithstanding this, the younger Kant proposed such a proof himself in *The Only Possible Ground of Proof* (or *Beweisgrund*, for short) from 1762. This so-called "possibility proof" has recently received meticulous scrutiny and is, I think, quite well-understood now. In brief, Kant argues that all possibility must be grounded in an absolutely necessary being (OPGP 2:79f.) and then identifies this being with God (OPGP 2:83).<sup>1</sup> However, the way God grounds possibility is controversial to an astonishing degree.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars hold that God is the ground

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<sup>1</sup> I quote Kant according to volume and page numbers of the *Akademie* edition. Translations are usually mine, although I considered standard translations. The following abbreviations for titles are used: M-x = Metaphysics x (lecture), ND = Nova Dilucidatio, OPGP = The Only Possible Ground of Proof, Opt = Essay on Some Considerations on Optimism. Wolff and Crusius are quoted according to paragraphs.

<sup>2</sup> Newlands distinguishes between the questions, first, on what in God possibility depends and, second, the way God grounds possibility (2013: 158). However, this distinction is of itself vague. For example, Newlands holds that, according to Leibniz, possibility is grounded in God's intellect and is grounded by a form of ontological dependence (2013: 158). But this threatens to reify God's capacities in a questionable

by instantiating at least some possibilities (which I refer to as the “instantiation view”)<sup>3</sup>, others that he is the ground by thinking them in his understanding (call this “intellectualism”)<sup>4</sup>, and Stang, on his former approach, that God is the ground by his power (*Macht*), which he calls the “power view”<sup>5</sup>, but I will refer to as “potentialism”.<sup>6</sup> Newlands rejects all this and argues that Kant does not have any account of God’s grounding of possibility.<sup>7</sup> But, recently, Stang has argued that this alleged indeterminacy is on purpose because Kant denies that we can ever comprehend how God grounds possibility, albeit Stang claims that Kant’s account is implicitly committed to potentialism.<sup>8</sup>

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manner; another way to answer the questions on Leibniz’s behalf might be that, first, possibility is grounded just in God (or some of his properties) and, second, possibility is grounded by God’s conceiving of them. (I am not suggesting this as an interpretation of Leibniz, though.) For this reason, I make no use of Newland’s distinction in my paper.

<sup>3</sup> See Adams 2000, Chignell 2009, 2012, 2014a, Boehm 2014. On this view, all possibilities can in some way be logically derived from predicates that are instantiated somewhere in the world. While Boehm concludes that this makes Kant a Spinozist, Chignell holds that there is only a “threat of Spinozism” which bothers Kant as he firmly rejects Spinozism. There has been considerable pushback to the instantiation view, especially to Chignell’s version of it (see Newlands 2013: 181-5, Abaci 2014: 5-18, 2019: 110-5, 124-6, Yong 2014: 30-8, Stang 2016: 106-12, Hoffer 2016: 187-93). I find the objections mostly convincing and do not need to repeat them here.

<sup>4</sup> See Insole 2011 and Hoffer 2016. Intellectualism has been the view of Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten (see Stang 2010: 279, 296n10, Insole 2011: 419f., Newlands 2013: 164–6, Hoffer 2016: 193–5).

<sup>5</sup> See Stang 2010: 280f.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the grounding of possibility in Descartes, Spinoza, and especially Leibniz, see Newlands 2013.

<sup>7</sup> See Newlands 2013: 177. If I succeed in showing that Kant has a theistic-potentialist account, this ought to be enough to refute Newlands.

<sup>8</sup> See Stang 2016: 118, similarly Abaci 2019: 130f. Stang might react to my theistic-potentialist reading, which is in fact a specification of what he calls the “power view”, by arguing that Kant is implicitly committed to it, even though he officially denies that we can have an account of how God grounds possibility; so there is no real tension to Stang’s view. However, I think that Yong (2017: 256-60) has put

In this paper, I argue that Kant has what I call a “theistic-potentialist” account of God’s grounding of possibility. That is, God grounds possibility by his powers, but in a specific way that fits to Kant’s theistic conception of God. For, on my reading, God grounds possibility by his understanding and will. This also gives intellectualism its due. Crucial for my reading is what I call the “Principle of Possible Existence” (PPE): If something is possible, then it is possible that it exists. A ground of possibility, then, is a ground that makes it possible that something exists.

I begin by arguing that, according to both Kant and Crusius, God grounds the possibility of worldly things by his powers because worldly things are only possible if there are powers to produce them. However, unlike contemporary approaches, which attempt to ground possibility in dispositions, powers, or potentialities<sup>9</sup>, Kant and Crusius have only a commitment to potentialism because of PPE; furthermore, they hold that God is absolutely necessary and hence has no grounds. In section two, I consider the third of Kant’s arguments for theism – that is, the view that the absolutely necessary being has understanding and will – and contend that this argument establishes that God grounds possibility by his understanding and will, which shows that Kant has a theistic-potentialist account. Next, section three considers the traditional distinction between “internal” and “external” possibility, accepted by Kant as well. I discuss a textual and a

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forth compelling objections against Stang’s textual case for the view that we are barred from such knowledge, according to Kant (I cannot discuss this matter here). Yong’s own reading is that all available readings face an “interpretive standoff” (2017: 255), but hopes that the “prepredicative accounts of the grounds of content set forth by Hölderlin, Fichte, and Hegel” (2017: 265) can shed light on Kant’s account of grounding of possibility in *Beweisgrund*. Whatever the merits of Yong’s reading of post-Kantian idealists, I am skeptical about this interpretation of Kant, although I cannot respond to Yong’s intriguing proposal in this paper.

<sup>9</sup> Such accounts have recently been defended by Borghini and Williams 2008, Jacobs 2010, and Vetter 2015. Nonetheless, these approaches have the same Aristotelian root as Crusius’s and Kant’s.

systematic objection to my reading, which are based on that distinction, and argue that they pose no threat to my account. Section four concludes.

## **1. God as the Ground of Possibility by his Power**

A very condensed summary of the possibility proof runs like this: Something is possible, therefore there must be an absolutely necessary being that grounds all possibility outside himself and this being is God.<sup>10</sup> So there are two main steps of the possibility proof: first, Kant establishes that there is an absolutely necessary being that grounds all possibility; and next, he argues, albeit only in rough outline, that this being must have all the predicates<sup>11</sup> that constitute the concept of God. As regards the first step, Kant introduces the concept of possibility by distinguishing between a formal and a material aspect of possibility (OPGP 2:77f.). The formal aspect concerns whether some predicates are consistent or else contradict each other. But the relations of consistency and contradiction presuppose that there are relata that constitute the material aspect of possibility (this is the “real” or the “data” of possibility, OPGP 2:77f.). According to Kant, something can be impossible even absent a contradiction because the data of possibility may not be “given” (OPGP 2:78, 2:79). He then goes on to argue that it would be a contradiction if something were possible but nothing actual through which the possibility were given (OPGP 2:78). Since Kant apparently thinks we can know a priori that something is

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<sup>10</sup> For detailed discussion of the possibility proof, see Wood 1978: 64–71, Fisher and Watkins 1998: 369–80, Adams 2000, Chignell 2009, Stang 2010, 2016: ch. 4–5, Boehm 2014: 20–43, Abaci: 2017: 264–70, 2019: 104–31, Kanterian 2018: 207–41.

<sup>11</sup> Like Kant, I am using the term ‘predicate’ indiscriminately both for concepts and properties of things.

possible<sup>12</sup>, he infers that, necessarily, something exists through which possibility is given (OPGP 2:79).<sup>13</sup>

It is not so clear what Kant means by “given” or why he thinks that a possibility not given by something actual would be a contradiction. Fortunately, we can set these issues aside for our purposes. What matters is that, according to Kant, there are two ways a possibility can be given. Either a possibility is given “in the actual as a determination”, or it is “given as a consequence through another existence” (OPGP 2:79).<sup>14</sup> As Kant goes on to explain, only the “absolutely necessary being”<sup>15</sup> is not dependent on other beings, hence “his own possibility is originally

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<sup>12</sup> See Chignell 2009: 164.

<sup>13</sup> Some scholars believe that Kant identifies possibility with “thinkability” (see Wood 1978: 66, 68, Fisher and Watkins 1998: 371, Yong 2017: 253f.). But this is wrong. To be sure, Kant makes a strong connection between possibility and thinkability in *Beweisgrund*, arguing that “everything possible is something that can be thought” (OPGP 2:78). Notwithstanding this, he stops short of identifying possibility with thinkability and even claims that some concepts, which as such are thinkable, may be “deception” (OPGP 2:80) or “empty words” that do not signify possible things (OPGP 2:81). What Kant seems to mean instead is that possible is whatever is *legitimately* thinkable. And legitimately thinkable is what is given by something actual. For similar views to mine, see Chignell 2009: 168, Stang 2016: 118–20, Abaci 2017: 268f., 2019: 127–9.

<sup>14</sup> In the literature, the predicates instantiated by God are often called “fundamental”, whereas those that are consequences of God are called “derivative”. Kant also argues that some concepts, like ‘space’ and ‘extension’, cannot be further analyzed into other concepts (OPGP 2:81), which we can call “logically atomic”. It is important to note that fundamental predicates are not the same as logically atomic predicates (see Stang 2016: 106, 110), contrary to what some scholars assume (e.g., Adams 2000: 430, Chignell 2009: 166n19, Abaci 2019: 120). For Kant says that the predicate ‘extension’ cannot be instantiated by God (OPGP 2:85), so there are logically atomic predicates which are not fundamental.

<sup>15</sup> The notion of “absolute necessity” is tricky. On its nominal definition, “Absolutely necessary is of which the opposite is in itself impossible” (OPGP 2:81). As Kant points out, however, this is not the real definition (OPGP 2:81f.). See Stang 2010: 281-5, 2016: 122-8, Abaci 2019: 115-9 for discussion, although I have some concerns with their accounts which I may address in future work.

given” (OPGP 2:86).<sup>16</sup> The possibility of all contingent beings, on the contrary, depends on being grounded by the absolutely necessary being, which contains the “ultimate real ground of all other possibility” (OPGP 2:83).<sup>17</sup>

But what is a “real ground”? Kant adopts this notion from Crusius, who distinguishes between “ideal” and “real” grounds. While an ideal ground is a “ground of cognition” and, as such, only exists in thoughts, a real ground is a ground that “fully or partially produces or makes possible the thing itself outside the thought” (E 34). Real grounds, in turn, are either “effective causes” or “existential grounds” – for instance, the three sides of a triangle are the existential ground of the magnitude of its angles (E 36). Real grounds in the first, causal sense are crucial for Crusius’s account of possibility:

We call *possible* that which is thought, but does not yet exist, or from the existence of which we yet abstract. However, if something which not yet exists is to begin to exist: then this must be produced through an efficient cause ... Therefore, that which is real in the possibilities of such things that do not yet exist – that is, which can have an influence in the coexisting and succeeding things – consists in the existence of a cause of a represented thing. And the *possibility of such things that do not yet exist is, according to its higher concept*, nothing else but the relation of a thing that we do not yet think as existing to an existing thing, by virtue of which the latter is a sufficient cause for the production of the former, which, as of yet, is only thought. (Crusius, E 56)

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<sup>16</sup> As Stang (2016: 104, 118) points out against Adams (2000: 438), Chignell (2009: 181), and Newlands (2013: 176), it is not the case that God’s own possibility and the possibility of his predicates are grounded in his actuality. Rather, these possibilities are not in need of being grounded.

<sup>17</sup> See also OPGP 2:79, 85, 87, and Stang 2016: 107–12.

If someone should find this passage difficult to parse, it would be hard to disagree. But the idea is a classical Aristotelian one: possibility is grounded in actuality.<sup>18</sup> More precisely, existing things ground possibility through their powers. If something is possible, there is a “sufficient cause” for it. In his dissertation *De Usu*, Crusius distinguishes between “sufficient” and “determining” grounds. While a sufficient ground is sufficient to determine an object *if* the ground is posited, a determining ground actually determines an object because the ground is posited (De usu, 1-3). Thus, a sufficient cause is a cause that is sufficient to produce or change an object if the cause is posited – in other words, the cause has the power, but we abstract from whether the cause acts.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, according to Crusius, something is possible if there is a sufficient but not (yet) determining cause for it.

Analogously to ideal and real grounds, Crusius distinguishes between “ideal possibility”, or the “mere possibility in thoughts” (E 56), and “real possibility”, the “possibility outside of thoughts”, which obtains if something is grounded in powers. For, in this case, “sufficient causes for the thing are really present [*wirklich vorhanden*], which only need to come into the state of action [*in dem Stand der Action kommen dürfen*]” (Crusius, E 56).<sup>20</sup> Crusius applies his potentialism to the grounding of possibility by God<sup>21</sup>:

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<sup>18</sup> At first glance, Crusius may seem to restrict possibility to non-existing things, as he says: “We call *possible* that which is thought, but does not yet exist”, from which would follow that all possible things depend on powers. But Crusius immediately offers an alternative definition of possibility as that “from the existence of which we as yet abstract”. While none of this constitutes a satisfying definition of possibility, the second phrase reveals that Crusius does not restrict possibility to non-existing things.

<sup>19</sup> See Crusius, E 56, 64, 66, 69, 83(a), 83(b), 405.

<sup>20</sup> See also Crusius, E 63, 64, 69, and Stang 2010: 280.

<sup>21</sup> See also Stang (2010: 296f.n15, 2016: 113), who correctly points out that Crusius’s potentialist account does not make him a voluntarist about God’s grounding of possibility, as Chignell (2009: 181) holds.

The ideal possibility of not existing things would not be useful for anything unless ideal possibility contained at least as much reality in itself that, for everything that contradicts neither itself nor other given truths, God is at least a sufficient cause if he were to make use of his omnipotence. (Crusius, E 56)

Without God's omnipotence, there would only be ideal possibility (of thoughts), but not real possibility (of worldly things). Thus, God is the sufficient cause of real possibility

Kant uses the expression 'real possibility' only in later work (and not in the same way as Crusius). But on a general level, he clearly has, like Crusius, a potentialist account of the dependency of possibility on God. This comes to the fore when Kant writes that "the things themselves are only possible through this being [sc. God], that is, they can only exist as effects of him" (OPGP 2:125). The explanation of "possible" through "can only exist as effect of" reveals his potentialism.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Kant holds that God is a "sufficient real ground" of possibility because God must have the properties "through which ... everything outside him can become actual" (OPGP 2:88). Kant justifies his use of the term 'determining ground' in *Nova Dilucidatio* from 1755 (ND 1:393) by reference to Crusius, so he was clearly aware of the meaning of 'sufficient ground' in Crusius. Therefore, we can assume that 'sufficient real ground' has the same meaning as the Crusian term 'sufficient cause', which is a sufficient ground by virtue of powers.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See also Stang 2016: 113.

<sup>23</sup> Some readers object that possibility cannot be grounded in powers because this raises the question what makes powers themselves possible (see Adams 2000: 438f., Chignell 2009: 181, Newlands 2013: 175n52, Yong 2017: 260f.; for a related objection, see Abaci 2019: 130). But since God is the absolutely necessary being, his powers are not in need of being grounded (see section 3 as regards the powers of worldly substances, which are only grounds of external possibility).



However, neither Kant nor Crusius *define* possibility in terms of powers.<sup>24</sup> This would clearly be inadequate, as both think that the possibility of God does not depend on powers or any other grounds.<sup>25</sup> Rather, the reason why the possibility of contingent beings depends on powers is that they could not exist without something that causes them either to exist or to have certain properties. Looking again at Crusius's quote from E 56, he asks how "something that not yet exists is to begin to exist" – that is, something which is merely possible – and his answer is that "this must be produced through an efficient cause". It is therefore a necessary condition of the existence of a contingent being (or of the instantiation of some of its predicates) that something causes it. From this Crusius infers that something is possible if a sufficient cause for it exists.<sup>26</sup>

This argument is implicitly based on a premise which we can call the Principle of Possible Existence (PPE):

Something is possible iff it possibly exists.

This seems trivial, but one might want to dispute it. For example, assume intellectualism were true and God grounded possibilities by thinking them, but also assume that, implausibly, God were causally inert and could not create a world. If we added that a world can only exist if created by God, then it followed that no worldly things can exist, even though they would be possible because God thinks them. This scenario would violate PPE. But if PPE holds and

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<sup>24</sup> This is where Kant and Crusius differ from the contemporary approaches mentioned in n. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Crusius argues that God is "the first ground of the world" and it is not possible to "ask for a higher real ground why he exists" (E 237). Kant claims that, since the possibility of the absolutely necessary being and its predicates are given through his existence, the absolutely necessary being does not contain the real ground of "the possibility of the most real being himself" (OPGP 2:86).

<sup>26</sup> Apparently, the expression "cause" refers to an object with powers to cause something. It is not implied that the object actually causes something.

worldly things or predicates can only exist or be instantiated if there is a cause for it, then things or predicates are only possible if there is a sufficient cause for them.<sup>27</sup>

Kant apparently accepts PPE, too. In the course of an argument that I analyze in detail in the next section, he infers from the fact that God is the ground of possibility that he can make all possible things actual:

Now the necessary being is the sufficient real ground of all that which is possible external to him; for this reason, even the property must be encountered in him through which ... everything outside him can become actual. (OPGP 2:88)

So we have seen that there is excellent textual support for Stang's former view that Kant has a potentialist account of God as the ground of possibility. The textual evidence is clearly incompatible with the claim that, whether deliberately or not, Kant offers no account of how God grounds possibility. It also conflicts with the main rival accounts of potentialism, that is, intellectualism and the instantiation view. PPE shows why they would be unacceptable for Kant or anyone who endorses this principle. Intellectualism would be too little to satisfy PPE, for God's understanding alone would be insufficient to make things actual. But the instantiation view, on the contrary, would be too much, for it is not required of any worldly property that it is actualized so that God can make it actual. It would be bizarre if God could only create an object if the properties which the object is to instantiate are already instantiated somewhere.

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<sup>27</sup> Since possible existence requires more than the presence of sufficient causes, Crusius argues that there are degrees of real possibility, depending on how many conditions of possible existence are met (E 56). For our purposes, it suffices to focus on powers.

Nevertheless, characterizing Kant's account merely as potentialist (as Stang did in 2010) is insufficient. In the next section, we will specify it as a theistic-potentialist view.<sup>28</sup>

One remark is in order before leaving the section. A number of scholars hold that the grounding relation in the possibility proof should be understood in terms of (or close to) contemporary "metaphysical explanation", or "grounding". On this account, the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) demands that possibilities must be "explained" in order to minimize "bruteness", that is, to leave only God (and maybe his predicates) unexplained.<sup>29</sup> A difficulty of this approach is that Kant does not appeal to the PSR in the possibility proof, or at least not explicitly.<sup>30</sup> So it would be

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<sup>28</sup> There are a number of questions that could be raised about potentialism. One of them would be what a generalized formal definition of grounds of possibility would look like if we considered conditions of possible existence other than causes. But this would be tricky – in fact, we would have to consider many of the problems that plague a counterfactual analysis of causality. Answering this question would be unfeasible here. – Another question is how abstract objects, in particular mathematical objects, can be grounded in powers. In *Beweisgrund*, Kant considers the unity of geometry (OPGP 2:93-6) and concludes that the harmony and order that can be encountered there is a reason to presume a "supreme ground" (OPGP 2:96). The problem is that geometrical objects do not exist like physical substances and hence cannot be caused by God, which seems to conflict with my reading. However, Kant does not say in *Beweisgrund* how he thinks about the ontological status of mathematical objects. If he were a Platonist, then mathematical objects clearly could not be grounded in powers. But if he should think that geometrical objects are just forms of physical objects (which would be closer to his critical views), then God would be the ground of mathematical objects by being the ground of physical objects. This would be compatible with potentialism.

<sup>29</sup> See Fisher and Watkins 1998: 375 n. 15, Adams 2000: 426, Chignell 2009: 157f., Yong 2014: 28, 2017: 252f.

<sup>30</sup> It is true that, in *Nova Dilucidatio*, a writing that appeared in print some years before *Beweisgrund*, Kant accepts two versions of the PSR, namely "Nothing is true without a determining ground" (ND 1:393), and "No contingent thing can lack a ground that antecedently determines its existence" (ND 1:395). In *Beweisgrund*, however, he does not endorse the PSR in either form and even appears to express reservations as for the use of the second principle in a proof of God's existence (OPGP 2:157).

tempting to reject metaphysical explanation on the grounds that potentialism has better textual support. However, these two accounts of grounding do not necessarily have to be seen as rivals. As Newlands (2013: 172) points out, an explanatory relation may depend on some other relation such that this relation does the explanatory work. For example, one might argue that sufficient causal grounds “explain” why something is possible, so the explanatory relation is dependent on the causal grounding relation.<sup>31</sup> This puts me in a position to declare myself agnostic about the role of metaphysical explanation in Kant’s *Beweisgrund*.

## 2. God as the Ground of Possibility by his Understanding and Will

As I have said above, the possibility proof consists of two main steps. At the first step, Kant argues that something can be possible only if an absolutely necessary being is the real ground of possibility. Then he shows that this being has all the predicates that are contained in the concept of God, so this being is God. One of these predicates is being a “spirit” (OPGP 2:88) – that is, a being with understanding and will, rather than a “blindly necessary ground” that would not differ from the “eternal fate” of some ancient philosophers<sup>32</sup> (OPGP 2:89). This contrasts two fundamentally different conceptions of God, which Kant will distinguish in the *Critique* by using the labels “deism” and “theism” (A631/B659). Deism only has an abstract conception of God as the being that possesses all reality and is akin to pantheism or Spinozism, whereas theism holds that we can attribute to God the predicates of “understanding and freedom” (A631/B659) and is

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Nonetheless, one could argue that there is an implicit third variant at work of the form: “No contingent thing can lack a real ground of its possibility”, which clearly is a premise of the possibility proof.

<sup>31</sup> In a similar vein, Abaci argues that “the requirement that there be an explanation for real possibility does not dictate what counts as such an explanation” (2019: 127).

<sup>32</sup> This description matches the rejection of deism in the *Critique*, of which Kant says that it can only yield a notion of God as the “blindly active [*blindwirkende*] eternal nature as the root of all things” (A632/B660).

more amenable to traditional Christian theology. In the *Critique*, Kant rejects deism as inadequate and holds that only theism can establish an adequate conception of God (A632f./B660f.); and notwithstanding notable differences between the *Critique* and *Beweisgrund*, it is clear that he rejects deism in his earlier writing, too.

Kant briefly sketches three arguments for theism in *Beweisgrund*. The first argument contends that the divine understanding and will are perfect realities and, as such, must belong to God, the second that God must have understanding and will because the effect (the world) cannot be greater than the cause (OPGP 2:87f.). But my interpretative thesis – that God grounds possibility by his understanding and will – turns on the third of these arguments.<sup>33</sup> I will refer to it as the ‘Third Argument’ and present it in full now:

Third, order, beauty, perfection in everything which is possible presuppose a being by whose properties either these relations are grounded, or at least through whom the things are possible according to these relations as from a principal ground. Now the necessary being is the sufficient real ground of all that which is possible external to him; for this reason, even the property must be encountered in him through which, according to these relations, everything outside him can become actual. But it appears that the ground of external possibility, of order, beauty, and perfection, is not sufficient unless a will that conforms to the understanding is presupposed. Thus, it will be necessary to attribute these properties to the Supreme Being.

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<sup>33</sup> This argument is usually neglected. Stang, however, admits that, on a “very natural reading” of the argument, God grounds possibility by his power and understanding (2016: 112). Unfortunately, he rejects this reading without explaining why he considers it mistaken or how the argument should be read instead. Hoffer (2016: 196) uses the argument as evidence that God has an understanding, but ignores the role of God’s will.

Everybody realizes that, irrespective of all the grounds of the generation of plants and trees, nonetheless regular flowerbeds, boulevards, and such like, are only possible through an understanding which conceives the plan and a will which executes it. In the absence of an understanding, all power [*Macht*] or generative power [*Hervorbringungskraft*], likewise all other data of possibility, are insufficient for making the possibility of such order complete. (OPGP 2:88)<sup>34</sup>

The Third Argument is, in all its details, difficult to understand and we will unpack it step by step. Let us begin with a broad outline of the argument:

- (1) All possibilities exhibit relations of “order, beauty, perfection” to each other, which are only possible if they have a unified ground. Call these the “perfect relations”.
- (2) If there is an absolutely necessary being that is the sufficient real ground of possibility, this being is the unified ground of the perfect relations.
- (3) There is an absolutely necessary being that is the sufficient real ground of possibility.
- (4) Therefore, the absolutely necessary being is the unified ground of the perfect relations.  
(from (1) to (3))
- (5) The absolutely necessary being could not be the unified ground of the perfect relations without understanding and will.
- (6) For this reason, the absolutely necessary being has understanding and will. (from (4) and (5))

This valid argument turns on the premises (1), (2), (3), and (5). Kant takes himself to have already established at this point that there must be an absolutely necessary being as the sufficient

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<sup>34</sup> See also OPGP 2:123.

real ground of possibility, which is premise (3); we have addressed this matter in the previous section. So we must discuss premises (1), (2), and (5).

Premise (1) is based on physico-theology, that is, the science that tries to prove the existence of God through the properties of the world. In the Third Argument, Kant presents the premise in a popular form and appeals to the analogy by human design to defend it: a human designer, craftsman, or architect can only be the sufficient ground of the possibility of gardens and the like if she has not only powers, but also an understanding by which she conceives a plan of regular flowerbeds or avenues. Likewise, so the argument goes, the world (with its order, perfection, and beauty) is only possible if there is a being who conceives it in his mind.<sup>35</sup> Not the possibility of any individual thing or predicate requires an understanding, but the relations of all possibilities to each other.<sup>36</sup> In section two of *Beweisgrund*, Kant talks extensively about physico-theology and presents a second proof based on physico-theological considerations which is a posteriori.<sup>37</sup> As the possibility proof is a priori, one might wonder whether physico-theological considerations are impermissible in it. However, the Third Argument does not make any explicit assumptions about how we come to know that these perfect relations among all possibilities obtain. Therefore, Kant might think that an a priori argument for it is available. Granted, if one is not really into physico-

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<sup>35</sup> This is a popularized presentation because Kant in fact thinks that the analogy with human design misleads one into a bad form of physico-theology. See section 3.

<sup>36</sup> The Third Argument also makes a distinction between grounding the relations between possibilities and grounding the relations as depending on a “principal ground”. It is not very clear what this means, but I take it that, at this point, Kant merely argues that there is *some* being who conceives all these possibilities, so this being might not ground the realm of possibility, but could also be some mediocre deity which has a looser connection to the grounding process. Only in the next sentence Kant establishes that this being must be the absolutely necessary being which grounds all possibility.

<sup>37</sup> However, Kant ultimately concedes that the proof is “incapable of mathematical certainty and precision” (OPGP 2:160).

theology, one may not feel the force of any argument to the effect that the structure of the realm of possibilities requires an understanding which conceives it.

But premise (1) does not yet make such far-reaching assumptions. It merely contends that the perfect relations are only possible if there is a unified ground – it neither makes an assumption about the being that grounds them nor about *how* this being grounds them. This is where premise (2) comes into play, which argues that if there is a sufficient real ground of possibility, this being also grounds the perfect relations. The reason probably is that it is not possible to ground all possibilities without grounding the relations among these possibilities, and vice versa.<sup>38</sup> And since such an absolutely necessary being exists – qua (3) – the absolutely necessary being is the sufficient real ground not only of every individual possibility, but also of the perfect relations among all possibilities (which is (4)).

Finally, premise (5) argues that the absolutely necessary being needs understanding and will to be the sufficient ground of possibility. I hasten to add that the fact that possibility depends on God's will does not mean that God makes something possible by his decrees. This would render Kant a voluntarist about possibility, a view he explicitly rejects by saying: "the will makes nothing possible, but only decides [that something be actual] what is already presupposed as possible" (OPGP 2:100).<sup>39</sup> Rather, possibility depends on God's will because the will is the power to make the unified order of the world actual. Again, a comparison with Crusius is illuminating. Like

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<sup>38</sup> See also OPGP 2:125. For extensive discussion of the unity of the ground, see Yong 2014: 38-44, Stang 2016: 132-44.

<sup>39</sup> See also OPGP 2:91, M-Herder 28:134, and Stang 2016: 113. Voluntarism has been accepted by Descartes, who mysteriously argues that God causes something to be possible by his will. See Newlands 2013: 158-161 for a quick overview of Descartes's account.



Kant, Crusius is a theist and makes a physico-theological argument that God needs his understanding to create the world:

We encounter in the world an orderly and regular connection and sequence of things that obviously leads us to the fact that the world has been formed according to ideas and has an intelligent [*verständige*] cause. (Crusius, E 221, see also E 268)

And implicit in Crusius's discussion of God's will is the assumption that, since God is the intelligent cause of the world, he creates the world by his will (see e.g. E 278). God could not create the world by his will alone because, if "God had no understanding: then he could also have no will because will presupposes understanding" (Crusius, E 267).<sup>40</sup> For will is not just a capacity to cause an event – it is "the power of a spirit to act according to its representations" (Crusius, E 275). Since a will can only act according to representations if an understanding thinks them, it follows that, if God has will, then he has understanding. But God could also not be the ground of possibility by his understanding without the will. This distinguishes Crusius from the intellectualist conceptions of Leibniz and Wolff, who hold that God grounds possibilities by just thinking them. According to Crusius, God's understanding can only make the unified order of nature possible if he has a capacity to be the cause of such order; and this is his will.

Seen in this light, the parallels to Kant are striking. Like Crusius, Kant holds that God grounds possibility by his understanding and will, not by his understanding alone: "the ground ... is not sufficient unless a will that conforms to the understanding is presupposed" (OPGP 2:88).<sup>41</sup>

Although the understanding is, unlike the will, not a causal ground of possibility, understanding is a necessary condition of any willing and therefore contributes to making the sufficient real

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<sup>40</sup> See also Crusius, E 445.

<sup>41</sup> See also, e.g., OPGP 2:91f.

ground of possibility complete. Conversely, absent an understanding, the absolutely necessary being only has a “power” or “generative power”, but not a will. This distinguishes Kant’s (and Crusius’s) theistic-potentialist account of God’s grounding of possibility from mere potentialism. Both Kant and Crusius are adhering to PPE here; they ask what capacities are needed so that God can create a world with the perfect relations. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to deem Kant a Crusian about the grounds of possibility.

### 3. Internal and External Possibility

Up to this point, I have only talked about the grounds of possibility, period. However, following a Leibniz-Wolffian tradition, Kant distinguishes between “internal” and “external” possibility. In this section, I explain the distinction, consider a textual difficulty for my reading of the Third Argument coming from this distinction, and discuss the different ways in which God grounds internal and external possibility.

Kant’s source for the terminology of ‘internal’ and ‘external possibility’ appears to be the following passage in Wolff’s *Cosmology*<sup>42</sup>:

*Internally possible* is what is possible regarded in itself, that is, which, considered in itself, does not include any contradiction ... *Externally possible* is what has a determinate cause in the visible world, that is, which is able to exist in it ... (Wolff, *Cosm* 111)

As Wolff understands it, external possibility is that which can exist given contingent causal conditions. Internal possibility, on the contrary, is what is possible in itself.<sup>43</sup> Another way to put

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<sup>42</sup> Wolff’s student Baumgarten, whose *Metaphysica* was the textbook for Kant’s lectures on metaphysics, also makes the distinction, albeit with different terminology. Compare Baumgarten, M 15 (17:29) with Baumgarten, M 16 (17:30).

this is that internal possibility is the essence of a thing<sup>44</sup>, whereas external possibility concerns what is possible given actual external conditions, that is, concrete circumstances of its existence. To give an example, it is internally possible for balls to roll; but it is externally possible for a ball to roll (in a concrete situation) only if there is a cause that can set the ball into motion.

In contrast to external possibility, internal possibility can be cognized by the principle of contradiction alone. But cognizing external possibility requires knowledge of the causal conditions of the actual world. For external possibility is the agreement with contingent actual conditions, and Wolff holds that something can only exist if there can be a cause for it. This becomes clear by the notion of a “potential being”, which he defines as that which “can have its sufficient ground of existence” in an existing being (Ont 175). Since a substance can only be a ground of actuality by virtue of its powers (Ont 881), a substance is a sufficient cause (to adopt Crusius’s term) of external possibility. However, since everything that is externally possible necessarily exists at one point of time (which is a consequence of Wolff’s determinism)<sup>45</sup>, external possibility is co-extensional with actuality<sup>46, 47</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> In *Theologia Naturalis*, Wolff calls internal possibility “possibility considered absolutely”, and external possibility is called possibility “considered as it is restricted by the context [*in systemata redacta*]” (TN 142, see also GM 574). See also Dunlop 2018: 1135, Abaci 2019: 71f.

<sup>44</sup> See Wolff, GM 35, also Hoffer 2016: 194. In this passage, Wolff says “the essence of a thing is its possibility” and he clearly has internal possibility in mind.

<sup>45</sup> See Wolff, Cosm 112, 114. Determinism means that everything that happens is hypothetically necessary, which rules out free choice and uncaused events. Thus, everything that is externally possible is hypothetically necessary and actual.

<sup>46</sup> See Cosm 112, also Abaci 2019: 73.

<sup>47</sup> Also see Dunlop’s and Abaci’s discussion of Wolff’s views on possibility (see Dunlop 2018: 1134f., Abaci 2019: 59–74), although I disagree with Dunlop on the meaning of “possibility *in potentia remota*”, which she reads in a way that seems close to Crusian real possibility.

Wolff's distinction harks back to Leibniz, who distinguishes between possibility "in itself" (*per se*) and possibility *per accidens*. The former is the possibility of something "in its own nature", the latter the possibility insofar as it depends on external conditions – for example, something may be possible *per se* but not *per accidens* because God does not choose to make it actual.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, Leibniz's conception of possibility *per se* is closely related to Wolff's notion of internal possibility. And although they disagree insofar as Wolff rejects Leibniz's doctrine of pre-established harmony with regard to causality within the physical world, they agree that God predetermines the course of events in the actual world.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, like Leibniz's possibility *per accidens*, Wolff's external possibility is dependent on what God chooses to happen.

Crusius does not employ the terminology of internal and external possibility, but makes a distinction between two kinds of real possibility which comes to the same. He says that something can be impossible either "absolutely" or "under the position of certain circumstances" (E 58). The negation of the latter is just external possibility (or something close). Absolutely impossible, on the contrary, is that "which contradicts itself or the properties of the necessary universal cause of all things" (E 58). Therefore, absolutely possible is what is, first, free of contradiction and, second, grounded in God, where Crusius alludes to God as the sufficient cause of (absolute) real possibility.

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<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., Leibniz, Con 57, also Chignell 2009: 167n20, Stang 2016: 15n11, and the references mentioned there. My views on Leibniz's distinction of the different kinds of possibility have been informed by Adams 1994: ch. 2, Newlands 2010, Lin 2012, and Abaci 2019: 35–54.

<sup>49</sup> That Wolff thinks that God predetermines what happens in the world follows from determinism together with the fact that God creates the world.

Kant uses the expressions ‘internal possibility’ and ‘essence’ interchangeably<sup>50</sup>; and, in *Nova Dilucidatio*, he says that “essences ... consist in internal possibility” (ND 1:395)<sup>51</sup>. Thus, when he speaks of God as the ground of “internal possibility”<sup>52</sup>, we can safely assume that he uses the term in Wolff’s sense, but also that it coincides with Crusius’s conception of absolute (real) possibility. This is the only kind of possibility Kant is interested in *Beweisgrund* – he says that “there will be talked about no other possibility or impossibility than the so-called internal or absolute one” in *Beweisgrund* (OPGP 2:78). This clearly means that Kant does not intend to talk about external possibility.<sup>53</sup> Apparently, he leaves out external possibility because he considers it to be unsuitable for a proof of God’s existence.<sup>54</sup> For “conditioned possibility” – which is plainly the same as external possibility – “merely makes one see that something can only exist in certain connections; and the existence of the cause is proved here only insofar as the consequence exists” (OPGP 2:157).<sup>55</sup> This means that external possibility depends on contingent causal conditions which do not require the existence of an absolutely necessary being, but only of a very powerful one. Thus, “such a proof can only be done from internal possibility” (OPGP 2:157).

Notwithstanding this, we have to address a potential objection that is based on Kant’s use of the term ‘external possibility’ in the Third Argument. As I read it, he wants to prove that God needs understanding and will in order to ground *internal* possibility. However, in this argument, Kant refers to God as “the ground of *external* possibility, of order, beauty, and perfection”, without

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<sup>50</sup> See OPGP 2:92, 2:100, 2:162.

<sup>51</sup> See Hoffer 2016: 194.

<sup>52</sup> See OPGP 2:78, 2:84, and elsewhere.

<sup>53</sup> See also Abaci 2019: 108f.

<sup>54</sup> See OPGP 2:157, also Chignell 2009: 181, Kanterian 2018: 265.

<sup>55</sup> I take it that Kant speaks of a “cause” (and not of a ground of external possibility) because he agrees with Wolff that external possibility is co-extensional with actuality.

explicitly mentioning internal possibility (OPGP 2:88, emphasis mine). This could motivate the following objection: Internal possibility is required only for the first step of the possibility proof, that is, to show that there is an absolutely necessary being. The task of the Third Argument, however, is to prove that the absolutely necessary being is a spirit, without which we could not show that this being is God. The argument accomplishes this by holding that God grounds external possibility by creating the world, which includes the contingent worldly grounds of external possibility. But to decide that the world has to be this way rather than another, God needs understanding and will. Consequently, the Third Argument does not show that *internal* possibility depends on God's understanding and will.<sup>56</sup>

As sophisticated as this reading is, I argue that it must be rejected. To begin with, the Third Argument itself contains textual evidence against the objection. Kant routinely associates “order, beauty, perfection” (and the like) with internal possibility for the reason that these properties of the world belong to its non-moral dependency.<sup>57</sup> What is more, systematic considerations lead to the same result. As we have just seen, Kant rejects the assumption that external possibility is suitable for a proof of God for the reason that external possibility is contingent. In fact, such a proof would be a backslide into a kind of physico-theology that considers the order and harmony of the world exclusively dependent on God's choice. This account would only establish the “moral dependency” of the world. But Kant claims that the world exhibits also “non-moral [*unmoralische*] dependency”: the harmony of the essences themselves, which is not the result of a choice, is dependent on God (OPGP 2:100).<sup>58</sup> The traditional method of physico-theology, which

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<sup>56</sup> I would like to thank xxx for discussion on this kind of objection.

<sup>57</sup> See OPGP 2:92, 2:95f., 2:98, 2:99, 2:101, 2:124.

<sup>58</sup> For helpful discussion of Kant's treatment of physico-theology and the difference between moral and non-moral dependency, see Theis 1994: 127–32, Kanterian 2018: 248–59.

Kant criticizes, proves God's existence by taking only moral dependency into regard (OPGP 2:117). According to Kant, this is wrong – among others, because this can only prove the existence of an “architect and not the creator of the world, who has ordered and formed the material, but not produced and created it” (OPGP 2:123). Even if one takes oneself to have proved the existence of an absolutely necessary being, one cannot infer from the fact that something is externally possible that this being is the ground of the moral order of the world, since some more mediocre deities could have done the job of giving the world a moral order that depends on their choice as well. So the Third Argument can only talk about God as the ground of internal possibility.

The question remains, though, why Kant writes that God is “the ground of external possibility, of order, beauty, and perfection” (OPGP 2:88). Two viable explanations come to mind. First, the use of ‘external possibility’ may just be a mistake or misprint. This explanation would not be *ad hoc*. The term ‘external possibility’ appears out of a sudden, and the mistake/misprint may have been induced by the occurrence of the phrase “possible external to him” just one sentence earlier. The term ‘internal possibility’, however, would seem more appropriate in this sentence because the twofold use of ‘of’ indicates that “order, beauty, and perfection” is appositional to “external possibility”.<sup>59</sup> Another explanation would be that, if God grounds all possibility, he must also ground external possibility. Since the creation of the world includes causal relations<sup>60</sup>, on which external possibility depends, God is indirectly also the ground of external possibility. Therefore, God grounds external possibility indirectly by creating a world. Either way, the text does not

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<sup>59</sup> If you think that a misprint is exceptionally unlikely, just consider that this kind of thing happens at times nowadays and ask yourself why it should not have occurred in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>60</sup> See Hoffer 2016: 199–202.

support the interpretation that God does not ground internal possibility by his understanding and will.

Yet, Kant's theistic-potentialist account of the grounds of internal possibility may seem to blur the distinction between internal and external possibility. Recall that, for Wolff and Leibniz, internal possibility consists in the consistency with a given essence, whereas external possibility also requires the agreement with actual causal conditions. According to this view, it is sufficient for internal possibility that God conceives the essences in his mind; only external possibility requires that there be a possible causal action that makes an object actual. But if we adhere to Kant's theory, the grounds of internal and external possibility are seemingly the same: they consist in powers that can make something actual. To be sure, this problem does not occur in the case of worldly substances, which cannot create, but only change other substances as essences are unchangeable.<sup>61</sup> Hence, worldly substances are not grounds of internal possibility. But God is not only the direct ground of internal possibility, but in some cases – by the act of creation (as regards the initial state of the world) or by miracles<sup>62</sup> – also the direct ground of external possibility. Therefore, an explanation is needed as to what distinguishes grounds of internal from those of external possibility.

A satisfying solution is available if we consider that internal possibility concerns essences *in abstracto*, whereas external possibility concerns possibilities *in concreto*. For internal possibility,

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<sup>61</sup> Kant appears to endorse Baumgarten's (M 106) claim that essences are necessary and unchangeable (see M-Herder 28: 18). This view is very traditional and has also been championed by Wolff (GM 42, Ont 300).

<sup>62</sup> Since the whole world owes its existence to God's creation, but substances cannot be created by worldly things, worldly substances must be created directly by God. Miracles, on the contrary, "interrupt the order of nature" (OPGP 2:116); they are direct causal interventions by God and Kant clearly does not rule out their possibility. See Chignell 2014b for a helpful discussion of Kant's account of miracles.



we abstract from any scenario in which the object could be realized. God can create all essences and combinations of essences (as long as the combinations are consistent) by his understanding and will; this shows that God is the sufficient real ground of internal possibility. As long as we do not ask whether there are scenarios in which internal possibilities can be made actual, we do not care whether God in fact can use his faculties to create such a world.

But this changes once we turn to external possibility. Consider first the example of Susan, who has a high viral load of Sars-CoV-2 and wants to meet her friend Debbie in a bar. Susan is a sufficient real ground of infecting Debbie by exposing her to the virus. But it is only externally possible that she infects Debbie if she also can be a determining ground. For this, it is required that she walks to the bar, that she is not cautious enough not to meet inside bars, that she is motivated to meet Debbie, and so on. If we trace the causal chain by which all this is made possible back to the first cause, then we end at God, who creates the world (or maybe intervenes by a miracle).<sup>63</sup> So is it externally possible that God uses his understanding and will to make it happen that Susan infects Debbie?

Kant defends Leibniz's "optimism" (as Kant calls it) – or the "principle of the best" (as it is commonly called) – according to which it would contradict God's omnibenevolence not to create the best possible world.<sup>64</sup> Thus, even though God has the will and understanding to create other worlds, he can only create a world in which Susan infects Debbie if this is the best possible

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<sup>63</sup> This presupposes thorough determinism of the will, an account that Kant defends against Crusius in *Nova Dilucidatio*. See ND 1:398-405.

<sup>64</sup> See OPGP 2:153f., also his essay on optimism from 1758 (Opt 2:27–35). For Leibniz, see, for instance, Mon 53–5. It goes without saying that the principle of the best is subject to great scholarly controversy, and I cannot discuss the topic here. I also disregard the question whether the critical Kant abandons Leibniz's and his own early optimism.

world. Therefore, only the best possible world is externally possible. Although it is not a contingent fact whether God can produce a certain world, it is neither a fact that belongs to (or is entailed by) the essence of the world (which is the conjunction of all internal possibilities that constitute the world). Rather, whether any given internally possible world is also externally possible depends on the relation of the world to all other worlds as regards its goodness (it must be the best world) and God's omnibenevolence, which are external conditions. In summary, the difference between grounds of internal and of external possibility is that grounds of internal possibility only require sufficient grounds, whereas grounds of external possibility also need the possibility of determining grounds.

It is impossible to know whether Kant in fact has this view (he says nothing about the problem), and some people may doubt that this is a particularly good solution. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out that my interpretation does full justice to his central assumptions concerning possibility. First, it satisfies Kant's view that all worldly possibility is grounded in causal powers. Second, the suggested account coheres with the assumption that internal possibility depends on God's essence and not on his choice.<sup>65</sup> It is crucial that internal possibility can be cognized according to the principle of contradiction because internal possibility is derivable from essences. Since internal possibility is the same in all possible worlds, there must be grounds of internal possibility in all these worlds, which is best achieved by an absolutely necessary being. Third, my interpretation satisfies PPE. Even though most internally possible worlds cannot be actual (as God cannot create them), this does not harm their internal possibility because internal possibility

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<sup>65</sup> This helps to refute an objection from Chignell (2009: 181), who argues that powers cannot ground internal possibility because they can only be grounds of external possibility. However, while it is true that worldly powers can only be grounds of external possibility (because the existence of substances with these powers is contingent), God exists absolutely necessarily, so his powers can be grounds of internal possibility.

abstracts from external conditions. And fourth, Kant can account for the fact that external possibility is not directly dependent on God's essence. For the grounds of external possibility are either contingent worldly grounds or God's decrees.<sup>66</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that Kant has a theistic-potentialist account of God's grounding of possibility in *Beweisgrund*, according to which God grounds internal possibility by his understanding and will. We have also seen that Kant, like Crusius, is committed to PPE – the principle that whatever is possible possibly exists. The next question would be if he still has these views from *Beweisgrund* in the critical period, albeit in a modified form. And on a systematic level, we might explore whether PPE is of interest for contemporary modal metaphysics. These are tasks for future research.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The fact that external possibility depends on God's decrees does not conflict with Kant's repudiation of voluntarism about possibility cited earlier, which only holds for internal possibility.

<sup>67</sup> [acknowledgments]

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