

Kant on the Ontological Argument

Ian Proops

The University of Texas at Austin

[Pre-publication draft only. If you wish cite the paper, please refer to the published version, which is available from:

Nous Early View, July 31, 2013, DOI: 10.1111/nous.12041]

Abstract

The article examines Kant's various criticisms of the broadly Cartesian ontological argument as they are developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is argued that each of these criticisms is effective against its intended target, and that these targets include—in addition to Descartes himself—Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten. It is argued that Kant's most famous criticism—the charge that *being* is not a real predicate—is directed exclusively against Leibniz. Kant's argument for this thesis—the argument proceeding from his example of a hundred thalers—although it may seem to beg the question, in fact succeeds against Leibniz. It does so because the charge of begging the question can be rebutted if one assumes certain premises to which Leibniz is committed.

Introduction

Philosophers are apt to speak of “Kant's objection to the ontological argument,” as if to suggest that he had only one such objection, or, at any rate, only one that really mattered.¹ In truth, however,

Kant's critical case against the ontological argument comprises a suite of complementary objections, some of them intended to have force against any proponent of the broadly Cartesian version of the argument, others directed against more specific targets. Kant's most famous objection—the one that hinges on the claim that **being** is not a real predicate (A 598/B 626)—is, or so I will argue, of this second kind. It is intended to have force only against Leibniz, who—in works available to Kant—defends a modified version of Descartes's argument.

I take this view to be recommended chiefly on grounds of interpretive charity. For, as it seems to me, the argument Kant offers for the claim that **being** is not a real predicate succeeds if—but only if—a certain Leibnizian commitment that is not shared by Descartes is assumed as a background premise. This does not mean that Kant's critical case *as a whole* is ineffective against Descartes; for, as we shall see, Kant's discussion in the *Ideal of Pure Reason* contains certain other criticisms that succeed against all proponents of the broadly Cartesian version of the argument—including Descartes himself. It does mean, however, that if we are to appreciate the power of Kant's most famous objection, we will need to keep in mind that at relevant points in his discussion he is treating Leibniz as the caretaker of the Cartesian argument (I will argue that at other points, Wolff and Baumgarten play a similar role).

Kant's critique of the ontological argument proceeds in two distinct phases. In the opening phase, the relatively soft targets of Wolff and Baumgarten are disposed of in preliminary skirmishes. Then, with those opponents out of the way, Kant concentrates on Leibniz, who, I will argue, constitutes his most immediate target for the remainder of his discussion.

Kant launches two salvos against Leibniz. The first is his famous charge that *being* (or *actuality*) is not a real predicate. Kant supports this claim with an argument that makes use of his celebrated example of “a hundred thalers” (A 599/B 627). This argument, I will argue, succeeds against Leibniz because in this context Kant can appeal to certain Leibnizian commitments to

neutralize what would otherwise be a powerful objection to his reasoning. The second salvo is Kant's charge that Leibniz has not proved the *real* possibility of a "highest being"—that is, a being that has all realities—for he has not shown that all realities are compossible (A 602/B 631). This second objection, I will argue, succeeds against Descartes as well as Leibniz, but Kant presents it as directed *in the first instance* against the latter philosopher (*ibid.*).

The bulk of this essay is devoted to explaining and defending Kant's argument for his thesis that *being*—in its guise as *actuality*—is not a real predicate. But I hope to accomplish two further goals in passing. First, by paying attention to some of Kant's minor opponents, I hope to illuminate one of his more obscure (and more neglected) criticisms of the ontological argument, namely, the claim that in essaying the ontological argument Kant's opponent is already guilty of a contradiction (A 597/B 625). Second, I will offer a reappraisal of the role played in Kant's discussion by Caterus's well-known objection to the ontological argument. I will argue that Kant does not see this objection as effective *in general*, and that he runs it only against certain selected opponents whom he considers to be vulnerable to the criticism for special reasons. I will begin, however, by examining the details of Kant's presentation of the ontological argument in the first *Critique*. I do so partly in order to identify the argument's contentious premises, and partly in order to establish that Kant engages, most immediately, with a characteristically Leibnizian version of the argument.

[1] Kant's presentation of the Ontological Argument in the first *Critique*

Kant introduces the ontological argument as an objection to his thesis that any concept can be consistently supposed to lack exemplification. He represents his opponent as contending that the concept of *the most real being* constitutes the sole counterexample to this thesis (A 595/B 623). Kant sets out the ontological argument in a dense thicket of text that I will refer to as "passage A":

[Against the principle that every concept can be consistently supposed to lack instances] you challenge me with one case that you set up as a proof [of its falsehood] through the fact that there is one and indeed only this **one** concept where the non-being or the cancelling of its object is contradictory within itself, and this is the concept of the most real being [*der Begriff des allerrealsten Wesens*]. [This being] has, you say, all reality, and [you say that] you are justified in assuming such a being as possible (to which I have consented up to this point, even though a non-contradictory concept falls far short of proving the possibility of its object). Now existence is also comprehended under all reality: thus existence lies in the concept of something possible. If this thing is cancelled, then the internal possibility of the thing is cancelled, which is contradictory.² (A 596–97/B 625)

Two points about this passage should be noted at the outset. First, because Kant presents the ontological argument as his opponent's attempt to counterexample the thesis that any concept can fail to be exemplified, it will not be polemically effective for him to criticize the argument—as he sometimes comes close to doing (for example, at the beginning of A 598/B 626)—merely on the ground that *any concept can fail to be exemplified*. For, obviously, to do so in *this* context would be to beg the question. Second, the version of the ontological argument presented here differs from Descartes's version in its *explicit* reliance on a possibility assumption.³ Kant portrays his opponent as attempting to prove that the most real being exists, *if it is possible*. And, as we shall shortly see, he complains that his opponent establishes (at best) only its conceptual and not its real possibility. This feature of the argument, I shall argue, serves to identify Kant's *immediate* opponent as broadly Leibnizian; for Leibniz—in works accessible to Kant—had attempted to augment Descartes's

argument with a demonstration of the possibility assumption on which it implicitly relies. This second point is worth developing before we proceed.

In the *New Essays*, Leibniz remarks that the ontological argument “is not fallacious, but it is an incomplete demonstration which assumes something which should also be proved in order to render the argument mathematically evident” (*New Essays*, bk. 4, chap. 10, §7, 437–38). The demonstration, he contends, falls short of mathematical evidence because “it is tacitly assumed that this idea of a wholly great or wholly perfect being is possible and does not imply a contradiction” (ibid.).⁴ A proof of the logical consistency of the concept of a wholly perfect being is required, Leibniz argues, because if that concept were to prove contradictory, we would be able to demonstrate “opposite conclusions” from it—including, presumably, both the existence and the nonexistence of God.⁵

Leibniz’s attempted possibility proof occurs in a number of places in his writings, including section 45 of the *Monadology*—a work we know Kant to have read. There Leibniz argues that because we conceive of God as containing “no limits and no negation,” and because negations (as well as positive properties) are required to generate contradictions, the concept of God is guaranteed to be logically consistent. Similar arguments are given by Wolff in the second part of his *Theologia Naturalis* (§13) and by Baumgarten in his *Metaphysica* (§806)—a text that Kant frequently used in his metaphysics lectures.

As we have seen, when he sets out the ontological argument in passage *A*, Kant observes that its proponent incurs an obligation to defend the logical consistency of the concept of the most real being. Later in the first *Critique* he grants that the possibility proof just described does in fact manage to establish this limited result: “The analytic mark of possibility,” he says “which consists in the fact that mere positings (realities) do not generate a contradiction, of course, cannot be denied of [the concept of a highest being⁶]” (A 602/B 630; compare 28: 1016). But passage *A* also contains a

parenthetical suggestion that the proponent of the ontological argument would, strictly speaking, need to establish something stronger, namely, the *real* possibility of the most real being. For it notes that to establish the logical consistency of the concept of the most real being is not yet to establish the possibility of its object (compare 28: 1023–24)—and since in the present context Kant is granting the *conceptual* possibility of the most real being, “possibility” here can only mean “real possibility.” Kant plainly takes Leibniz to have failed to establish this stronger conclusion (A 602/B 630; 28: 1024),⁷ so this is one component of his critical case against both Leibniz and Descartes.

In order to see precisely how Kant takes this and the other criticisms he raises to undermine the version of the ontological argument on which he focuses it will help to identify the controversial premises of the argument set out in passage *A*. To do so we will need to present that argument more rigorously than Kant does himself. In the following formulation I use “P” for “premise,” “L” for “lemma,” and “C” for “conclusion.” In addition, I indicate the textual basis for a premise in parentheses—or, in the event that the premise is suppressed, I indicate that this is so.

- P1. The most real being has all reality (“[The most real being] has, you say, all reality”).⁸
- P2. Existence is a reality (“Existence is comprehended under all reality”).
- P3. P1 and P2 are conceptual truths (Suppressed premise).
- P4. The concept of *the most real being* is logically consistent (“[You say that] you are justified in assuming such a being as possible.”).⁹
- L1. The concept of *the most real being* contains *existence* and is logically consistent (“Existence lies in the concept of something possible”) (By P1–P4).
- L2. So the concept of *the existent most real being* is logically consistent (Immediate inference from L1).

- P5. The existent most real being does not exist (“If this thing”—that is, the *object* of the concept *the existent most real being*—“is cancelled”) (*Reductio* assumption¹⁰).
- P6. If the most real being does not exist, then the concept of the most real being contains nonexistence (Suppressed premise).
- L3. But then the existent most real being is not possible internally (“then the internal possibility of the thing is cancelled”) (By P5 and P6).
- P7. A thing is not possible internally just in case its concept is not logically consistent (Suppressed premise).
- L4. But then the concept of *the existent most real being* is not logically consistent (By L3 and P7).
- L5. But L4 contradicts L2 (“which is contradictory”).
- L6. The existent most real being exists (From L5, discharging the *reductio* assumption, P5).

Therefore:

- C. The most real being exists (By the first conjunct of L1).

To a reader who is familiar with Descartes’s version of the ontological argument in the Fifth Meditation this version may seem oddly baroque. But its intricacy is accounted for, first, by the need to register the argument’s possibility assumption as an explicit premise—a feature that marks the argument as broadly Leibnizian; and, second, by Kant’s desire to present the heart of the argument as an attempt to derive a contradiction from the assumption that the most real being does not exist. Kant presents the argument in this way because he regards the most real being as his opponent’s proposed candidate for a being that exists with absolute necessity (A 585/B 613). Kant insists that the only conception of (absolutely) necessary existence we have is one according to which a

necessary being is a being that is “necessary from its concept” (A 612/B 640).¹¹ But since, for Kant, one shows that something’s existence follows *necessarily* from its concept by showing that the assumption of its non-existence entails a contradiction, it follows that the ontological argument must employ a similar proof strategy in arguing for the most real being’s necessary existence.¹²

This point helps to explain why Kant’s most famous objection involves the concept of *being* rather than *necessary being*. For in order to undermine versions of the ontological argument that argue that the *ens realissimum* exists necessarily, it suffices—given Kant’s understanding of what kind of thing a necessary being would have to be—to show that the *ens realissimum*’s existence (or actuality or being) does not follow from its concept. A separate argument that, in addition, its necessary existence does not so follow is not required. Accordingly, Kant needs only to argue that *existence*—as opposed to *necessary existence*—is not a real predicate.

It goes without saying that a further factor contributing to the complexity of our reconstruction is our practice of making tacit premises explicit. I have presented the argument as tacitly assuming premises P3, P6, and P7.¹³ Premise P3 is needed to underwrite Kant’s transitions from claims about *things* to claims about the corresponding *concepts*. If, for example, P1 and P2 were true, but not conceptually true, they would not entail that existence is contained in the *concept* of the most real being (the first conjunct of L1). The suppressed premise, P6, is required to facilitate the transition from the assumption that the existing most real being lacks existence to the conclusion that the existing most real being is not possible internally.

Let us examine the grounds for premises P6 and P7 more closely, beginning with P7, which says: “A thing is not possible internally just in case its concept is not logically consistent.” This premise, as it seems to me, is one that Kant regards as true in virtue of the meaning of the term “possible internally.” This point is not obvious, but it emerges from a close examination of the relevant texts.

In the first *Critique*, Kant treats the phrases “possible internally [*interne möglich*]” and “possible in itself [*an sich selbst möglich*]” as synonymous (A 324/B 381). The latter phrase is a term of art, one apparently borrowed (most immediately) from Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* (§§15–18, especially §18), where, in line with established Wolffian tradition, something’s being “*in se possibile*” (“possible in itself”) is contrasted with its being “*hypothetice possibile*” (“hypothetically possible”). Kant himself contrasts “internal [*innere*]” with “hypothetical” possibility (28: 562; 28: 734);¹⁴ so there is good reason to think he is taking over Baumgarten’s distinction—along with his terminology—and using the term “possible internally” to mean precisely what Baumgarten means by “possible in itself.”

What it is for something to be “possible internally” (or “possible in itself”) is, I think, just for its *concept* to be logically consistent. So much is suggested by Kant’s remark that: “[to say that something is] possible in itself ([or] internally) ... [is] the **least** one can say of an object (A 324/B 381).” Plausibly, the least one can say of an object is that its concept is logically consistent. The same interpretation is suggested by Kant’s claim in his metaphysics lectures that inner possibility can be cognized “only in accordance with the principle of contradiction” (28: 562). The tendency of these reflections, then, is that P7 should be viewed as an immediate consequence of (what Kant would have regarded as) the conceptual or definitional truth that a thing is possible internally just in case its concept is logically consistent.

We turn now to P6, which runs: “If the most real being does not exist, then the concept of the most real being contains nonexistence.” What justifies Kant in attributing this premise to his opponent? One possibility is charity alone, for without P6 the argument of passage *A* would be unsound. But one can perhaps say something more substantive here. For one principle known to Kant that would license P6 occurs in Descartes’s “geometrical” presentation of the Cartesian system in the *Meditations*’ “Second Replies.”¹⁵ The ninth definition of that presentation runs: “When we say that something is *contained in the nature or concept* of a thing, this is the same as saying that it is true of

that thing, or that it can be asserted of that thing” (AT VII, 162; CSM, 114). It follows from this “same-saying” claim that to say that nonexistence is true of a thing is the same as saying that nonexistence is contained in the nature or concept of that thing. A Leibnizian principle familiar to Kant that could do the same work is arguably contained in the following gloss on the Principle of Sufficient Reason from the *Theodicy*: “There is no true enunciation whose reason could not be seen by one possessing all the knowledge necessary for its complete understanding” (Huggard, 419).¹⁶

Given his recognition of synthetic truths, Kant would of course reject P6 as false. But there are two reasons why it would be out of place for him to challenge this assumption in the present context. First, Kant’s case against the ontological argument will be the stronger the less it depends on his own positive views. Kant would have been aware that his recognition of the phenomenon of synthetic truth would have been controversial to Wolffians, and therefore it suits his purposes to let the premise go unchallenged for the sake of building a compelling case against the ontological argument. Second, Kant would also have been aware that most formulations of the Cartesian ontological argument lack the complexity of the argument on which he focuses. To pounce on P6, accordingly, would be to invite the charge of attacking a straw man.

One final wrinkle we should note at this stage is that Kant’s presentation employs two different notions of “cancellation.” At one point—P5—he speaks of the *object* of a certain concept as being canceled; but at another—L3—he speaks of the *internal possibility* of this same object as being canceled. What it is for the *object* of a concept to be “canceled” is, I think, for the nonexistence of such an object to be asserted. On the other hand, what it is for the *internal possibility* of a thing to be canceled is for the concept of that object to be shown to contain logically inconsistent constituent concepts or “marks.” No difficulty is caused by supposing that Kant uses the notion of “cancellation” in these two different ways, though the nuance is worth noting.¹⁷

Before turning finally to Kant's criticisms of the argument just presented, we would do well to address an objection that might be raised to my claim that Kant is targeting a broadly Leibnizian version of the ontological argument. One might worry that at the conclusion of his discussion Kant expressly refers to his target as the famous "ontological (Cartesian) proof [*ontologischen (Cartesianischen) Beweise*] (A 602/B 630)." This might lead one to think that Kant must be treating Descartes as his chief or most immediate opponent.¹⁸ There are, however, good reasons to think otherwise. For, first, it turns out that Kant sometimes uses the phrase "the Cartesian proof" as an umbrella term for any version of the modern, post-Anselmian ontological argument *in contrast to the cosmological, teleological, or other "proofs."* And, second, he speaks of philosophers other than Descartes as running "the Cartesian proof."

The first of these points is clear from a remark in Kant's pre-critical work, *The Only Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (hereafter, "OPB"). Here he says: "There are four possible arguments for the existence of God . . . both the Cartesian proof and the proof which proceeds from the empirical concept of existence . . . are false as well as utterly impossible. It has further been shown that the proof which derives the existence of God and the properties of the Divine Being from the properties of the things to be found in the world contains an argument which is at once powerful and very beautiful; unfortunately, it is incapable of the rigor required of a demonstration" (2: 162).

The second of these points—namely, the idea that Kant speaks of philosophers other than Descartes as running "the Cartesian argument"—is clear from his speaking in his metaphysics lectures of "the **Cartesian** proof, which Wolff and others have assumed" (*Metaphysics L1*, 28: 313; compare 28: 314). Wolff's version of the argument is Leibnizian in character insofar as it is supplemented by Leibniz's attempted possibility proof (*Theologiae Naturalis*, pt. 2, sections 19 and 21);

so this shows that Kant is prepared to refer to a distinctively Leibnizian version of the ontological argument as “the Cartesian proof.”

Taken together, these last two points suggest that we should not infer from Kant’s speaking of “the ontological (Cartesian) proof” in the first *Critique* that he must be referring there to Descartes’s version of the ontological argument as opposed say, to Leibniz’s or Wolff’s.

The same conclusion is suggested by an examination of the context in which the label “the ontological (Cartesian) proof” occurs. Kant says: “Leibniz was far from having achieved what he flattered himself he had done, namely, gain insight a priori into the possibility of such a sublime ideal being. [New Paragraph] Thus the famous ontological (Cartesian) proof of the existence of a highest being from concepts is only so much trouble and labor lost (A 602/B 631).” As the word “Thus” indicates, the Cartesian proof fails, in Kant’s view, because [among other things] *Leibniz* failed in his endeavor to supplement Descartes’s original version of the argument with the needed possibility proof. The targets of Kant’s criticism at this point, then, are both Descartes’s original version of the argument and Leibniz’s attempt to repair it.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Kant sees both Leibniz and Wolff as having resorted to the ontological argument in attempting to complete the cosmological argument (28: 315; 28: 599). It therefore seems safest to include both authors, along with Descartes, among Kant’s likely targets—as well, no doubt, as certain Wolffians, such as Baumgarten. And, indeed, each of these last three philosophers develops a version of the ontological argument in a work that was available to Kant (see, in addition to Leibniz’s *New Essays*, Wolff’s *Theologia Naturalis* (pt. 2, §§1–21), and Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* (§803–23)).

Since Wolff and Baumgarten run the ontological argument on the concept of the *ens perfectissimum* rather than the *ens realissimum* one might wonder why Kant focuses almost exclusively on the latter concept. The answer seems to lie in his desire to avoid portraying the argument as

begging questions about the identity of the most real being's attributes. Since Kant regards the word "perfection" as "always presuppos[ing] a relation to a being endowed with cognition and desire" (2: 90), and since he sees these attributes as characteristic of the Theist's but not the Deist's God (28: 1001–2), it suits him to set out the argument using the more neutral term, "*ens realissimum*."

[2] Kant's objections to the ontological argument

When one turns to Kant's objections to the argument, the first thing one notices is that Kant's well-known objection at A 602/B 630 to the Leibniz–Wolffian possibility "proof"—a purported proof of the *real* possibility of a being possessing every reality—serves to cast doubt on P1, the premise that says that the most real being has all reality. For if, as the objection contends, there might, for all Leibniz has shown, be a real repugnancy between two realities, then the *most* real being might, for all we know, not have every reality. Kant sums up this objection in his Religion Lectures: "When I know that a being is the highest in its reality, I still do not on that account know whether it has all realities" (28: 1251). What might give me that knowledge, of course—if we could come by it—would be a proof that a being having every reality is a real possibility. And yet Leibniz fails to provide such a proof since he demonstrates only the *conceptual* possibility of a being having every reality.

Kant, however, is not content to rest his critical case on this objection to P1. He also raises his famous objection to the assumption that being (in its guise as actuality) is a reality—our P2. It is to this objection that we now turn.

[2.1] "*Being* is not a real predicate"

In the first *Critique* Kant frames his objection to P2 somewhat indirectly. “**Being**,” he says, “is obviously not a real predicate, that is, a concept of something that could be added to the concept of a thing” (A 598/B 626). One wonders why he should put the point so obliquely. Why does he not simply say that being (or actuality) is not a reality? The answer, I think, is that in the first *Critique* Kant is concerned to avoid giving the misleading impression that he believes that being is a *property*—only not one that qualifies as a reality. Accordingly, rather than flatly denying that existence (or being) is a reality, he frames his criticism as the point that the concept of *being* is not a real predicate.¹⁹ Such a claim, I shall argue, *entails* that being is not a reality; so in making it Kant achieves the effect of disputing P2 without implying—in Grice’s sense of “implicating”—that being is a property.

The present section is devoted to making a case for the interpretation of “real predicate” just sketched. The first part argues that by a “real predicate” Kant means a concept that represents a reality; the second further defends the claim that a real predicate is a *concept* as opposed to a property; and the third offers an account of the relationship between Kant’s two apparently nonequivalent characterizations of “real predicate” at A 598/B 626.

Let us begin by considering a *prima facie* difficulty for Kant’s thesis that *being* is not a real predicate. It has been widely noted that this thesis appears to be in tension with his claim that all existential judgments are synthetic (A 598/B 626). The problem is that if *being* is not a real predicate, then, by the definition of “real predicate,” it must be a concept that *cannot* be “added” to any other concept. But that seems to mean that it must be analytically contained in every concept.²⁰ But, if so, existential judgments would have to be analytic.

Fortunately, however, the tension can be resolved by taking account of the fuller explanation of “real predicate” that Kant offers in his Religion Lectures. “**Being**,” he says, “is obviously not a real predicate, that is, the concept of something that could be added [*hinzukommen könnte*] to the

concept of a thing in order to make it [es] still more perfect” (*Religionslehre Pölitz*, 1783–4, 28: 1027). With the exception of the word “thus,” this remark coincides with its counterpart in the first *Critique* up to, but not including, the phrase “in order to make it still more perfect.” It seems plausible, therefore, that in the Religion Lectures Kant is merely enlarging upon his characterization of “real predicate” in the first *Critique*. He is saying that a real predicate is one that can effect a special kind of “addition,” or synthetic predication, namely, one in which the object represented by the subject–concept is, in a certain sense, *perfected* (The neuter pronoun, “es,” indicates that what is supposed to be perfected is the object of the concept rather than the concept itself). A remark from Kant’s metaphysics lectures suggests that perfecting something in this sense is a matter of somehow increasing its *degree of reality*: “Metaphysical perfection,” says Kant, “consists in the degrees of reality ... One thing is metaphysically more perfect than the other. One has more reality than the other” (*Metaphysics L₁*, 28: 556).²¹ But, since predications do not literally enhance the objects in question, Kant must be speaking loosely. Correcting for that looseness, we may gloss the characterization contained in the Religion Lectures as follows:

RP1: A real predicate is a concept, *P*, whose combination with another concept, *S*, in a subject–predicate judgment, *S* is *P*, could serve to “perfect” *S*’s object in the sense of representing that object as possessing more reality than *S* already represents it as possessing.²²

If this is right, then for Kant something will count as a real predicate only if it represents a reality. For predicates representing privations (or, in Kant’s parlance, “negations”) will not serve to represent the object of the subject–concept as any more real than it is already represented as being by the subject–concept.

Such a reading has the virtue of making Kant consistent. A *real predication*, on this interpretation, is a species of synthetic predication: it is a synthetic predication *of a reality*. Accordingly, in denying that existence is a real predicate Kant is not contradicting his claim that predications of existence are synthetic. Rather, he is affirming that such predications are not predications of a reality—a point that is perfectly compatible with their being synthetic predications.

On this reading, Kant's most famous objection to the ontological argument turns on the idea that the concept expressed by the linguistic predicate "exists" (or "is actual") does not represent a reality. Or, to put the point in the material mode, it turns on the idea that existence (actuality) is not a reality. It therefore counts in favor of the reading that in the Religion Lectures Kant emphasizes precisely this point and—indeed—does so in language suggestive of the idea that existence is not a reality precisely because it does not enhance a thing's perfection. "In [the ontological argument]," he says, "everything unquestionably depends on whether the existence of a thing is in fact one of its realities. But the fact that a thing exists does not by itself make the thing more perfect" (28: 1027).

The present interpretation, we should note, has the merit of making sense of Kant's remarks about the modal predicates. "The predicates of possibility, actuality, and necessity," he says, "do not in the least augment [*vermehrten*] the concept of which they are asserted in such a way as to add [*hinzusetzen*] something to the representation of the object" (A 233/ B 286). The predicates in question do not "augment" the concepts of which they are asserted because they do not serve to represent the objects of those concepts as having more reality than they are already represented as possessing by the concepts themselves. It is in this sense that they do not add something *to the representation* of the object—that is, to the object's *concept*. In another sense, of course, they *do* add something to the concept of which they are asserted, namely, a specification of the way it relates to our faculty of cognition (A 219).

Kant sums up these thoughts—insofar as they apply to the concept of actuality—in a remark from some metaphysics lectures from the mid-1780s: “More is contained in *actuality* than in possibility, [which is to say] not that more is represented in the thing by actuality, but [that] more is added to our thinking” (29: 765; compare B 287). He means that although the concept expressed by “is actual” does not represent the subject-concept’s object as any more real than the subject-concept already represents it as being, nonetheless it serves to represent the subject-concept as having an object that can, in principle, be encountered in experience.

The present interpretation involves portraying Kant as attributing to his opponent a set of views hailing from the Platonic tradition²³—views to which he himself also subscribes.²⁴ Two key ideas from this tradition are, first, that objects of all kinds fall into a hierarchy of degrees of reality; and, second, that although some concepts are thought to represent realities (for example, *heat*, *sightedness*, *light*, *good deed*), others are thought to represent mere privations or lacks of realities (for example, *cold*, *blindness*, *shadow*, *sin*). We will shortly see that Kant’s argument that *actuality* is not a real predicate makes essential use of this framework; but first let us deliver on our promise to defend our interpretation of a “real predicate” as a *concept* rather than a *property*.

[2.2] Real Predicates as Concepts

At A 598/B 627 Kant characterizes a real predicate as “the determination of a thing,” and since he often treats determinations as properties of things, one might doubt whether one really ought to take seriously the appearance created at A 599/B 628 that a real predicate is a concept. There is, nonetheless, good reason to do so. First, as we have already seen, real predicates are explicitly equated with “concepts” not only in the first *Critique* but also in the Religion Lectures. Second, Kant often speaks of “predicates” as concepts, and, in line with this, he treats them as being “contained”

in other concepts or as constituents “making [them] up” (see, for example, A6/B 10; A 572/B 600; compare A 69/B 94). His treating *real* predicates as concepts of a certain kind, then, can be viewed as just another instance of this more general practice. Third, Kant sometimes uses the term “determination” in contexts in which he is naturally understood to be speaking of concepts rather than properties. At A 731/ B 760, for example, he describes a constituent of a faulty Wolffian definition of a circle as a “determination,” and in his logic lectures he speaks of determinations as sometimes *lying in* concepts (*Dohna-Wundlacken Logic*, 24: 764). Elsewhere he speaks of the determination of a thing as if it were a representation (A 348/ B 406), and of determinations as capable of being “added” to concepts (B 286). These locutions would be hard to make sense of if the “determinations” spoken of were properties rather than concepts.

[2.3] Kant’s two characterizations of “real predicate”

This brings us to the question why Kant seems to offer two different characterizations of the notion of a “real predicate” in his discussion of the ontological argument. Up until now we have focused on the characterization he offers in the course of denying that *being* is a real predicate. But in the paragraph preceding that remark he offers a somewhat different characterization:

The illusion consisting in the confusion of a logical predicate with a real one (i.e., the determination of a thing) nearly precludes all instruction. Anything one likes can serve as a **logical predicate**, even the subject can be predicated of itself; for logic abstracts from every content. But the **determination** is a predicate, which adds to [*hinzu kommt*] the concept and augments [it] [*ihn vergrößert*]. Thus it must not be included in it already. (A 598/B 626)

The opening sentence of this passage equates a real predicate with the determination of a thing, while the closing sentence suggests that whether something is serving as the determination of a thing depends on the role it plays in a particular judgment.²⁵ To be specific, something counts as a determination in a given judgment only if it is not already included in the subject–concept of that judgment.

This suggests that Kant is operating with a judgment-relative notion of a real predicate alongside his judgment-independent notion. A succinct characterization of the former notion might run:

RP2 (judgment-relative):

A predicate, *P*, occurs as a determination (real predicate) in the subject-predicate judgment, “*S* is *P*,” just in case *P* augments *S* in the sense of representing *S*’s object as having more reality than *S* already represents it as having.

Plausibly, the reason why Kant introduces this judgment-relative notion of a real predicate before presenting the judgment-independent (or “absolute”) notion is just that the latter can be defined in terms of the former. One would say:

RP3 (absolute):

A predicate, *P*, is a real predicate in the absolute sense just in case there is some judgment²⁶ in which *P* occurs as a real predicate in the judgment-relative sense.

If the existential quantification in RP3 is expressed (in the familiar way) by the use of a modal idiom, RP3 becomes RP4:

RP4 (absolute):

A predicate, P , is a real predicate in the absolute sense just in case P could occur as a real predicate in the judgment-relative sense.

This modal formulation plausibly amounts to a more explicit statement of the characterization at which Kant is aiming in his Religion Lectures and which he presents succinctly at A 598/B 626.

When a concept is a real predicate the associated property is, I would claim, a reality. And a reality is a “perfecting” or “reality-enhancing” property in the sense made clear by the following principle:

R: For any property F , if F is a reality, then an arbitrary object, x , having both F and G will have more reality than a G differing from x only as far as it needs to do in order to be non- F .

(Here, I ignore certain subtleties of use and mention and I treat “ x ” as ranging over real possibilia.)

Sightedness, for example, counts as a reality because an arbitrarily chosen sighted mouse, x , will have more reality than a nonsighted mouse differing from x only as far as it would need to do in order to be nonsighted.

I will suggest in section 5 that Kant’s argument that actuality is not a real predicate tacitly relies on this principle.

[3] Kant against Wolff and Baumgarten

I have proposed an interpretation of Kant's famous criticism of the ontological argument on which he is taking issue with the idea that existence (or actuality) is a reality, in the sense—to put it very roughly—of a property whose possession by a thing enhances its degree of reality. In defense of such an interpretation we may note that Kant explicitly attributes such a conception of existence to one of his possible Wolffian opponents—namely, Baumgarten—in *The Only Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*:

Wolff's explanation of existence, that it is a completion of possibility [*Ergänzung der Möglichkeit*], is obviously very indeterminate. If one does not already know in advance what can be thought about possibility in a thing, one is not going to learn it from this explanation. **Baumgarten** introduces the concept of thoroughgoing internal determination, and maintains that it is this which is more in existence than in mere possibility, for it completes that which is left indeterminate by the predicates lying in or flowing from the essence. (2: 76; compare Wolff, *Ontologia*, §174; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §55)

Here, Kant's criticism of Wolff's explanation of existence is simply that it is too sketchy to be of use. By contrast, his criticism of Baumgarten is substantive and, for our purposes, illuminating. He takes Baumgarten to be treating *existence* as a real predicate representing a reality-enhancing property that applies to some among the possibilia. He also takes Baumgarten to be locating the difference between an actual thing and a mere possibility in the possession by the former of a full complement of properties, including those neither contained in nor flowing from its essence. A mere possibilium

(a possible human being, say) has the properties contained in the thing's essence (in the present case: rationality and animality) along with those that flow from this essence (risibility, say); but it lacks contingent accidents such as a position in time, a position in space, or a particular age or stature. It is only upon actualization that a possibilium comes to acquire these and other spatiotemporal properties, and so—in Baumgarten's view—comes to have more reality than it had prior to actualization.²⁷ Baumgarten thus both treats *existence* as a real predicate and reduces the property of existence to another property, namely, thoroughgoing determination. Wolff, by contrast, although he treats existence as a reality (*Theologia Naturalis*, pt. 2, §20), and although he treats it as adding something to—or “completing”—a possibilium, does not follow Baumgarten in trying to specify in what exactly this addition or completion consists.

Kant objects to Baumgarten's view of existence on the ground that, by treating a possibilium as an indeterminate entity, it infringes the law of excluded middle—a law which, in the present context, he does not distinguish from the law *tertium non datur* (2: 76). But since this criticism applies only to Baumgarten's particular attempt to reduce existence to a degree-of-reality-enhancing property of a thing (viz., “thoroughgoing internal determination”), it remains local in character. What Kant needs is a compelling general argument against any attempt to construe existence as a reality-enhancing property. But that argument is one that he does not develop until the first *Critique*, when he formulates the argument proceeding from the example of a hundred thalers (more on which shortly).

There is, nonetheless, some reason to think that in the first *Critique*, even while broadening the scope of his attack, Kant may have retained Baumgarten (and possibly Wolff) among his immediate targets. For it is, I think, only on such an assumption that the first *Critique*'s very first objection to the ontological argument begins to make sense. This runs:

I answer: you have already committed a contradiction when you have brought the concept of its existence, under whatever concealed [*versteckten*] name, into the concept of a thing which you would think merely in terms of its possibility. (A 597/B 625)

This obscure remark is often neglected in discussions of the ontological argument, and, when it is discussed, it is sometimes not treated as expressing a criticism in its own right.²⁸ This is understandable; for without a good deal of context the remark can seem utterly baffling. How, one wonders, could the assumption that *existence* is contained in the concept of a most real being amount to a *contradiction*? Surely, that would require the concept of the most real being to contain *nonexistence* as a constituent concept. And surely that is the *last* thing a champion of the ontological argument would wish to affirm.

On the hypothesis that Kant's interlocutor here is Baumgarten, however, Kant's point snaps crisply into focus. The contradiction lies not between the concept of *existence* and marks of the concept of *the most real being*, but rather between Baumgarten's *explanation* of existence, on the one hand, and the central idea of the ontological argument on the other, namely, the idea that the concept of *existence* is (covertly) contained in the concept of *the most real being*.²⁹ According to Baumgarten, existence is something external to the concept of a thing—which concept includes as marks only those concepts that represent essential properties and necessary accidents. But according to the proponent of the ontological argument, existence is contained in the concept of a most real being. Thus, if Baumgarten is right about the nature of existence, he will be unable to run the ontological argument.

Kant would, I think, also take this criticism to apply to Wolff. For if existence is, as Wolff maintains, the “completion” of a possibility, it must lie outside the concept of any given *possibilium*—or so I believe Kant would suppose.

Having made this first criticism, Kant immediately waives it in order to make another. He continues: “If one allows you to do that, then you have won the illusion of a victory, but in fact you have said nothing; for you have committed a mere tautology” (A 597/B 625). His point, I think, is that Baumgarten and Wolff, because they make existence external to the essence of a thing, leave themselves open to Caterus’s objection to Descartes’s version of the ontological argument. That objection ran, roughly, as follows: In deriving God’s existence from his concept one has not demonstrated God’s existence outside of thought—one has not, as Caterus puts it, shown the existence in question to be anything “actual in the real world” (AT 7: 99; CSM 2: 72). Rather, one has merely asserted the tautological claim that an existing God exists. And that is not what the theist wanted, since anyone could with equal justice affirm that, for example, (in this sense of existence) an existing unicorn exists. To put the point in modern terms, we have reached only the conclusion: $\forall x$ [x is an *ens realissimum* & $\exists y (y = x) \rightarrow \exists y (y = x)$], not the desired conclusion: $\exists x (x$ is an *ens realissimum*).

Descartes, in replying to Caterus, had claimed that the objection did not apply to his argument—though it did apply to Anselm’s—since, unlike his famous predecessor, he had begun not with a mere name or signification of God (“that than which nothing greater can be thought”) but with a concept that is genuinely expressive of God’s “true and immutable nature or essence” (AT 7: 115–16; CSM 2: 82–83). This, Descartes supposed, provided the proper starting point for a demonstration that God exists in reality (the desired second-level claim) and not merely in thought (the first-level claim).

It would take us too far afield to discuss the merits of Descartes’s response, but what matters for our purposes is that here Kant is plausibly charging against Baumgarten and Wolff that in treating existence as external to the divine essence and thus—in effect, treating the concept of God

as “the existent *ens realissimum*”—they begin with an arbitrarily constructed concept, one that does not express an essence.³⁰ If that is right, they are no less vulnerable to Caterus’s objection than was St. Anselm. If this reading is correct, Kant, although he generally rejects Caterus’s objection (for the reasons offered by Descartes in the First Replies), nonetheless believes that it gains purchase against Baumgarten and Wolff precisely because they endorse a view of existence as the completion of a “possibility,” which here—as often elsewhere—Kant identifies with an essence.³¹

Some evidence supporting the view that in general Kant endorses Descartes’s reply to Caterus is supplied by a reflection of uncertain date, which, through its use of examples, shows the influence of Descartes’s response to Caterus in the First Replies:³²

Against [the Cartesian ontological argument] one objects in vain that such a possible thing includes existence within itself only in the understanding ... but not outside of thought ... The latter indeed occurs when one arbitrarily combines something with a concept that is not necessarily posited thereby; e.g., in this way wings are posited of a horse in thought in order to form a Pegasus, hence wings belong to some horse or other only in thought. ... On the contrary, where the connection of a predicate with a thing is not arbitrary, but is combined through the essence of the things themselves, the predicate does not belong to it because we think it in the thing, but rather it is necessary to think such a predicate in it because it belongs to the thing itself. For this reason I cannot say that the equality of the angles with two right angles belongs to a triangle only in thought, but rather it belongs to it in itself ... This is how matters [would] also stand with existence, if it could be regarded as a predicate of things (17: 240–41).

Since Kant does not list Leibniz along with Baumgarten and Wolff as someone who attempts to define existence as the completion of a possibility, it seems likely that he does not take Leibniz to be vulnerable to Caterus's objection.³³ So, having disposed of Baumgarten and Wolff, Kant still needs a good argument against Leibniz. One such argument, as we have already seen, is his objection to Leibniz's attempt to prove the possibility of a being with all the realities (A 602/B 630). But another is his argument that *being* is not a real predicate. We shall turn to that argument shortly, but first we should briefly address the question why the thesis for which Kant argues is not quite—in form at least—the thesis that he states. Why does the hundred thalers argument purport to establish that *actuality* rather than *being* fails to qualify as a real predicate?

[4] **Being, existence, and actuality**

In order to answer this question it helps to delve a little into Kant's pre-critical thought about existence. From the early 1760s onward, Kant equates the concept of *being* with the general notion of *positing* and he distinguishes between absolute and relative positing.³⁴ The former he takes to be expressed by the verb *to be* as it figures in such claims as "God is," the latter by the same verb as it figures in such claims as "God is omnipotent." In *OPB* Kant insists that existence must be "distinguished from any predicate" since it is never posited relative to another thing, but only absolutely (2: 73). In the first *Critique* Kant continues to adhere to this view of being (as never posited *relative* to the subject), but he now expresses his point more concessively. He grants that the concept of existence qualifies at least as a logical predicate, but he denies that this concept represents a reality. His earlier denial that *existence* is a predicate is accordingly replaced by a denial that it is a *real* predicate.

Since in the first *Critique* Kant wishes to argue that “is” in its noncopulative use does not express a concept that represents a reality, we might expect him to argue that *existence* (*Dasein*)—the concept that his opponent takes to be expressed by this use of “is”—is not a real predicate. Why, then, does he argue instead that *actuality* (*Wirklichkeit*) is not a real predicate? The answer, I think, is not far to seek: Kant simply draws no distinction between actuality and existence.

So much is clear from the fact that, while in both the first *Critique* and the *Prolegomena* (4: 303) Kant lists the modal categories as “possibility-impossibility,” “existence-non-existence” (*Dasein-Nichtsein*)³⁵ and “necessity” (A 80/B 106), he also, on the one hand, lists the unschematized categories as “possibility,” “actuality” (*Wirklichkeit*) and “necessity” (A 144–45/B 184) and, on the other, treats the principles of modality as definitions of possibility, actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), and necessity (A 219/B 266). In addition, although in some places in his writings he offers “absolute positing” as the definition of *existence* (2: 73; 2: 82; R 5710, 18: 332), in others he offers this same phrase as the definition of *actuality* (28: 556; 29: 822). Nor should this equivalence surprise us; for in treating *existence* and *actuality* as the same notion, differently expressed, Kant is simply following in the footsteps of Wolff (*Ontologia* § 174). All this suggests that when he denies that *being* is a real predicate he means that *being*—construed as *existence* or, equivalently, as *actuality*—is not a real predicate.

[5] Kant’s argument that *actuality* is not a real predicate

In the first *Critique* Kant’s argument that *actuality* is not a real predicate is formulated somewhat inexplicitly at A 599/B 627. When fully spelled out it takes the form of a simple (and obviously valid) *modus tollens*:

AP1. If *actuality* were a real predicate, then the actual would contain more than the merely possible
(Suppressed premise).

AP2. The actual contains nothing more than the merely possible (Quotation from A 599/B 627).

Therefore:

AC. *Actuality* is not a real predicate.

Kant's commentators have struggled to find merit in this argument, and it is not hard to see why. The main problem is that AP1 would only seem plausible if a real predicate were a concept that augmented *all* (consistent) concepts containing neither it nor its negation. But Kant has defined it as a predicate that merely augments *some* concept not already containing it. Premise AP1, whose consequent purports to speak of possibilities in general, is thus left seeming unjustified.

This difficulty may be overcome, however, if we suppose that the tacit argument for AP1 rests not on Kant's definition of a real predicate, but rather on the principle we earlier called "R" (see the end of §2.3). More precisely, the difficulty is overcome if we suppose that Kant is assuming, first, that a real predicate is one that represents a reality and, second, that realities are governed by principle R. Our reflections up to this point have suggested that we should understand the notion of one thing's containing "more" than another in terms of its containing more *reality* than that other.³⁶ If that is correct, then the consequent of AP1 follows from its antecedent together with, first, the assumption that real predicates (immediately) represent realities and, second, the following instance of R:

If actuality is a reality, then an arbitrary object, x , that has G will have more reality than a nonactual G differing from x only as far as it needs to do in order to be nonactual.

Premise AP1, then, is something that Kant is entitled to assume.

Our next task is to examine Kant's argument for AP2. But first we need to get clearer about how he is thinking of the concept on which he runs this argument, namely, *a hundred thalers*.³⁷

[6] The special character of Kant's example of *a hundred thalers*

To understand Kant's argument it is important to appreciate that he is thinking of the concept of *a hundred thalers* in a highly specific way. He is thinking of it not as the concept of a concrete pile of coins, but rather as the concept of a particular *debt*—as it might be, the total balance of thalers residing in a certain Prussian's bank account at the close of business on a particular day.

The reason why Kant chooses to run his argument on such a concept is that the crucial supposition on which the argument rests requires that he choose a concept with certain special features, and the concept of *a deposit of a hundred thalers* fits the bill. Kant's choice of example enables him to argue roughly as follows. Suppose an actual deposit of (exactly) a hundred thalers were to have more reality than a merely possible deposit of a hundred thalers. Then the former would be a larger deposit than the latter. But then, absurdly, what actualizes the possibility in question would not fall under the concept of (exactly) a hundred thalers (I explain this argument more fully in the next section).

It is important to realize that such an argument would not have been available to Kant if he had construed *a hundred thalers* as the concept of a concrete pile of coins. For in that case, he would not have been able to conclude that a hundred actual thalers was a larger sum of money than a hundred merely possible thalers from the assumption that the former had more reality than the latter. If, for example, were a reality, then a concrete pile of coins might take on an

additional reality just by warming up, while, of course, remaining the same sum of money. That is why it is crucial to think of a hundred thalers as an abstract debt.

The logic of Kant's argument, then, demands that he choose an example of an extremely special kind. Interpretive charity, I would claim, therefore already justifies us in understanding "a hundred thalers" as an abstract debt, rather than a concrete pile of coins. But it is worth nothing, further, that when he first uses the example of a hundred thalers in his published writings—in his 1763 work, *Negative Magnitudes*—he expressly treats the sum in question as a debt. And, he does so—interestingly for our purposes—in a context in which he is treating the property of having a certain debt (whether an asset or a liability) as a paradigm example of a *reality*.

Kant introduces the example in the course of explaining the concept of a "real repugnancy":

Real repugnancy is ... based upon the relation of two predicates of the same thing to each other; but this relation is quite different from that which is present in logical repugnancy. [In real repugnancy] that which is affirmed by the one is not negated by the other. [Rather, in this case] both predicates, A and B, are affirmative. However, since the consequences of the two, each construed as existing on its own, would be *a* and *b*, it follows that, if the two are construed as existing together, neither consequence *a* nor consequence *b* is to be found in the subject; the consequence of the two predicates A and B, construed as existing together, is therefore zero. (2: 172)

In the preamble to this passage Kant glosses the notion of a "truly affirmative" predicate as a "realitas"; so it is clear that in a real repugnancy there is an opposition of (the consequences of) two *realities*. In the continuation of the passage Kant illustrates his idea with a monetary example:

Suppose that someone has active debt $A = 100$ thalers with regard to another person; that active debt is the ground of a correspondingly large [interest] income. But suppose that this same person also has a passive debt $B = 100$ thalers; then that passive debt is the ground of a correspondingly large expenditure [on interest payments]. The two debts together are the ground of zero, that is to say, the ground for neither giving nor receiving money. (2: 172)

The philosophical point Kant is making here need not concern us. What matters for our purposes is, first, that the example of a hundred thalers enters Kant's published works in a context in which it is clearly intended to be construed as a *debt*; second, that the debt in question—whether an active debt (an asset) or a passive debt (a liability)—would have been considered by Kant to be a *positive* ground (2: 175) of its consequence (that “consequence” being a stream of interest income in the active case, and a series of interest payments in the passive), and third, that Kant would have thought of the property of having (or, in the active case, being owed) the debt in question as a reality as opposed to a negation.

All this suggests that it is not at all far-fetched to suppose that in the hundred thalers argument Kant may be conceiving of a hundred thalers as a debt.

[7] A more precise formulation of Kant's “hundred thalers” argument

The argument for AP2 runs:

A hundred actual thalers contain not an iota more [*das mindeste mehr*] than a hundred possible ones. For since the latter signifies the concept and the former the object and its positing in itself, then, in case the former contained more than the latter, my concept would not express

the entire object and thus would not be a commensurate [*angemessene*] concept of it. (A 599/B 627)

The argument leaves much implicit. Fully spelled out, it would run:

- TP1. If the actual contained more than the merely possible, then, in particular, an actual deposit of a hundred thalers would contain more than a merely possible deposit of a hundred thalers.
- TP2. If an actual deposit of a hundred thalers contained more than a merely possible deposit of a hundred thalers, then my concept of a deposit of a hundred thalers would not express the entire object and would not be a commensurate concept of it.
- TP3. But my concept of a deposit of a hundred thalers does express the entire object and is a commensurate concept of it.

So, by a two-step *modus tollens*:

TC (= AP2). The actual does not contain more than the merely possible.

This argument, too, is valid. Premise TP1 is unobjectionable: it simply amounts to the claim that if each actualized possibilium contained more reality than the possibilium it actualizes, then, in particular, an actual deposit of a hundred thalers would contain more reality than a merely possible deposit of a hundred thalers. Our scrutiny should therefore fall on TP2 and TP3. Each of these premises requires some interpretation, for we need to know what it would be for a concept to “express the entire object” and be a “commensurate” concept of it.

I suggest that what it is for a concept to be a commensurate concept of its object is for it to represent its object as having *exactly as much* reality as it does in fact have. What it is for a concept to express its entire object, for its part, is just for it to represent its object as having *at least as much* reality as it does in fact have. These glosses accord with our emphasis on the framework of degrees of reality, but the main reason for accepting them is just that they make possible a plausible interpretation of Kant's argument for AP2.

Kant's appeal to the notion of a "commensurate" concept is in fact an unnecessary complication. The argument will still be valid if we, first, reformulate TP2 more simply as:

TP2 (simplified): If an actual deposit of a hundred thalers contained more [reality] than a merely possible deposit of a hundred thalers, then what actualizes a merely possible deposit of a hundred thalers would not fall under the concept of a deposit of a hundred thalers.

and, second, simplify TP3 to:

TP3 (simplified): What actualizes a merely possible deposit of a hundred thalers falls under the concept of a deposit of a hundred thalers.

I take the reasoning supporting the crucial premise TP2 (simplified) to rest on the following principle.

M: The only way one bank deposit, *A*, could have more reality than another *B*, is if the monetary magnitude of *A* were to exceed that of *B*.

The argument for TP2 (simplified) then runs: Suppose the antecedent of TP2 (simplified). Suppose, that is, that an actual deposit of a hundred thalers were to have more reality than a merely possible deposit of a hundred thalers. Then, by principle *M*, the monetary magnitude of the former would exceed that of the latter. Suppose, further, that a merely possible deposit of a hundred thalers has a monetary magnitude of exactly a hundred thalers. Then an actual deposit of a hundred thalers, since it has a greater monetary magnitude than a merely possible deposit of a hundred thalers, will not fall under the concept of a hundred thalers. *QED*.

The argument appears to be valid, but one might question its soundness on the ground that its crucial premise, *M*, seems to be dubious at best. Principle *M* in effect treats monetary magnitude as a proxy for degree of reality. But one might wonder whether bank deposits differing in their degree of reality need differ in their monetary magnitude. The problem arises because, in the case of deposits, a better proxy for degree of reality than monetary magnitude would seem to be the *value* to the depositor of the deposit. This is not merely a function of the deposit's monetary magnitude since two deposits of a hundred thalers might earn different rates of interest, or reside in banks differing in their degree of security, or with different chances of defaulting, and so forth. But, although genuine, this problem may be addressed merely by modifying Kant's example in a minor respect (and modifying principle *M* accordingly).³⁸

First, we need to replace the example of the concept of *a deposit of a hundred thalers* with a concept that builds in a determinate *value* rather than just a determinate monetary magnitude. One such concept might be that of *a deposit of a hundred thalers residing in the Königsberg branch of the Royal Prussian Bank (in a fund earning five percent interest per annum) as it is at the close of business on April 22nd, 1781*. If that is not sufficiently detailed to fix the value of the deposit, one may further complicate the example as needed. This repair is available simply because Kant needs just one concept to

counterexample the claim that actuality is governed by principle R. His argument is in that respect robust.

Second, we need to reformulate principle *M* so that it speaks not of all deposits but of all deposits of a highly specific kind. Let us call a bank deposit “a deposit of kind *k*” just in case it is a deposit in the *Königsberg branch of the Royal Prussian Bank (in a fund earning five percent interest per annum) as it is at the close of business on April 22nd, 1781*. Then we may revise *M* as follows:

M (revised):

The only way one deposit of kind *k*, *A*, could have more reality than another of kind *k*, *B*, is if the monetary magnitude of *A* were to exceed that of *B*.

With these slight modifications in place the argument for TP2 (simplified) would now run: Suppose the antecedent of TP2 (simplified), namely, that a hundred *actual* thalers (construed as a deposit of kind *k*) had more reality than a hundred *merely possible* thalers (construed as a deposit of kind *k*). Suppose, further, that the monetary magnitude of anything falling under the concept of a deposit of kind *k* of a hundred possible thalers is: a hundred thalers. Then, by principle *M (revised)* and our first assumption, the monetary magnitude of a deposit of kind *k* of a hundred actual thalers will have a monetary magnitude exceeding a hundred thalers. But, by our second assumption, a deposit of kind *k* of a hundred actual thalers will not fall under the concept of a deposit of kind *k* of a hundred thalers. *QED*.

[8] Evaluation of the argument³⁹

Principle *M (revised)* is in fact ambiguous between two different principles:

M (weak): Necessarily, for all deposits of kind k , x and y , if x is more real than y , then x has a larger monetary magnitude than y .

M (strong): For any possible deposits of kind k , x and y , if x is more real than y , then x has a larger monetary magnitude than y .

In *M (weak)* the values of the variables “ x ” and “ y ” are possibilities in the same possible world; in *M (strong)*, by contrast, the values of the variables may or may not be worldmates.

A difficulty now arises because neither disambiguation seems suitable for the job originally assigned to principle *M*. Although *M (weak)* is plausibly true, it is not the principle relied on in the argument; for in TP2 a comparison is made between the degrees of reality of a merely possible deposit and its actualization. *M (strong)*, on the other hand, *is* relied on, but it seems to render the argument question-begging, since it seems to be true only if *actuality* is assumed not to be a real predicate. After all, if *actuality* were a real predicate, then one possible deposit might, for all we have argued, be more real than another merely by dint of being actual. Should we conclude that Kant has stumbled by conflating these two disambiguations of *M*, and so unwittingly rendered his argument question-begging?

This is certainly possible, but fortunately a more charitable interpretation is available. If I am correct in thinking that the “100 thalers” argument is directed only against Leibniz, Kant will be able to use Leibnizian commitments as premises in the course of his critical argument. But with these added resources Kant is able to defend principle *M (strong)* against the charge of begging the question.

First, let us spell out the objection. Kant's envisaged opponent objects to principle *M (strong)* on the ground that it is in fact possible to conceive of two possible deposits of kind \mathcal{L} , x and y , such that x is more real than y even though x and y have precisely the same monetary magnitude. The difference in degree of reality, Kant's opponent claims, derives merely from the fact that x is actual and y merely possible. In other words, it derives from nothing over and above the fact that x has a reality that y lacks, namely, actuality. And to deny that one possibilium could be more real than another merely by dint of being actual (when the other is merely possible)—his opponent continues—is simply to beg the question in favor of the view that actuality is not a reality.

Kant, however, can reply that this objection is not available to Leibniz, with the consequence that the hundred thalers argument is effective at least against him. This is so because Leibniz, as Kant would have been aware, takes a stand on the Euthyphro contrast that is incompatible with running the present objection to *M (strong)*. In the *Theodicy*—a text with which Kant was familiar—Leibniz takes the position that the actual world is actualized by God because it is good: it is not good because it is actualized. “Those who believe that God established good and evil by an arbitrary decree,” he says, “deprive God of the designation *good*: for what cause could one have to praise him for what he does, if in doing something quite different he would have done equally well?” (Huggard, 236).⁴⁰ For Leibniz, then, God is good because he chooses to actualize the best possible world—a world that is best quite independently of his choice. Substituting “most real” for “best”—as the traditional would plausibly warrant (compare *Theodicy* §201)—we obtain the conclusion that, for Leibniz, the actual world is not the most real because it is actualized by God, but is rather actualized by God because its corresponding unactualized possibilium is the most real. To put the point slightly differently: for Leibniz, differences in the degree of reality between worlds must exist prior to God's choice of which world to make actual and must serve to ground that choice; they cannot be consequent upon God's choice. But since there seems to be no reason why this reasoning should

not apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to parts of worlds as much as to whole worlds, it seems that Leibniz cannot counterexample *M* (*strong*) in the way we have envisaged. He cannot, that is to say, suppose that one possible deposit of kind *k* is more real than another merely by dint of being actual (that is, merely by dint of having been actualized) when the other is merely possible. For that would involve portraying God's actualizing activity as bestowing extra reality on that deposit. Instead, the actual deposit has to be supposed to have been actualized on account of having occupied—independently of God's free choice—the most real possible world. Actuality, then, for Leibniz—or, at least, for the Leibniz of the *Theodicy*—is consequent upon a world's degree of reality and not partly constitutive of it, as it would have to be if it were a reality.

Since Kant would have been aware of the relevant passage from the *Theodicy*, there is reason to think he would also have been aware of these points. I conclude that the hundred thalers argument is effective at least against the Leibniz with which Kant would have been familiar. Whether Kant's most famous criticism is also effective against Wolff (and his followers) is less clear simply because it is hard to know what their commitments are on the Euthyphro contrast. But since Wolff treats existence as the completion of a possibility (*Ontologia* §174), it seems likely that Kant, who would have taken this idea to entail that a thing's existence is extrinsic to its essence, would in any case have treated him as vulnerable, like Baumgarten, to the first two objections that he raises. But the important point, as we noted at the outset, is that, having whittled down his German rationalist opponents to Leibniz through preliminary arguments, Kant can appeal to a particular Leibnizian commitment to construct an argument—the hundred thalers argument—that is effective specifically against him. We have seen that this commitment is plausibly Leibniz's stand on the Euthyphro contrast.

Conclusion

In 1762 in *OPB* Kant had already denied that the “is” of existence counts as a predicate in the sense of a term expressing a relative positing. In the first *Critique* he continues to maintain such a view, but now, rather than merely rehashing his earlier claims, he strengthens his critical case by freeing it of its former dependence on his own views about existence. He argues—in effect—that, even if he were wrong about whether “exists” expressed a relative positing, the property whose relative positing it would express would not be of the right kind to figure in the ontological argument, since it would not be a reality.

This argument, I hope to have shown, is capable of being refined so that it is in fact effective against one of Kant’s most important rationalist opponents—namely, Leibniz. I hope to have shown, in addition, that against Baumgarten—and also arguably against Wolff—Kant offers the simpler argument that to view existence as the completion of a possibility is incompatible with conducting the ontological argument in the first place, along with the argument that he is, on account of this view, vulnerable to Caterus’s objection. Since Descartes famously espouses a voluntarist conception of God’s powers, Kant’s argument that *existence* is not a real predicate seems unlikely to be effective against him. But we can suppose that Kant would take his objection to Leibniz’s attempt to demonstrate the real possibility of God to also have force against Descartes’s original version of the argument; for, when rigorously set out, that argument would plausibly depend on an assumption closely akin to premise P1.

These last points bring out the importance of a point that has been a major subtheme of this essay, namely, the need to treat Kant’s various criticisms of the ontological argument as not all directed against the same figures. I hope to have shown that Kant’s critical case is many layered and that, when taken as a whole, it succeeds against his historical opponents, including both Descartes and Leibniz. It should, I think, also succeed against any contemporary version of the ontological

argument that makes essential appeal to the assumption that a most real—or supremely perfect—being is metaphysically possible.⁴¹

Abbreviations

- AT: *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. 11 vols. Paris: Librairie Philosophique. J. Vrin, 1973–82.
- CSM: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Edited and translated by John Cottingham, Robert Soothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and (vol. 3 only) Anthony Kenny. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91.
- G: Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Die Philosophischen Schriften*. Edited by C. I. Gerhardt. 7 vols. Berlin 1857–90. Reprinted Hildesheim 1965.
- L: Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Translated by L. Loemker, 2nd ed. Dordrecht, 1969.
- New Elucidation*: *Principiorum primorum cognitionis metaphysicae nova dilucidatio*. In Kant 1900, vol. 1:385–416. English translation in Walford 1992, 1–45.
- On a Discovery*: *Über ein Entdeckung nach der alle neue Kritik der Reinen Vernunft durch eine ältere entbehrlich gemacht werden soll*. In Kant 1900, 8:185–251, English translation in Henry Allison et al., *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 271–336.

OPB: *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Dasein Gottes*. In Kant 1900, 2:62–163. English translation in Walford 1992, 107–201.

Bibliography

Ariew Roger and Garber Daniel, eds. *G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Essays*, 1989.

Baumgarten, Alexander. 1902. *Metaphysica*. Reprinted in Kant 1900–, Vols. 15, 1 (5–54), and 17 (5–226). Orig. pub. Halle, 1739 and Frankfurt, 1757. English translation of selected passages in Watkins 2009.

Bering, Johann, 1780. *Prüfung der Beweise für das Dasein Gottes aus den Begriffen eines höchstvollkommenen und notwendigen Wesens*. Giesen.

Bonevac, D. 1982. “Kant on Existence and Modality,” *Archiv Für Geschichte der Philosophie* 64(3), 289–300.

Campbell, R. 1974. “Real Predicates and ‘Exists’.” *Mind* 83 (329):95–99.

Carriero, J. 2009. *Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes’s Meditations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Descartes, René. 1983. *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 11 vols. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin. English translation in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch.

Everitt, N. 1995. “Kant’s discussion of the Ontological Argument,” *Kant-Studien* 86, 385–401.

- Grier, M. 2010. "The Ideal of Pure Reason." In *The Cambridge Companion to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, edited by Paul Guyer, 266–89. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Guyer Paul, and Allen Wood, eds. and trans. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Henrich, D. 1961. *Der Ontologische Gottesbeweis*. Tübingen.
- Kant, I. 1900–. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Berlin: Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (now de Gruyter).
- Leibniz, G. W. 1975. *Discours de métaphysique*. Edited by Henri Lestienne. New edition Paris: Vrin.
- 1991. *G. W. Leibniz's Monadology*. Edited by Nicholas Rescher Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press. (Also in L 643–53 and G 6, 607–23).
- 1996. *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Translated and edited by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Orig. pub. 1765.
- 2010. *Theodicy*. Edited by Austin M. Farrer translated by E. M. Huggard. Cosimo Classics.
- Naragon, S. (Website) *Kant in the Classroom*. <http://www.manchester.edu/kant/Home/index.htm>.
- Plantinga, A. 1966. "Kant's Objection to the Ontological Argument," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 63, no. 19.
- Shaffer J. A. 1962. "Existence, Predication and the Ontological Argument." *Mind*, 71, (283): 307–25.
- Stuckenberg, J. H. W. 1882. *The Life of Immanuel Kant*. (London: Macmillan). Reprinted, with a new preface by Rolf George. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986.

Watkins, E. 2009. *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason: Background Source Materials*. Cambridge University Press.

Walford, David, trans. and ed. 1992. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*. In collaboration with Ralf Meerbote. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wolff, Christian. 1962–. *Gesammelte Werke*. Edited by Jean École et al. Hildesheim: Olms.

Wood, Allen. 1978. *Kant's Rational Theology*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

¹ See, for example, Plantinga, 1966.

² All translations are my own, though they usually depart in at most minor respects from existing standard translations. They are based on Kant 1900. My translations of passages from the first *Critique* take as their point of departure Guyer and Wood, 1998.

³ For Descartes's version see the fifth *Mediation*, AT, VII, 65–67; CSM II, 45–46.

⁴ Leibniz nonetheless takes the argument to provide a “demonstrated moral conclusion.” He does so because he supposes we may assume God to be possible until proven impossible (*New Essays*, bk. 4, chap. 10, p. 438). He takes the argument to show that “in the present state of our knowledge we ought to judge that God exists and to act accordingly” (*ibid.*).

⁵ See “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth and Ideas” [1684],” in Ariew and Garber, 1989, 25, and *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §24.

⁶ Although Kant speaks here of the concept of “a highest being,” it is clear from remarks he makes elsewhere that he views this merely as a variant on the phrase “a most real being.” One such remark

occurs in his essay of 1786 “What Is Orientation in Thinking?”, where he speaks of “a most real (highest) being” (8: 138). Compare: “a most real thing <ens realissimum>, which one also calls a most perfect, highest thing <ens perfectissimum, summum>” (*Metaphysics K3*, 29: 1001) and see also 28: 1013–14, 19).

⁷ This point is made more explicitly in the Religion Lectures where Kant remarks: “The real possibility of a most real being must be proven before I can prove its existence [by the ontological argument]” (28:1023).

⁸ That Kant runs the argument on the concept of “the most real being” is not evident from Guyer and Wood’s translation, but it is clear from the German.

⁹ The gloss on “possible” offered here is substantiated later in the present section.

¹⁰ Although, for expository convenience, I have presented the argument as a *reductio ad absurdum*, strictly speaking, it takes the form of a direct proof that incorporates a *modus tollens*—where one premise of this *modus tollens* is an instance of the principle of contradiction. Such a proof, of course, mimics a *reductio*, but without beginning with a counterfactual supposition.

¹¹ That Kant views this as the *only* coherent conception of an absolutely necessary being is clear from a remark he makes in his Religion Lectures. “Reason,” he says “cognizes [*erkennt*] absolute necessity *only* in what is necessary from its concept” (28: 1032, emphasis added). Since Kant denies that we know any being to be absolutely necessary, the word “cognizes” here can only mean “comprehends” or “conceives.” And, in line with this, in the first *Critique* itself Kant simply *equates* absolute necessity with “existence from mere concepts” (A 607/B 635).

¹² One wonders whether Baumgarten's presentation of the argument might not have been at the forefront of Kant's mind at certain points in his exposition for he (Baumgarten) infers the necessary existence of God from the alleged internal (or "*in se*") impossibility of the non-existence of this being (*Metaphysica*, §823). I would not insist on this point, however, but merely on the idea that the argument that Kant presents is *broadly* Leibnizian.

¹³ We should not be surprised that Kant's presentation of the argument leaves certain premises implicit. Kant, after all, was not operating with anything approaching our modern (Fregean) standards of rigor.

¹⁴ In Kant's view, just as much as in Baumgarten's, something may be possible in itself while being hypothetically *impossible*. Kant gives the example of someone's being rich through his own efforts. This is possible in itself, but it is also hypothetically impossible, since it would be impossible, if he were lazy (29: 813).

¹⁵ Kant owned a copy of the third edition of 1650.

¹⁶ My thanks to Des Hogan for drawing my attention to this passage.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Katherine Dunlop for drawing this feature of the argument to my attention.

¹⁸ This impression might be strengthened if one allowed oneself to be guided by Kemp Smith's translation of the passage in question.

¹⁹ The concept of *being*, for Kant, is a representation, while the property of being, if there were such a thing, would be what this representation represents.

²⁰ See, for example, Shaffer 1962, 309; Campbell 1974, 96; Wood 1978, 104–5; and Everitt 1995, 393.

²¹ Compare Leibniz, *Monadology*, §41: “*perfection* [is] nothing but the amount of positive reality taken separately.”

²² The thought is not that *P* represents *S*’s object as having one degree of reality, *S* another, but rather that *P* represents *S*’s object as possessing a reality about which *S* is noncommittal.

²³ Kant expressly associates aspects of this Platonic framework with Wolffianism. See, for example, *Metaphysics K3*, 29:1001.

²⁴ See A 290–92/B 347–49 and 28: 1078. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for persuading me that Kant is buying into this framework rather than merely assuming it for the sake of argument.

²⁵ Several authors have observed that Kant treats one and the same predicate as functioning as a determination in some judgments but not in others. See, for example, Campbell 1974, 96–97; Bonevac 1982, 290; and Everitt, 1995, 393.

²⁶ Here “judgment” means “proposition” rather than “act of judgment.”

²⁷ Here, I am treating Baumgarten’s use of the word “more” as it figures in his contention that thoroughgoing internal determination is that which makes an actual thing “more” than the possibilium it actualizes as meaning “more real.” The materials for a defense of this interpretation are discussed in note 36 below.

²⁸ In her 2010, for example, Michelle Grier conflates the charge of contradictoriness with the—on the face of it entirely different—charge of tautologousness by which it is immediately followed

(278). By contrast, I take it that Kant's words at A 597/B 625, "If one allows you to do that," in fact function to waive his first objection for the sake of raising a distinct worry about tautologousness.

²⁹ Kant seems to be assuming that anything derivable from the concept of *the most real being* is contained in that concept. That would follow if one espoused P6.

³⁰ For an insightful and helpfully sympathetic account of Descartes's response to Caterus see Carriero 2009, chap. 5.

³¹ Kant often either equates inner possibility with essence (see, for example, *On a Discovery*, 8: 229), or holds the former to consist in the latter (see, for example, *New Elucidation*, 1: 395).

³² Compare esp. AT 117–18; CSM 2: 84.

³³ Whether Kant is right to exempt Leibniz from Caterus's criticism is another question. For our purposes, however, it can be set aside.

³⁴ "The concept of positing or setting is perfectly simple: it is identical with the concept of being in general" (*OPB* 2: 73).

³⁵ In the *Prolegomena* Kant lists "*Dasein*" rather than "*Dasein-Nichtsein*."

³⁶ In suppressing the word "reality" in this passage and others in which his point is to claim that one thing contains (or would contain) more reality than another, Kant is simply following Descartes, who says, for example, that "there must be at least as much in the cause as in the effect" (*Meditations*, CSM, 34, AT 49). It is worth noting that the early Kant had himself once endorsed a generalized version of the same Cartesian principle. In *OPB* he affirms that "the consequence cannot exceed the ground" (2: 88), and, indeed, he appeals to this principle in the course of a demonstration.

³⁷ While its celebrity is beyond dispute, the originality of Kant’s “hundred thalers argument” remains unclear. Dieter Henrich (1960: 119) observes that Johann Bering (1780) had already given a version of the argument in contending that existence is not a reality. On the other hand, since there is no external evidence that Kant ever read Bering’s work, one wonders whether Bering might rather have learned of the argument from Kant—or, indeed, whether each author might have been drawing on yet a third source. Steve Naragon reports that Kant lectured on natural theology during the year 1774 (Naragon, *Kant in the Classroom*); and Stuckenberg (1882, 71) reports that Kant delivered a course of lectures on “Criticisms on [*sic*] the proofs of the divine existence” prior to 1763. Bering, who is usually described as one of Kant’s “disciples,” might have learned of the argument from an auditor at one of these lecture courses, if he was not present himself. Also, relevant here is the fact that as early as 1763 Kant was already making prominent use in another context of the example of one hundred thalers (see section 6 below). (I am indebted to Naragon [*Kant in the Classroom*] for the quotation from Stuckenberg.)

³⁸ I am indebted to Jon Litland for this suggestion.

³⁹ This section has benefited from discussions with Martin Lin.

⁴⁰ This reasoning occurs also in *Discourse on Metaphysics*, which, however, was not available to Kant. Leibniz says: “[If we say] that things are not good by virtue of any rule of goodness but solely by virtue of the will of God, it seems to me that we unknowingly destroy all of God’s love and all his glory. For why praise him for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing the exact contrary?” (op. cit. § 2).

⁴¹ I am grateful to Dan Bonevac, Karen Carroll, Katherine Dunlop, Alex Grzankowski, Ivan Heyman, Martin Lin, Jon Litland, Bryan Pickel, Jon Shaheen, Nicole Smith and Eric Watkins. My

thanks, also, to two anonymous referees. An early draft of this paper was given at a session at the Pacific APA in 2011. I am grateful to the audience for many stimulating questions and observations. Special thanks are due to my commentator on that occasion, Des Hogan, for thoughtful comments that led to substantive improvements. Part of this article was written while I was a Fellow at the National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. I am grateful to the Center and its staff for the extraordinarily supportive intellectual environment it created in the nine happy months I spent there, and to GlaxoSmithKlein for its generous support of the fellowship.