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THE NEEDS OF REASON:

KANT, METAPHYSICS, AND THE PROOFS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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PREFACE

It is a terrifying thing to put out a book which perhaps has no audience. I must think that a reader still willing to study a long book on the proofs for the existence of God, if there are any left, will expect that it say something substantive on the question: *Do they work?* Yet I have nothing to say for an answer, for I find the question to be hopelessly underdetermined. As a reply I can only offer a nest of other questions: *What would it mean for them to “work” - to be valid with true premises, to convince someone that some God exists, or something else?* And: *Which “God” are we talking about, exactly?* And: *What is the price to pay if they don’t “work,” and who or what pays it?* And: *Have you considered why you are asking this?* This project basically concerns that nest of other questions, so that a reader expecting affirmation or denial may be left unsatisfied (albeit one should also ask what “satisfaction” would look like here).

What I will suggest in this book is that the arguments which have manifested concerning God’s existence in the four hundred years since Descartes cannot be taken on their face - that we will never make further philosophical headway on them without considering the “needs of reason” underlying them, the needs which drove the project of rational theology. Yet just with that I fear that I have already lost the readership in philosophy of religion which still remains interested in the proofs, who may well take this entire book as a miserable ad hominem. The validity and viability of these arguments, one might reasonably counter, cannot be either confirmed or refuted by whatever motives may underlie them - and that is true enough, albeit it is no reason to limit all discussions of the proofs to their truth or falsity. Indeed, if we still have not agreed upon any “touchstone” which can come to a final decision after four centuries and yet we

continue to debate these proofs, then it may be worth reexamining them from a different set of questions. It may be worth asking what the proofs *do* (considered in their broadest sense), and perhaps do *successfully, regardless* of their argumentative viability. This will indeed amount to an “ad hominem”, but perhaps a valuable one (in that the “homines” are worth considering).

Yet on the other side, the very fact that I still insist on taking the proofs seriously will perhaps lose me all the *rest* of my readers. In the rest of philosophy, and just as much in theology and religious studies, consideration of these proofs is now looked upon with a certain degree of befuddlement if not outright contempt. They seem to be quaint relics of a bygone age which only a handful of conspiracists still cling to, like flat-earthism or theories of phlogiston - certainly not worth deeper consideration. And yet these “relics” sat in the center of philosophy, and indeed the center of theology and the study of religion, for nearly two centuries, and it is unclear whether we have a full accounting of the effects. That is to say, an investigation of the proofs may not be a matter of idle curiosity for those contemptuous of their presence: indeed, a proper critique of the proofs might have a crucial role to play in those researchers’ own attempts at self-reflection.

The proofs, I suggest, must therefore be taken quite seriously, albeit not read just on their face. The approach I take to reinterpret them, as my title indicates, is by way of an exhaustive rereading of *Kant*, especially his account of rational theology from his early work up until his last working drafts. The conclusions I reach are, indeed, only extensions of what Kant himself writes, albeit often only in the margins and often reread through other authors (especially Heidegger). Even a small improvement on Kant’s achievements is a difficult thing, however, and (I would argue) a worthwhile one. But even if that may yet give me some appeal among the dedicated Kant scholars, given the sheer mass of material they must already deal with and the

“understandable weary sigh that must greet every new study,”¹ such scholars may actually be the most difficult audience of all.²

The upshot of this study, if one finds the results convincing, will first be a better understanding of the whole *metaphysical* context of the proofs; indeed, I am suggesting that metaphysics is the proofs’ proper home, and that Kant’s treatment of them gives us a quite novel way to understand “metaphysics” itself. But not only that: there may be at least two other results from the above, if the hypothetical reader remains patient.

First, it confirms that and how the proofs, and the wider tradition of which they are a part, have been the lens through which we have understood “religion” for the past several centuries. It is perhaps no accident that even still religious studies, to the extent that it is willing to perform the old religionswissenschaftlich task of talking about religion “in general” rather than breaking out into individual studies, often remains theoretically bogged down - e.g., it remains divided on whether religion primarily makes claims about how the world is (speculation, existence), or instead primarily provides for morality or happiness or social cohesion or behavioral norms or economic production (practice, action), or somehow both. It is not that such debates and such understandings of religion are completely wrongheaded, but rather that they show signs of a *distortion* that, I argue, stems from an uncritical absorption of the fundamental concepts of rational theology. To be sure, one sometimes hears the sentiment that religious studies will not become a full-blooded field until it can free itself from the latent influence of “theology,” and while I agree with such a sentiment (and applaud the project of revealing biases and latent presuppositions) I suspect the worry finds a superficial target. On the one hand, theology, as the

¹ Pippin, *Kant’s Theory of Form* 1.

² Albeit given that the question of the proofs ultimately touches on nearly every segment of Kant’s thought (early and late) they are likely to run into them sooner or later, so that they may still find this effort a helpful reference.

science of faith by faith, manifests quite legitimately within religious studies as one possible conduct of a religious actor; on the other, to the extent that a theologian masquerading as a theorist of religion tries to sneak illegitimate elements of his own prejudice into a general account the result is, at worst, merely a subtle con job which someone else in the field can and will eventually pick up on. Far more difficult to fix, by contrast, would be a distorting influence within the very language and concepts of the field.³ The theologian masquerading as religious theorist mostly plays by the rules until he breaks them (skillfully or otherwise), but if I am right then “metaphysics” as it emerges in the Cartesian era *is* “the rules.” It is in the air that religious studies breathes, knowingly or not. The more stubborn latent influence is perhaps not properly Christian-theological, but *metaphysical*-theological.⁴ If religious studies is ever to develop a common set of concepts that can properly ground its individual research projects, it will only do so by first coming to terms with this tradition - and if that will not immediately cure shortcomings of the understanding of religion outside of the academy, still it is a start.

But theology proper, as the curiously outward self-reflection of the faithful, surely also benefits from this kind of clarificatory work. As much as the chorus repeats, in that field and well beyond, that we have long since moved on from “metaphysics,” “ontotheology,”

³ I cannot express the point any better than Mazuzawa: “Today, self-consciously secularist scientists of religion tend to identify the persistence of Christian ideology as the foremost problem in the field of religious studies: not enough cleansing of the past legacy, and too much fresh infusion of religiously motivated interests. This, to be sure, may be true. But when we thus complain... do we understand our condition adequately? And if and when we will finally manage to round up sundry varieties of crypto-theology scurrying in the tribunal of science, will we then apprehend the right suspects? Or are we not failing to see a much larger, systemic network of discursive organization, of which the ones in custody are but low-level functionaries?... If we are to be serious in our critical intention, the exorcism of an undead Christian absolutism would not suffice... [H]istoriography must always include the historical analysis of our discourse itself.” *The Invention of World Religions* 328.

⁴ It is instructive that the canonical founding texts of religious studies (James, Durkheim, Freud, Marx, Weber, Eliade, Müller, van der Leeuw...), troubled in their presuppositions as they surely are, seldom seem to structurally rely on incarnation, the cross, trinity, baptism, and so on (which would be dead giveaways), but indeed rely quite heavily on - for example - notions of “experience” and “belief” basically drawn from philosophy, conceptions of “the supernatural” taken over from the 1800s and going back two centuries beforehand, conceptions of the practical role of that “supernatural,” the theory/practice distinction itself, etc..

“logocentrism,” and so on, often the *meaning* of these terms remains suspiciously opaque and the nature of the escape still less clear. One should not be too hasty here. When the point at issue lies in the very conceptual apparatus of talking about God or gods or religion, it cannot be so easily overcome with a flurry of novel terminology or pooh-poohing of the past or appeal to special kinds of experiences. The only proper approach, if one wishes to be legitimately “post-metaphysical,” is first the painstaking work of finding where the wrong turns are, understanding how they got there, and labelling them appropriately for future generations.

Whatever new contributions this effort makes to those fields, and to philosophy itself, it does so by returning to a long-running question - “what is metaphysics?” - in a way that is, if not new, still much-overlooked. Before we take sides for or against either metaphysics or a God of philosophy we might try rendering another question as “first and most necessary,” namely: “What does reason properly want with metaphysics? What final end does reason have in view with its treatment?”⁵ For if current “actual progress” on the proofs, and indeed on our theoretical accounts of religion, remains stalled, we may still find another path by first reconsidering what reason even *wants* with such items. That is less a historical question about the psychological motives of certain writers (although historical analysis remains critical) than a matter of determining, from the inner details of rational theology itself, in what context it can have legitimate sense. If the reading of Kant (especially of Kantian “Glaube”) presented here suggests anything, it is that metaphysics is not proved or discovered but *needed*, that the edifice of

⁵ From *What is the Actual Progress that Metaphysics Has Made in Germany Since Leibniz’s and Wolff’s Time?*, 20:259. “Die erste und nothwendigste Frage ist wohl: Was die Vernunft eigentlich mit der Metaphysik will? welchen Endzweck sie mit ihrer Bearbeitung vor Augen habe?” All citations of Kant refer to the volume and pages of the Akademieausgabe, and for quotations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* I have also included the customary notation for the first (A) and second (B) edition paginations. All translations of texts prior to 1800 are my own unless otherwise indicated.

“metaphysica” is a *side effect* of our practical projects. One cannot critique metaphysics except that one critique an entire way of life. The moment of the world in which I write this Preface neatly demonstrates, in the worst way imaginable, that a disruption in our “All” (universum), indeed in our “Principes de la connoissance,”⁶ is first a disruption in what we *do*.

Whether the present effort offers any steps forward on any of the questions above is up to the readers to decide (wherever they may be).⁷ If they are not steps that readers wanted, may they yet be ones that are needed.

Chicago, 3 April 2020

⁶ Cf the “Preface” to Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*, AT IXb 14. All citations of Descartes refer to the volume and page number of the Adam-Tannery edition of Descartes’ *Oeuvres*.

⁷ Countless benefactors have contributed to this project over the years in their own ways, but it surely would not have been possible at all without the advice and inspiration of its *initial* reader, Jean-Luc Marion. He above all others has taught me that the history of philosophy must remain philosophical, and his half-century of work on Descartes has provided the model for this effort. My only remaining hope is to have future readers as charitable as the first one.

“No existing thing could be what we have meant by God. Any existing God would be less than God. An existent God would be an idol or a demon. (This is near to Kant’s thinking.)”

-Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (p.508)

“.....great cataclysms stand ahead when the multitude have first conceived that all of Christendom grounds itself upon assumptions; the existence of God, immortality, biblical authority, inspiration, and other [matters] will always remain problems. I have tried to deny everything; o, to tear down is easy, but to build up! And tearing oneself down seems easier than it is; through the impressions of our childhood, the influences of our parents, of our rearing, we are so determined in our innermost that those deep-rooted prejudices do not let themselves be torn away by rational grounds or mere will so easily. The power of habit, the need for the higher, the break with everything established, the disintegration of all forms of society, doubts whether two thousand years have not led humanity off by an illusion, the feeling of one's own arrogance and recklessness: all this fights an undecided fight until finally painful experiences, sad events lead our heart back to the old childish faith. But to observe the impression which such doubts make on the mind, that must be a contribution to each one's own cultural history. It is not otherwise thinkable except that something remains to cling to, a payout from all that speculation, which cannot always be a knowing, but can also be a faith, indeed what even a moral feeling sometimes stirs or oppresses.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche, “Fate and History” (in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe I.2*, p.433)

“Kant inspires our awe as a representative of the spirit of the eighteenth century. We cannot help feeling that in him this spirit has not only reached maturity and beyond. In him, we feel, this spirit... has quite simply come to terms with itself; it therefore knows where it stands and it has thus acquired humility... In

Kant we find this spirit at a point beyond self-satisfaction and rebellion in being what it is, namely, distinct, existing in history as it does, keeping within its confines, being completely itself and completely self-conscious, and in its limits. In its limits, as they are understood by Kant, something of humanity's limits in general, and at this something of wisdom, seems to become visible. In Kant’s philosophy, as in the music of Mozart, there is something of the calm and majesty of death which seems suddenly to loom up from afar to oppose the eighteenth-century spirit. That is why, in Kant, thrown completely back upon humility, it shines forth once again in its full splendour. That is why it here commands our respect.”

-Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (p.254-5.)

CHAPTER I. Why the Proofs?, Why Metaphysics?, Why Kant?

Philosophy at its best, to be sure, often amounts to the close scrutiny of the hidden assumptions underlying what appears boring and obvious. Yet if the goal is to reinterpret these old proofs, one may wonder whether such an approach is doomed to be useless from the start. That is, one may suspect that the “hidden assumptions” of the proofs contain nothing of any interest whatsoever, that the boring and obvious is just that and nothing besides. Indeed, in the terrain of philosophy few topics seem as fallow. Any student who’s read a few books or taken a class on the topic should be able to name the proofs, quote their canonical form, and produce the canonical counterarguments on command; even the various attempts to revitalize the proofs in the last half-century have, self-admittedly, mostly just tidied them up and set them in stricter form. There seems to be little more to be found. When anyone asks, *Do they work?*, at best one can shrug: we stack up scores of books and papers, justifications and probabilities on all sides as we wish, and still come no closer to an end of debate. And if there were in fact interesting assumptions to be discovered in the proofs at one time - taking being or necessity as a predicate, for example - they have long since been exposed and explored in detail. Since the topic has been basically unproductive for two centuries, nothing else is likely to be found in it: little appears left except to reshuffle and restate and reinterpret what has already been said.

Yet we are still *stuck* with the proofs. Perhaps most obvious about them, and most boring, is that despite everything they somehow still have to be taught, still have to be discussed. One will hardly ever have a cycle of first-year philosophy courses without the proofs coming up at some point, or hear a public debate about “religion” without the first question being whether the

existence of God can be proved.¹ Even today in philosophy of religion, if we want to pride ourselves for becoming increasingly eclectic and sprawling in approach and subject matter we can typically do so only by first clarifying that we are now “not just” a site for constant debate about these proofs. They are still there, even though we have the sense that conversations on their legitimacy can only end in a shrug, even though beyond institutional inertia we may not be able to say why the proofs are in the curriculum to begin with.² In spite of how “boring” they are, we do not quite know what the proofs are doing here. Moreover, not only doing (in a strangely dominant way) in our conversations about religion but even doing in the *historical* record to begin with. The proofs have been handed down to us - we are part of that tradition - yet it remains a question what that tradition itself really amounts to and where it really comes from.

It is my gamble in this book that we will find what remains hidden in this apparently “obvious” field by approaching precisely that question, and approaching it through a reappropriation of Kant. This “new critique” of the proofs will amount to reinterpreting the *metaphysical* basis of the entire rational theological tradition. What I will eventually conclude, to put things roughly, is that from Descartes onwards the genuine ground for these proofs is just as much practical as it is metaphysical - indeed, metaphysical *because* practical. The proofs as explicit theoretical demonstrations can thus be reread as mere symptoms of what I will call *practical-ontotheological* “needs of reason.” The ground of the proofs must be read in reverse of the proofs themselves, as it were - not as procuring an existence, but rather as securing an

¹ And when this ends indecisively, the second question will likely be whether belief in God’s existence at least confers a *practical* benefit in the form of morality, happiness, productivity, etc. - in fact these two questions, as I will suggest, are necessarily related.

² Iris Murdoch suggests, borrowing a thought from Schopenhauer, that the proofs (especially the “ontological” one) simply have a certain “charm” to them regardless of argumentative force. Which is surely right, but only pushes off the question: if that is so, *why* do they have this charming quality? Cf *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* 407-10.

intelligibility for particular modes of being that thereby give meaning to our practical conduct with entities, and this by way of the presupposition of (“faith” in) a master entity. The notion of necessity at the heart of the speculative proofs thereby lies in *us* and not in that entity, in that (at least within metaphysics) reason itself *needs* the “God of philosophy” to make sense of the possibility of its own conduct. This has the wider effect of shifting the entire problematic of metaphysics - ontology included - towards the practical.

I will do the work of unpacking all that in the next several hundred pages. Nevertheless the reader may reasonably respond to the above that there are at least two much more simple and evident reasons why the proofs manifested historically and still have a hold on us today. First, the purpose of the proofs is *apologetical*, i.e. believers wanted a rational argument for their faith. Second, the proofs are a kind of philosophical *idolatry*, i.e. the metaphysicians invented a “God” which allowed them to justify certain of their own claims. Neither suggestion is quite wrong but, as I will show, both are incomplete. This introductory Chapter dedicates itself to complicating those two possibilities, which in turn will set the stage for a reading of Kant. In particular it will indicate that Descartes represents *the* crucial inflection point in rational theology, to some extent *the* phenomenon to be understood. The first suggestion shows, if anything, that the moment when the proofs really become “apologetical” is precisely in Descartes - and for *metaphysics*, not for sacred doctrine. The second suggestion in turn reveals a certain relevance for Heidegger and what he calls “ontotheology,” but it is an ontotheology which, in Descartes, is *backwards*. Kant, I suggest, provides the only possible ground for approaching these puzzles.

I. Metaphysics and Apologetics

Why are there proofs for the existence of God? Relation to God, it would seem, is first a question of *religious doctrine*. So that question, it would seem, has an obvious answer: the intention is just to rationally prove a piece of doctrine on the basis of premises which could be agreed upon by anyone and everyone.³ The proofs thus belong to *apologetics*.

Yet this apparently evident explanation, as a short review will indicate, is not supported by the texts themselves. What the same review will *also* show, however, is a pivotal role for Descartes and a deep relation between his proofs and his metaphysics.

A. "...quiddam meditationis exemplum" (Anselm)

One might consider Anselm of Canterbury as a good first case for this question. He writes in the *Proslogion's* "Preface," for example...

...I began to inquire with myself whether perhaps a single argument could be found which was in need of no other than itself alone to prove itself, and alone sufficed to build up why God truly is, and why he is the supreme good in need of no other, and whence all things are in need [of God] in order to be and be well, and whatever things we believe of the divine substance..⁴

³ This strange "agreeable to anyone and everyone" with regard to the divine is characteristic of rational theology as such - strange, because the *claim* to "anyone/everyone" does not rely on human beings actually agreeing on anything at all. The drive towards universality and completeness is properly characteristic of *reason itself*, particularly reason in Kant's time (the modern), and does not necessarily have to do with the opinions of people. Whence my insistence on the phrase "rational" theology - which is in fact is a rather late term, uncommon until Kant's appropriation of it - over "natural" theology, preferred by most figures up through Baumgarten. It is precisely "reason" which needs such a theology. Hegel (with some disapproval) calls rational theology "the universal highroad or the universal mode in which what is known of God is said of God"; it is "the theology of the Enlightenment." Which is surely correct, and also makes it all the more bizarre that we nevertheless first want to explain this theology in terms of its being useful for the defense of *particular, non-universal* religious doctrines properly outside of the Enlightenment's scope. Quotes from *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion I*, 121 and 124.

⁴ *Opera Omnia I*, 93: "...coepi mecum quaerere, si forte posset inveniri unum argumentum, quod nullo alio ad se probandum quam se solo indigeret, et solum ad astruendum quia Deus vere est, et quia est summum bonum nullo alio indigens, et quo omnia indigent ut sint et ut bene sint, et quaecumque de divina credimus substantia, sufficeret."

Which at first sounds like exactly the sort of thing the obvious apologetical interpretation is looking for. The whole point here is to “prove” the Christian beliefs of the author to the unbeliever *just by the argument itself*, i.e. with nothing assumed from faith. Or, as the *Monologion* says in its own “Preface” about its prescribed form, “...nothing in [the meditation] may be proved by the authority of scripture...”⁵

Except that both texts, especially the *Proslogion*, strike a quite non-apologetical tone. Almost that entire tract, including the famous argument of §2-3, is written in the form of a *prayer* (“Therefore Lord, you who give understanding to faith, give me, so far as you see to allow, that I understand that you are as we believe and you are this which we believe...”⁶). The first paragraph, moreover, is an *exhortation* to prayer or, more specifically, to meditation:

Come, little man today, flee a little your occupations, hide yourself a while from your tumultuous thoughts. Today abandon onerous cares and postpone your laborious distractions. Be free a bit for God, and rest a bit in him. “Enter into the chamber” (Matt. 6:6) of your mind, exclude everything except God and whatever may help you towards he who is to be sought, and “the door being closed,” seek him...⁷

This is far indeed from the tone of, say, the apologies of Justin Martyr or Tertullian, or anything explicitly written to show the reasonableness of Christianity *to non-Christians*. Presumably an exhortation to prayer and meditation on God, complete with a quotation from the gospels, is the worst possible way to begin a work meant to appeal to, or even be a polemic against, heathens or nonbelievers. To the contrary, then, the entire *Proslogion* and (to a stylistically less extreme extent) *Monologion* read as if written for Anselm’s brothers, i.e. *for other Christians*. Even when

⁵ *ibid* 7: “...quatenus auctoritate scripturae penitus nihil in ea persuaderetur...”

⁶ *ibid* 101: “Ergo Domine, qui das fidei intellectum, da mihi, ut, quantum scis expedire intelligam, quia es sicut credimus, et hoc es quod credimus.”

⁷ *ibid* 97: “Eia nunc, homuncio, fuge paululum occupationes tuas, absconde te modicum a tumultuosis cogitationibus tuis Abice nunc onerosas curas, et postpone laboriosas distentiones tuas. Vaca aliquantulum Deo, et requiesce aliquantulum in eo. “Intra in cubiculum” mentis tuae, exclude omnia praeter Deum et quae te iuvent ad quaerendum eum, et “clauso ostio” quaere eum.”

Anselm replies to Gaunilo's attacks on his proof he makes it clear that he is not responding to "the fool" (i.e. the nonbeliever) themselves, nor to a heathen or heretic, but specifically to a well-meaning fellow believer:

Since the fool, against whom I spoke in my little work, does not reprimand me in these remarks, rather a certain non-foolish and catholic [Christian] on behalf of the fool, it can suffice for me to respond to the catholic.⁸

I thank you for your kindness, regarding both the reprimand and the approval of my little work. For since you so greatly raise approval for those [parts] which seem to you worthy of acceptance, it is evident enough that you reprimanded those which looked weak to you due to benevolence, not malevolence.⁹

Thus the only thing in these texts which could allow the reader to find an apologetical aim is just the brute fact that they contain proofs of God's being or existence. But that justification for such a reading only works if the sole possible reason why a theistic proof would ever be in any text is for just such an apologetical aim.

But that assumption should be contested. Despite deploying "the fool" as a rhetorical device, Anselm never writes anywhere that the goal here is to get the person in a position of unbelief to understand that and how God exists. Instead, Anselm's seeming goals for his tracts line up quite well with his tone of address (i.e. community with fellow Christians). For example, in the *Proslogion* "Preface" he also writes:

I have written the little work below on this [argument] and on certain other matters under the persona of one striving to raise their mind to the God to be contemplated and seeking to understand what they believe.¹⁰

⁸ ibid 130: "Quoniam non me reprehendit in his dictis ille 'insipiens,' contra quem sum locutus in meo opusculo; sed quidam non insipiens, et catholicus, pro insipiente: sufficere mihi potest respondere catholico."

⁹ ibid 139: "Gratias ago benignitati tuae et in reprehensione et in laude meiopusculi. Cum enim ea quae tibi digna susceptione videntur, tanta laude extulisti: satis apparet, quia quae tibi infirma visa sunt, benevolentia non malevolentia reprehendisti."

¹⁰ ibid 93-4: "...de hoc ipso et de quibusdam aliis sub persona conantis erigere mentem suam ad contemplandum deum et quaerentis intelligere quod credit, subditum scripsi opusculum."

Presumably this is to say, if the “persona” is to be taken seriously, that the point is precisely this elevation to the contemplation of *what is already believed* by the Christian reader. And even the proof should be read in this way. In other words, it is not that one must *first* prove God’s existence and *then* contemplate this God; instead, the proof of God’s existence is actually part of the contemplation of a God one believes in from the beginning. The opening lines of the *Monologion* anticipate the same point, if anything more directly:

Some [of my] brothers have often and studiously implored me that I transcribe, as a certain example of meditation, some of those things which I had put forward in common speaking conversation concerning meditating on the divine essence, and some others of those kinds of things connected to meditation.¹¹

Anselm’s proof in this earlier text as well thus seems intended to appear within the context of a meditation on God’s essence. And the thought seems to be, especially with the *Proslogion* and its emphasis on its proof’s simplicity, that the proofs for God’s existence are there to provide a kind of “focus” for the Christian believer’s contemplation of that God.

This may initially seem strange: what use would a believer have for a proof for the existence of a God they already believe in? But given consideration, there is nothing strange at all in a believer stepping back from doctrine for a moment to see what reason alone can fathom about a God’s being. This sort of “triangulation” is actually quite prudent. For if I can prove the existence of something which looks very, very God-like without relying on my reading of sacred doctrine, I have very good grounds for assuming that this God-like entity is the very same as the God of my faith; and thereafter, importantly, whatever insight I can gain about this entity’s essence might be used to correct my own beliefs, i.e. my own interpretation of sacred doctrine

¹¹ *ibid* 7: “Quidam fratres saepe me studioseque precati sunt ut quaedam quae illis de meditanda Divinitatis essentia, et quibusdam aliis huiusmodi meditationi cohaerentibus, usitato sermone colloquendo protuleram, sub quodam eis meditationis exemplo describerem.”

(or, by extension, the interpretations of my fellow believers). I don't *first* leap from the proof of an existence to *then* believing in the relevant God, rather I use unaided reason as a kind of check against misreadings and misunderstandings of my preexisting faith. And this, it seems to me, is the most straightforward reading of Anselm's intentions: to clarify one's understanding of God's being, even as based upon faith, via the use of reason.¹² And surely such a reading far better fits the stated original titles of these two works - "Exemplum meditandi de ratione fidei," *Example of a Meditation upon the Rationality of Faith*, "Fides quaerens intellectum," *Faith Seeking Understanding*.¹³

Of course, I am not making the stronger claim that Anselm's arguments are such that they could not even be *repurposed* for various kinds of apologetical purposes. Surely there is nothing stopping anyone, now or in the past, from doing precisely this, and I have little to say against such moves taken on their own terms. (And they would indeed have to be evaluated on those terms, although - as I will suggest- it is highly questionable how much *doctrine* any such repurposed proofs can support.) My point is merely that there is nothing to speak of in Anselm's texts themselves which supports the thought that he intended his arguments to have purchase on non-Christians - to the contrary, everything supports the reading that he was writing for his fellow believers, presumably his brothers, and for the purposes of their meditations on *what they*

¹² Wittgenstein penned a well-known note on this topic: "A proof of God's existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is give their 'belief' an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs." The notion of using such arguments to analyze and better found a faith that one already has is, in my reading, much how such early "proofs" are deployed in Anselm and others. From *Culture and Value* 85e.

¹³ I am far from being the first to read Anselm in something like this way, and Barth's *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* is only the most prominent case. For an excellent more recent example one may consult Chapter 7, "The Otherness of Anselm," in John Clayton's *Religions, Reasons and Gods*. An alternative approach to separating Anselm from the later tradition is taken by Jean-Luc Marion in Chapter 7, "Is the Argument Ontological?," of *Cartesian Questions*.

already believed. And this point, modest as it is, should already be enough to show that Anselm's proofs were not intended as apologetics.

B. "...aliquae verisimilitudines" (Thomas Aquinas)

But the apologetical explanation is thereby far from overruled, and Anselm is not the only writer in the canon. If we're to stick to the most classical authors (I limit myself to Christian texts for reasons of my own familiarity - an inadequate reason, to be sure), perhaps better results might be found in Thomas Aquinas, who after all explicitly sets some of his writing "contra gentiles" - against the nations, i.e. the heathens. Thomas declares in that very text that...

Certainly among those [matters] which are to be considered in regard to God according to himself, what must be set out in advance, as it were the necessary foundation for the whole work, is the consideration whereby it is demonstrated that God is. For not having that, all consideration of divine things is taken away.¹⁴

Which again sounds like a direct, explicit statement that the proofs have the apologetical goal of demonstrating religious doctrine, at least in its basics. If the existence of God is supposed to provide the "necessary foundation" for any divine considerations, proving that existence just means establishing rational grounds for faith.

But this is not quite what Thomas says. Just before this passage he establishes a "duplex veritas divinarum," a double truth of divine matters: "...of these [divine things], reason's investigation can reach the one, however the other exceeds all industry of reason."¹⁵ At bottom

¹⁴ *Contra Gentiles*, lib.1 cap.9 n.8: "Inter ea vero quae de Deo secundum seipsum consideranda sunt, praemittendum est, quasi totius operis necessarium fundamentum, consideratio qua demonstratur Deum esse. Quo non habito, omnis consideratio de rebus divinis tollitur."

¹⁵ *ibid*, lib.1 cap.9 n.1: "...ad quarum unam investigatio rationis pertingere potest, alia vero omnem rationis excedit industriam."

this is the distinction between philosophical discipline (as rational theology) and sacred doctrine (as revealed theology). Demonstrations, in the strict sense, are only available for the first kind of divine truth, not at all for the second. The best the rational apologist can hope for with the second truth is to defeat and dismantle positive counterarguments:

Therefore one must proceed to the manifestation of the first truth by rational demonstrations, by which the adversary could be convinced. But because such reasonings cannot be had for the second truth, the intention should not be towards this, (i.e.) that the adversary be convinced by reasonings: rather [it should be] that their reasonings which they have against the truth be broken up.

To finally *overcome* an opponent of faith no argument can suffice, whence Thomas' conclusion:

“In truth the singular way of convincing the adversary against truth of this kind is from the authority of scripture divinely confirmed by miracles: indeed, we do not believe those things which are beyond human reason, except by God revealing [them].”¹⁶

Still, one might reply, even if *some* aspects of faith cannot be achieved through demonstration, surely we must at least attain knowledge of *other* aspects (such as the existence of God) by such demonstrations. Yet still the answer is no - certainly not “knowledge” of anything *within faith proper*. Indeed, such “knowledge” may not ever be possible for us, by demonstration or otherwise. Thomas writes earlier on in this same text:

Therefore human reason thus holds itself to cognizing the truth of faith, which can only be most known [notissima] by those who see the divine substance [*i.e., in beatitude*], insofar as it can collect certain true likenesses of it, which nevertheless do not suffice in regard to this - that the preceding truth be comprehended as if understood demonstratively or through itself. Yet it is useful that the human mind exercise itself in reasonings of this kind, however feeble, provided that the presumption to comprehend or demonstrate be abandoned: for to be able to consider

¹⁶ *ibid*, lib.1 cap.9 n.2-3: “Ad primae igitur veritatis manifestationem per rationes demonstrativas, quibus adversarius convinci possit, procedendum est. Sed quia tales rationes ad secundam veritatem haberi non possunt, non debet esse ad hoc intentio ut adversarius rationibus vincatur: sed ut eius rationes, quas contra veritatem habet, solvantur; cum veritati fidei ratio naturalis contraria esse non possit, ut ostensum est. Singularis vero modus convincendi adversarium contra huiusmodi veritatem est ex auctoritate Scripturae divinitus confirmata miraculis: quae enim supra rationem humanam sunt, non credimus nisi Deo revelante.”

something concerning the highest things, even by meager and feeble consideration, is the most pleasant thing, as is apparent from what was said.¹⁷

Strictly speaking, full *knowledge* of the truth of faith (beatitude) is available only to those who have directly seen God's substance by force of miracle. Rational argument can get us nothing of this, at best only a feeble "likeness," however useful the exercise of our mind may be for our own purposes. More than that, however. If sacred doctrine (revelation) is only a shadow of what God and the blessed know without mediation,¹⁸ then rational theology is only a shadow of that shadow. From the point of view of the faith, the demonstration of God's "esse" in fact gets us very little: the proofs may be demonstrative (and Thomas thinks they are), but they cannot reach knowledge of God's substance. Certainly they are not demonstrative of anything specific to Christian faith (at best they give us hints at further hints). Thus, consider the conclusion of the Thomistic proofs in the *Summa Theologiae* (Ia Q.2 A.3 co). The first portion of each proof ends, indeed demonstratively, with a prime mover, a first efficient cause, and so on. But in each case Thomas has to add to this entity, "...this everyone understands to be God," "...to which everyone gives the name of God," "...and this we call God," and so on. But these additions are not really part of the argument: the leap from prime mover to God *is not demonstrated*, and indeed by Thomas' lights *cannot* be. To be perfectly strict, moreover, this leap must be done in *two* steps rather than one: one must willingly grant that a prime mover, first cause, or whatever is merely a "God" *of some kind* before one can then jump to the specific God *of Christianity*.

¹⁷ Ibid, lib.1 cap.8 n.1-2: "Humana igitur ratio ad cognoscendum fidei veritatem, quae solum videntibus divinam substantiam potest esse notissima, ita se habet quod ad eam potest aliquas verisimilitudines colligere, quae tamen non sufficiunt ad hoc quod praedicta veritas quasi demonstrative vel per se intellecta comprehendatur. Utile tamen est ut in huiusmodi rationibus, quantumcumque debilibus, se mens humana exerceat, dummodo desit comprehendendi vel demonstrandi praesumptio: quia de rebus altissimis etiam parva et debili consideratione aliquid posse inspicere iucundissimum est, ut ex dictis apparet."

¹⁸ Or, to state his position more strictly, sacred doctrine proceeds on the basis of a higher science which is known only to God and the blessed. Cf *Summa Theologiae* Ia Q.1 A.2 co.

Thomas famously expresses the proper role of these demonstrations, and what they can legitimately achieve, with the phrase “*praeambula*,” *preambles* to faith:

...that God is, and other things of this kind concerning God which can be known [nota] by natural reason, as said in Romans 1, are not articles of faith, but are things preceding the articles, for faith thus presupposes natural cognition just as grace presupposes nature and as perfection presupposes the perfectible.¹⁹

I do not have the space to comment on all the implications of this passage, but at the least it can be said to draw an even stricter line between what is *internal* to faith and what can at best act as a *run-up* (*praeambulum*) to faith.²⁰ *Even the existence of a God* is not an article of faith in any strict sense, but is rather merely part of the red carpet leading to the threshold. (Or, to use the earlier metaphor: it is precisely *because* that existence is a “necessary foundation” that it does not reach any of the highest heights, in the same way that something perfectible is poorer than - albeit prior to - the same thing perfected.) All of which is to say, for Aquinas the proper truths of Christianity cannot be demonstrated. One can reach such truths through beatitude or, less directly, by faith (sacred doctrine), but not rational demonstration.

Thus the proofs in Thomas might be called “apologetical” only in a maximally general sense, and not for Christianity proper or for any other doctrine. The only foes who might - *might!* - be touched by these demonstrations are atheists and agnostics, yet the “danger” of such foes goes unmentioned in *Contra Gentiles* lib.1 - in cap.2, for example, Thomas only explicitly

¹⁹ Ia Q.2 A.2 ad 1: “Ad primum ergo dicendum quod Deum esse, et alia huiusmodi quae per rationem naturalem nota possunt esse de Deo, ut dicitur Rom. I non sunt articuli fidei, sed praeambula ad articulos, sic enim fides praesupponit cognitionem naturalem, sicut gratia naturam, et ut perfectio perfectibile.” Thomas is presumably thinking of Romans 1:19-20.

²⁰ Obviously many - Ralph McNerny’s excellent book of the same name (*Praeambula Fidei*), for example - would surely insist on the *philosophical* seriousness of Thomas’ demonstrations. But that is something I do not here dispute. The question I presently raise is only whether such demonstrations can, on Thomas’ account, be taken as *Christian apologetics*, i.e. as rational arguments made for the sake of the specific articles of Christian faith, and Thomas seems to state pretty explicitly that they cannot. One does not need to downplay Thomas’ philosophical goals in order to show that they did not include ambitions to prove faith through philosophy.

mentions pagans, Muslims, Jews, and heretics, and one may reasonably wonder about the final utility of demonstrations for the first kind of truth if the named rivals would already accept their conclusions. The most these Thomistic proofs can “apologetically” support, by Thomas’ own lights, is a kind of broad deism whose relevance to faith proper remains highly limited. (Perhaps not even that - a nonbeliever, after all might well be willing to accept a prime mover while denying the leap to that entity’s Godhood.)

Yet this is by no means to say that the proofs somehow “fail” for Thomas’ purposes. It must be recalled that, e.g., the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae* does not end with the “five ways,” nor does it skip to trinity and the rest straightaway; instead the proofs are immediately followed by long explorations of God’s simplicity, perfection, goodness, etc., supported by the winnings from the proofs as much as doctrine. Within that context the proofs’ function bears more than a little resemblance to Anselm’s “Fides quaerens intellectum.” Much like his predecessor, Aquinas gives little sign of intending to use philosophy to convince others of Christian truth and every indication of trying to use philosophy and theology hand in hand to correct the interpretations of those already faithful.

C. “...les fondemens de la Metaphysique” (Descartes)

But perhaps an apologetical explanation for the proofs can still have some purchase later on, in “modern” philosophy - and since the modern history of the proofs properly begins with Descartes, one should look to him first. And indeed, the letter to the Sorbonne which opens the *Meditations* seems to confirm such an explanation more clearly than the other authors:

I have always esteemed the two questions, on God and on the Soul, to be particular due to the fact that they are to be better demonstrated by the help of Philosophy than of Theology: for although it suffices for us faithful to believe on faith that the human soul does not perish with the body and that God exists, surely for the nonbelievers no religion, nor even almost any moral virtue, seem to be able to convince them except first through this, that those two [facts] be proved by natural reason... And although it is entirely true that the existence of God is to be believed because it is taught in sacred scriptures and, vice versa, that sacred scriptures are to be believed because they are acquired from God; for indeed, since faith is the gift of God, that same [entity] who gives the grace for believing other things can also grant that we believe that he exists; still, this [argument] cannot be proposed to nonbelievers, as they would judge it to be circular. And indeed I have noticed not merely that you and all other Theologians affirm that the existence of God can be proved by natural reason, but also it is inferred from the sacred scripture that the knowledge [cognitio] of God is easier [to get] than that which is acquired about many created things, and that it is even altogether so easy that those who do not have that [knowledge] are to be condemned... On that account I supposed it was not improper for me to inquire how it is and in what way God is known more easily and certainly than things of the world.²¹

This sounds still more promising. Descartes too seems to grant that proofs for God's existence are only effective against "nonbelievers" (not against heretics or adherents of other religions), but he does imply that the existence of God has been promoted from a mere preamble to something "taught by the sacred scriptures." There is perhaps nothing unique or distinctive about that "teaching," but still: the implication is that philosophical demonstration is here to convince unbelievers to, so to speak, get their toes into the water of religious doctrine if not plunge any deeper, and that's all the apologetical explanation wants to say.

²¹ AT VII 1-2: "Semper existimavi duas quaestiones, de Deo & de Animâ, praecipuas esse ex iis quae Philosophiae potius quàm Theologiae ope sunt demonstrandae: nam quamvis nobis fidelibus animam humanam cum corpore non interire, Deumque existere, fide credere sufficiat, certe infidelibus nulla religio, nec fere etiam ulla moralis virtus, videtur posse persuaderi, nisi prius illis ista duo ratione naturali probentur: cùmque saepe in hac vitâ majora vitiis quàm virtutibus praemia proponantur, pauci rectum utili praeferrent, si nec Deum timerent, nec aliam vitam expectarent. Et quamvis omnino verum sit, Dei existentiam credendam esse, quoniam in sacris scripturis docetur, & vice versâ credendas sacras scripturas, quoniam habentur a Deo; quia nempe, cùm fides sit donum Dei, ille idem qui dat gratiam ad reliqua credenda, potest etiam dare, ut ipsum existere credamus; non tamen hoc infidelibus proponi potest, quia circulum esse judicarent. Et quidem animadverti non modo vos omnes aliosque Theologos affirmare Dei existentiam naturali ratione posse probari, sed & ex sacrâ Scripturâ inferri, ejus cognitionem multis, quae de rebus creatis habentur, esse faciliorem, atque omnino esse tam facilem, ut qui illam non habent sint culpandi. Patet enim Sap. 13 ex his verbis: *Nec his debet ignosci. Si enim tantum potuerunt scire, ut possent aestimare saeculum, quomodo hujus dominum non facilius invenerunt?* Et ad Rom. cap. I, dicitur illos esse *inexcusabiles*. Atque ibidem etiam per haec verba: *Quod notum est Dei, manifestum est in illis*, videmur admoneri ea omnia quae de Deo sciri possunt, rationibus non aliunde petitis quàm ab ipsâmet nostrâ mente posse ostendi. Quod idcirco quomodo fiat, & quâ viâ Deus facilius & certius quàm res saeculi cognoscatur, non putavi a me esse alienum inquirere."

Yet at this same moment when the apologetical reading of the proofs finally seems most defensible, if only by way of blurred boundaries between rational argument and what scripture teaches, there is an additional characteristic to what Descartes is doing that still undermines it. Even backed up by what is to be “inferred” from scripture (like Thomas he refers to Romans 1:19-20, but also to Wisdom 13:8-9), why does he need to claim that “God is known more easily and certainly than things of the world”? For if the goal is just to prove to the unbelievers that God exists, in principle it should not matter what priority different items have in the order of knowledge. It should not matter, that is, whether in God’s existence they are convinced of something easier or harder than anything else, only that they are convinced. The question of epistemic priority can only make sense in a different context.

And Descartes is never unclear about what that context is. For example, he writes in a summary of his *Discourse on the Method*: “...in the fourth [part], [you will find] the reasonings by which [the author] proves the existence of God and the human soul, *which are the foundations of metaphysics...*”²² (my emphasis) That is, the relevant context is not at all the defense of faith, but metaphysics. As Descartes explains later on in the *Principles of Philosophy*, “[T]he first part [of true philosophy] is Metaphysics, which contains the Principles of knowledge, among which is the explication of the principal attributes of God, of the immateriality of our souls, and of all the clear and simple notions which are in us.”²³ He further writes:

²² AT VI 1: “En la 4, la raisons par lesquelles il prouve l’existence de Dieu & de l’ame humaine, qui sont les fondemens de la Metaphysique.”

²³ AT IXb 14: “Puis, lorsqu’il s’est acquis quelque habitude à trouver la vérité en ces questions, il doit commencer tout de bon à s’appliquer à la vraie Philosophie, dont la première partie est la Métaphysique, qui contient les Principes de la connaissance, entre lesquels est l’explication des principaux attributs de Dieu, de l’immatérialité de nos âmes, & de toutes les notions claires & simples qui sont en nous.”

...there is a God who is the author of all that is in the world, and who, being the source of all truth, has not created our understanding [to be] of such nature that it can be misled in judgment it makes of things of which it has a very clear and very distinct perception. These are all the Principles I use concerning immaterial or Metaphysical things...²⁴

God's existence must be proved not just, and not even *primarily*, to convince nonbelievers, but also to secure the foundations of metaphysics.

The letter to the Sorbonne therefore speaks at two quite different levels. On the one hand there is indeed appeal to a limited apologetical project of sorts - one which, although in a certain sense it can really effect no more than what Thomas already intended, views itself as proving not just an insufficient "true likeness" that might lead up to (not into) faith, but "verus Deus," "ipse Deus," the true God himself.²⁵ But this apologetical project also evidently provides a cover for another, much more novel function for the proofs, namely a metaphysical one: the proofs of God's existence are also the most crucial among the first principles of our knowledge, the foundations by which anything else can be known. God's existence is more easily and certainly known not because it must be that way to convince the unbeliever, not even because scripture can be read to say so, but because all other certainty rests upon God's existence and the knowledge of his nature: "This [absolute certainty of my explications] of course rests upon a metaphysical foundation, that God is superlatively good and not at all deceptive....."²⁶ We *may*

²⁴ AT IXb 10: "il y a vn Dieu qui est autheur de tout ce qui est au monde, & qui, estant la source de toute verité, n'a point créé nostre entendement de telle nature qu'il se puisse tromper au jugement qu'il fait des choses dont il a vne perception fort claire & fort distincte. Ce sont là tous les Principes dont je me sers touchant les choses immateriales ou Metaphysiques..."

²⁵ Cf the end of "Meditation V," at AT VII 71: "Atque ita plane video omnis scientiae certitudinem & veritatem ab unâ veri Dei cognitione pendere, adeo ut, priusquam illum nossem, nihil de ullâ aliâ re perfecte scire potuerim. Jam verò innumera, tum de ipso Deo aliisque rebus intellectualibus, tum etiam de omni illâ naturâ corporeâ, quae est purae Matheseos objectum, mihi plane nota & certa esse possunt."

²⁶ From the *Principles*, AT VIIIa 328: "...quaedam sunt, etiam in rebus naturalibus, quae absolute... certa existimamus, hoc scilicet innixi Metaphysico fundamento, quod Deus sit summe bonus et minime fallax..."

believe in God on grounds of faith, but we *must* “believe” on *rational* grounds - because the existence of God is the condition which makes all other science (knowledge) possible.

There is something extremely curious about the double role of the proofs of God’s existence at the distinctive moment that is Descartes. They are now presented as genuinely apologetical in a certain sense, albeit still not for any specific faith - i.e., they might be something one can hold over nonbelievers, but there is still nothing in the proofs to demonstrate or justify anything particular to Christianity. The proofs still “defend” only a deism in general or, better put, for the kind of deism that can be rationally argued for (as opposed to whatever can be reached by faith). Yet that apologetical role at the same time *drops* the distinction between preamble and faith, philosophical discipline and sacred doctrine; reason alone now reaches the true God himself. Thus the strange, apparently noncommittal apologetical role, fully thought through, turns out to be *directly wedded* with the proofs’ metaphysical role among the first principles of knowledge. It is precisely a *metaphysical* God that the proofs defend. It is not just that on the one hand the proofs make us certain of what we must know first before we can hope to know anything else, and on the other they make a rational defense of Christianity. God’s primary role here is not Christian or anything else - reason itself has, in a strange way, nudged into doctrine and set the content of doctrine. The apologetics is *for metaphysics*; metaphysics and religion blur together. Which is to say, the apologetical explanation succeeds here, but only by way of the religious doctrines - supposedly the items to be defended - getting nudged to the side.

D. Apology Without Doctrine?

With this I have by no means exhausted the catalogue of authors, but hopefully by now the assumption that the proofs are only there to prove or even merely justify the doctrines of Christianity or any other religion has shown itself to be highly suspect: if they can be said to clearly justify anything at all, it is only the needs of metaphysics (the principles of human knowledge).

Yet the reader may still object that I am asking too much of the proofs, that I am reading the apologetical explanation too strongly: perhaps the proofs should not be thought of as proving any specific faith wholesale or even any part of it, but simply as showing that the specific doctrines are *not in conflict* with reason because they are always, so to speak, added *on top* of what reason can reach. The proofs thereby provide a kind of mutually agreed starting point from which one can then proceed to the particular faith of one's choosing - and if this is not what Aquinas had in mind with the phrase "praeambula fidei," it is not an unreasonable adaptation. The thought, then, is that the proofs are to provide a kind of vague, totally general God upon which we may add details in reaching our own chosen religion, showing that religion and reason are perfectly compatible.

As unobjectionable as this may sound, though, its consequences must be thought through. If the reader allows the metaphor, this is to understand God on the model of *frozen yogurt*: in the same way that everyone in the shop gets exactly the same vague, undefined sugary paste out of the same machine but then defines it as their own when they head to the toppings bar (smothering the paste in the crushed cookies, gummy animals, and sauces of their choice), we here think of the God of philosophy as just an empty substance to be filled in by the details of their particular religion.

Are the Gods of the proofs just such “empty” substances? Perhaps, but this is by no means self-evident. We should take pause at the prospect that such a God has to be both specific enough to play a fundamental metaphysical role (as, e.g., a first cause) - else the proofs do not work - and at the same time radically underdetermined enough that it does not conflict with particular religious doctrines. This balance, if it is not totally unfeasible, is a difficult one, and for rational theology there is always the temptation to resolve it in the direction of adding specifics to the metaphysical side. After Descartes such a God takes on a very precise context and character within metaphysics, with precise roles therein. To take such a God, already highly defined, and “load it up” with the details of Christian or other teachings is surely both philosophically and theologically questionable. One cannot assume that the two kinds of God are compatible without any further consideration.²⁷ Thus if one at all intends to use these proofs for the sake of one’s religion, even in limited scope, one must not exempt oneself from engaging in a “critique” of exactly what those proofs amount to - at the least, to check whether they are proving the right God.

At this point it is clear that, at least after Descartes, there is only one context in which the “apologetical” explanation seems to apply with force. The proofs cannot defend any sacred doctrine with sufficient specificity, but the doctrine they *can* evidently defend turns out not to be sacred - that is, it turns out to be metaphysics.

²⁷ To point out historical support for the worry, Al-Ghazali’s attacks on Avicenna in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* are based not only in perceived shortcomings in Avicenna’s arguments, but in his reading those arguments as relying on a downright heretical notion of God. The necessitarian God of “the philosophers” is not self-evidently compatible with a God of radical omnipotence and agency, which Al-Ghazali reads as central to Islam. The wider point is that for religious apologetical purposes one cannot just “prove” any God that one wishes. For a more detailed account of Al-Ghazali on Avicenna, see Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World* 148-151.

II. Metaphysics and Idolatry

We still lack a clear direction to go in, but at least the difficulties with the initial explanation have helped to give us some hints. We seem to learn little about the proofs' nature if we start by working backwards from the doctrinal ends which, at the very last point of the process, we might take them to serve; instead they must be approached on their home ground so to speak, namely metaphysics. And this implies that earlier texts, while remarkable on other merits, can be set in brackets for our purposes while we look at the proofs in their "metaphysical" moment, namely after Descartes.

But the metaphysical (and not properly doctrinal) nature of the proofs after Descartes in turn suggests a *second* simple and evident explanation. The reader could argue, not lacking grounds for doing so, that if these proofs are there to proffer a "metaphysical foundation" and not for purposes internal to religion, then they amount to a case of *metaphysical idolatry*. In fact Jean-Luc Marion argued a sophisticated version of exactly this in his earliest works: "By excessively appropriating 'God' to itself through proof, thought separates itself from separation, misses distance, and finds itself one morning surrounded by idols, by concepts, and by proofs, but abandoned by the divine - atheistic."²⁸ Idolatry as such (as Marion takes it) need not be a bad thing,²⁹ but counterfeiting an idol for the God of one's religion certainly could be.

But if the proofs substitute in one God for another, it must nevertheless be a God of a very special sort. The God of the proofs is a God of metaphysics, of reason; it is God which "can come into philosophy."³⁰ And it is *Heidegger* who provides Marion (and, so far as I can tell,

²⁸ *The Idol and Distance*, 12.

²⁹ See, e.g., his discussion in *Being Given* at 229ff.

³⁰ Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 56.

everyone in the same tradition) with the crucial characterization of this particular mode of “idolatry.” I quote the one quoting the other:

[In metaphysics the divine] is only a question... of entities in their being, and not of that which faith offers to authentically Christian theology; an indisputable proof comes to us in that (the) theology (of onto-theo-logy), in stating “the existence of God” *positively*, can nevertheless perfectly well blaspheme: “For example, a proof for the existence of God can be constructed by means of the most rigorous formal logic and yet prove nothing, since a God who must permit his existence to be proved in the first place is ultimately a very ungodly God. The best such proofs of existence can yield is blasphemy.”³¹

That word “ontotheology” (or “onto-theo-logy” when Heidegger wants to articulate the various moments in the term) is the key concept.³² If I spend a good bit of time on the following pages clarifying it (along with associated terms), it is not only to show that this “idol of metaphysics” account in its basic form will, just like the “apologetics” one, eventually fall short. This account too is getting something right about the proofs - a rereading of “ontotheology” will have a role to play in my last Chapter - but (again) not in a straightforward way. I intend, then, to conclude this discussion by setting up a way in which the concept may be amended.

³¹ *God Without Being*, 64, quoting Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche II*, 106. Regarding my use of Heidegger and his readers, all quotations from *Being and Time* are my own translations but citations of other translations have been amended as necessary to alter the translation of “Seiende” from “being” to “entity.” This is done to avoid the common and seriously unfortunate fallacy of rendering *both* “Sein” (the infinitive) *and* “Seiende” (the participle) by the single word “being,” which - although not “incorrect” - to my judgment effectively erases from the page the most basic terminological distinction in Heidegger’s work, so that the reader must try to insert the German back into the English by context. I follow the practice of older translations in finding some other rendering for “Seiende,” which at least gives the naive first-time reader half a chance. This same amendment of translations has also been applied to quotations from others, especially Marion.

³² The term was, of course, originally used by Kant, albeit in a quite different sense. Cf my final Chapter.

But if only to get clear on the terms involved,³³ ontotheology calls for more delicate textual work than in the previous section. In particular, exploring ontotheology first requires considerable discussion of another term of his, namely “metaphysics.” To be clear, my exposition will be freer than Heidegger himself would allow and will impose a rather artificial order on very different discussions spread between many texts spanning decades. Everything I still include here, I emphasize, is chosen so as to be relevant to later discussions - thus I bracket out certain details which are unnecessary for our purposes, notably the specifics of Heidegger’s interpretation of the history of Western thought.³⁴

As a word of warning, Heidegger’s writings can often appear as a series of arcane pronouncements, which (quite rightly) rubs many the wrong way. But it is not necessary to read him so. I encourage the reader to instead take these statements not as decrees but as *indications* there to prompt further consideration. It is not as if Heidegger already has fully-developed concepts but deliberately obfuscates them, or that he’s simply a word-spinning charlatan (and he

³³ There is still a regrettable tendency among some writers to use the terms “ontotheology” and “metaphysics” (in Heidegger’s sense) as if they were warhammers. Whence Iain Thomson’s quip, “On hearing the expression ‘ontotheology,’ many philosophers start looking for the door.” Within the never-ending hermeneutics of suspicion there have strangely been few serious attempts at a hermeneutics of the hermeneutics’ own terminological weapons of choice, here at getting clear on the exact problem of “ontotheology” and “metaphysics.” It is, one may think, Bad to be doing either. And yet even if this is right, one will surely not dissuade the Bad metaphysicians from doing their Bad ontotheology without getting them clear on exactly what they are thereby doing and why it is so Bad. A syrup of jargon will not accomplish this. At the very least it would presumably be worthwhile to try to get *oneself* clearer on the terms, yet as Thomson rightly asks, “Why is it... that in the growing philosophical literature contesting or critically appropriating these otherwise diverse schools of [post-Heideggerian] thought, we nowhere find a careful reconstruction of the idiosyncratic understanding of metaphysics on which Heideggerian historicity is based? Even thinkers such as Derrida, Baudrillard, and Irigaray, who often speak not just of metaphysics but of philosophy *tout court* as ‘ontotheology,’ never adequately unpack the meaning of the term.” Quotes from *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 7 and 10.

³⁴ For accounts that remain closer to Heidegger’s own formulations, more exactly track his chronological development, and provide an outline of his reading of philosophical history, I refer the reader to both Chapter I (p. 7-43) of Thomson’s *Heidegger on Ontotheology* as well as Chapters IV-VI (p. 93-156) of Vedder’s, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion*.

can prompt either interpretation); rather he tends to use his language to *point out* issues which remain open for question even for him, and explore them with whatever tools he has on hand.

A. What Metaphysics Is

In his most famous discussion of ontotheology Heidegger explicitly and directly links it with metaphysics: “[M]etaphysics is onto-theo-logy,”³⁵ “[M]etaphysics is not only theo-logic but also onto-logic. Metaphysics, first of all, is neither only the one nor the other *also*. Rather, metaphysics is theo-logic because it is onto-logic. It is onto-logic because it is theo-logic.”³⁶ The following sections really just amount to unpacking exactly what these statements mean, something made more difficult by his own terminological instabilities. In particular Heidegger seems to go through at least *four* different usages of the term “metaphysics,” and though in his more self-conciliatory moments he will take some efforts to relate them, for our purposes it is more helpful to keep them disambiguated.³⁷ It is the fourth (and chronologically final) meaning which is relevant for us, but in the interest of better avoiding confusion I will make a short discussion of all four.

³⁵ *Identity and Difference* 54.

³⁶ *Ibid* 60.

³⁷ I should note that Thomson (and he is not alone among Heidegger scholars) does not distinguish these different senses of the term as I do; he regards what I call the *historical* sense as a “[refinement of] the understanding of metaphysics he first set forth in 1929” (*Heidegger on Ontotheology* 11), i.e. the sense I am calling the *meta-metaphysical* one. But it is precisely this latter sense that, it seems to me, needs to be flagged as radically out of place, both by what Heidegger himself says about this period (discussed below) as well as by the fact that trying to keep these meanings together produces an account that is incoherent. Heidegger will wind up saying, e.g., that metaphysics is somehow Dasein itself and also that it is incapable of properly approaching the question of being. And although Heidegger should be allowed to be inconsistent if he insists, this reads to me as a case where the scholarship may avoid such problems by way of pointing out simple equivocalities.

Throughout the 1920s and early '30s Heidegger uses the term “metaphysics” in what I will call a *pejorative* sense, a *traditional* sense, and a “*meta-metaphysical*” sense. The purely *pejorative* sense often appears with a set of scare quotes. The very first line of *Being and Time* presents a good example: “Today, although our time claims progress in affirming ‘metaphysics’ once again, the [question concerning being] has come to be forgotten.”³⁸ Heidegger’s target of abuse here seems to be any move to deal with certain issues (philosophical or otherwise) by recourse to an explanation through entities of a special, supernatural sort.

This “popular” meaning is to be distinguished from the second, *traditional* meaning of metaphysics, which is understood chiefly - but only chiefly - in terms of the science of being:

Once having made the ascent [to being] we shall not again descend to an entity, which, say, might lie like another world behind the familiar entities. The transcendental science of being has nothing to do with popular metaphysics, which deals with some entity behind the known entities; rather, the scientific concept of metaphysics is identical with the concept of philosophy in general - critically transcendental science of being, ontology.³⁹

Yet traditional metaphysics is not *only* ontology. Along with “*metaphysica generalis*” it also includes dealings with one or a series of *special cases* among the entities, what is eventually called “*metaphysica specialis*.” He here outlines this division through Suarez, although he says the same about many others (e.g. Baumgarten and Kant): “[D]istinctions were drawn between *metaphysica generalis*, general ontology, and *metaphysica specialis*, which included *cosmologia rationalis*, ontology of nature, *psychologia rationalis*, ontology of mind, and *theologia rationalis*, ontology of God.”⁴⁰ Traditional metaphysics, along with its function, is thus *confused* (his term),⁴¹ as it attempts to be both a science of being and a science of certain distinguished entities;⁴² this

³⁸ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 2. All translations of *Sein und Zeit* are my own.

³⁹ *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 17.

⁴⁰ *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* 80.

⁴¹ Cf *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, §12.

confusion was seen by Heidegger by at least the mid-'20s, and it seems to lead him into the development of the fourth meaning (detailed below).

Before then, however, there is a period from 1929 to around the mid-'30s when Heidegger attempts to use “metaphysics” to describe *his own position* at that moment, i.e. that of *Being and Time*.; this meaning is evidently present in the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* and the Kantbuch, and most famously in the lecture “What Is Metaphysics?” In the later “Postscript” and “Introduction” to “What Is Metaphysics?” Heidegger doesn’t exactly withdraw this meaning of the word, but it doesn’t take much reading between the lines to see that his position on the term has significantly changed by then. For example: “The question ‘What is metaphysics?’ questions beyond metaphysics. It springs from a thinking that has already entered into an overcoming of metaphysics.”⁴³ Heidegger is more explicit in his unpublished writings: “What [‘What is Metaphysics’] makes manifest as determination of ‘metaphysics’ is already no longer metaphysics but rather its overcoming.”⁴⁴ “The lecture ‘*Was ist Metaphysik?*’ ... goes already beyond metaphysics.... And yet, this lecture designates this ‘going beyond’ and the so-attained positioning of the inquiry simply as the actual metaphysics, so to speak as the *meta-metaphysics*.”⁴⁵ “Thus in the lecture ‘*Was ist Metaphysik?*’ the question of being is

⁴² A version of this confusion, I suggest, still persists in present philosophy. There is something remarkable in the fact that, despite an anti-metaphysical pause in the first half of the twentieth century, all of the elements of the old special metaphysics came flying right back under different names particularly after Quine. Rational psychology returned as “philosophy of mind,” and rational theology as “philosophy of religion”; the name “metaphysics” mostly came to mean the study of the make-up of the world, i.e. what was once the specific territory of rational cosmology (with the term “cosmology” itself mostly becoming the philosophy of physics). And *ontology*, the key question about being (not entities) in general, has in the meantime also returned, yet in a highly confused way. “Ontology” after Quine, has mostly become the debate about “what there is” (to be decided on the basis of our choice of logics, our pragmatic concerns, our tastes, etc.). Which strictly speaking is *ontic*, a kind of generalization of special metaphysics. But even generalized ontic decisions are not ontology, i.e. this is precisely the confusion. What van Inwagen has recently called “*meta-ontology*” is, from (early) Heidegger’s point of view, ontology proper - see van Inwagen’s “Meta-ontology.”

⁴³ *Pathmarks* 231.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, 121.

⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, 333.

answered with reference to something that is indeed entirely different from metaphysics... The lecture ‘*Was ist Metaphysik?*’ calls ‘metaphysics’ that which is never ever ‘metaphysics.’”⁴⁶ Heidegger still seems to chase after what he sees as a potential “German metaphysics” beyond this lecture, especially in 1933,⁴⁷ but his “meta-metaphysical” appropriation of the term has totally dropped out by around 1937-8.⁴⁸

The sense relevant for our purposes develops to some extent “in embryo” during 1934-7, and seems to be pretty well established by ‘38. This *being-historical* (or just “historical”) sense of metaphysics seems to be Heidegger’s final answer to the longstanding “confusion” of traditional metaphysics which he had already identified in Aristotle, e.g., in 1929:

...Aristotle himself... divides [First Philosophy]... into two fundamental orientations of questioning, without making their unity itself into a problem. According to this division, the issue is on the one hand *entities as such*, i.e. that which pertains to every entity as an entity, to every ōv insofar as it is an ōv.... *At the same time* however it *also* poses the question concerning *entities as a whole*, in inquiring back into the *supreme* and *ultimate* [entity]...⁴⁹

Up until the mid-’30s Heidegger seemed to think that this confusion of ontology proper with sciences of various special entities, and other confusions besides, could be dealt with by simply rooting them out and then doing the job right. In other words, he seemed to think that there was nothing misguided *by nature* with ontology from the Greeks on forward, only that it needed to be re-clarified and placed on better foundations. For example, in *Being and Time*:

...the question [concerning being] is not thereby a gratuitous one. *As a thematic question for genuine investigation* it kept the research of *Plato* and *Aristotle* in suspense only for it to admittedly fall silent from then on. What those two won has carried through in manifold reshufflings and “touch-ups” until the *Logic* of *Hegel*. And what was once wrested from the

⁴⁶ Ibid 342.

⁴⁷ See the discussion at *Being and Truth*, 63.

⁴⁸ That being said, the status of the term during the middle of the ‘30s remains ambiguous, as does his approach to the history of philosophy. Despite growing interest in what he will call “the history of being,” even up until ‘37 or so he continues to look within German philosophy for hints of that “German metaphysics.” This explains his relatively cheerful interpretations of Schelling and Nietzsche (at least early on), which to some extent continue the tradition of “violent” interpretation found most famously in the Kantbuch.

⁴⁹ *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* 42-3.

phenomena with the highest labor of thinking, albeit fragmentarily and in first stabs, has long since been trivialized.

This, immediately preceded by:

...it is heretofore necessary first of all that an understanding of the sense of this question be reawakened. The concrete elaboration of the question concerning the sense of “being” is the purpose of the following treatise.⁵⁰

So to all appearances, Heidegger understood himself at the time as *continuing* the project of Plato and Aristotle by trying to do it better.

By the time of the *historical* meaning of metaphysics, i.e. the late ‘30s, this is no longer the case. The shortcomings of Greek ontology are no longer accidental, are no longer a confusion that needs correction or even could be corrected. Rather they mark the whole tradition through and through, and a philosophy which tried to depart from them would really be pointing to something entirely new and different (what Heidegger will dramatically call “the other beginning”). The position of *Being and Time* is thereby reinterpreted: its intentions, properly understood, can no longer be included within the old tradition. *Being and Time* is rather “the crossing to the leap,”⁵¹ or in more detail: “‘Fundamental-ontological’ mindfulness (laying the foundation of ontology as its overcoming) is *crossing* from the end of the first beginning” - i.e., historical metaphysics - “to the other beginning.”⁵² Heidegger’s previous work is now a kind of preparation within the *language* of metaphysics for a nevertheless quite *non-metaphysical* approach to the question of being: “Although, all the works from *Sein und Zeit* up to *Vom Wesen des Grundes*, as the threshold, still speak and present metaphysically, *the thinking* in these works is *not metaphysical*.”⁵³

⁵⁰ *Sein und Zeit* 1-2.

⁵¹ *Contributions* 165.

⁵² *Contributions* 162.

⁵³ *Mindfulness* 286.

Thus in one stroke Heidegger divorces *all* of his work from the entire preceding history of philosophy. Granting him that for the moment, it is important to understand exactly what worries him in metaphysics and to dispel some myths. It goes without saying that Heidegger's worries about metaphysics are *ontological* ones, i.e. worries about its understanding of being. "Ontology," as an understanding of being, is neither optional nor gratuitous. Understanding of what "to be" means may be, and usually is, unspoken and non-explicit, but it remains in play in all of our conduct all the same:

In all knowing and claiming, in all conduct towards entities, in all self-conduct towards my own self, "being" is used... [A] riddle lies a priori in all conduct and all being towards entities as entities. That we ever already live in an understanding of being, and that the sense of being is cloaked in obscurity just the same, proves the fundamental necessity to repeat the question concerning the sense of "being."⁵⁴

"Ontology's" necessity does not make such an understanding of being somehow neutral or unquestionable. Rather, the *way* in which being is understood can have tremendous consequences for explicit philosophy, and for the wider history and culture that guides itself upon philosophical assumptions (explicit and otherwise). For Heidegger, explicit or implicit assumptions within the understanding of being are the secret force guiding Western history. One can thus consider historical metaphysics *both* as Heidegger's understanding of the actual period of philosophy running from the Greeks up to Nietzsche, *and* in terms of the peculiarities of its approach to being. (The latter, as I said earlier, is the sense which is relevant here.)⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Sein und Zeit* 4. There are now many good introductions to Heidegger's "pursuit of being" (to quote Iris Murdoch); as a fine example I point the reader to the John Haugeland's posthumously published attempt in the first two chapters of *Dasein Disclosed*, 51-75.

⁵⁵ If I set aside Heidegger's explicit reading of the history of philosophy as "metaphysics," it is not only because it "will strike students of the history of philosophy as a massive oversimplification" (Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology* 22) but because it is too hasty. There is nothing inherently wrong with simplification if it is *right*, and nothing wrong, e.g., in Heidegger's trying to find the initial misstep (and thereby perhaps a way out of the trap) in Parmenides or Anaximander or Homer (on all this Thompson has much to say at 28-42), even if it may sometimes read as an extraordinary stretch. This could simply amount to historical analysis of the concepts at issue. Yet one must make a distinction between using history to understand such problems (and thereby develop better diagnostic

To clarify how Heidegger understands metaphysics' distinctive character, it will first be helpful to dispel a pair of half-truths. The first is that Heidegger thinks no one prior to him ever asked the question concerning being; the quote about Plato and Aristotle above should be enough to show that this is not the case. However, he *does* think that no one has inquired into being *rightly*. The second is that Heidegger thinks everyone before him somehow confused being (the infinitive) with entities (the things that are) and made being into an entity. This is not just obviously historically falsifiable, but also untrue of Heidegger. Even the position that the "to be" of entities itself *is* rarely simply lines "to be" up along with all the other entities; even the boldest Thomist, in naming God as "being," would only do so with a great deal of warnings and qualifications. And when Heidegger declares that being is no genus and nothing like an entity in the very first section of *Being and Time*, he does so through considerable historical support. Nevertheless he *does* think that metaphysics has a peculiar way of "entity-izing" being.

Heidegger identifies something weirdly pathological (my term) about the metaphysical approach to being. He would grant that much of historical metaphysics can or does already admit something like an "ontological difference", a distinction between the entities and all of their various qualities versus the "to be" of those entities. In speaking *negatively*, metaphysics is quite capable of saying that "being is not an entity," "being is not a real quality," and so on. But in trying to reach a *positive* understanding of being, explicitly or implicitly, metaphysics characteristically collapses. Its conclusion, upon noticing that being is neither entity nor quality of entity, should be that a proper interpretation of being would do better by setting aside examination of either entities or qualities and then starting somewhere else entirely - which is

tools), and constitutively *projecting* a half-developed thought back onto the texts. Even if it is for good intentions, Heidegger often does too much of the latter. If I try to remain with the basic concept and hang back from his application of it, it is precisely in order to better pave the way for that former approach.

Heidegger's ultimate position. But metaphysics is characterized by never reaching this conclusion: "Metaphysics... did not dare at all and ever yet to inquire into the truth of being [i.e. being itself]; and, therefore, even in its own history it always had to remain confused and uncertain about its guiding-thread (of thinking)."⁵⁶ Instead it persists in thinking being in terms of entities, as a kind of *quasi*-entity or *quasi*-quality or something at any rate based in entities. Heidegger calls this pathological interpretation of being "the being of entities" or "entityness":

Initially and throughout the long history between Anaximander and Nietzsche, inquiring into being is only the question concerning the being of entities. The question aims at entities as what is asked about and inquires into what *they* are. What is inquired into is determined as what is common to all entities. Being has the character of entityness. Entityness as an addendum to entities results from an inquiry that proceeds from entities and inquires *back* into entities.⁵⁷

Once again, it is not that metaphysics never inquires into being but that it does so in a way which dodges its own question.⁵⁸ The procedure of metaphysics "thinks *from* entities and *away from* them *towards* being but thinks past being (with respect to its truth) back to entities..."⁵⁹ It can get its grasp on being *only* by way of entities: "...being is *thought* in the entityness of entities (in what an entity as an entity is) and yet always only entities are *inquired into*."⁶⁰

This pathological skipping-over of being itself in favor of the entityness of entities represents, so to speak, the *first* side of historical metaphysics. It is decidedly the side which Heidegger is most concerned with, insofar as his final interest lies in finding a philosophical approach to being itself. But intimately tied up with that tendency is *another* side to metaphysics.

⁵⁶ *Contributions* 121-2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid* 299.

⁵⁸ Although a bit imprecise elsewhere, Robbins' "The Problem of Ontotheology" says this extremely well: "Put bluntly, ontotheology's problem is... that ontotheology does not recognize that it even has a problem. It assumes that its beginning and end is secure, when in fact, by giving thought to these conditions that make ontotheological thinking possible in the first place, it becomes apparent that the ground is ungrounded, suspended over an abyss, and that the height is forgetful of transcendence and oblivious to the ontological difference, thus reinforcing the circle of the same." (142)

⁵⁹ *Mindfulness* 306. Also cf *Nietzsche IV* at 211.

⁶⁰ *Mindfulness* 241.

The fact of the matter is that metaphysics' understanding of being in terms of entityness *works* to a large degree; it gets a grasp on being sufficiently efficacious to make most of the phenomenal realm intelligible, and even the phenomena which are much more difficult fits for the various kinds of entityness - Heidegger himself in various places proposes at least Dasein, thing, God, being itself, and event as harder cases - can, with a bit of violence, be set into place. Assuming that Heidegger's charges are fair ones, it is therefore necessary to work out *how this is possible*, i.e. what procedure metaphysics uses to fix its relatively effective interpretations of entityness. And this question leads directly to the discussion's real goal, that of ontotheology.

B. Ontotheology

Metaphysical understanding characteristically cannot and will never grasp or inquire into being itself. What it *can* do, according to Heidegger, is support an interpretation of the entityness of entities sufficient to make those entities universally intelligible and certain. Entities, as the entities they are, are always rendered as comprehensible, rational:

Western metaphysics, that is, the reflection on entities as such and as a whole, determines entities in advance and for its entire history as what is conceivable and definable in the respects of reason and thinking. Insofar as all customary thinking is always grounded in a form of metaphysics, everyday and metaphysical thinking alike rest on "trust" in this relation, on the confidence that entities as such show themselves in the thinking of reason and its categories, that is to say, that what is true and truth are grasped and secured in reason. Western metaphysics is based on this priority of reason.⁶¹

The key to this is *ontotheology*, the term we are trying to understand. In his first published (albeit not first presented) account of the concept, he says:

Metaphysics thinks of entities as such, that is, in general [*i.e., it is ontological*]. Metaphysics thinks of entities as such, as a whole [*i.e. a whole "grounded" by a highest, theological entity*].

⁶¹ Nietzsche III, 50.

Metaphysics thinks of the being of entities both in the ground-giving unity of what is most general, what is indifferently valid everywhere [*i.e.*, *entityness*], and also in the unity of the all that accounts for the ground, that is, of the All-Highest.⁶²

This is put quite vaguely, intentionally so. The genitive in the phrase “being of entities” is meant to be undecided: being is what, so to speak, all entities are “from” and that which defines them as entities, but this being is also itself “grounded” by a highest kind of entity.⁶³ If their entityness is what makes entities rational and reliable, it is an “all-highest” entity which somehow renders up this entityness in the first place.

Two initial points should be made. First, the concept of “ontotheology” in fact predates that of the historical sense of metaphysics. Heidegger already had a somewhat developed sense of the term in place by the early ’30s:

The speculative interpretation of being is onto-theo-logy. This expression is not only meant to say that philosophy is guided by theology or even that philosophy is theology, in the sense of a speculative or rational theology.... With the term “ontotheology” we mean that the problematic of *ōv* - as a logical problematic - is guided from beginning to end by *θεός*, which is itself conceived “logically” - logically in the sense of speculative thinking.⁶⁴

Here Heidegger is still thinking of the concept in relation to the traditional sense of metaphysics. This “guidance” of ontology by theology, along with the previously discussed confusion of general and special metaphysics, is still seen only a kind of blunder, albeit one rooted at least as far back as Aristotle. He describes ontotheology as a kind of “revolving within itself,” “a continuous playing back and forth between the theological question of the ground of entities as a

⁶² *Identity and Difference* 58.

⁶³ Or, as Thomson nicely puts the point: “[M]etaphysics reinforces its foundational claims about what and how entities *are*... by coming at the problem from both ends of the conceptual scale simultaneously: Metaphysics effects *both* a bottom-up ‘ground-giving or establishing’ (in which its understanding of the being of entities, reached by generalizing from its conception of the most basic entity, grounds the intelligible order from inside out) *and* a top-down, theological ‘founding or justification’ (in which its understanding of the being of entities, derived from its conception of the highest entity, secures the intelligible order from outside in).” (*Heidegger on Ontotheology* 18)

⁶⁴ *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, 98.

whole and the ontological question of the essence of entities as such”⁶⁵ - but at this point, prior to the development of the historical sense of metaphysics, he apparently sees nothing disastrous about the classical concept of ontology *in itself*. The real depth of the problem of ontotheology, and the impossibility of ever conquering it within the tradition, does not seem to strike Heidegger until his later turn against (historical) metaphysics.

Second, the “-theology” here should not necessarily imply that we’re talking about a *God*, at least not in the usual sense. Certainly it should not imply an accidental mixture between ontology and, say, Christian dogmatics: “[T]he theological character of ontology is not merely due to the fact that Greek metaphysics was later taken up and transformed by the ecclesiastic theology of Christianity. Rather it is due to the manner in which entities as entities have revealed themselves from early on,”⁶⁶ i.e. due to philosophy’s roots in Greek metaphysics. From even before *Being and Time* the “theology” which matters to Heidegger is the one he finds in *Aristotle*.⁶⁷ This θεολογική, referring to *Metaphysics VI*, is “the λόγος that is concerned with the θεός, not in the sense of a creator God or a personal God, but simply with the θεῖον.”⁶⁸ Or again: “Θεῖον and θειότατον have nothing to do with religiosity; on the contrary, it simply means τιμιώτατον ὄν, entity in the proper sense, a *neutral, ontological* concept. Θεολογία is the science of that which is *most properly an entity*...”⁶⁹ The θεῖον is not even defined in terms of religious divinity; it rather describes a *role*, “τιμιώτατον γένος, the most original entity.” Or yet again, in another text written a decade later: “Insofar as the ἀρχή [basis] of ὄν ἢ ὄν ἀπλῶς [entity purely

⁶⁵ *Schelling’s Treatise*, 66.

⁶⁶ *Pathmarks* 287-8.

⁶⁷ Vedder is particularly helpful in explaining Heidegger’s concerns with Aristotle’s theology throughout the ‘20s; cf. *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion* 96-107.

⁶⁸ *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* 43.

⁶⁹ *Basic Concepts of Ancient Philosophy*, 150.

as entity] could be called θεῖον (θεῖον is in this way interpretable as what always presences beforehand), the πρώτη φιλοσοφία [first philosophy] in itself becomes ἐπιστήμη θεολογική [theological science].”⁷⁰ It is true that in many of the first publications on this topic Heidegger seems to have a *God* of some sort in mind, even if only a “God of philosophy” to whom, famously, “man can neither pray nor sacrifice... can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this God.”⁷¹ But in the strictest understanding of ontotheology, divinity as such is not central. So far as I understand Heidegger’s meaning, what is important about the θεῖον is not that it be divine but that it play the role of a *progenitor entity*, an entity that comes “first” among entities.

This “firstness” can come in a number of ways, and it is well worth exploring Heidegger’s cases. In the Aristotelian example the meaning of the θεῖον’s originality is relatively clear. The θεῖον is defined by perpetually being in its own οὐσία, always already being at its completion (ἐντελέχεια).⁷² It remains in its being, as the entity that it is, consistently and without admixture. The ontotheology here consists in “reading” the being of all other entities through this one distinguished entity: entities can be grasped and rendered intelligible precisely when their being is itself grasped in terms of the perpetual οὐσία of the θεῖον.⁷³ But in a pair of places the *Mindfulness* manuscript offers two or perhaps three other possibilities. I quote Heidegger at length:

...to the extent that being itself is nevertheless “thought” [in metaphysics] and its determination is grasped as a task, three directions of metaphysics consequently open up:

1. Being is heightened to the most entity (ᾧτως ὄν) because being bestows entityness upon any entity (ἰδέα). Being is the “outward appearance” which bestows upon entities their particular

⁷⁰ *Mindfulness* 331.

⁷¹ *Identity and Difference* 72.

⁷² Cf *Nietzsche IV, Nihilism* 171-2.

⁷³ Here of the dense discussion at *Basic Concepts of Ancient Philosophy*, 144-152.

‘look’ as such. In this sense and in this domain, ἰδέα is δύναμις, the empowering of the extant in presence and constancy, and as this empowering itself the power of presencing. . . .

2. Being is explained with a view to that which being by its power (of distributing capability) renders efficacious (explained in view of ἀγαθὸν ἀκρότατον), what has already been equally strived for with ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας. The *Summum bonum* is thought in a Christian way as *ens entium creans* (*Deus creator*). Being is “explained” in terms of the highest entity.

3. Being is relegated to representedness and interpreted as objectness of objects for the subject that is charged with representation, whereby at times the “subject” plays its role of “origin” as conditioned and at times as unconditioned.

Thus metaphysics derives being either from a highest entity or it makes being into the contrivance of an entity and its mere representing, or it conjoins both explanations of being derived from entities.⁷⁴

And, secondly:

Either metaphysics must take being straightaway as ἰδέα - the most entity of entities which later proves to be the emptiest and most general that belong to entities - on account of which then *entities* are called upon to cover up the vulnerability while the filling-up of the ‘formal’ with the ‘content’ rectifies the damage of abstraction, *or* metaphysics must take being as entityness *retro-related* to man as the subject which as the unconditioned is what conditions the objectness and unconstitutedness and this unconditionedness itself is the most-entity (Hegel).

All metaphysical thinking then wavers back and forth between both possibilities and looks for ways out in order to avoid being becoming either a thing or a mere subjective contrivance. But basically, being remains always both. . . .⁷⁵

These passages are preliminary sketches, not an exhaustive classification of the varieties of ontotheology,⁷⁶ but they suggest an enormous range to the term. Heidegger alludes to one or perhaps two Platonic ontotheologies: being itself as ἰδέα, as the “entity” which gives entityness to all others, and being “explained” in terms of a highest entity, a good beyond being. This in turn seems to have its “Christian” variation: entities are “created,” put into their being, by a creator entity. But most interestingly there is also a ontotheology of *subject*: being is understood as

⁷⁴ *Mindfulness* 75-6.

⁷⁵ *ibid* 346-7.

⁷⁶ Thomson has an enormous and intimidating classification of ontotheologies at *Heidegger on Ontotheology* 16, although I remain skeptical of some of the elements on it.

“representedness,” as being an object of the subject’s thinking. (All this will have to be considered in depth later.)

But within this enormous variety there is a common thread: the $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$, the master entity, whatever it may be, always provides metaphysics with an answer to what being (entityness) means. If being means being-caused, being-thought, etc., then it is the $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ which does the causing and thinking; if being means being-complete or persevering-in-being, the $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ does that first and best of all. In the face of an insecure relation to entities and their way of being, reason can safeguard itself by way of appeal to the most certain entity of all. Ontotheology is the name for this appeal.

C. Complications; Or, the Retrogression of the Proofs

As I suggested above, it should not be thought that “ontotheology” signifies a closed concept for Heidegger. He deserves credit for noticing the phenomenon and giving it a name, but that is far from saying that he completely clarifies it or drives it back to its real roots. (That the interpretation of *Kant* offers the best opportunity for this is one of the central claims of this book.) Indeed, I suspect that certain tendencies which allowed him to be the thinker he was - his insistence on the being-question, his strict linear interpretation of the history of philosophy - in fact ended up hindering the progress he could make on this topic. But even if one grants that the concept can be further clarified, especially if one considers it a worthwhile and productive hypothesis about “the God which comes into philosophy,” we still have to consider whether it is at all capable of “explaining” the theistic proofs at all - as an idolatry or as anything else.

Heidegger himself tends to assume that the proofs are simply a further step in metaphysics' development, i.e. simply a case in point for ontotheology.⁷⁷ But once the *details* of ontotheology are pointed out - and this is why I spent so long on the term - this becomes an incredibly dubious conclusion, and for a simple and obvious reason.

The θεῖον, the master entity, is supposed to function by grounding and securing the being of entities, thereby making the totality of entities accessible. In ontotheology we conceive of the θεῖον as being posited *first, in advance of everything else*, in order to secure the rest. With most proofs of God's existence, however, the procedure is exactly the *reverse* of this. Consider, for example, a simple argument by design (what Kant's first Critique calls a "physicotheological" proof): there I begin with the overall purposiveness of nature, of natural *entities*, and from there try to conclude to a divine designer after the fact. In order to get to a God, that is, I *first* posit natural entities and their particular mode of being. As a broad rule about the proofs, being comes *before* any existing God: it is only *because* a collection of entities is stable in their being that any master entity can be proved. In a relatively early analysis of Descartes (predating the concept of ontotheology) Heidegger even grants something like this point, albeit in a polemical way:

From precisely what entity do I take the *basis* for the establishment of God's existence itself? If we focus on this, it is evident that God's existence is not so much the source from which the being of the ens creatum is determined, but vice versa. The being of God Himself is determined on the basis of a definite preconception of created being...⁷⁸

The language here suggests the tremendous problem with applying ontotheology to the theistic proofs. How can God play the role of securing the being of created entities if one already has a "definite preconception" of the created entities prior to God's existence being proved, to the

⁷⁷ E.g., in a section of the *Contributions* titled "The View of All Metaphysics on Being," he opines that "[t]he more exclusively thinking turns to entities and seeks for itself a ground that exists *totally as an entity* (cf Descartes and modernity), the more decisively philosophy distances itself from the truth of being." From *Contributions* 120.

⁷⁸ *Introduction to Phenomenological Research* 142.

point that God's own being is determined by that preconception? Even if God is not so determined, the entities and their being seem comprehensible enough without proof of God's existence. That is, the proofs at work in Descartes and other authors seem to add nothing of ontotheological value: whatever their proving does, it doesn't establish the θεῖον as Heidegger describes it. And if not, if ontotheology is basically the *exact reverse* of the typical procedure of the proofs, then that concept can provide little help in understanding their nature. *Either* a God comes first, in which case it is perfectly possible for it to then prescribe and secure the being of all other entities in its sphere, *or* those entities and their being make themselves perfectly manifest first, and then we use them to prove a God later.⁷⁹

It is true that if (on the one hand) the givenness of entities and of the realm of being which embraces those entities is required for a proof of this sort, yet (on the other) that the God to be proved is supposed to grant the realm of being, and thereby the entities, in the first place, then any ontotheological reading of the proofs would, *prima facie*, be doomed to incoherence. In fact, however, both the early and the late Heidegger's judgments of the proofs (first that they are a simple case of reading created being into God, second that they are a simple case of ontotheology) are a bit too brutal and naive. It is, I will argue, perfectly possible to render the theistic proofs compatible with the concept of ontotheology, so long as one is willing to read them in a richer and more paradoxical way. What I now present is not so much an answer to this problem - a full answer will have to wait until we reach Kant - but rather a way in which an "ontotheological" reading of the proofs can be made to work, along with evidence that particularly in Descartes the proofs really do work like this. When the proofs terminate in the

⁷⁹ It is instructive that the chapters of Marion's *Descartes' Metaphysical Prism* which deal with ontotheology (Chapter 2) and the proofs (Chapter 4) have to begin from an entirely different set of framing questions, as if the two topics were both present and yet not neatly compatible.

existence of a θεῖον (and the knowledge of such), when read carefully they do so only because in another sense they also really *begin* with the same θεῖον. If the reader allows a bit of foreign terminology to help express the situation, I suggest we can make sense of the situation on analogy with the “crab canon” of medieval music.

Since at least the late middle ages there has been an art, called *canon*, for generating highly complex musical textures from some antecedent. These “rule” pieces, although now usually fully written out when published, were more traditionally presented as a kind of riddle to students and performers: given a small selection of musical material and a few hints, they had to find the rule and thereby generate the rest of the musical texture from what was already on hand. For example, one might generate additional parts by repeating the given part with a delay, with a transposition of the pitches, faster or slower, etc.. Within this genre one of the most well-known variations was the so-called “canon cancrizans,” *crab* canon: the rule is such that the remaining musical material is generated by reading the given part *backwards, in retrograde* (as crabs were supposed to walk backwards). In this kind of canon it is not that the piece is read “correctly” by going through the score backwards, but that the *total* musical work does not appear until the score is read and performed *both ways simultaneously*.⁸⁰

As a working hypothesis, then, I propose to read Descartes’ presentation of the proofs in the *Meditations* as crab canons which must be taken backwards as well as forwards. More than that, I propose that this can be confirmed within the word of the text itself. Given the antecedent “score” of the proofs - their functional progression on the surface - it should be possible to first

⁸⁰ There is a very good recent and not terribly technical discussion of retrograde/crab canons in Schiltz’s *Music and Riddle Culture in the Renaissance* at 103-8. But also see her fascinating account (at 293-301) of the relation between the crab, circularity, and the image of the world carried on the crab’s back, at least as it appears in an anonymous Czech broadside. In the case of the proofs, perhaps God is akin to that crab.

pick out the antecedent's structural elements in the text, but then also find the same progression given in an intelligible way *in reverse order* - that is to say, with a few alterations but featuring roughly the same structural elements - *within the same text*. The bidirectional readings, I suggest, produce not a circle but a complete "work." (The retrograde need not be completely perfect - again, the point is only to show that the demands of both demonstration and ontotheology can be satisfied, albeit in a way that only Kant can eventually clarify.)

I first present what should be a generally agreeable account of the "antecedent" part, the procedure of the proofs within the *Meditations* as normally read. I locate a first structural moment in Descartes' transition from "Meditation I" to "II." The situation there is quite dire; Descartes writes:

I therefore suppose that everything I see is false; I never trust in any of those things that deceitful memory represents to have existed; I have no senses at all; body, figure, extension, motion, and place are chimeras. So what will be true? Perhaps this alone, that nothing is certain.⁸¹

Here everything is open to hyperbolic doubt. Doubt concerning entities extends not just to the existences I can sense, but even to universal and mathematical truths; even the *being* of these entities is questionable in its own way, given that I can no longer trust in thinkability, causality, etc.. Call this first structural moment *the radical contingency of all entities and their being*. And yet in another sense these entities and their being remain perfectly well on hand (if uncertain), and without such availability one could not move on.

Secondly there is *the introduction of a distinctive entity as a point of transition*, i.e. a stable entity from which the proof can then proceed. For Descartes' earlier proof in "Meditation III" this is, of course, an idea ("Thus only the idea of God remains, and what must be considered

⁸¹ AT VII 24: "Suppono igitur omnia quae video falsa esse; credo nihil unquam extitisse eorum quae mendax memoria repraesentat; nullos plane habeo sensus; corpus, figura, extensio, motus, locusque sunt chimerae. Quid igitur erit verum? Fortassis hoc unum, nihil esse certi."

is whether there is anything in it which could not have come from me”),⁸² while the later proof focuses more strictly on the I (“...it would be agreeable to further inquire whether I myself, having such an idea [of God], could be, if no such entity existed. What was I from, really?”⁸³). This entity, in either case, is the turning point of the proofs’ procedure.

Finally there is *the discovery of God*. By way of the intermediary entity it is possible to reach the right sort of conclusion: “...yet altogether one must conclude from this alone, that I exist and a certain idea of a perfect entity - that is, God - is in me, that [the fact that] God indeed exists is most evidently demonstrated.”⁸⁴ The same step that secures the existence of God also secures the certainty of entities in their being, and Descartes writes:

And thus I plainly see that all certainty and truth in science hangs upon a single thing, the cognition of the true God, to the point that prior to recognizing him [nossem] I could perfectly know nothing about any other thing. Now innumerable things can be plainly known and certain to me, both concerning the very God and other intellectual matters and also concerning all those things of corporeal nature which are the object of pure mathesis.⁸⁵

This completes the procedure of the theistic proofs (albeit not yet the project of the *Meditations*) on this first level.

To repeat the first side of the dilemma, it seemed that the understanding of being, and the relevant entities, have to come first in order for God’s existence to ever be proved, and the *antecedent* reading of the *Meditations* above displays this quite clearly: in spite of any

⁸² AT VII 45: “Itaque sola restat idea Dei, in quâ considerandum est an aliquid sit quod a me ipso non potuerit proficisci.”

⁸³ AT VII 47-48: “...ulterius quaerere libet an ego ipse habens illam ideam esse possem, si tale ens nullum existeret. Nempe a quo essem?” These proofs are, of course, not completely distinct; the details of Descartes’ proofs will be discussed in detail in my third and fourth Chapters.

⁸⁴ AT VII 51: “...sed omnino est concludendum, ex hoc solo quòd existam, quaedamque idea entis perfectissimi, hoc est Dei, in me sit, evidentissime demonstrari Deum etiam existere.”

⁸⁵ AT VII 71: “Atque ita plane video omnis scientiae certitudinem & veritatem ab unâ veri Dei cognitione pendere, adeo ut, priusquam illum nossem, nihil de ullâ aliâ re perfecte scire potuerim. Jam verò innumera, tum de ipso Deo aliisque rebus intellectualibus, tum etiam de omni illâ naturâ corporeâ, quae est purae Matheseos objectum, mihi plane nota & certa esse possunt.”

hyperbolic doubts the right entities are on hand to prove God's existence, even if they remain uncertain. The second side of the same dilemma, by contrast, held that a θεῖον must be presupposed before any secure understanding of the relevant kind of being could be possible, and this will turn out to be the case for the *retrograde* reading of the proofs. If the retrograde reading of the same procedure is to be legitimate, then, it must replicate all of the steps of the antecedent reading, *mutatis mutandis*, in *reverse* - given the same text it must *begin with the discovery of God, proceed to the introduction of a transitional entity, and conclude with the contingency of entities and being*. And in fact one can read the *Meditations* in just this way. In such a case, one begins with God not as an existence but as a kind of *rational suspicion*, so that one ends with the radical contingency of entities and being - here not contingent on doubt, but contingent upon God's status - and pivots in the middle upon an entity, in this case the transition of God from a suspicion to an existence.

To the first, in fact Descartes does make a first "discovery" of God well before any actual proofs, in the passage which makes the first major move towards hyperbolic doubt:

But yet a certain ancient opinion is fixed in my mind that there is a God who can do anything, and by whom I exist just in this way, and am created. But whence do I know that that [God] did not make it so that there is just no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no figure, no magnitude, no place, and yet that all of these would look to me to exist no differently than now? Even more... may I thus be mistaken as often as I likewise add two and three, or count the sides of a square, or something else even easier, if that can be devised?⁸⁶

This passage and the ones that follow have a double meaning. On the one hand, as Marion rightly says, there is no precise concept of God at work here ("...the entire second *Meditatio*

⁸⁶ AT VII 21: "Verumtamen infixa quaedam est meae menti vetus opinio, Deum esse qui potest omnia, & a quo talis, qualis existo, sum creatus. Unde autem scio illum non fecisse ut nulla plane sit terra, nullum coelum, nulla res extensa, nulla figura, nulla magnitudo, nullus locus, & tamen haec omnia non aliter quàm nunc mihi videantur existere? Imò etiam... ita ego ut fallar quoties duo & tria simul addo, vel numero quadrati latera, vel si quid aliud facilius fingi potest?"

works within the determinate hypothesis of a decidedly indeterminate God...⁸⁷). “God” could be, in the passages that follow, a deity who could allow me to be fooled (without itself fooling me), an omnipotent evil genius, or even just the chance operations of nature. The presence of a “something” which may render the powers of my reason fallacious somehow is less an argumentative premise than a *suspicion*, something that *worries* the I, and yet this mere suspicion is totally decisive for the rest of the *Meditations*. With all content of thought plus the creation of “earth, sky, extended thing, shape, size, place” here placed in this entity’s hands, one must conclude that God - *as mere suspicion* - has already been ceded control over all ontological realms at issue in the proofs from the beginning of the text. God is not only already an active presence in “Meditation I,” but is also already acting as a θεῖον (albeit an untrusted one).

There is still a transitional entity, except this time around it will turn out to be not the I nor any idea, but a God now rendered determinate, existing, and “non fallax.” In “Meditation III,” on this rereading, the demonstration of God’s existence now serve less to establish a God who wasn’t there before than to render the suspected God who already rules over being into a stable figure, an existent and trustworthy θεῖον rather than a threat.

But the stability of this θεῖον in terms of existence and truthfulness in fact renders the two Cartesian ontologies (thinking and causality), as well as their entities, *more* contingent and not less. In the case of a mere *suspicion* of God, even if the entire ontological situation has a radical threat hanging over it (to the point where being and entities are rendered open to hyperbolic doubt), the nature of that threat remains entirely indistinct and indeterminate. The *confirmation* that “there is a God who can do anything” does indeed secure the certainty of entities in their

⁸⁷ *On Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism* 213.

being in the same stroke, but only by making them fully contingent upon such a progenitor: “...I have perceived that God is, and likewise at once understood that all others hang upon him.”⁸⁸ At the conclusion of the proofs, everything thought and everything caused - as well as thinking and causality as modes of being - are firmly held in suspense by the Cartesian $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$.

This double reading, while limited in application, does show that demonstration and ontotheology need not be in conflict and can even be complementary. Hyperbolic doubt and the radical contingency of entities and their being (antecedent) turns out to be possible only on the basis of a suspected, indeterminate God who threatens - and thereby rules over - being (retrograde). God’s transition from a mere suspicion to a certain and trustworthy existence (retrograde) first requires the I with its idea of the infinite (antecedent) - which itself is only secured under the threat of a less-than-ideal deity. The existence thereby proved then positively secures the ontologies of thinking and causality (antecedent), such that all being and all entities are made contingent upon that existence all the more (retrograde). The complete system created by this combined reading neatly displays Descartes as something of a metaphysical genius: it shows an ontotheology is *already active* at the beginning of the *Meditations* at the very moment that hyperbolic doubt is extended to its furthest limits (in fact that doubt *just is* the ontotheology), just not yet at its fullest “realization” until the ontologies already on hand are themselves used to render the right God’s existence theoretically certain. The fact that Descartes’ presentation of the proofs (read forward and backward in tandem) gives us a fully worked out system of ontotheology just as much as an apology for metaphysics should reinforce the point that Descartes has, and must have, a privileged position within this topic.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ AT VII 70: “...percepi Deum esse, quia simul etiam intellexi caetera omnia ab eo pendere...”

⁸⁹ If the successors of Descartes do not always display these same details, that may indicate less that such details are not necessary than that such successors are at some level skipping over them. If the project I engage in deals in a fair

But if the early Marion's explanation of the proofs as a kind of metaphysical idolatry can now be partially vindicated, it is only at the price of our being served with several mystifying paradoxes. Whence this "ancient opinion" which is so "fixed" in Descartes' mind? Whence this strange retrograde reading which, at least in Descartes' text, is so crucial to the proofs' function? What would it even mean to "presuppose" an ontotheology, and how does that relate to the work of theoretical demonstration? These questions surely deserve consideration, although at the moment they remain without a clear answer.

III. A New Critique of Rational Theology?

The simple and evident explanations, when put under a bit of pressure, turn out to be not so much wrong as far more mystifying than we could have supposed. This much seems clear: 1) if we want to know why we are still stuck with the proofs of God's existence in all the various ways we are stuck with them, we must make a historical critique of the tradition of the proofs of which we ourselves are still a part; and 2) since the proofs as we have them are first deployed in their modern mode, as an "apologia" for metaphysics, by *Descartes*, more specifically this historical critique will be an analysis of the exact role of the proofs and rational theology within the history of modern - i.e., Cartesian in the broadest sense - metaphysics. This is no easy thing. It is difficult to know even where to begin.

amount of historical description of these texts, in a sense the descriptive work comes secondary to understanding the sense and function of these proofs *when they are at their best* - when they, so to speak, best know the role they play. That is to say, this is a *normative* project concerning how the proofs ought to function (in order to make their best sense), but with the caveat that it is precisely those "norms" which remain obscure.

And yet this would obviously not be the first ever “critique” of the proofs. At the twilight of the Cartesian era it was *Kant* who made the first (and really only) attempt to trace the proofs back to their roots in human reason, and to evaluate their proper role within metaphysics. But Kant’s relevance to the discussion here is still more basic than as a mere precursor. Kant is the one who classifies and characterizes the proofs according to their general procedures; he is even the one who gave them *names*. When first years debate the validity of the “ontological” or other proofs, it is Kant’s terms that they deploy. To the extent that we have any rigorous conceptualization of the proofs, right or wrong, it is due first to his efforts: any time we debate about the proofs we are first of all exploring within a house that Kant built, even if it perhaps remains imperfect or unfinished.

And Kant’s achievements here have long since been trivialized, popularly as well as very often within the field. “The proofs,” their names and characterizations, are treated as if they fell from the heavens in time immemorial. Kant himself is treated as if he simply found them lying around pre-labeled, gave them a section in his *Critique*, and (as the “great destroyer” that he was) made a case against them. In the meantime, as we’ve been arguing about the proofs and doing a lot of shrugging thereof, we have almost totally ignored the positive results of his or any *critique* of the proofs and of rational theology as such; indeed, there has been little consideration of what such a critique would even amount to or why it would be necessary.

Thus Kant must be read as not the “destroyer” of the proofs but the first to seriously attempt to *understand* them. Critique is never “criticism” in the base sense: the point is always to *see how something works* via inquiry into reason itself. Thus the real labor of all of Kant’s efforts, the mass of ice beneath the surface so to speak, is not to be found in positive (or

negative) theses but in the attempt to ground philosophical issues and difficulties in their sources within reason, to clarify obscurities and assign matters their proper place by way of consideration of reason's capacities and tendencies. Throughout his critical period Kant himself characterizes critique and its function within philosophical debates in just this way:

Critical philosophy is that which sets out to make its conquest not by the attempt to build or topple systems, or even just (like moderatism) to set up a roof on supports without a house for occasional accommodation, but from the investigation of the capacities of human reason (in whatever intent there may be)...⁹⁰

One can regard the critique of pure reason as the true tribunal for all disputes of [pure reason]; for it is not involved with the latter, as [disputes] which go immediately to the objects, but is set for this purpose, to determine and to judge the rights of reason overall according to the principles of their first institution.

Without this [critique] reason is, as it were, in the state of nature, and cannot make or secure its assertions and claims except through war...⁹¹

This call to determine and judge our own rational grounds applies to the proofs as much as anything else, if not them most of all. Kant's famous "attacks" on the proofs in the "Ideal of Pure Reason" must therefore be read as resting upon a less evident but far more expansive *critical investigation* of the proper place of rational theology within human reason.

It is precisely that investigation which is really important here. Even (and especially) if one disagrees with his explicit conclusions, for the purposes of a historical analysis of rational theology following Descartes a confrontation with Kant *is not optional*. The Kantian interpretation of the proofs, even if it was read crudely, has still provided the conceptual basis

⁹⁰ From the "Proclamation of the Coming Conclusion of a Treaty for Eternal Peace in Philosophy," 8:416. "Kritische Philosophie ist diejenige, welche nicht mit den Versuchen Systeme zu bauen oder zu stürzen, oder gar nur (wie der Moderatism) ein Dach ohne Haus zum gelegentlichen unterkommen auf Stützen zu stellen, sondern von der Untersuchung der Vermögen der menschlichen Vernunft (in welcher Absicht es auch sei) Eroberung zu machen anfängt..."

⁹¹ A751/B779, in 3:491-2. "Man kann die Kritik der reinen Vernunft als den wahren Gerichtshof für alle Streitigkeiten derselben ansehen; denn sie ist in die letzteren, als welche auf Objecte unmittelbar gehen, nicht mit verwickelt, sondern ist dazu gesetzt, die Rechtsame der Vernunft überhaupt nach den Grundsätzen ihrer ersten Institution zu bestimmen und zu beurtheilen.

"Ohne dieselbe ist die Vernunft gleichsam im Stande der Natur und kann ihre Behauptungen und Ansprüche nicht anders geltend machen oder sichern, als durch Krieg."

upon which we now stand today. Fundamental errors or distortions, on our side or on Kant's, may only become apparent and eventually resolved by way of a reading of this earlier analysis. And, as I will argue in further detail later, a full grasp of his conclusions will not be possible without appreciating the full scope of his dealings with rational theology *throughout his career*, and (so far as we can) the full scope of the proofs as manifested throughout modern philosophy.

The plan for the study is as follows. This discussion (Chapter I) has already done the work of narrowing the topic to focus on the era of Cartesian metaphysics, suggesting Heidegger as a useful interlocutor, and posing a difficult puzzle in the form of a “retrograde” to the proofs. Given that, we can clarify the nature and importance of the historical work to be done and introduce the question of a *systematization* of the proofs, i.e. of how the proofs hang together (Chapter II). Using Kant's 1763 *Beweisgrund*'s early system of proofs as a hub to explore around, we can outline and discuss (in his terms) the proofs from intellectual concepts (Chapter III) and those from empirical concepts (Chapter IV). The introduction of a *moral* proof, and with it the concept of *faith* (Chapter V), not only shifts us into the critical period but also provides a model for how rational theology can be reinterpreted more generally; this model makes it possible for us to reread the old proofs, as transformed in the critical system, through the concept of “Vernunftglaube” (Chapter VI). Finally we can translate the basic problematic of the proofs from one of necessity to one concerning the “needs of reason,” and thereby provide an account of the whole metaphysical project of the proofs in terms of practical ontotheology (Chapter VII).

It goes without saying that I do not and cannot justify Kant's full importance (or many other claims) before the fact. The real justification can only come in the end, in the results. Yet even if for the moment I can only offer a promissory note, still all that has been said so far

should point to certain topics' priority for any deeper understanding of the proofs as we now deal with them: their new beginning in modern philosophy and especially in Descartes, their deep relationship to metaphysics (less so to traditional "religion"), the strange way that they seem to presume a θεῖον long before explicitly proving such an entity's existence. If Kant's contributions to this tradition are acknowledged as tremendous and indeed unavoidable, then we should make the effort to rightly understand them.

CHAPTER II. An Introduction to the Precritical System of Proofs

If the goal is to conceptually determine the philosophical sense of the proofs for the existence of God, the project has to amount to a kind of *self-interpretation*. We ourselves are the recipients of the rational theological tradition, else its legacy would make no difference for us; the project thus amounts to getting clear on what we ourselves thereby take on (willingly or not).

We cannot approach the proofs in isolation from their history. All philosophy is “historical” in the sense that it *has a history*, that it is always performed through and by way of a received tradition. As a rule, a philosophical position which claims to be a-historical is just not transparent to itself, i.e. it is basically in the dark about what it is assuming from the past; it may still arrive at real insights, but it must remain to some extent blind to exactly what it is doing. A great deal of our work in philosophy involves first trying to see exactly *what the question is*, i.e. trying to grasp and fix all of the conceptual elements involved within it. Once the question becomes clear, either the direction in which a resolution lies becomes equally clear (in which case the rest is easy) or we come to understand how and why no real resolution is possible – i.e., we discover that the issue was quite different from how it initially appeared. Concepts can and must be clarified in various ways. I suggest that *here*, with the proofs, the mode of clarification which takes pride of place is *historical*, i.e. the analysis of the tradition of the problem: formalize them however one may wish, still the proofs have an irreducible *content*, including a tangle of half-understood concepts all received from a prior tradition. *Any* approach to the proofs will thus always imply a historical dimension, knowingly or not; what I do here is make the historical-conceptual analysis into the entire project.

My hypothesis is that such analysis can only be accomplished through a reappropriation of Kant's interpretation of rational theology, and an inquiry into how that interpretation develops over his career. We reread ourselves *by* rereading Kant, and if we do so from the right set of questions then we should gain new insight into his problematic (which is also our own). The present chapter has the main goal of preparing the overall approach and securing a "system" of proofs to work from. This involves a first decision concerning where to even start, and some distinctions that separate the present effort from previous ones. After some further comments concerning Kant's general philosophical approach (early as well as late), I will properly begin the whole project by reconstructing Kant's argument concerning the completeness of his system of theistic proofs - which is *not* the famous system of the 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason*.

I. Preliminary Comments

Most approaches to Kant on the proofs go first to the famous "Ideal of Pure Reason" in the first *Critique*, or at least tend to strongly anchor themselves in that text. The fact that I do *not* do so is because, for reasons further explained in my sixth Chapter, in many ways the "Ideal" is an unusual effort not especially reflective of the full scope of Kant's thinking on the subject. I say this not to undermine the importance of that text - indeed, it is crucial - but to emphasize that one must not read it in isolation. In fact, even the context of the whole *Critique* and the whole body of critical writings is not enough: Kant's presentation of the proofs within the *Critique*, and his discussion thereof, is one result of a process of thinking that goes back nearly thirty years to the beginnings of his career. Rather than beginning at a rather idiosyncratic (if highly famous)

moment in the middle I instead begin with Kant's *first* efforts on the subject, and then develop the project's set of concepts as he develops his own. My intention is to broach Kant's farthest conclusions only once we are in a position to understand the metaphysical problematic that drives them. On the other hand, this is not to say that discussion of Kant's precritical writings on the proofs amounts to mere preparation. As I make clear below, the young Kant *was still Kant*: nearly two decades prior to the *Critique* he was already trying to approach the proofs via the attitude he would later call "critical," above all in *The One Possible Probative Ground for a Demonstration of the Existence of God* of 1763 (hereafter "*Beweisgrund*"). It is *that* text which will provide my initial starting point.

Yet it is not just that the "Ideal" and the broader "system" of rational theology within the critical period is built upon these earlier considerations. As will become increasingly clear in my later Chapters, there really *is* no neat, tidy, complete, and stable "system" of the proofs in the critical period, despite Kant sometimes giving the appearance of one. The critical Kant speaks of the proofs in many different ways, making it extremely difficult to piece together a complete picture of Kant's later thoughts (to the point that, to readers unclear on what is going on, he can often seem to contradict himself). The only way to navigate this is by working forward from the earlier texts, which is the major reason why I do so. Those texts were the starting point for his later considerations, and *were* consistently systematic: Kant's only attempt to build a *complete* system of the proofs as such is to be found not in the *Critique*, I suggest, but in the humble Third Section of the *Beweisgrund*. What one finds in those later discussions, properly understood, is something like the *wreckage* of this first system left over from the introduction of a "moral

proof” (and the ensuing explosion). It is nearly impossible to understand these later results without first asking the right questions about the earlier context from which they emerge.

And to be sure, there is a burgeoning literature on many of these subjects already in place. To the extent that I object to previous interpretations of the links between Kant’s early approaches to the proofs and the later ones, it does not concern the *content* of what they say. *Within the limits of their inquiries*, everything they present is reasonably adequate. The problem lies, rather, in the nature of their questions, their agenda itself, i.e. in what they go looking for and what they take for granted in doing so.

Occasionally the claims seem to be little more bold than to make the point that the early Kant is in fact relevant to Kant scholarship. For example, Regina Ortiz-Mena’s *From Existence to the Ideal*, based on her 1991 dissertation, is a masterful and impressively sourced piece of scholarship, a still-underread precursor to the current generation of scholars (Chignell, Watkins, Abaci, Stang...) now working on Kant’s early metaphysics.¹ But what I read as the central, unifying claim of Ortiz-Mena’s book is far too modest:

This study of the evolution of Kant’s theology reveals that the pre-critical writings exhibit a great deal of originality and independence from the philosophies of Leibniz and Wolff.

The study of the evolution of Kant’s theology will evidence that his thought did not suffer a radical transformation, but rather evolved slowly over time. Moreover, because many of the

¹ Ortiz-Mena’s effort is, I would argue, still currently the best book-length resource on the relation between Kant’s early and late approaches to rational theology – it is more modest and exacting than Laberge’s *La théologie kantienne précritique*, and more specific to rational theology than Insole’s recent *The Intolerable God*, both of which are on related topics. With the exception of Insole (who is far more focused on moral theology, in any case), these texts are unfortunately difficult to obtain – as something more easily located I also mention Allen Wood’s *Kant’s Rational Theology*, the first half of which focuses on Kant’s precritical ontological proof and its later developments. Finally, there are several other studies just on Kant’s early period: Schmucke’s, *Die Ontotheologie des vorkritischen Kant* focuses entirely on Kant’s own argument; Schönfeld’s *Philosophy of the Young Kant* presents a synoptic view of the early Kant but spends considerable time on the rational theology; Kanterian’s *God, Kant, and Metaphysics* deals with the early Kant’s considerations on religion in the broad, reading him as increasingly close to Luther. The studies on the *critical* Kant’s relation to religion and the proofs are, of course, manifold, and I will cite them as they come up.

arguments elaborated in the pre-critical writings are reiterated in the *Critique* Kant's thought evidences continuity, and not a break with his own philosophical past.²

To put it another way, the claim is that the early Kant *was still Kant* rather than an German scholastic. I am sympathetic to the point, but I wonder who actually needs the correction that she advocates. Often she will quote L.W. Beck as a potential bugbear, e.g.:

Lewis Beck presents two statements which appear to support the theory of a sudden change in Kant's thought. He says:

Kant himself refers to the year 1769 as having "brought a great light". (Moreover) he says... his recollection of Hume... interrupted (his) dogmatic slumbers and gave (his) investigations into the field of philosophy quite a new direction.

These two statements appear to add weight to a certain interpretation of Kant's philosophy, namely, one which gives center stage to the critical epistemology...³

Beck is painted as taking the early Kant as a simple dogmatist, requiring the "great light" to come in order to present anything really new. Yet this is a serious distortion, unusual for her, of Beck's position. Beck, who studied the early texts quite seriously, actually ends up close to Ortiz-Mena (if not even more of a champion for their continuity with the later work):

But though the years 1769 to 1772 were marked by a sudden maturation in Kant's thought, it would be a grave mistake to name the period before them "pre-critical" and the period after them "critical." Nor would it be correct to call the first subperiod "dogmatic"... the writings of Kant show a continuous and persistent concern with the competency of reason to establish metaphysics as a science. Against the common conception of Kant the dogmatic slumberer awakened by Hume in 1772, I would suggest that Kant was never an orthodox Wolffian...⁴

Thus Beck appears not to need the correction Ortiz-Mena presents. And in this he is nothing special: in fact one is hard-pressed to think of *any* scholar who has actually studied the early Kant and still thinks of him as an orthodox Wolffian, or as having nothing in common with the

² Ortiz-Mena 172 and 7. Against my reading Ortiz-Mena would insist that "[T]he historical analysis serves as a tool to uncover the deeper philosophical layers of Kant's thought, and thereby offer a new way of looking at his development and writings," (7) but it is difficult to see this evidenced in her text.

³ Ibid 172.

⁴ Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy*, 439.

Kant of the *Critique*. Mere familiarity with the texts tends to cure this impression straightaway. The only exceptions to this awareness would therefore be scholars who *have not read* the early Kant, presumably on the prejudice that there is nothing to be gained - but they are not likely to be reading Ortiz-Mena's book either, so that it appears to serve a claim which her audience will already agree with.

But even with scholars who are more decisively *historico-philosophical* than just historical, the limitations of their inquiry seem to me to render them blind not only to the broader problems of rational theology which Kant is actually discussing but even make them miss *basic facts in the text itself* which are obvious on a more appropriate line of questioning. To return to Heidegger for a moment, one finds comparisons between the early and late Kant on the proofs in two texts of his, the *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* of 1927 (published 1975) and "Kants These über das Sein" (1961). In both cases the frame is explicitly described as the problem of being, and the discussion of Kant is made within that frame:

If philosophy is the science of being, then the first and last and basic problem of philosophy must be, What does being signify? Whence can something like being in general be understood? How is the understanding of being at all possible?... Before we broach these fundamental questions, it will be worthwhile first to make ourselves familiar for once with discussions about being. To this end we shall deal in the first part of the course with some characteristic theses about being as individual concrete phenomenological problems, theses that have been advanced in the course of the history of Western philosophy. In this connection we are interested, not in the historical contexts of the philosophical inquiries within which these theses about being make their appearance, but in their specifically inherent content.⁵

Why do we listen to Kant to learn something about being? For two reasons. First, Kant took a far-reaching step in the discussion of being. Second, Kant took this step out of loyalty to the tradition, i.e. in a critical encounter with it, which threw new light on it. Both reasons for the reference to Kant's thesis about being impel us to reflect.⁶

⁵ *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 15.

⁶ *Pathmarks*, 338.

Although the texts are also interestingly and importantly different, in both cases Heidegger focuses on the thesis (common between the *Critique* and the *Beweisgrund*) that “being is not a (real) predicate.”⁷ I do not attempt to sum up Heidegger’s conclusions, rather he serves as an example of a figure who writes on these texts *specifically* for Kant’s approach to ontology and modality, still a common enough topic. What I want to point out is that there is an extraordinary shortsightedness in this (actually quite common) project of approaching the *Beweisgrund* with an eye towards the problem of *being*, namely that Kant’s view of being is presented, both pre-critically and critically (in the “Ideal”), in the context of *proving the existence of God*.

Heidegger, to his credit, is canny enough to notice this:

We are confronted by the striking fact that Kant discusses the most general of all the concepts of being where he is dealing with the knowability of a wholly determinate, distinctive entity, namely, God... [But] it is no accident that the science of being is oriented in a distinctive sense toward the entity which is God.... There comes to light here a remarkable phenomenon... namely, that the problem of being in general is most closely bound up with the problem of God, the problem of defining his essence and demonstrating his existence.⁸

In the course of the history of ontotheological inquiry the task has arisen not only of showing what the highest being is but of proving that this most supreme of beings *is*, that God exists.⁹

And yet instead of trying to better understand this “striking fact,” in both texts Heidegger drops the topic altogether (“We cannot here discuss the reason for this remarkable connection...”), thereby dropping *the* topic of Kant’s text. His focus, while perfectly justifiable within its own boundaries, leaves obscure the core of the *Beweisgrund*, namely that it is a project about *proving the existence of God*: the proofs themselves never receive any serious analysis. Heidegger, in discussing a book about proving the existence of God, never slows down to ask what this very

⁷ I should note, however, that much of Ortiz-Mena’s scholarly work also focuses on the question of being, especially the distinction between existence and reality.

⁸ *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* 29

⁹ *Pathmarks* 341.

endeavor could mean, even though he grants that it is a serious question. And if this indication of Heidegger's limitations is a fair one – Heidegger, who at least *recognizes* the question – then it falls all the harder on scholars who see no issue, i.e. who do not stop to wonder why Kant would be writing on the topic or why it would involve a full-blown theory of being. If the proofs really are the “secret goad”¹⁰ prodding forward Kant's work, then surely the proofs should have been approached and investigated on their own terms and according to their own sense.

That project - investigation of the precise relation between being and God's existence, i.e., an *analytic of rational theology* - is precisely why this book exists. Without such an analytic not only will the nature of the theistic proofs themselves remain obscure, but we who inherit the *consequences* of those proofs may remain blind to those consequences (because we still take the sense of the proofs “for granted”). The idea here, once again, is to use Kant as a guide for developing positive concepts of our own. And if it is necessary to appreciate Kant's overall development on the topic of the proofs in order to understand his more radical critical conclusions, then a reexamination of the early texts should be the best (not to say *only*) first step towards an adequate interpretation of the proofs themselves. That gives the *Beweisgrund*, and particularly its third and final section, a certain priority.

II. The Precritical Critique of Rational Theology (*Beweisgrund* III)

The *method* of the *Beweisgrund* is already critical, although its *intentions* are not. By “critical” one can mean either the edifice presented by Kant from 1781 onwards (always

¹⁰ *ibid* 344. Kanterian admits to stealing this phrase (retranslated as ‘secret thorn’) for the subtitle of his book; see *Kant, God, and Metaphysics* xv.

characteristically in a state of redrafting and revision) or simply his overall approach to philosophical problems, already briefly discussed in the last chapter. I mean it here in this latter sense. There is a deep continuity in how Kant deals with such problems across his career - for example, here is his characterization of his critical approach in the 1781 “Antinomy”:

The dogmatic analysis [of the problems of cosmology] is therefore not just uncertain, but impossible. But the critical one, which can be completely certain, considers the question not objectively but rather according to the foundations of cognition upon which it is grounded.¹¹

Critique first explicitly avoids any affirmation or denial (“Bejahung oder Verneinung”) of any conclusion on the question at issue, to an extent even ignores the arguments on either side. The real work, and the only approach which can really be “certain,” is rather to examine the grounds of the whole issue. The foundations must become clear, exhaustively so, before any affirmations or denials can even be considered much less admitted. This is from 1781, yet we may find much the same sentiment expressed almost twenty years earlier in the *Beweisgrund*:

...as an inquiring understanding, when it has fallen onto the trail of investigation, will not be satisfied until everything around it is clear and until, if I may so express myself, the circle which circumscribes its question completely closes, so no one will regard an endeavor such as the present, related to logical exactness in such important cognitions, as useless or superfluous – especially since there are many cases wherein, without such carefulness, the application of their concepts would remain unsure and doubtful.¹²

Here Kant speaks of “closing the circle” around a question rather than considering its ground, but the thought is the same: any attempt to answer a question is necessarily uncertain until all of the relevant issues have been rounded up and accounted for. Thus Kant’s early texts on rational

¹¹A484/B512, in 3:335. “Die dogmatische Auflösung ist also nicht etwa ungewiß, sondern unmöglich. Die kritische aber, welche völlig gewiß sein kann, betrachtet die Frage gar nicht objektiv, sondern nach dem Fundamente der Erkenntnis, worauf sie gegründet ist.”

¹²2:161-2. “...da ein forschender Verstand, wenn er einmal auf die Spur der Untersuchung gerathen ist, nicht eher befriedigt wird, als bis alles um ihn licht ist und bis sich, wenn ich mich so ausdrücken darf, der Zirkel, der seine Frage umgrenzt, völlig schließt, so wird niemand eine Bemühung, die wie die gegenwärtige auf die logische Genauigkeit in einem so sehr wichtigen Erkenntnisse verwandt ist, für unnütz und überflüssig halten, vornehmlich weil es viele Fälle giebt, da ohne solche Sorgfalt die Anwendung seiner Begriffe unsicher und zweifelhaft bleiben würde..”

theology, above all the *Beweisgrund*, are not just pushing forward dogmatic theological conclusions. Even where they *aim at* dogmatic conclusions they do so by way of a highly nuanced approach. They deploy a comprehensive method that closes the boundaries of their circle, or (said with other metaphors) “reviews the route of their voyage,” or “guards their borders”:

[Metaphysics is] a darksome ocean without shores and without beacons where one must begin just as the sailor on unmapped seas – who, as soon as he sets foot on land somewhere, reviews his journey and investigates whether or not some unnoticed sea current has thrown off his course, regardless of all the deliberation which the art of navigation may ever command.¹³

[One upside of metaphysics is] to perceive whether the task [at hand] is even determined by what one can know, and which sort of relationship the question has to empirical concepts, upon which all of our judgments must at all times rest. Insofar as metaphysics is a science of the borders of human reason - and since a small country at all times has plenty of borders, generally it means all the more to know and claim well its possessions than to blindly go out upon conquests - just so this use of the science mentioned is the most unrecognized and likewise the most important, as it is reached only quite late and after long experience.¹⁴

For our purposes, the value of Kant’s dogmatic conclusions matters far less than the results of this distinctively critical mode of examination.

The *Beweisgrund*’s Third Section is the fruit borne by this approach. Although it initially appears to be a short afterthought appended to his own proof (Section I) and his natural theology (Section II), in fact it is one of the most novel achievements of the period: an attempt at a systematic critique of all rational theology. The importance of this section is already indicated by

¹³ 2:66. “Ein finsterer Ocean ohne Ufer und ohne Leuchttürme, wo man es wie der Seefahrer auf einem unbeschrifteten Meere anfangen muß, welcher, so bald er irgendwo Land betritt, seine Fahrt prüft und untersucht, ob nicht etwa unbemerkte Seeströme seinen Lauf verwirrt haben, aller Behutsamkeit ungeachtet, die die Kunst zu Schiffen nur immer gebieten mag.”

¹⁴ From *Dreams of a Spirit-Seeker*, 2:367-8. “...einzusehen, ob die Aufgabe aus demjenigen, was man wissen kann, auch bestimmt sei und welches Verhältniß die Frage zu den Erfahrungsbegriffen habe, darauf sich alle unsre Urtheile jederzeit stützen müssen. In so fern ist die Metaphysik eine Wissenschaft von den Grenzen der menschlichen Vernunft, und da ein kleines Land jederzeit viel Grenze hat, überhaupt auch mehr daran liegt seine Besitzungen wohl zu kennen und zu behaupten, als blindlings auf Eroberungen auszugehen, so ist dieser Nutzen der erwähnten Wissenschaft der unbekannteste und zugleich der wichtigste, wie er denn auch nur ziemlich spät und nach langer Erfahrung erreicht wird.”

the title of the book itself, *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund* – literally, “The One Possible Probative Ground.” Kant does proffer his own outline for an “ontological” proof of God’s existence in this text (as discussed below), but if that were his only concern then he could perfectly well have titled his book “*Ein Beweisgrund*,” “a ground of proof.” Instead it is “*Der einzig mögliche*,” the one and *only* one possible.¹⁵ If he is to back up his title, not only does Kant have to present a valid argumentative outline for his own proof but he has to show that no *alternative* approaches for a theistic proof can be possible:

Conviction in the great truth, There is a God, if it should have the highest grade of mathematical certainty, has this property: that only through a single way can it be obtained. And it gives this reflection the merit that, as soon as one is convinced that no further option of the sort is possible, philosophical efforts must unite themselves on a single probative ground, in order to better the flaws which may come into the execution of the same rather than to discard it.¹⁶

If he is to unite philosophy around a single approach (his own), then Kant must not only establish that approach as viable but completely “close the circle” around the very project of proving the existence of God itself. It requires him to inquire into where *any* proof of the sort can come from, to conceptually fix it from out of its roots in reason, and only then to determine its viability. This is what he attempts in the nine dense pages at the very end of the *Beweisgrund*. Even if the argumentation is not worked out in detail, with much of it being quite compressed and the development of the discussion being somewhat scattered, the very idea of “closing the circle” around the proofs in this way constitutes a new step in the history of rational theology. It is the first critique, and by the same stroke the first *system*, of the theistic proofs.

¹⁵ Martin Schönfeld has his own account of this title, which he finds (for good reason) somewhat puzzling. See his *Philosophy of the Young Kant* at 192-5.

¹⁶ 2:155. “Die Überzeugung von der großen Wahrheit: es ist ein Gott, wenn sie den höchsten Grad mathematischer Gewißheit haben soll, hat dieses Eigene: daß sie nur durch einen einzigen Weg kann erlangt werden, und giebt dieser Betrachtung den Vorzug, daß die philosophische Bemühungen sich bei einem einzigen Beweisgrunde vereinigen müssen, um die Fehler, die in der Ausführung desselben möchten eingelaufen sein, vielmehr zu verbessern als ihn zu verwerfen, so bald man überzeugt ist, daß keine Wahl unter mehr dergleichen möglich sei.”

III. Kant's First System of the Proofs

Kant's attempt at a complete system of all the possible probative grounds for demonstrating God's existence, and the "argument" for that system, is deceptively terse. It consists of a single paragraph at the beginning of *Beweisgrund* III:

All the probative grounds for the existence of God can only be taken either from the intellectual concepts [Verstandesbegriffe] of the merely possible, or from the empirical concepts [Erfahrungsbegriffe] of the existent. In the first case it concludes either from the possible as a ground to the existence of God as a result, or from the possible as a result to the divine existence as a ground. In the second case, in turn, it concludes either from that whose existence we experience to merely the existence of a first and independent cause, but to the divine properties of the same by means of the parsing of this concept, or both existence as well as the properties will be immediately deduced from what experience teaches.¹⁷

This is short and dense to the point that it does not even seem to be an *argument*, but more like a pure declarative statement: either a proof comes from concepts of the understanding, and that in two ways, or from concepts of experience, and that also in two ways, and somehow nothing else is to be allowed. Yet the details of an argument can be teased out, especially with some judicious use of discussions from the 1770 *Sensible and Intelligible Worlds*.¹⁸

The core of Kant's argument, if I understand him, is that *the limits of the proofs for the existence of God are the same as the limits of the sources and uses of our concepts*. The two

¹⁷ 2:155-6: "Alle Beweisgründe für das Dasein Gottes können nur entweder aus den Verstandesbegriffen des bloß Möglichen, oder aus dem Erfahrungsbegriffe des Existirenden, hergenommen werden. In dem ersteren Falle wird entweder von dem Möglichen als einem Grunde auf das Dasein Gottes als eine Folge, oder aus dem Möglichen als einer Folge auf die göttliche Existenz als einen Grund geschlossen. Im zweiten Falle wird wiederum entweder aus demjenigen, dessen Dasein wir erfahren, bloß auf die Existenz einer ersten und unabhängigen Ursache, vermittelst der Zergliederung dieses Begriffs aber auf die göttliche Eigenschaften derselben geschlossen, oder es werden aus dem, was die Erfahrung lehrt, sowohl das Dasein als auch die Eigenschaften desselben unmittelbar gefolgert."

¹⁸ The reader may object, of course, that there is some danger in utilizing this later text to interpret the earlier one when it has notably different goals and commitments from seven years prior. I admit the point, but the basic distinctions that Kant has in mind seem to me general enough to cut across both texts. We can apply the *comments* of 1770 without importing the *conclusions*.

empirical proofs mark out, so to speak, the opposite limits of the use of empirical concepts, with nothing meaningful in the middle, while the intellectual proofs mark out the only two ways an intellectual concept could be so used. This gives us *four* possible ways (“probative grounds”) to approach demonstrating God’s existence. Before I develop Kant’s argument, however, a word on those “grounds” themselves and in particular the terms for them that Kant deploys.

A. A Note on Terminology

One aspect of the *Beweisgrund* which may come as a shock to readers more familiar with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and which has been explained away if not totally ignored by much of the secondary literature, is that Kant’s terminology for the proofs is radically different from one text to the other. In the “Ideal” of the *Critique*, to be discussed in detail in Chapter VI, one finds the famous trio of speculative proofs which Kant calls “ontological,” “cosmological,” and “physicotheological”¹⁹ - a proof from mere concepts, a proof from the mere existence of contingent entities, and a proof from the details of nature. In the *Beweisgrund* not only are there four proofs (and not three), but the same terms sometimes indicate totally different arguments. The “cosmological” proof of the *Critique* is never properly named in the *Beweisgrund*: the briefest description it receives is as the proof “from the empirical concept of existence via the analysis of the concept of an independent thing,”²⁰ although in the *New Dilucidation* of 1755

¹⁹ The fact that, as is already fairly well recognized, the “physicotheological” proof of the First *Critique* later becomes the physico*teleological* proof of the Third should already indicate that Kant’s terminology is far from set in stone, as we shall see.

²⁰ 2:162: “...aus dem Erfahrungsbegriffe vom Dasein vermittelt der Auflösung des Begriffes von einem unabhängigen Dinge...”

Kant briefly alludes to it as the proof “from contingency.”²¹ It is precisely the “physicotheological” proof of the *Critique*, however, that is initially termed “cosmological.” Meanwhile, the “ontological” proof of 1781 actually turns out to be a kind of fusion between two rather distinct modes of presentation, what Kant calls the “Cartesian” and the “ontological,” the latter being his own preferred mode of proof (this fusion is made once Kant realizes that, at least in a speculative mode, the two cannot really be separated). To sum that up, in proper order, from 1763 to 1781 the Cartesian and ontological proofs are combined into one (“ontological”) argument, the proof from contingency becomes the “cosmological” proof, and the original “cosmological” proof becomes physicotheological.

All of these details will be discussed further in the next chapters, but the instabilities in the terms will make any such commentary at all quite difficult. To settle the terminology a bit for the reader’s benefit, in my own commentary I will stick to a consistent set of terms whenever possible. Following the young Kant I keep the Cartesian and ontological proofs disambiguated, so that anytime I speak of an “ontological” proof without qualification I mean Kant’s old proof “from possibility.” To avoid unneeded confusion I will try to simply drop the term “cosmological” altogether, referring to the two empirical approaches as the “contingency proof” and “physicotheological proof” respectively. To sum all of this up:

²¹ Cf 1:414.

Table 1. Terms for the Theistic Proofs

Kant's Terms, 1755-63	Kant's Terms, 1781	My Terms
Cartesian Proof	Ontological Proof	Cartesian Proof
Ontological Proof		Ontological Proof
Proof "from Contingency"?	Cosmological Proof	Contingency Proof
Cosmological Proof	Physicotheological Proof	Physicotheological Proof

I will not presume to alter any of Kant's own writings when I quote them, of course (so as not to force a terminological univocity that isn't there), but this note and my attempt to compromise between the periods should help minimize ambiguities wherever possible.

B. The Argument of *Beweisgrund* III

If Kant's argument is that the number of proofs is delimited by the sources and uses of our concepts, then the first move in the text above obviously lies in the distinction between empirical and intellectual concepts. For this Kant, that is a very strong distinction indeed. In 1770 Kant will write concerning the former: "The common concepts of experience are called empirical, and [its] objects phenomena, while the laws of both experience and of all sensitive cognitions generally are called laws of phenomena."²² That opening genitive should be read very strongly - empirical concepts are *from experience*, and it is precisely their sensible origins that define them. They will never lose that mark, whatever we may do to them: "[These] cognitions

²² 2:394. "Experientiae conceptus communes dicuntur empirici, et obiecta phaenomena, leges autem tam experientiae quam generatim omnis cognitionis sensitivae vocantur leges phaenomenorum."

must always be considered as sensitive [cognitions], however great the logical use for the understanding may be concerning them. For they are called sensitive on account of their genesis... Hence the most general empirical laws are nothing but sensual...²³ On the other side, intellectual concepts have their origin from nowhere but the understanding alone:

But with respect to what attains to such strictly intellectual [concepts], in which the use of the understanding is real - such concepts, of either objects or of relations, are given by the very nature of the understanding and are not abstracted from any use of the senses, nor contain any form of sensitive cognition.²⁴

The distinction between empirical and intellectual concepts, to emphasize Kant's point, is not about specificity versus generality. What matters is *where* the concepts in question are drawn from, and concepts can never change their genealogy: "And so empirical concepts are not made intellectual in the real sense, and do not exceed the species of sensitive cognition, by reduction to greater universality - rather, however far they may ascend by abstraction, they remain sensitive indefinitely."²⁵

But in pointing this out, Kant also tacitly admits that empirical concepts may be considerably modified. He further hints at this in a short discussion clarifying the different senses in which a concept might be "abstract":

But here it is necessary to note the greatest ambiguity of the expression "abstract"... Namely, [regarding intellectual concepts] it should properly be said: to abstract away from things, not to abstract something. The former implies that in a certain concept we do not attend to other things in whatever way tied to it; the latter, however, that it is not given except in the concrete, and thus that it is separated out from things conjoined [to it]. Hence the intellectual concept abstracts away from everything sensitive, is not abstracted out from sensitive [cognitions], and would perhaps

²³ 2:393. "Maximi autem momenti hic est, notasse, cognitiones semper habendas esse pro sensitivis, quantuscunque circa illas intellectui fuerit usus logicus. Nam vocantur sensitivae propter genesis... Hinc generalissimae leges empiricae sunt nihilo secius sensuales..."

²⁴ 2:394. "Quod autem intellectualia stricte talia attinet, in quibus usus intellectus est realis, conceptus tales tam obiectorum quam respectuum dantur per ipsam naturam intellectus, neque ab ullo sensuum usu sunt abstracti, nec formam ullam continent cognitionis sensitivae, qua talis."

²⁵ Ibid. "Conceptus itaque empirici per reductionem ad maiorem universalitatem non fiunt intellectuales in sensu reali, et non excedunt speciem cognitionis sensitivae, sed, quousque abstrahendo adscendant, sensitivi manent in indefinitum."

more rightly be called “abstracting” than “abstract.” Whereby it is more prudent to name intellectual concepts “pure ideas,” and on the other hand name those concepts given only empirically “abstract.”²⁶

The intention of the passage is to further isolate intellectual concepts from empirical ones, but the other consequence is that *all* empirical concepts are “abstract” in the sense that they have been, at least to some extent, separated out from their original context. Even so, there can be relative differences at the level of abstraction.²⁷ Empirical concepts can, with a bit of work, be quite thoroughly emptied of specific content, to the point that we might presumably arrive even at concepts like that of mere phenomena in general. Thus at the extremes we can consider a contrast between “maximally refined” concepts of this sort and “full fat” concepts with their empirical contexts mostly left intact.

With such a contrast in mind, I turn first to the two theistic proofs “from the empirical concepts of the existent” in the hopes of reconstructing the argument. To repeat, Kant says that any empirical approach either “concludes... from that whose existence we experience to merely the existence of a first and independent cause, but to the divine properties of the same by means of the parsing of this concept,” or “both existence as well as the properties will be immediately deduced from what experience teaches.” That is, the empirical concepts of existing entities are not quite working in the same way. In the first case (what I’m calling the “contingency” proof) what we use from experience is *mere existence*, while in the second case (the

²⁶ 2:394. “Necesse autem hic est, maximam ambiguitatem vocis abstracti notare, quam, ne nostram de intellectualibus disquisitionem maculet, antea abstergendam esse satius duco. Nempe proprie dicendum esset: ab aliquibus abstrahere, non aliquid abstrahere. Prius denotat, quod in conceptu quodam ad alia quomocunque ipsi nexa non attendamus; posterius autem, quod non detur, nisi in concreto et ita, ut a coniunctis separetur. Hinc conceptus intellectualis abstrahit ab omni sensitivo, non abstrahitur a sensitivis, et forsitan rectius diceretur abstrahens quam abstractus. Quare intellectuales consultius est ideas puras, qui autem empirice tantum dantur conceptus, abstractos nominare.”

²⁷ Kant does not speak much on this, but we might easily imagine examples - e.g., “animal” is more abstracted than “Bullmastiff.”

“physicotheological” proof) experience also “teaches” us various *properties*. What Kant is hinting at - and this will be confirmed with further consideration of the proofs in the next Chapter - is that the proofs are based upon different levels of empirical-conceptual abstraction. On the one hand we may abstract away from all the qualities of empirical entities as well as all the relations that those entities may have to their contexts, and consider them purely as *phenomenal existences*. All we then have left of them is their mere existence as such, which in this context amounts to their *being-caused*. That absolute maximum of empirical abstraction, a pure distillate of causal existence with all other properties left out, gives us the empirical route to “a first and independent cause,” which must then be supplemented (as we will further discuss) by “the analysis of the concept.” On the other hand, we may take the same entities with all the complexity of their properties, their qualities and interrelated commerce in nature, left intact. We are then considering these natural entities as an articulated whole, or at least as much of a whole as experience has “taught” us. This level of minimum abstraction and maximum complexity, nature left with all its richness and interactivity, is in turn the basis for an empirical route to what Kant will later call a “rational author” of nature.

Kant’s implied argument for the completeness of the empirical side of the system would thus amount to the thought that concepts drawn from sensible experience cannot be modified to reach a God in any other way. The two proofs mark out, so to speak, the opposite extreme limits of empirical cognition: one proof demands a total austerity of given content beyond the mere existence of contingent entities, while the other demands a maximal and overwhelming complexity of given content within a whole natural world of entities. Going anywhere in the “middle” would not introduce a new method so much as dilute the current ones; the “middle,” so

to speak, drops out of theological relevance.²⁸ Wherever we go within the concepts of experience, there is - the argument seems to go - no further route to a proof to be found. We may abstract those concepts to greater and greater heights, leave them unrefined, modify their contents as we like, but we do not thereby find any new approaches. We have only the paths through causal abstraction or the concreteness of nature.

But it should be noted that, for Kant, the empirical approach is to some extent always already doomed by its reliance on empirical *concepts*. Especially by 1770, the proper concept of God is even distinctively *alien* to such concepts. In another passage in the *Sensible and Intelligible Worlds* Kant says that the concept of “ens summum, DEUS,”²⁹ is the intellectual concept of noumenal perfection considered in a theoretical sense - which is to say, among other things, that the concept is *distinctively* intellectual. This is also implied in the earlier texts, including the *Beweisgrund*. In 1763 not only are there no other ways to try to reach God through empirical concepts, but the conceptual limitations of each proof will also be what leads (in Kant’s eyes) to their inability to establish the *divine properties* of the first cause or world-author. As we shall see, the contingency proof has no content to do so at all except by sneaking in an intellectual concept as a cheat, and the physicotheological proof, even if it maintains all the richness of experience, will still always lag behind the superlative degree of content that it would need. Even in 1763 the concept of God is kept intellectual de facto, if not by outright decree.

Kant’s division of the two proofs from intellectual concepts requires still more judicious reading. His explicit statement - that it is the approach which “concludes either from the possible as a ground to the existence of God as a result, or from the possible as a result to the divine

²⁸ As I discuss in Chapter IV, Kant will attempt to “marry” these proofs at various points. But that does not make the two meet in any middle so much as it tries to render the extremes into a unity.

²⁹ 2:396.

existence as a ground” - has something to it, but is obviously more written for prosaic symmetry (ground to result, result to ground) than strict clarity. Kant’s own proof, what he calls “ontological,” does indeed (as we will see) move from “the possible” as a contingent fact to an existence which grounds that fact, so that it matches the second half of the description. But the procedure of the other intellectual proof, what Kant calls “Cartesian,” is quite different.

Elsewhere Kant always describes this first mode of proof purely as demonstration via the logical analysis of God’s concept, e.g.:

...the hypothetical existence therein must be capable of being found through parsing of this concept; for there is no other derivation of a consequence from a concept of the possible but through logical analysis. But then existence must be included as a predicate within the possible.³⁰

The language of “ground” and “result” is odd: it is not that the possibility is a “ground” which “results” in an existence (God), but that the mere logical consideration of this entity’s possibility is supposed to show it to be always already existing. Again, Kant’s prose and economy of expression in the passage above should not distract from the intention, namely to exhaust the possible routes to proving God’s existence.

Read while leaning on it, so to speak, the passage still has a case to make. What both intellectual proofs share, on Kant’s reading, is a common *concept* - namely God as “ens summum,” a most perfect or most real entity,³¹ i.e. the entity to which all primitive positive qualities belong (either as determinations or as results)³² - which is what makes the delimitation

³⁰ 2:156. “...so muß durch die Zergliederung dieses Begriffes die gedachte Existenz darin können angetroffen werden; denn es giebt keine andere Ableitung einer Folge aus einem Begriffe des Möglichen als durch die logische Auflösung. Alsdann müßte aber das Dasein wie ein Prädicat in dem Möglichen enthalten sein.”

³¹ Kant expresses some reservations about the concept of “perfection” (Vollkommenheit) at, e.g., 2:90 in the first section of the *Beweisgrund*, but the issue is not crucial for present purposes.

³² 2:86: “Nun kann aber in dem allerrealsten Wesen keine Realrepugnanz oder positiver Widerstreit seiner eigenen Bestimmungen sein, weil die Folge davon eine Beraubung oder Mangel sein würde, welches seiner höchsten Realität widerspricht, und da, wenn alle Realitäten in demselben als Bestimmungen lägen, ein solcher Widerstreit entstehen müßte, so können sie nicht insgesamt als Prädicate in ihm sein, mithin weil sie doch alle durch ihn gegeben sind, so werden sie entweder zu seinen Bestimmungen oder Folgen gehören.”

of approaches rather simple. Unlike the two empirical proofs, whose problem remains the lack of any concept to match the necessary entity indicated by the relevant existences, here we already have the right concept or at least the right conceptual material. God, for the early Kant, is the intellectual concept par excellence. And, since we cannot hope to empirically *discover* an entity matching this concept, there seem to be only two ways to use such a concept to reach an existence. Most obviously we may ask where that intellectual concept or indeed *any* concept comes from, i.e. ask for a ground for “the possible” as such, which results in the proof for an existing ground for all possibility. Beyond that there is nothing else to try except somehow “seeing” existence within the concept directly, i.e. claiming that God’s mere possibility already implies God’s existence. There is no symmetry in the sense that the approaches can just be reversed, but there is in both cases a move from mere possibility to existence - either in the sense of searching for an existing entity as a “ground,” or via the paralogism of taking existence as a real quality. And, so the argument goes, there seems to be no other way that an intellectual concept could be used (on its own) to reach a divine existence.

We end up, then, with four and only four possible routes of argumentation. We run out of grounds to prove the existence of God, Kant is apparently arguing, because we run out of kinds of concepts and ways to use those concepts. But as with all arguments of this sort, the premise can be challenged - i.e., there may be another source of concepts or another use of our concepts which could still expand the collection. Indeed, as I discuss in Chapter V, Kant himself will enact just this kind of expansion a few years later, with the introduction of a “moral proof” that shatters his earlier attempt to close the circle. Still, that does not mean that we need pay no more attention to this system. It is not only that Kant’s later discussions are, so to speak, built in its

ruins, but that we ourselves ought not drop the question of systematicity. If the ultimate question for the present project is to understand the nature of these proofs and where they are coming from, crucial to the effort will be seeing what their limits are and how they hang together as a whole. Indeed, the shortcomings of this argument are a call to pay greater attention to the sources, and uses, of our own concepts.

Further concerns with “systematicity” and related questions will have to await a more detailed account of the contents of this initial system, along with the novelties introduced by the *moral* proof to come later. That account is the work of the following two Chapters, dealing first with the proofs from intellectual concepts (the Cartesian and ontological) and then the proofs from empirical concepts (contingency and physicotheological). They should make especially clear not only the details of Kant’s efforts, but also that the roots of his entire problematic can be found in *Descartes*.

CHAPTER III. The Proofs from Intellectual Concepts

This chapter, as much as the one to follow, serves a number of purposes. The most obvious is simply to discuss the two proofs “from the intellectual concepts of the merely possible,” introduced in the previous chapter, as the early Kant understood them. Yet that alone will not do. *All* of the theistic proofs Kant deals with, I argue, derive from Descartes - indeed, Kant’s connections to Descartes are startling at moments - so that consideration of the proofs’ roots in Descartes and (where useful) how they manifest in the intervening tradition will do much to drive the discussion forward. All of the proofs, but especially these, will therefore also require digressions into the nuances of Descartes’ interpretation of being, how he takes existence and indeed mere possibility. Yet at the same time, everything done here has the most important job of preparing us for how Kant’s approach to the proofs will change in his later works.

The Cartesian and ontological proofs, on their face, share a certain commonality (to the point that later on Kant will simply make them dovetail). Both, it would appear, are a priori and performed from “mere possibles.” But what will start to suggest itself here and become increasingly prominent throughout the rest of this book is just how *exceptional* the Cartesian proof really is. Whereas all the other proofs (including the ontological) have deep connections to particular understandings of being, the Cartesian is practically inert. Yet at the same time, if the other proofs constantly ride upon a demand for a certain kind of existence - that is, upon some *necessity* - then it is the Cartesian which really centers upon “necessity” as its theme.

I. The Cartesian Proof

In *Beweisgrund* III Kant describes this first method of demonstration via intellectual concepts in brief:

If [the proof] is to be deduced from concepts of the merely possible as a ground to existence as a consequence, then the hypothetical existence therein must be capable of being found through parsing of this concept; for there is no other derivation of a consequence from a concept of the possible but through logical analysis. But then existence must be included as a predicate within the possible.¹

To put it in terms he will apply later, Kant understands this proof to infer God's existence by a priori logical analysis of God's mere concept. This text, as well as shorter passages on the same topic in the *New Dilucidation* (1755) and elsewhere will have to be discussed in greater detail. I insist on the point that Kant refers to this proof not as "ontological" but as *Cartesian* ("We meanwhile have a proof which is built upon this ground, namely the so-called Cartesian one"),² distinguishing it from the original ontological one below; as previously discussed, I myself follow Kant's early terminology in this.

As a more general note before I begin, it is important to respect these discussions *as their own texts*. One of the more persistent sources of interpretive distraction in reading the young Kant consists in the hidden prejudice that discussion of the early texts must somehow be justified by way of connection to the later ones, as if we should be able to find "first drafts" of various parts of the *Critique* from twenty years earlier.³ I will have more to say on its relation to the

¹ 2:156. "Wenn aus dem Begriffe des bloß Möglichen als einem Grunde das Dasein als eine Folgerung soll geschlossen werden, so muß durch die Zergliederung dieses Begriffes die gedachte Existenz darin können angetroffen werden; denn es giebt keine andere Ableitung einer Folge aus einem Begriffe des Möglichen als durch die logische Auflösung. Alsdann müßte aber das Dasein wie ein Prädicat in dem Möglichen enthalten sein."

² 2:156. "Indessen haben wir einen berühmten Beweis, der auf diesen Grund erbauet ist, nämlich den so genannten Cartesianischen."

³ Cassirer, for example, seems to read the arguments of early and late texts as virtually equivalent, save only that Kant seems to preserve some variation of an ontological proof (see *Kant's Life and Thought*, 65). Heidegger's treatment, along similar lines, was previously discussed (*Basic Problems of Phenomenology* 27).

Critique later, but for now it is sufficient to point out that Kant's treatment of this proof in the *Beweisgrund* - which I discuss below - is strikingly different from the *Critique*, albeit less in the nature of his attack on it than in why that attack is in the book. The later Kant grants the "ontological" (nee Cartesian) proof quite a special status:

...this [Cartesian/ontological proof] yet always contains the only possible probative ground (provided that only a speculative proof finds its stand anywhere) which no human reason can bypass.

...thus the ontological proof from nothing but pure concepts of reason is the only one possible, if any proof of a proposition raised so far above all empirical use of the understanding is possible at all.⁴

In the only two places in the text where the title of his old book is quoted verbatim, it is to declare that *all* speculative proofs must go through this one (the "einzig mögliche Beweisgrund"). Thus even if Kant will try to disqualify this proof here using admittedly more or less the same tactic as in 1763, the *result* (the function) of such a disqualification has a far wider scope: insofar as he tries to link all of the other proofs to the Cartesian one (something he does *not* do in the earlier text), the disqualification of this proof is the disqualification of *any* speculative theistic proof at all. It is to discredit the theological ambitions of speculative metaphysics in the space of two moves - first to elevate the Cartesian proof to the most fundamental role therein, to the point that this proof simply *is* speculative theology,⁵ and then to show up this "Beweisgrund" as hollow. The reuse of the old 1763 objection in the *Critique* thus occurs against a radically different backdrop, where the Cartesian proof must be placed among the most necessary and fundamental illusions of reason.⁶ Yet in that old book itself, when Kant

⁴ A625/B653 in 3:416, and A630/B658 in 3:419. "...mithin dieser immer noch den einzig möglichen Beweisgrund (wofern überall nur ein speculativer Beweis stattfindet) enthalte, den keine menschliche Vernunft vorbeigehen kann." "...so ist der ontologische Beweis aus lauter reinen Vernunftbegriffen der einzige mögliche, wenn überall nur ein Beweis von einem so weit über allen empirischen Verstandesgebrauch erhabenen Satze möglich ist."

⁵ See my Chapter VI.

⁶ See my Chapter VII.

introduces his reexamination of “existence” (in order to attack this proof in much the same way as later) the strong implication is that the proof is the product of a mere *mistake*:

In these reflections I would thus not presume unto the analysis of the very simple and well-understood concept of existence, were it not the case exactly here that this omission can encourage confusion and critical errors. It is assured that [this concept] can without consideration be applied in the remaining whole of worldly wisdom rudimentarily, as it occurs in common use – the only question excluded being that of absolutely necessary and contingent existence, as here a more subtle investigation has drawn mistaken conclusions, which have diffused themselves over one of the loftiest parts of worldly wisdom, out of an unfortunately contrived but otherwise very pure concept.⁷

Kant is here almost apologetic for having to go into such depth on the concepts behind the argument, given that - as it will soon turn out - he thinks it amounts to just a conceptual or linguistic error which has perpetuated itself through “subtle” (i.e. bad) philosophy. The Cartesian proof is thus by no means something we necessarily fall into due to the nature of human reason itself, as in the *Critique*. It is a mere piece of confusion. Kant here needs to prepare a conceptual clean slate upon which to present *his own* proof (discussed below), so that the Cartesian proof is only refuted to save Kant’s proof the trouble of being compared to it (as they both employ misleadingly similar notions of “necessary existence”); otherwise it has no particular importance. I say this in advance only to emphasize that if and when the young Kant agrees with his older counterpart (which happens often enough), he need not do so for the same purposes. And getting a proper grip on Kant’s view of the proofs and rational theology over his career will require appreciating just those purposes.

⁷ 2:70-71. “Ich würde mich daher in diesen Betrachtungen nicht bis zur Auflösung des sehr einfachen und wohlverstandnen Begriffs des Daseins versteigen, wenn nicht hier gerade der Fall wäre, wo diese Verabsäumung Verwirrung und wichtige Irrthümer veranlassen kann. Es ist sicher, daß er in der übrigen ganzen Weltweisheit so unentwickelt, wie er im gemeinen Gebrauch vorkommt, ohne Bedenken könne angebracht werden, die einzige Frage vom absolut nothwendigen und zufälligen Dasein ausgenommen, denn hier hat eine subtilere Nachforschung aus einem unglücklich gekünstelten, sonst sehr reinen Begriff irrige Schlüsse gezogen, die sich über einen der erhabensten Theile der Weltweisheit verbreitet haben.”

The main purpose of my present discussion is to get a sense for both the strength and the limitations of Kant's distinctive approach to this proof as it emerges in 1763. It will turn out (and this will be a common theme) that Kant is actually extremely close to Descartes in certain respects, something that can be further appreciated via examination of Descartes' various accounts of being and existence. It is actually via reasoning extremely close to Descartes' own that Kant is able to show that the "Meditation V" proof is highly dubious - but that does not prevent Descartes from taking the same proof in another direction in later texts. What the early Kant's limitations suggest is that the issue at the heart of the Cartesian proof is not perfection but *necessity*, that the God at issue *just is* the necessary entity.

A. Perfection and Existence

I will not yet excessively rehearse the argument of "Meditation V," which is the most obvious target of Kant's comments (even if he perhaps never read it). The text is well-known:

It is certain that I discover the idea of God, i.e. of a most perfect entity, at me no less than the idea of any figure or number; nor do I understand any less clearly and distinctly that it pertains to its nature that it always exists... and hence... the existence of God should be at me at minimum by the grade of certainty as regards that by which the truths of mathematics have been hitherto.⁸

Insofar as existing is a perfection, I can be certain that a most perfect entity exists; the logical consequence, existence, is drawn directly from the concept.

⁸ AT VII 65-6. "Certe ejus ideam, nempe entis summe perfecti, non minus apud me invenio, quàm ideam cujusvis figurae aut numeri; nec minus clare & distincte intelligo ad ejus naturam pertinere ut semper existat, quàm id quòd de aliquâ figurâ aut numero demonstro ad ejus figurae aut numeri naturam etiam pertinere; ac proinde, quamvis non omnia, quae superioribus hisce diebus meditatus sum, vera essent, in eodem ad minimum certitudinis gradu esse deberet apud me Dei existentia, in quo fuerunt hactenus Mathematicae veritates." I discuss my translation of "apud me" as "at me" below.

In tracing out the historical context of Kant's treatment of this proof, what may be surprising to a scholar of prior modern thought is just how nakedly *Cartesian* Kant's treatment of the Cartesian proof is. By contrast, the mainline German scholastic approach on the Cartesian proof up to Kant's day was to place the central problematic of the proof upon proving God's noncontradiction (coherence) first. Leibniz raises this question as early as 1676, e.g.:

Descartes' reasoning concerning the existence of a most perfect Entity supposes that a most perfect Entity can be understood, or is possible. For with this posited, that a notion of this sort is given, it follows immediately that this Entity exists, since we have crafted it such as to immediately contain existence. Yet the question is raised whether it is in our power to craft such an Entity, or whether such a notion, with respect to the thing, is, and can be understood clearly and distinctly without contradiction. For adversaries will say that such a notion of a most perfect Entity, or of an Entity that exists by Essence, is a chimera.⁹

This point is focused and sharpened in discussions over the next thirty years,¹⁰ with the Leibnizian modification of the Cartesian proof is most evident in the highly extended version in Baumgarten's *Metaphysics*. Most of the groundwork of Baumgarten's proof is actually done in the "Ontologia," long before the "Theologia naturalis"¹¹; all of the emphasis is placed on removing the risk of God's impossibility, with the actual jump to existence achieved in a simple move at §810 ("Existence is a reality compossible with the essence and with the rest of the

⁹ "Cartesii ratiocinatio de Entis perfectissimi existentia supposuit Ens perfectissimum intelligi posse sive possibile esse. Hoc enim posito quod detur ejusmodi notio statim sequitur existere illud Ens quoniam ipsum tale finximus ut statim existentiam contineat. Quaeritur autem an sit in nostra potestate tale Ens fingere sive an talis notio sit a parte rei clareque ac distincte sine contradictione intelligi possit. Dicent enim adversarii talem notionem Entis perfectissimi sive Entis per Essentiam existentis esse chimaeram." From "That the Most Perfect Entity Exists" in *Die philosophischen Schriften VII* 262.

¹⁰ Cf, e.g., the 1684 "Meditations" at *Die philosophischen Schriften IV*, 424, and the 1704 *New Essays* of at *Bd. V*, 418-9.

¹¹ There Baumgarten must establish the principle of the excluded middle (§10), mark out latent contradiction - as opposed to obvious, patent contradiction - as a special case which can be resolved without issue (§13), define positive and negative predicates as "realities" and "negations" (§36), and most importantly establish that existence is a reality (§66). Yet importantly at §55 (p.15-16) even Baumgarten defines existence not just as a predicate among others but as "complementum essentiae sive possibilitatis internae," "the complement of the essence or of internal possibility," a definition borrowed from Wolff (see §174 in *Philosophia prima sive Ontologia, Editio Nova* (Francofurti : Officina Libraria Rengeriana, 1736), 143). Which is to say that even in these thinkers existence is not just one predicate among others; the picture is always a bit more nuanced. See *Metaphysica*, 4-18.

realities... Therefore the most perfect entity has existence”).¹² The worry is that if a most perfect entity gets any and all perfection, including existence, by definition, there could be a hidden contradiction between certain of them (even the ones we aren’t aware of). The only possible approach to securing the proof, by the lights of Leibniz and his followers, thus consists in deciding and delimiting in advance what counts as a genuine predicate, thereby *indirectly* making sure that all perfections can conceivably be lined up together in a single entity.¹³ Once it is established that all positive, primitive conceptual predicates are compatible, this tradition just sees little real difficulty with then inferring full-blooded “existence” or “necessary existence” from maximal perfection.

This is not at all the case with Descartes himself (or, later, with Kant). In fact Descartes was already well aware of the gist of Leibiz’ worry about a most perfect entity’s interior contradictions - it was presented to him by Mersenne in the “Objections”¹⁴ - and he does not take it seriously. If Leibniz at bottom worries that a contradiction might potentially lie *hidden* in the nature of the most perfect entity that I choose, it is because he supposes that there might “be” contradictory concepts or natures around and available that I may find and then mistakenly draw conclusions from. For Descartes such a supposition is grotesque - there “are” no such things as contradictory natures, save according to my own thinking and the mistakes therein:

...all self-contradiction or impossibility [is] according to our conception alone, it consists in wrongly joining together mutually opposed ideas - and it cannot be in anything posited excepted from the intellect because from this itself, that something is excepted from the intellect, it is manifest that it does not self-contradict or is possible. And self-contradiction according to our

¹² “§810. Exsistentia est realitas cum essentia et reliquis realitatibus compossibilis, §66, 807. Ergo ens perfectissimum habet existentiam, §807.” *Metaphysica, Editio VI* (Halaе Magdeburgicae: Carl Herman Hemmerde, 1768), 332. For comparison, also see Wolff’s proof at §21 of his *Theologia Naturalis*, 15.

¹³ See, e.g., the rest of “That the Most Perfect Entity Exists” in *Philosophischen Schriften VII*, 261-2.

¹⁴ AT VII 127.

concepts arises only insofar as they are obscure and confused, and there cannot be any [contradiction] in clear and distinct ones.¹⁵

Illegitimate ideas are solely the product of poor thinking on my part, and this goes just as much for the ideas whose content exceeds my understanding (for if I cannot join together mutually opposed ideas which I don't know about yet, then no contradiction can lie within the excess content). If we are *legitimately thinking* such an entity, clearly and distinctly, then that very thinking itself shows its possibility.¹⁶ Descartes turns the Germans' worries back against themselves decades in advance.

But he does admit that the proof has a serious vulnerability. The "Meditation V" admission that "of course at first glance this [proof] is not entirely perspicuous, but renders some appearance of sophism,"¹⁷ refers not to the coherence of the *ens summe perfectum*, but instead to the thought that existence could be an inescapable and indeed *essential* perfection of such an entity ("...I am indeed accustomed to distinguishing existence from essence with all other things..."). The difficulty for Descartes is the final step which seemed so evident to the German scholastics, namely that God's possibility implies full-blown existence. Indeed, two of the three objections Descartes poses to himself in "Meditation V" are centered around this issue:¹⁸ the first

¹⁵ VII 152: "Omnis enim implicancia sive impossibilitas in solo nostro conceptu, ideas sibi mutuo adversantes male conjungente, consistit, nec, in ullà re extra intellectum positâ esse potest, quia hoc ipso quòd aliquid sit extra intellectum, manifestum est non implicare, sed esse possibile. Oritur autem in nostris conceptibus implicancia ex eo tantùm quòd sint obscuri & confusi, nec ulla unquam in claris & distinctis esse potest."

¹⁶ Descartes' stress on the need to "clearly and distinctly perceive" anything pertaining to the concept in question before moving on to the rest of the proof, insofar as that clarity and distinctness is what first guarantees the objective content of the concept (cf AT VII 150), is as close as he gets to granting the Leibnizian point. But for Descartes, of course, clear and distinct perception is *de rigueur* for knowing as such.

¹⁷ AT VII 66: "Quanquam sane hoc primâ fronte non est omnino perspicuum, sed quandam sophismatis speciem refert. Cùm enim assuetus sim in omnibus aliis rebus existentiam ab essentiâ distinguere..."

¹⁸ Moreover, Gassendi spends much time in the "Fifth Objections" expressing this same worry - see AT VII 323-6. Kevin Harrelson in *The Ontological Argument*, 52-55, correctly makes the point that one can find Kant's "being is no real predicate" thesis prefigured in Gassendi - but indeed, if that phrase were all that mattered then one could already infer the same sentiment from the problems Descartes himself poses against the argument in "Meditation V." Gassendi comes to the proof armed only with his nominalism, not with Kant's distinction between different

objection insists upon a *general* separation of existence and essence which would include even God, the second that *thinking* God with existence, even necessarily, does not imply that *there is* any existing God.¹⁹ Descartes' counterarguments center on showing how the special case of a most perfect entity *must really exist* by logical force, however unnecessary that might be for other entities. The responses to these difficulties are the core of the text, and Descartes places by far the most weight on them:

...indeed it is no more a contradiction to think a God (that is, a most perfect entity) which is missing existence (that is, which is lacking some perfection) than to think a mountain which is missing a valley.²⁰

Yet from this, that I cannot think God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and just so that he exists in truth... nor do I have the freedom to think a God without existence (that is, a most perfect being without highest perfection), as I have the freedom to imagine a horse with wings or without wings.²¹

The nature of these comments, and indeed Descartes' advance response to the Leibnizians, requires some comments concerning Descartes' ontology of ideas.

B. "Apud me" and Descartes' Ontology of Ideas

"Meditation V," of course, does not necessarily assume any *existences* beyond my own.

Yet that should not imply that there is no other *being* at issue. In a passage that will determine the science of ontology to come, Descartes writes:

levels of position (the real innovation in the approach of the *Beweisgrund*); Gassendi can balk at the proof, but not *diagnose* the error as Kant does.

¹⁹ The third objection seems basically formal and, to my eyes, not especially important.

²⁰ AT VII 66. "...adeo ut non magis repugnet cogitare Deum (hoc est ens summe perfectum) cui desit existentia (hoc est cui desit aliqua perfectio), quàm cogitare montem cui desit vallis."

²¹ AT VII 67: "Atqui ex eo quòd non possim cogitare Deum nisi existentem, sequitur existentiam a Deo esse inseparabilem, ac proinde illum reverà existere... neque enim mihi liberum est Deum absque existentia (hoc est ens summe perfectum absque summâ perfectione) cogitare, ut liberum est equum vel cum alis vel sine alis imaginari."

In this case I presume what needs be considered most of all is that I discover *apud me* innumerable ideas of certain things which, even if they may perhaps exist nowhere beyond me, still cannot be said to be nothing...²²

Notably, I leave the “apud me” untranslated for now. Although this passage shows up relatively late in the *Meditations*, in fact a good deal of it operates throughout the entire text from “Meditation III” onwards and it is crucial for understanding the task of “proving existences.” Descartes here posits a certain kind of “minimal” being outside of existence proper, a being which would still apply even to entities of which there are no extant examples. There are no dodos, for example, yet even if there never have been such entities we can say (e.g.) that the dodo is a bird. The dodo, or at least dodo-ness, *is* in way. And even if we are unclear on the nature of this “minimal” being, it gets the point across that existence somehow calls for *more*. Still more than that, though, the search for existence seems to *require* this “lesser” status in advance: the very fact that we can ask *whether something exists or not* (whether that be dodos or God) already implies that the entity is first “minimally” given for such existential considerations.

I suggest that we may better understand the nature of this “minimal being” by way of Descartes’ phrase “apud me,” which reappears throughout the entire *Meditations* at key moments in the argumentative structure. This phrase is inevitably rendered by the translators as “in me,” “within me,” or (most violently) “in my mind.” Such translations only seem possible on the basis of a hugely loaded prejudice of Descartes’ position, as they have little to do with the Latin: translating “apud me” as “*in* me” is to insist, against the text, that Descartes thinks of “consciousness” or “the mind” or “the I” as a kind of self-enclosed jar wherein one may stack

²² AT VII 64: “Quodque hîc maxime considerandum puto, invenio apud me innumeras ideas quarumdam rerum, quae, etiam si extra me fortasse nullibi existant, non tamen dici possunt nihil esse...”

various mental baubles that somehow relate to a cosmos external to that jar.²³ But none of that is implied in the text, which is notable for its very vagueness and lack of commitment. To say that something is “apud...” is to say that it is *before* (as in “he’s standing before the crowd”) or *around* (“he’s around here somewhere”) or, as I will translate it, *at* (“he’s at my place”). The “apud me” is an expression of *availability*, of a kind of lived proximity: I discover ideas “at my place,” “hanging out around me,” without any further determination of their status. It is their “being-at-me” which says that the ideas *are not nothing*, even if they do not “exist.”

But how does the being of ideas (being-at) stand as compared with existence? In the “Fifth Replies” Descartes writes, “...I indeed extend [the term ‘idea’] to everything which is thought.”²⁴ “Idea” means cogitatum; the idea is *that which gets thought* in a thinking, as distinguished from the act of thinking itself. This implies, e.g., that if I think of my next door neighbor, then they thereby count as an idea (whatever else may determine them). And yet my neighbor is presumably not just some mere object floating around in a shadowy limbo, as Russell might have said, but an existing person (say, “an actual man with a tailor and a bank-account or a public-house and a drunken wife”).²⁵ How can my neighbor be both an idea (I am *thinking* them) and also an independent, self-sufficient entity at the same moment?

²³ To be sure, elsewhere he will often speak of the ideas “in cogitatione” as opposed to the things “extra cogitationem.” He will even use the formulation “in me,” e.g. at the beginning of “Meditation III” (AT VII 35, “Sed ne nunc quidem illas ideas *in me* esse inficior”). But even in those cases (where the Latin is not being quite so abused) it remains a stretch to read the prepositions as expressing entities’ quasi-locational relation to some enclosed mind-space. In certain cases, e.g. with “in” versus “extra,” the distinction presumably describes *how* something is, not *where* it is; in that case it would be better to translate “in” and “extra” as “according to” and “excepted from” rather than “within” and “outside.” Even in other cases there is no need to take the “in me” as a kind of locational ablative - e.g., “ideas... menti meae obversari” (on the same page) means the ideas appearing *to* my mind. The ideas’ mode of being is to be “around” or “at,” not “inside.”

²⁴ AT VII 366: “...ego [nomen ideae] vero ad id omne quod cogitatur, extendo.”

²⁵ *Principles of Mathematics Vol.I* 53. The relevance of this discussion to the question of *denotation* and (more broadly) of *intentionality* should be obvious.

To be sure, there is an obvious solution in the history of philosophy, namely to distinguish the person themselves and my idea of them. Strictly speaking there are *two* entities, with the idea being a *representation* of the person. At the beginning of “Meditation III” Descartes considers exactly this solution, claiming for the moment that “Some among these [ideas] are as it were likenesses of things, for whom alone the term idea properly fits....”²⁶ This provisional definition of idea in terms of *likeness to the thing* (which will throw off Hobbes and others) is then explicitly questioned (“What reason moves me to estimate that those [ideas] are likenesses of these things?”)²⁷ and explicitly rejected (“Even if [the ideas] proceeded from things distinct from me, it does not follow from this that those [ideas] must be likenesses of these things”)²⁸ a few pages later. The ideas are not likenesses of the things, certainly not any additional entity. Rather, ideas *are* the things themselves - *as* thought. If I have an idea of my neighbor, I think my neighbor themselves, the only example of the breed. I myself, God, geometrical objects, material things, etc., all entities of radically different sorts, all get to be ideas insofar as they get thought.²⁹

²⁶ AT VII 37: “Quaedam ex his tanquam rerum imagines sunt, quibus solis proprie convenit ideae nomen...”

²⁷ AT VII 38: “...quaenam me moveat ratio ut illas istis rebus similes esse existimem.”

²⁸ AT VII 39: “...quamvis a rebus a me diversis procederent, non inde sequitur illas rebus istis similes esse debere.”

²⁹ Descartes’ statements, I admit, are not always so clear cut as this. “Idea” *in the strict sense* means the thing as thought, but there is also a certain running ambiguity in Descartes’ terminology. Very often the word “idea” is used to designate not so much the thing as thought, but rather the *being-thought* itself: for example, he will often speak of ideas being “caused” or “produced” by something or other, when strictly speaking what he intends is not the causing of *the thing* but rather the causing of a *manifestation* of the thing within thinking. (This exact problem is of course recapitulated in Kant’s 1772 letter to Herz on the relation of representation and object; cf 10:130-1.) This slight murkiness in expression, this slippage between the entity and its being, is by no means limited to Descartes, but “representational” interpretations of Descartes – interpretations which Descartes otherwise seems determined to head off, as above – typically rely upon this slippage in order to read the idea as an entity distinct from the thing represented. To speak in Heidegger’s terms, these readings assume that the relation of the things to acts of thinking must be an *ontic* relation between two entities, the thing and an image. But in this case the relation is *ontological*: it is between the thing itself and its mode of manifestation, namely its being-thought. Descartes is insistent that the representational interpretation cannot be the right one, but often he seems to lack the language for clearly expressing the alternative view – hence a kind of blurring in the word “idea” between the thing which is thought and its manifestation to thinking.

Yet there are problems with an apparent Platonism here, related to problems in the direction of explanation. Is it the thinking which makes the idea (= entity as thought) possible, or the other way around? Descartes sometimes calls the idea “forma,” the *form* of a thought (“By the name *idea* I understand the very form of any thought whatsoever, through immediate perception of which I am conscious of the very same thought),”³⁰ meaning something close to the εἶδος/ιδέα in the Platonic tradition. E.g., he writes in reply to Hobbes:

[Hobbes’ objection] wants only images of the material things depicted in the corporeal imagination to be understood by the name “idea”... But I explain everywhere... that I take the name “idea” to mean everything that is immediately perceived by the mind – to the point that, because I perceive willing and fearing in myself when I will and fear, the very same will and fear are numbered by me among the ideas. I have used this name because long ago it was the common term by which the philosophers had to signify the forms of the perceptions of the divine mind, although we would acknowledge no imagination in God; and I have no [name] more suitable.³¹

If the idea or “form” is the substantive object paired up with a thought-event (the paradigm case here apparently being that of *divine* thinking), still this pairing may not be an equal one. The cogitatum may result from the cogitare, or the other way around; the idea could be merely a kind of *consequence* of the work of thinking, or the idea might first produce the thinking by, as it were, allowing itself or even forcing itself into immediate presentation.³² And for the most part Descartes’s answer to the direction of explanation depends on whether the thinker is myself or God. For God the ideas are *always* produced by the thinking; as he writes in reply to Mersenne’s objection that the idea of God may be a mere “ens rationis”...

³⁰ From the “Third Replies,” AT VII 160: “*Ideae* nomine intellego cujuslibet cogitationis formam illam, per cujus immediatam perceptionem ipsius ejusdem cogitationis consius sum...”

³¹ AT VII 181: “Hic nomine *ideae* vult tantum intellegi imagines rerum materialium in phantasia corporea depictas... Atqui ego passim ubique... ostendo me nomen *ideae* sumere pro omni eo quod immediate a mente percipitur, adeo ut cum volo & timeo, quia simul percipio me velle et timere, ipsa volitio et timor inter *ideas* a me numerentur. Ususque sum hoc nomine, qui jam tritum erat a Philosophis ad formas perceptionum mentis divinae significandas, quamvis nullam in Deo phantasiam agnoscamus; & nullam aptius habebam.”

³² The ambiguous genitive in the expressions “forma cogitationis” and “forma perceptionis” neatly expresses much of the difficulty

...indeed it is not true [that the idea of God is *ens rationis*] with the sense wherein what is understood by *ens rationis* is “something which is not,” but rather only [with the sense] wherein every operation of the understanding is *ens rationis*, that is, an entity produced by reason; and moreover the whole of this world can be said to be *ens rationis*, that is, created by a simple act of the divine mind.³³

Descartes is not saying that all ideas *exist* (some, like my neighbor as thought, certainly do), but all of them are at least in the mode of “being-at” (here, being-at-God). For us ideas tend to precede our thinking about them, at least in their “natures,” and here I once again quote the passage from before:

In this case I presume what needs be considered most of all is that I discover at me innumerable ideas of certain things which, even if they may perhaps exist nowhere beyond me, still cannot be said to be nothing; and although they may be thought by me in some sense by choice, still they are not invented by me, but rather have their own true and immutable natures.³⁴

If I can produce thoughts (e.g.) about the angles of a triangle adding up to 180 degrees basically by fiat, still I could not do so except via the idea of the triangle already being at me - yet that, as we shall further see, requires God. The introduction of God in the passage to Mersenne also seems to express a general ontology: to be is to be “ens rationis” or, in the language of “Meditation V,” to be *at*, and first of all *at God*.³⁵ And if the relation of this general ontology to God immediately recalls Heidegger’s discussions of ontotheology in the first Chapter, that is (I suggest) no accident.

To the extent that we “distinguish existence from essence with all other things,” however, what does that “existence” actually mean? And why should the distinction not apply to God?

³³ AT VII 134: “Neque enim hoc eo sensu verum est, quo per *ens rationis* intelligitur id quod non est, sed eo tantum quo omnis operatio intellectus *ens rationis*, hoc est a ratione profectum; atque etiam totus hic mundus *ens rationis* divinae, hoc est ens per simplicem actum mentis divinae creatum, dici potest.”

³⁴ AT VII 64: “Quodque hîc maxime considerandum puto, invenio apud me innumeras ideas quarumdam rerum, quae, etiam si extra me fortasse nullibi existant, non tamen dici possunt nihil esse; & quamvis a me quodammodo ad arbitrium cogitentur, non tamen a me finguntur, sed suas habent veras & immutabiles naturas.”

³⁵ Descartes’ “Platonism” regarding ideas and/or natures is a rather involved debate in the literature, and I point the reader to Rozemond’s “Descartes’s Ontology of the Eternal Truths” as an excellent starting point.

C. Formal Distinction (Descartes on Existence, Part I)

When Hobbes objects (in broadly nominalist fashion) that an essence which does not “exist” also “is” not, Descartes’ reply is brief to the point of appearing completely dismissive: “The distinction of essence from existence is recognized by all.”³⁶

But the brevity should not deceive us, nor indicate any lack of consideration of the problem. Descartes is as familiar as anyone with the scholastic debates regarding essence and existence; when he says that the distinction “is recognized by all,” then, he cannot mean that the split of essence from existence is settled doctrine agreed upon by all parties (otherwise a Hobbes could not so much as pose the question). What the “nota est omnibus” means, rather, is that the distinction is something fundamental to *any* thinking about being as such, even if technical prejudices might lead a thinker to deny it in words if not in their thinking itself. His problem is methodological, i.e. it concerns how to present the issues without getting completely tripped up and making the matter still more obscure. Descartes’ Eudoxus (from *The Search for Truth*) comments on this problem:

Indeed, among the especial errors which could be committed in the sciences one perhaps needs to add the error of those who wish to define that which must only be conceived; such men cannot distinguish those [things] which are clear from those which are obscure, nor separate that which (if it is to be understood) is worth and merits defining from that which can best be understood through its very self. Doubt, thought, and existence can certainly now be numbered among the very things which are clear and understood through themselves in this way. For I would believe that no one so stupid ever existed who would need to be told what existence was before he would be able to conclude and affirm himself to be.³⁷

³⁶ AT VII 194: “Nota est omnibus essentiae ab existentia distinctio...”

³⁷ AT X 524: “Imò fortasse praecipuis, qui in scientiis committi possint, erroribus eorum accensendus error est, qui id, quod concipi tantummodo debet, definire volunt; qui que ea, quae clara sunt, ab obscuris distinguere, & id, quod ut cognoscatur definiri exigit mereturque, ab eo, quod optimè per se ipsum cognosci potest, discernere nequeunt. Jam verò iis rebus, quae isto modo clarae sunt, & per se cognoscuntur, dubitatio, cogitatio, & existentia adnumerari

Existence and other ontological primitives cannot be “defined” as such. Still, existence must “add” *something* to the entity to distinguish it from being a mere idea. To the extent that discussion of it does not add to the obscurity, what does Descartes say about it?

Descartes’ clearest attempts to answer this question appear in *Principles of Philosophy* I.56-62, and then in far more detail in “Letter 418” - explicitly devoted to the distinction between essence and existence, and apparently written in some haste. He calls it a “rational” or “formal” distinction, which is to be sharply contrasted with a “real” distinction in the strict sense. But as a comparative case who flattens the issue into just such a real distinction - namely, rendering the mere idea and the thing into different entities - let us first consider Malebranche.

Malebranche’s metaphysical starting point is that ideas are available as the immediate objects of our thinking, which exist in their own right as entities distinct from that they represent:

I trust that all the world comes down in agreement that we do not perceive the objects outside of us by [par] themselves. We see the Sun, the Stars, and an infinitude of objects outside of us; and it is not plausible that the soul leaves the body and goes, so to speak, to promenade in the heavens for the contemplation of all those objects. Therefore [the soul] does not see them by themselves, and the immediate object of our mind, when for example it sees the Sun, is not the Sun, but rather something which is intimately united to our soul; and this I call *idea*. Thus, by the word *idea* I intend nothing other than that which is the immediate object, or [the object] nearest to the mind when it perceives some object – that is to say, that which touched and modified the mind with the perception which it has of an object.³⁸

possunt. Neminem enim unquam tam stupidum exstitisse crediderim, qui priùs quid sit existentia edocendus fuerit, antequam se esse concludere potuerit atque adfirmare.” Also cf *Principles of Philosophy* I.10, in AT VIII A 8.

³⁸*Recherche de la Vérité* III, II, I, §I, in *Oeuvres Complètes I*, 413-14: “Je croi que tout le monde tombe d’accord, que nous n’appercevons point les objets qui sont hors de nous par eux-mêmes. Nous voyons le Soleil, les Etoiles, & une infinité d’objets hors de nous; & il n’est pas vraisemblable que l’ame sorte du corps, & qu’elle aille, pour ainsi dire, se promener dans les cieux, pour y contempler tous ces objets. Elle ne les voit donc point par eux-mêmes, & l’objet immediat de nôtre esprit, lorsqu’il voit le Soleil par exemple, n’est pas le Soleil, mais quelque chose qui est intimement unie à nôtre ame; & c’est ce que j’appelle *idée*. Ainsi par ce mot *idée*, je n’entends ici autre chose, que ce qui est l’objet immédiat, ou le plus proche de l’esprit, quand il apperçoit quelque objet, c’est-a-dire ce qui touché & modifie l’esprit de la perception qu’il a d’un objet.”

The direct thinking of a thing is taken to be patently impossible right from the start (albeit this text is too precise on the matter, as he will admit elsewhere to equivocating on the term “idea”).³⁹ Excepting God, who is the “immediate object” par excellence, we do not “see” any objects of the world in any fashion other than by way of these representational ideas, and ideas are additional entities “different from [the entities represented].”⁴⁰ If for Descartes my neighbor is one thing, then in Malebranche they are now split into two: an actual one and a representation. The consequences come through most clearly in Malebranche’s treatment of the existence of the material world:

Thus, when we see bodies, let us judge only that we see them, and that these visible or intelligible bodies actually exist; but why might we judge positively that there is a material world outside, resembling the intelligible world that we see?⁴¹

The *ideas* of bodies, he says, *actually exist*, albeit it is an existence limited to the “intelligible world.” The problem of proving the material world is thus taken as a question of whether there are other, *external* bodies which correctly resemble the ideas which we presume to represent them. Malebranche affirms the existence of such bodies but explicitly refuses to *prove* it, justifying himself only via theology (“Certainly there is nothing but faith that can convince us that there really are bodies”).⁴² And for good reason. Once all mere ideas “exist” as much as

³⁹*De la Recherche de la Vérité Éclaircissement IIIa*, in *Oeuvres Complètes III*, 44: “Ainsi ce mot, *idée*, est equivoque.”

⁴⁰*Recherche III*, II, 7, §I, in *Oeuvres I* 448. In the broadest sense of “idea” that he will allow – the idea as anything that in any way represents an object to a mind, clearly or not – this should presumably extend even to the most confused cases of our knowledge, namely that of our own souls and conjecture about those of others. This “broadest” sense obviously contradicts the narrower use of the term in, e.g., all of *Recherche de la Vérité III*, II, 7. But then see *Éclaircissement IIIa*: “C’est pour cela que j’ai dit quelque fois qu’on avoit une idée de l’ame, & que quelquefois je l’ai nié.” “It is for this that I sometimes said that one has an idea of the soul, and sometimes denied it.” In *Oeuvres Complètes III*, 44.

⁴¹*Éclaircissement Via*, in *Oeuvres III* 60: “Ainsi, lorsque nous voyons des corps, jugeons seulement que nous en voyons & que ces corps visibles ou intelligibles existent actuellement; mais pourquoi jugerons-nous positivement qu’il y a au dehors un monde material, semblable au monde intelligible que nous voyons?”

⁴² *ibid* 64: “Certainement il n’y a que la Foi qui puisse nous convaincre qu’il y a effectivement des corps.”

things, albeit in their own world, the “real” world becomes quite pointless, a strange cosmic shadow or metaphysical appendix. With a slight shift in theological reasoning, then, Malebranche could well take the same position as Berkeley (“If therefore it were possible for bodies to exist without the mind, yet to hold they do so, must needs be a very precarious position; since it is to suppose, without any reason at all, that God has created innumerable beings that are entirely useless, and serve to no manner of purpose”).⁴³ Malebranche sees the distinction between “mere idea” and “existing thing” as a *real* distinction between two different (but related) entities, thereby viewing existence and being as coextensive.

The *Principles* and the “Letter” present quite a contrast to Malebranche. For Descartes the existence/essence distinction is still one between “the things as existing excepted from our thinking” and “the things’ ideas, which are according to our thinking,”⁴⁴ but not a break between two entities. There is only one entity between the mere idea and the existing thing; the distinction is somehow in the *way* that the entity is, but not in a “mode” in the usual sense. The terminology here is quite shaky: Descartes notes in *Principles* that although in the “First Replies” to Caterus he had originally spoken of the essence/existence break as a *modal* distinction,⁴⁵ in fact this is not quite “accurate.”⁴⁶ As he discusses in the “Letter,” the confusion stems from there being two types of modes, “Modes properly so-called, and Attributes, without which the things that the attributes are of cannot be,”⁴⁷ or (equivalently), “modes of the things themselves, and modes

⁴³*Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 109.

⁴⁴ AT IV 349-50: “Nihil autem aliud mihi videtur in hâc materia parere difficultatem, nisi quod non satis distingamus res extra cogitationem nostram existentes; à rerum ideis, quae sunt in nostrâ cogitatione.”

⁴⁵ Cf AT VII 120-1. Caterus (at AT VII 100) had suggested that Descartes deploy the Scotist notion of a “formal” distinction, which eventually he will; for the purposes of the replies, however, he says only that this distinction “non differre a modali.”

⁴⁶ *Principles* I.62, at AT VIII A. At least in this text Descartes prefers his own notion of a “rational” distinction rather than borrowing Caterus’ suggestion of “formal.”

⁴⁷ AT IV 348-9: “Modos propriè dictos, & Attributiones sine quibus res quarum sunt attributiones esse non possunt...”

cogitandi”⁴⁸ (a term I discuss below). Modes in the proper sense are ways that the thing is, as the very thing it is. For corporeal substances, modes include matters such as figure and motion: a wooden block can be such-and-such a size, it can be here or there, moving like so or at rest, etc.. Similarly, thinking substances may think in different ways (I may love the block, hate it, affirm or doubt its existence...), and these compartments are modes of myself (ways I am as the very mind which I am) in the proper sense of “mode.”

But the “way” a thing might also include *attributes*, matters such as existence, duration, magnitude, number, and all other “universals” (in the sense of κατηγορίαί). Descartes calls these, as above, modes cogitandi, modes of how the things *are to be thought* and *must be thought*:

...they are called by the broader word, Attributes, or modes cogitandi, as we indeed understand the essence of any thing in one mode in abstraction from whether it exists or exists not, and in another [mode] in consideration of [the thing] itself as existing; but the thing itself cannot be excepted from our thinking without its existence, nor also without its duration, or its magnitude, etc..⁴⁹

The attributes’ status is therefore somewhat ambiguous. They are not modes “rerum ipsarum,” proper to the things as such: existence and other “universals” of the same sort do not *ontically* belong to the thing. Yet at the same time, without these strange additional “modes cogitandi” the things “esse non possunt,” cannot be; *ontologically*, from the point of view of their being, the attributes are therefore more fundamental than the modes. The very term “attributum” indicates an act of *attribution*, a kind of *appointment* of the thing to how it is (to its being). And yet there is nothing arbitrary or “subjective” about them. The “cogitanti” implies that these are ways that the thing *must* be thought: even if they are not ontically “proper” to the things, the attributes

⁴⁸ AT IV 349: “...modos rerum ipsarum, & modos cogitandi.”

⁴⁹ AT IV 349: “Sed latiori vocabulo dicuntur Attributa, sive modi cogitandi, quia intelligimus quidem alio modo rei alicuius essentiam abstrahendo ab hoc, quod existat, vel non existat, & alio, considerando ipsam ut existentem; sed res ipsa sine existentia sua esse non potest extra nostram cogitationem, ut neque etiam sine sua duratione, vel sua magnitudine, &c.”

remain appropriate to them in some other sense. They “fit” the things, and *must* do so if the things are to be capable of being at all.

Descartes tries to further clarify matters at the very end of the letter, where he further describes exactly what sort of distinction might fit the relationship between essence and existence. The term “real” is used in two divergent ways, however, and for that reason I break up his classification of distinctions. He first writes:

So therefore I posit three [sorts of] distinctions: Real, which is between two substances...

A wooden block and the child which plays with it, e.g., are *really different* in the proper sense, as they are different substances; as above, this is how Malebranche takes the idea/thing distinction.

However, Descartes then goes on to introduce not only two other kinds of distinctions but also a broader, *second* sense for “real”:

...Modal, and formal, or [sive] of reason *ratiocinatae*; nevertheless these three, if only to be opposed to the distinction of reason *ratiocinantis*, may be called ‘Real,’ and in this [broad] sense essence may be called ‘really’ distinguished from existence...

In this second sense, “real” also describes *all* distinctions that in some way “fit” the entities in question. Real (in the proper sense), modal, and formal distinctions are all placed in opposition to distinctions of reason *ratiocinantis*, of an “active” reason which invents arbitrarily. It is only by way of this opposition, and this second sense of “real,” that Descartes will continue...

...Again, when by ‘essence’ we understand the thing purely as it is objectively according to the intellect, [and] by ‘existence’ truly the very same thing purely as it is excepted from the intellect, it is manifest that these two are ‘really’ distinguished.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ AT IV 350: “Sic igitur pono tantum tres distinctiones: Realem, quae est inter duas substantias; Modalem, & formalem, sive rationis ratiocinatae; quae tamen tres, si opponantur distinctionis rationis Ratiocinantis, dici possunt Reales, & hoc sensu dici poterit essentia realiter distingui ab existentia. Ut etiam, cum per essentiam intelligimus rem prout est obiectivè in intellectu; per existentiam vero rem eandem, prout est extra intellectum, manifestum est illa duo realiter distingui.”

With this second sense of “real” Descartes is perhaps attempting to meet the Thomists halfway, but his position is nevertheless clear. Beyond real distinctions (in the proper sense) between different substances and modal distinctions either between the modes of the thing (in the proper sense of “mode”) or between the modes and the thing itself, there is also the “formal” distinction at issue.⁵¹ Formal distinctions, distinctions involving attributes, are distinctions of reason, but of reason *ratiocinata* rather than *ratiocinantis* – of “passive,” rather than arbitrary, reason.

There is thus no *ontic* difference (real or modal) between essence and existence in any really existing thing. What, then, does the formal distinction consist in? Descartes explains:

So when I think the essence of a triangle and the existence of the very same triangle, those two thinkings, insofar as they are thinkings - taken objectively - likewise differ modally, the term ‘mode’ being taken strictly; but, it seems clear to me, this is not the same concerning the triangle existing excepted from thinking, where essence and existence are in no way [“modo”] distinguished; and it is the same concerning all universals; just as when I say “Peter is human,” that thinking through which I think Peter differs modally from that through which I think human, although being human and being Peter are nothing different in Peter himself, etc..⁵²

What differs in a formal distinction is not the thing itself, but *how* (in what way) the thing is *thought*. A *formal* distinction in the thing is therefore accompanied by, or indeed even constituted by, a *modal* distinction in the thinker who thinks the thing. Any thinking I may have of (e.g.) a block will be a mode of my I, a way in which I am. But I may think the same block *in different modes*, as *merely* an idea (with its existence “bracketed”) or as full-bloodedly existing. But these thinkings all concern the very same block. Any formal distinction *ratiocinatae* within the block is thus not arbitrary, but it is also not first of all about the block: the difference in the block turns out to be grounded in a difference in what the thinker *attributes* to the block.

⁵¹ Or, as he will say at Principles I.60-62, in AT VIII A 28-30, a *rational* distinction (“*distinctio rationis*”).

⁵² AT IV 350: “Ita, cum cogito essentiam trianguli, et existentiam eiusdem trianguli, duae istae cogitationes, quatenus sunt cogitationes, etiam objective sumptae modaliter differunt, strictè sumendo nomen modi; sed non idem est de triangulo extra cogitationem existente, in quo manifestum mihi videtur, essentiam & existentiam nullo modo distingui; & idem est de omnibus universalibus; ut, cum dico, Petrus est homo, cogitatio quidem quâ cogito Petrum, differt modaliter ab eâ quâ cogito hominem, sed in ipso Petro nihil aliud est esse hominem quam esse Petrum, &c.”

Descartes surely does not intend to say that we human beings may, by thinking a wooden block differently, force it into existence by sheer strength of will. Perhaps God could do this, if indeed the block is a kind of “ens rationis” “created by a simple act of the divine mind”,⁵³ but not us. If the difference “in” the block as existing versus being a mere idea is “really” a formal (rational) one - which implies *ratiocinata*, not *ratiocinantis* - then to discover (by experience or otherwise) that the block exists rather than not is to discover that it *should be thought* in a certain way.⁵⁴ It changes nothing about the block, which ontically remains the same as it was as a mere idea, rather it changes how we are to think about it (namely, as an existence). And this is to say that existence has a special status in Descartes: it is “of” the thing, yet not like other qualities are. Which, in a quite surprising way, once again puts him very close to Kant.

D. “Existence is not at all a predicate...”

Given his account of existence above, it is perhaps no surprise that Descartes’ worries in “Meditation V” center around the validity of logically-mathematically analyzing existence out of a mere idea. We distinguish existence from essence with all other things - existence is not found within the list of essential properties in anything else - so there is room to raise objections. And the worry is justified, in that Kant will bring exactly those objections in 1763.

Kant’s fascination with, and objection to, the “argumentum Cartesianum” is something we find early on in his career, as he already stops to make an attack on it in the middle of a scholium in the 1755 *New Dilucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Thought*. Even

⁵³ See above (quoted from AT VII 134).

⁵⁴ I discuss how that “discovery” is possible below.

this early there is no mention of the problem of God's possibility, unlike in the contemporary German scholasticism discussed above; instead Kant writes:

Indeed I know that the very notion of God is called forth, by which [philosophers] claim that the existence of the same is determined - [but] in truth it is easy to see that this is done ideally, not really. Form to yourself the notion of some entity, in which there is the omnitude of reality; by this concept, you must concede to granting it existence as well. Consequently the argument proceeds like so: if all realities without distinction *are united* in an entity, it will exist; but if they are only *conceived as united*, its existence likewise dwells only in ideas. Therefore the sentiment was better fashioned thusly: in forming for ourselves the notion of a certain entity which we address as God, we have defined that [notion] in a way that existence is included in it. Consequently, if the preconceived notion *is true*, it is likewise true that he exists. And indeed these things were said in kindness to those who render assent to the Cartesian argument.⁵⁵ [*my emphasis*]

The presentation is a bit rough, but the basic line of attack is clear. Kant actually seems to grant that existence is indeed a kind of predicate included with God's concept (along with all others), but the proof itself does not show that this concept is *true* as representative of anything outside thinking (i.e. that all of those realities are actually united in a genuine entity). This early argument is almost certainly borrowed from Crusius;⁵⁶ indeed, it is much what Descartes

⁵⁵ 1:394-5. "Novi quidem ad notionem ipsam Dei provocari, qua determinatam esse existentiam ipsius postulant, verum hoc idealiter fieri, non realiter, facile perspicitur. Notionem tibi formas entis cuiusdam, in quo est omnitude realitatis; per hunc conceptum te ipsi et existentiam largiri oportere confitendum est. Igitur ita procedit argumentatio: si in ente quodam realitates omnes sine gradu unitä sunt, illud existet; si unitä tantum concipiuntur, existentia quoq̄ ipsius in ideis tantum versatur. Ergo ita potius informanda erat sententia: notionem entis cuiusdam nobis formantes, quod Deum appellamus, eo modo illam determinavimus, ut existentia ipsi inclusa sit. Si vera igitur präconcepta notio, verum quoq̄, illum existere. Et häc quidem in eorum gratiam dicta sint, qui argumento Cartesiano assensum präbent."

⁵⁶ In point of fact Crusius may be nearly as important for the return to Descartes' initial focus as Kant. For comparison, Crusius' attack on the proof from his 1745 *Sketch* reads: "[S]ome renowned scholars, so as to satisfy the atheist even in this part, so far as possible, have made trial whether the existence of God may not let itself be proved fully according to the geometrical order, namely through the mere principle of contradiction. However, from the following one can survey a priori that such a proof cannot be right, and that the actuality of God is impossible to know other than from his works. It pertains thither to the Cartesian proof that one wants to set forth the existence of God from the concept of a most perfect entity, which concept namely implies existence in itself. Hereafter one reckons that one only needs to prove the possibility of a most perfect entity: Thus one makes evident its existence through the principle of contradiction. The inference must read like so: 'Whichever entity has all possible perfections, the same also has existence. But now God is an entity who has all possible perfections. According he also has existence, and thus is a God.' This inference may deceive, for this reason - because the first proposition is an axiom, and the other is a definition. However, it is not right in form, rather it is a syllogism with four terms. For the term 'existence' means something different in the conclusion than in the premise. In the premise, namely, one speaks about existence in the understanding, as a concept in the understanding namely implies existence in itself to

presents as his second objection within “Meditation V.” Kant already suspects some break between the usual predicates which we can conceptually list off, perhaps even including “existence” (at least nominally), and existence itself realiter. But at this point, he (like Crusius and Descartes’ objector) also still takes for granted that “existence” should be some kind of determinative predicate,⁵⁷ thus remaining vulnerable to Descartes’ response that that predicate

this extent - that if it is thought or set, existence must also be thought or set as a part of it. But in the conclusion one speaks about real existence outside of thought. The antecedent propositions are all ideal propositions [Idealsätze], and yet the conclusion ought become a real proposition [Realsatz]. Hence there is indisputably more in the conclusion than in the antecedent propositions.” And Crusius’ attack, along with Kant’s circa 1755, is really based in his opening characterization of existence, which reads: “Hence existence is that predicate of a thing by which, outside thought, it is to be encountered somewhere and at some time. When we say that a substance exists, we mean thus that it is immediately situated in a certain somewhere, or space, and at some time.” The phrase to note is *outside thought*, a qualification which is emphasized even further in Kant. Quotes from the *Entwurf*, 436-7 and 81 [“Jedoch aber haben einige berühmte Gelehrte, um den Atheisten auch in diesem Stücke, so viel möglich, Genüge zu thun, einen Versuch gethan, ob sich nicht die Existenz Gottes, völlig nach der geometrischen Manier, nemlich durch den blossen Satz vom Widerspruche erweisen liesse. Allein aus dem vorigen kan man a priori übersehen, daß ein solcher Beweis nicht richtig seyn könne, und daß sich die Wirklichkeit Gottes ohnmöglich anders, als aus seinen Werken erkennen lasse. Es gehöret dahin der cartesianische Beweis, da man die Existenz Gottes aus dem Begriffe des vollkommensten Wesens darthun will, welcher Begriff nemlich die Existenz in sich schliesset. Man meynet hernach, man dürfe nur die Möglichkeit eines vollkommensten Wesens erweisen: So erhelle die Existenz desselben, durch den Satz vom Widerspruche. Der Schluß muß also heissen: Welches Wesen alle nur mögliche Vollkommenheiten hat, dasselbe hat auch die Existenz. Nun aber ist Gott ein Wesen, welches alle nur mögliche Vollkommenheiten hat. Demnach hat er auch die Existenz, und also ist ein Gott. Dieser Schluß kan einen deßwegen betrügen, weil der erste Satz ein axioma, und der andere eine Definition ist. Allein er ist in forma nicht richtig, sondern ein syllogismus mit vier terminis. Denn der terminus, die Existenz haben, heißt in der Conclusion etwas anders als in der Grundproposition. Nemlich in der Grundproposition ist von der Existenz im Verstande die Rede, da nemlich ein Begriff im Verstande die Existenz in sich schliesset, dergestalt, daß wenn er gedacht oder gesetzt wird, die Existenz als ein Theil von ihm auch mit gedacht oder gesetzt werden muß. In der Conclusion aber ist von der realen Existenz ausserhalb der Gedanke die Rede. Die Vödersätze sind alle beyde Idealsätze, und doch soll die Conclusion ein Realsatz werden. Daher unstreitig in der Conclusion mehr als in den Vödersätzen ist.” “Daher ist die Existenz dasjenige Prädikat eines Dinges, vermöge dessen auch ausserhalb der Gedanke irgendwo und zu irgend einer Zeit anzutreffen ist. Wenn wir sagen, eine Substanz existire: So meinen wir, sie befinde sich unmittelbar in einem gewissen irgendwo, oder Raume, und irgend zu einer Zeit.”]

⁵⁷ Laberge and Schmucker disagree on this point, with Ortiz-Mena siding with Schmucker - the former reads the earlier text as assuming that existence is a mere predicate among others, while the latter two take Kant to have already anticipated the *Beweisgrund*'s more sophisticated approach. (See especially Ortiz-Mena's *Existence* 79-86 on this, but also Laberge's *Théologie* 55 and Schmucker's *Ontotheologie* 29.) Yet if Kant already basically has the apparatus of the *Beweisgrund* in play here, then one must surely ascribe that same toolset to Crusius. On the other hand, if Laberge is right that Kant here still treats existence as a “real predicate” (and I agree with him), this is not to say that in 1755 he does not already see something unusual with this predicate (in the language of being conceived/ideal versus being true/real). Kant's position here, like that of Crusius, seems to me more dubious than these readers allow. Yet this middle position, “on the way” to the *Beweisgrund*, is not new: to clearly see a break between ideal and real without yet shaking the thought that existence must be a determinative predicate of some kind (even if a very special one) is, as I suggest, exactly the position of the second objector in “Meditation V.”

just means existence pure and simple (“[if] I cannot *think* God except as existing, it follows... that he exists *in truth*”).

His position progresses a few years later only through a full-blown analysis of the meaning of “to be.” This analysis in the very first reflection of the very first section of the *Beweisgrund*, Kant’s account of “existence in general,” is perhaps the most-quoted part of the book.⁵⁸ Kant declares, departing from Crucius and in language not far removed from Descartes himself, that “Existence is not at all a predicate or a determination of any thing,”⁵⁹ that instead “existence, in the cases when it occurs in ordinary speech as a predicate, is not so much a predicate of the thing itself but rather of the thought which one has of it.”⁶⁰ As in Descartes, being in its various determinations has less to do with *what* we are thinking about (the thing) as with *how* it is thought or, as Kant says, with how it is “posited” or “set”:

The concept of position or setting is completely simple and identical with that of being in general. Now, something may be set merely as relative, or better, be thought merely as the relation (*respectus logicus*) of something to a thing as a characteristic, [and in this case being means] nothing but the copulative concept in a judgment. When [it is] considered not merely as this relation but as the thing set in and for itself, then this being amounts to existence.⁶¹

Changes within the string of predicates alters the ontic “what” of that which we talk about, while the expression of being or existence does not change this “what” in the slightest. Instead, these terms change *how those predicates as a whole are thought*. With some creative use of language,

⁵⁸ This, as I mention above, presumably because it seems to anticipate the attack on the “ontological” argument in the 1781 “Ideal” - but it is also now being taken seriously in its own right. For more detailed discussion I point the reader especially to Abaci’s *Kant’s Critical Theory of Modality*, Chapters 4 thru 6, and to Stang’s *Kant’s Modal Metaphysics* Chapters 1 thru 5.

⁵⁹ 2:72. “Das Dasein ist gar kein Prädicat oder Determination von irgend einem Dinge.”

⁶⁰ Ibid. “Es ist aber das Dasein in den Fällen, da es im gemeinen Redegebrauch als ein Prädicat vorkommt, nicht sowohl ein Prädicat von dem Dinge selbst, als vielmehr von dem Gedanken, den man davon hat.”

⁶¹ 2:73. “Der Begriff der Position oder Setzung ist völlig einfach und mit dem vom Sein überhaupt einerlei. Nun kann etwas als bloß beziehungsweise gesetzt, oder besser bloß die Beziehung (*respectus logicus*) von etwas als einem Merkmal zu einem Dinge gedacht werden, und dann ist das Sein, das ist die Position dieser Beziehung, nichts als der Verbindungsbegriff in einem Urtheile. Wird nicht bloß diese Beziehung, sondern die Sache an und für sich selbst gesetzt betrachtet, so ist dieses Sein so viel als Dasein.” Also cf 2:75.

Kant suggests that what is *in* the thing remains the same when it exists, but “more” is posited *through* its existence:

...[In terms of “what”] no more is set *in* an existence than *in* a mere possibility (for then the talk is of the predicates of the same [thing]), however *through* something existing more is set than *though* a mere possibility, as this also goes as far as the absolute position of the thing itself.⁶² [my emphasis]

Existence in the proper sense is thus “absolute position,” the positing of the thing *as a thing* along with all of its qualitative predicates, and not the addition of some new predicate.

The similarity with Descartes’ account, perhaps most especially in opposition to reasoning like Malebranche’s, is striking (although, to be sure, in Descartes’ discussions concerning the essence/existence distinction he mostly seems concerned with *entities which already exist*, not the details of proving the existence of otherwise determinate ideas), and Kant’s break between relative and absolute position then allows him to make an assault on “Meditation V” at precisely the point where Descartes saw it was most vulnerable. I quote Kant’s account of the Cartesian proof from *Beweisgrund* III:

We meanwhile have a proof which is built upon [concepts of the merely possible], namely the so-called Cartesian one. Right at the start one thinks up a concept of a possible thing, in which one represents all true perfection as being stipulated. Then one assumes that existence too is a perfection of things; thus, one concludes from the possibility of a most perfect entity to its existence. Just so, from the concept of anything which is represented merely as the most perfect of its kind, e.g. out of the very fact that a most perfect world is to be thought, one could conclude its existence. But without setting myself into a circuitous refutation of this proof, which one already finds in others, I only refer to what was clarified at the beginning of this work – namely that existence is not at all a predicate and thus no predicate of perfection, and therefore that nevermore can one conclude from an illustration [Erklärung], which contains an arbitrary compilation of various predicates that make up some or other possible things, to the existence of this thing, and hence not to the existence of God either.⁶³

⁶² 2:75. “...in einem Existirenden wird nichts mehr gesetzt als in einem blos Möglichen (denn alsdann ist die Rede von den Prädicaten desselben), allein durch etwas Existirendes wird mehr gesetzt als durch ein blos Mögliches, denn dieses geht auch auf absolute Position der Sache selbst.”

⁶³ 2:156-7. “Indessen haben wir einen berühmten Beweis, der auf diesen Grund erbauet ist, nämlich den so genannten Cartesianischen. Man erdenkt sich zuvörderst einen Begriff von einem möglichen Dinge, in welchem man alle wahre Vollkommenheit sich vereinbart vorstellt. Nun nimmt man an, das Dasein sei auch eine Vollkommenheit der Dinge; also schließt man aus der Möglichkeit eines vollkommensten Wesens auf seine

Kant's 1763 strategy for attacking the Cartesian proof, by way of attacking the claim that existence is a real predicate (a reality, a perfection), thus amounts to a kind of logical-linguistic clarification. He is willing to admit that "...exists," "...has existence" are predicational phrases which appear in ordinary language all the time, but this is by no means sufficient to show that existence is thereby anything proper to the makeup of the thing as such or indeed anything which in any way changes that makeup. The sense of phrases like "...exists," once put under the right kind of analysis, turns out to have an entirely different logical meaning. Earlier Kant takes examples from common speech, in this case the existential difference between kinds of one-horned animals:

E.g. 'the narwhal is granted existence, the unicorn not.' This intends to say nothing more than: the representation of the narwhal is an empirical concept, that is, the representation of an existing thing. Hence, too, in order to add validity to this statement of the existence of such a thing, one does not search in the concept of the subject - for there one finds only predicates of possibility - but in the source of the knowledge I have of it. "I have seen it," one says, or "I have heard from those who have seen it." It is thus not an entirely correct expression to say, "A narwhal is an existing animal," rather the reverse [is correct]: "Some existing sea animals are granted the predicates which I jointly think of as a narwhal."⁶⁴

This, then, gets to the heart of the problem that the younger Kant and Descartes' second objection put their finger on but couldn't quite express: one *discovers* existence, one does not

Existenz. Eben so könnte man aus dem Begriffe einer jeden Sache, welche auch nur als die vollkommenste ihrer Art vorgestellt wird, z. E. daraus allein schon, daß eine vollkommenste Welt zu gedenken ist, auf ihr Dasein schließen. Allein ohne mich in eine umständliche Widerlegung dieses Beweises einzulassen, welche man schon bei andern antrifft, so beziehe ich mich nur auf dasjenige, was im Anfange dieses Werks ist erklärt worden, daß nämlich das Dasein gar kein Prädicat, mithin auch kein Prädicat der Vollkommenheit sei, und daher aus einer Erklärung, welche eine willkürliche Vereinbarung verschiedener Prädicate enthält, um den Begriff von irgend einem möglichen Dinge aus zu machen, nimmermehr auf das Dasein dieses Dinges und folglich auch nicht auf das Dasein Gottes könne geschlossen werden."

⁶⁴ 2:72-3. "Z. E. dem Seeinhorn kommt die Existenz zu, dem Landeinhorn nicht. Es will dieses nichts anders sagen, als: die Vorstellung des Seeinhorns ist ein Erfahrungsbegriff, das ist, die Vorstellung eines existirenden Dinges. Daher man auch, um die Richtigkeit dieses Satzes von dem Dasein einer solchen Sache darzuthun, nicht in dem Begriffe des Subjects sucht, denn da findet man nur Prädicate der Möglichkeit, sondern in dem Ursprunge der Erkenntniß, die ich davon habe. Ich habe, sagt man, es gesehen, oder von denen vernommen, die es gesehen haben. Es ist daher kein völlig richtiger Ausdruck zu sagen: Ein Seeinhorn ist ein existirend Thier, sondern umgekehrt: einem gewissen existirenden Seethiere kommen die Prädicate zu, die ich an einem Einhorn zusammen gedenke."

logically pull it from a concept. To make a decision on the existence of narwhals one has to find an example of a narwhal, or ask someone who has, or somehow infer it from other evidence. And just so, finding an existing narwhal is not to add or confirm a new predicate (existence) within its concept; it is to learn that that concept *has an empirical example*, that it *applies* to at least one existing entity. This is why Kant can conclude at the end of the quote above that the normal way of formulating existence statements – “X exists,” “X has existence” – while not wrong per se, are misleading in that they express a certain subject-predicate relation which is quite backwards. What we mean to say is not “narwhals have existence,” but “there are entities which are narwhals” (or, to put it like Russell, “not all existing entities fail to be narwhals”). “Existence,” roughly put, is more like the subject predicated - *the existing entities* - than it is itself a predicate.

Kant’s argument is that the apparent predicates “...exists” and “...has existence” can simply be finessed out of the metaphysical vocabulary by way of sufficiently rigorous attention to their proper function. The very fact that someone can grant the right concept of God and yet deny that that set of predicates belongs to any existing entity implies that “existence” is something about how one *treats* that set, not something *in* that set:

When I say, “God is almighty,” then only this logical relation between God and almightiness is thought, as the latter is a characteristic of the first. Nothing further is set here. Whether God is, that is, is absolutely set or exists, is not at all contained therein... “God is almighty” must remain a true sentence even in the judgment of one who does not recognize [God’s] existence, if only he understands well how I take the concept of God. His existence alone must belong directly to the way in which his concept is set, for it is not found in the predicates themselves. And if the subject is not already assumed to be existing, then with any predicate it remains undetermined whether [the predicate] belongs to an existing or merely possible subject. Existence itself can therefore be no predicate.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ 2:74: “Wenn ich sage: Gott ist allmächtig, so wird nur diese logische Beziehung zwischen Gott und der Allmacht gedacht, da die letztere ein Merkmal des erstern ist. Weiter wird hier nichts gesetzt. Ob Gott sei, das ist, absolute gesetzt sei oder existire, das ist darin gar nicht enthalten... Gott ist allmächtig, muß ein wahrer Satz auch in dem Urtheil desjenigen bleiben, der dessen Dasein nicht erkennt, wenn er mich nur wohl versteht, wie ich den Begriff Gottes nehme. Allein sein Dasein muß unmittelbar zu der Art gehören, wie sein Begriff gesetzt wird, denn in den Prädicaten selber wird es nicht gefunden. Und wenn nicht schon das Subject als existirend vorausgesetzt ist, so bleibt es bei jeglichem Prädicate unbestimmt, ob es zu einem existirenden oder blos möglichen Subjecte gehöre. Das

Existence can never be a real predicate, reality, or perfection within the concept of an entity because entities don't "have" existence - rather, *there are entities* which "have" such-and-such real predicates. Arguing otherwise is to misunderstand the proper meaning and logical role of the term.⁶⁶ And this applies even to God:

[If] I say, God is an existing thing, it appears as though I were expressing the relation of a predicate to the subject. But there lies an inaccuracy in this expression as well. Said precisely, it should read: Something existing is God, that is, some existing thing is granted those predicates

Dasein kann daher selber kein Prädicat sein." It is strikingly evident that Kant must have had this passage in mind while writing the "Ideal," which in turn reads: "'Being' is evidently no real predicate, i.e. a concept of some aught that can be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the position of a thing or certain determinations in itself. In logical use it is simply the copula of a judgment. The proposition, 'God is almighty,' contains two concepts which have their objects, 'God' and 'omnipotence'; the word 'is' is still not a predicate above, rather only that which sets the predicate relation-wise upon the subject. Now if I take the subject (God) with all its predicates (among which omnipotence belongs) and say, 'God is,' or 'there is a God,' then I set no new predicate for the concept of God - rather [I set] only the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed the object in relation to my concept. Both must contain exactly the same, and therefore it can add nothing further to the concept, which merely expresses possibility, that I think its object as given per se (through the expression, 'it is')." [A598-9/B626-7, in 3:401: "Sein ist offenbar kein reales Prädicat, d.i. ein Begriff von irgend etwas, was zu dem Begriffe eines Dinges hinzukommen könne. Es ist bloß die Position eines Dinges oder gewisser Bestimmungen an sich selbst. Im logischen Gebrauche ist es lediglich die Copula eines Urtheils. Der Satz: Gott ist allmächtig, enthält zwei Begriffe, die ihre Objecte haben: Gott und Allmacht; das Wörtchen: ist, ist noch nicht ein Prädicat obenein, sondern nur das, was das Prädicat beziehungsweise aufs Subject setzt. Nehme ich nun das Subject (Gott) mit allen seinen Prädicaten (worunter auch die Allmacht gehört) zusammen und sage: Gott ist, oder es ist ein Gott, so setze ich kein neues Prädicat zum Begriffe von Gott, sondern nur das Subject an sich selbst mit allen seinen Prädicaten und zwar den Gegenstand in Beziehung auf meinen Begriff. Beide müssen genau einerlei enthalten, und es kann daher zu dem Begriffe, der bloß die Möglichkeit ausdrückt, darum daß ich dessen Gegenstand als schlechthin gegeben (durch den Ausdruck: er ist) denke, nichts weiter hinzukommen."]

⁶⁶ As an example of how easy it is to misread this point, I note Alvin Plantinga's attempt to refute Kant's refutation of this proof by first making a distinction between mere entity and the same entity as existing, and then a case about necessary propositions. Plantinga argues that even if one cannot define entities into existence via contingent premises - we can, for example, imagine a subclass of bachelors, namely existent "superbachelors," but it is merely *contingently* true that they have this predicate, i.e. actually exist - one can still do something like this from *necessary* premises. Gregory Robson's article on this objection is well worth reading and has a number of points against Plantinga, but the one that seems to me most on the nose reads: "I take Kant to be arguing that the predicate 'existence' cannot be legitimately included in the concept of any object. It is not clear then that Kant would accept Plantinga's apparently narrower reading of his criticism as applying to contingent propositions alone rather than to necessary propositions as well... [Plantinga's "superbachelors" example] shows only that [for Plantinga] Kant's criticism *does* apply to contingent premises. To convincingly support Plantinga's objection-from-irrelevance, more would need to be said as to why Kant's criticism cannot also apply to necessary propositions." In other words, Plantinga misses the point that, for Kant, "exists" just overall doesn't have the same logical role as other predicates; moreover, if Plantinga admits that Kant has a point about bachelors then it's not clear why the same point doesn't apply to God. One may still, of course, reply by constructing one's own first-order logic as one likes and then giving oneself leave to define into existence anything at all, and the fact that such options remain open may do much to explain Kant's change of tactics in the *Critique*. See *God, Freedom, and Evil* 94ff and "The Ontological Proof: Kant's Objections, Plantinga's Reply," 162.

which taken jointly we designate by the expression, God. These predicates are set in a way relative to the subject, but the thing itself is absolutely set together with all its predicates.⁶⁷

And if existence is no longer a reality or perfection, then it no longer follows that a most real or most perfect entity - no matter how coherent its concept - must have it. Very much like Descartes, Kant sees existence as having a rather special status, but to the point that it can no longer be considered a perfection.⁶⁸

E. Existentiality and the Ens Necessarium

Rather unexpectedly, Kant's attack on the proof in fact marks a remarkable *return* to the original problems and formulation of "Meditation V" and to Descartes' concerns with existence, against almost a century of previous continental thought. The texts certainly disagree on whether the proof works, and yet that disagreement itself rests upon a *consensus* about what's at issue.

Both thinkers see the central question of the proof in the peculiar status of existence: what it

⁶⁷ 2:74. "Sage ich: Gott ist ein existirend Ding, so scheint es, als wenn ich die Beziehung eines Prädicats zum Subjecte ausdrückte. Allein es liegt auch eine Unrichtigkeit in diesem Ausdruck. Genau gesagt, sollte es heißen: Etwas Existirendes ist Gott, das ist, einem existirenden Dinge kommen diejenigen Prädicate zu, die wir zusammen genommen durch den Ausdruck: Gott, bezeichnen. Diese Prädicate sind beziehungsweise auf dieses Subject gesetzt, allein das Ding selber sammt allen Prädicaten ist schlechthin gesetzt."

⁶⁸ Stang has an excellent recent double account of Kant's case against the Cartesian proof, which I think presents a highly plausible reading of the early Kant. In brief, Stang ("Kant's Argument," 585) argues that "by claiming that existence is not a determination, Kant is claiming that it is not possible for there to be non-existent objects," that Kant justifies this denial of non-existent entities much because "we have no use for the ontology of nonactual possibilia; if all of our thoughts about them have a generic content, then the explanatory work done by positing such objects can equally well be done by general concepts" ("Kant's Argument," 623). (On the other hand, if this works well for the early Kant, who still has more than a hint of Crusius, it may not match the later one. The latter's "ideal" is at least one concept "in individuo," even if the only one; but more importantly, the later Kant would view his attack on the Cartesian/ontological proof as incomplete without an accompanying account of the transcendental illusion which gives rise to the argument in the first place. If the "ontotheist" holds "that God exists necessarily in virtue of the fact that his existence is grounded in his essence" (*Kant's Modal Metaphysics*, 31) it is because they read a need of their own reason into that essence, and not just because of bad metaphysics: refute them however one wishes, without an alternative way of satisfying the same rational need they will bullet-bite their way back to the same argument. The full response to the Cartesian proof would then be found not so much in the "Ideal" as in the entire project of a critique of reason - see my final two Chapters.)

means to exist, whether God's existence should be the same as any other entity's, what difference lies in thinking something as existing versus not. This consensus, at odds with the intervening tradition, will eventually provide a clue to help us better understand the proof itself.⁶⁹

And yet "Meditation V" and Kant's most famous line of attack are not the last words on the Cartesian proof. Within its limits, to be sure, the *Beweisgrund* attack on the proof is convincing, and in many ways more exacting than its equivalent sections in the *Critique*. Yet in another way Kant's achievement is quite modest, this due to how the argument was formulated in the first place. Descartes' initial presentation in "Meditation V" basically renders the Cartesian proof into an argument about *perfections*, which is to say, *common ontic qualities*. At the very moment God is made exceptional among all entities via having existence *necessarily*, God's existence is also understood as an ordinary perfection which any other entity could have. God's being, even in having all perfections, appears not to be much of a special case, and God's "existence" is nothing special either. The only thing that makes God unique, and that existence anything of note, is that God has such qualities - including existence - *necessarily*.

I therefore propose that, at least in its definitive form, what may be most at issue in the proof is not *existence* (in the usual sense) or even *perfection* but this peculiar *necessity* of God. And if that is so, then this initial formulation of the proof and Kant's attack on it have both put their weight in the wrong place; the question of perfection or reality then becomes a distraction, and Kant's 1763 counterargument (as plausible as it may be within its limits) would thereby not strike the heart of the problem. Although it is a phrase almost never used by Descartes himself,

⁶⁹ And this will not be the last time we see such a connection between the two: as I stated above, I will argue that there is a deep connection back to Descartes within *all* of the proofs named in the *Beweisgrund*.

the God at the core of the Cartesian proof would then not be the *ens perfectissimum/realissimum* but instead another concept entirely: God as *ens necessarium, necessary entity*.⁷⁰

Ironically this is best confirmed through *Leibniz* (the same Leibniz whose preoccupation with possibility kept him from seriously dealing with Descartes' and Kant's deeper problems), who first fully voices such a concept. Faced with the frustration of the *ens perfectissimum's* logical coherence in a late letter, Leibniz proposes getting out of the problem by simply *abandoning* the perfections altogether, thereby producing a radically stripped-down version of the Cartesian proof. He writes:

...one might form an even simpler demonstration by not speaking of any perfections, so as not to be stopped by those who dare to deny that all perfections are compatible and consequently that the idea in question is possible. For in saying only that God is an Entity from itself or a primitive *Ens a se*, that is to say, one which exists by its essence; it is easy to conclude from this definition that such an Entity, if it is possible, exists, or rather this conclusion is a corollary that is immediately drawn from the definition and almost does not differ from it. Because the essence of the thing is just that which makes its possibility in particular, it is quite manifest that to exist by its essence is to exist by its possibility. And if the Entity from itself was defined in terms that approach it even more, in saying that it is the Entity that must exist because it is possible, it is manifest that all that one could say against the existence of such a being would be to deny its possibility.

One could also produce a modal proposition on this topic which would be one of the best fruits of all logic, to wit, that if the necessary Entity is possible, it exists. For the necessary Entity and the Entity by its essence are nothing but the same thing...⁷¹

⁷⁰ In Descartes I have seen this phrase only once, in a letter (apparently) to Silhon, at AT V 138 - and it is only when he quotes an argument of his interlocutor's back to him. This specific phrase in Latin is far more central for Wolff, e.g. in the *Theologia Naturalis pars posterior* at 16ff; and in French ("l'Estre necessaire") one finds it in late Leibniz as quoted below and, e.g., in the *Monadology* at *Die philosophischen Schriften VI*, 612-14.

⁷¹ "...on pourroit former une demonstration encore plus simple, en ne parlant point des perfections, pour n'être point arrêté par ceux qui s'aviseroyent de nier que toutes les perfections soient compatibles, et par consequent que l'idée en question soit possible. Car en disant seulement que Dieu est un Estre de soy ou primitif *Ens a se*, c'est à dire qui existe par son essence; il est aisé de conclure de cette définition, qu'un tel Estre, s'il est possible, existe, ou plutôt cette conclusion est un corollaire qui se tire immédiatement de la définition et n'en differe presque point. Car l'essence de la chose n'étant que ce qui fait sa possibilité en particulier, il est bien manifeste qu'exister par son essence, est exister par sa possibilité. Et si l'Estre de soy étoit défini en termes encore plus approchans, en disant que c'est l'Estre qui doit exister parce qu'il est possible, il est manifeste que tout ce qu'on pourroit dire contre l'existence d'un tel être, seroit de nier sa possibilité.

"On pourroit encore faire à ce sujet une proposition modale qui seroit un des meilleurs fruits de toute la Logique, sçavoir que si l'Estre necessaire est possible, il existe. Car l'Estre necessaire et l'Estre par son Essence ne sont qu'une même chose..." *Philosophischen Schriften IV*, 405-6.

Leibniz initially uses the language of “ens a se,” which strictly speaking stems more from Descartes’ “Replies” and the contingency proof. But by the second paragraph this formulation is elided into “l’Estre necessaire,” a term that simply *defines* the divine entity by necessity. The consequence of “not speaking of any perfections,” is not only a “simpler” and “easier” proof, but also a proof which initially grants God *no content whatsoever* - not a superlative essence or even an incomprehensible one, but rather an essence which is totally *indeterminate*. The ens necessarium is undecided, empty, its only “quality” being necessity itself. Nothing about it is certain save its existence.⁷²

And yet rethinking the Cartesian proof according to this quite different concept of God has another consequence: in shifting the discussion away from “real predicates” and towards necessity, the nature of *existence itself* also has to be reconsidered. If it is to Leibniz’ credit that he is the first to deploy the name “necessary entity” in such an extraordinary way, in fact the move is already anticipated by Descartes himself. The first time his Cartesian proof is ever put under pressure (by Caterus) Descartes effectively makes the same shift as Leibniz, putting the emphasis on necessity rather than God’s perfections. He writes:

But in order to remove the first part of this difficulty [i.e., why God should be a special case], one must distinguish between possible and necessary existence, and one must note that possible existence is indeed contained in the concept or idea of all things which are clearly and distinctly understood, but necessary existence is nowhere except in the idea of God alone.⁷³

This passage from the “First Replies” is repeated and amended in the “Second”:

Existence is contained in the idea or concept of each thing, as we can conceive of nothing except within the rationality [sub ratione] of its existing; possible or contingent existence is indeed

⁷² A fuller discussion of these texts, and of Leibniz’ attempt to nevertheless rejoin the two different concepts of God, may be found in Harrelson’ *Ontological Argument*, 151-55.

⁷³ AT VII 116: “Sed, ut prima hujus difficultatis pars tollatur, est distinguendum inter existentiam possibilem & necessariam, notandumque in eorum quidem omnium quae clare & distincte intelliguntur, conceptu sive idea existentiam possibilem contineri, sed nullibi necessariam, nisi in sola idea Dei.”

contained in the concept of a limited thing, and necessary and perfect [existence] in the concept of a most perfect entity.⁷⁴

God now has a unique kind of existence - namely, a necessary one - yet the way Descartes gets there has broader consequences concerning the essence/existence distinction which one might have hoped to be done with. These passages now declare that *anything whatsoever* must be conceived “sub ratione” existence, presumably including even things which do not exist.

Descartes’ point, of course, must not be read as a psychological one. To be sure, when I imagine a fictional wooden block, as a cobbled-together image of other existing things, to a large extent I cannot help but think that block as if it existed as well. But this psychological tendency of our fictions doesn’t seem to quite capture what Descartes is saying, which is intended as a point about the entities themselves. Existence is contained in the “concept” (idea) of the block or of any other entity, even if it is only as “possible or contingent,” even if it doesn’t properly exist, as a determination of that concept.

The best sense I can make of these passages is that Descartes intends “existence” in a slightly distinct sense than in the sections above. “Existence,” that is, is an aspect of something like a wooden block in two ways. In the first sense, an existing wooden block cannot really (or modally) be distinguished from its existence, but my thinking (or God’s thinking) about it may change regarding that existence. In the second sense, it has a possibility or a contingency to exist *within its idea*. Descartes elsewhere writes, “...this rule, ‘anything which we can conceive, can be’ ... is my own, and true...,”⁷⁵ and, “...I know that each thing of such sort that I understand it

⁷⁴ AT VII 166: “In omnis rei ideâ sive conceptu continetur existentia, quia nihil possumus concipere nisi sub ratione existentis; nempe continetur existentia possibilis sive contingens in conceptu rei limitatae, sed necessaria & perfecta in conceptu entis summe perfecti.”

⁷⁵ From the *Notes on a Certain Program*, AT VIII B 351: “...hanc regulam, quicquid possumus concipere, id potest esse... mea sit, & vera...” (“Esse posse” is an inexact phrase borrowed from Regius, to whom he is replying.)

clearly and distinctly can be made by God just as I understand it....”⁷⁶ By “a Deo fieri posse” and “esse posse,” Descartes means “*existere posse*.” The intention is to say that any idea which I can think in the right way - according to the method, without contradiction - *can exist*. An entity’s potentiality to exist is exactly equal to the degree that it is *conceivable*, and to be conceivable is already to be granted possible existence (existence in the second sense).⁷⁷

“Existence” in this second sense is the mark of a well-ordered idea. It does not say that anything *does* exist (save in the exceptional case of God), only that the ability to exist belongs to any properly-made concept of a thing. To avoid future confusion, I make a terminological distinction by reserving the word *existence* for the first sense, and using *existentiality* for “existence” in this second sense. Existentiality refers to any idea’s status as “sub ratione existentis,” to its ability to exist.⁷⁸

As will eventually be seen, much of the mystery characterizing the theistic proofs lies within the murky depths of this single phenomenon. We *cannot conceive* entities at all other than within the “rationality” of their existing; the necessity to think entities via existentiality is

⁷⁶ From “Meditation VI,” AT VII 78 “...scio omnia quae clare & distincte intelligo, talia a Deo fieri posse qualia illa intelligo...”

⁷⁷ But as in the “First Replies,” not existence proper: “...even if we never understand even the other things except just as if they existed, still it does not follow thenceforth that they exist, rather only that they can exist...” [AT VII 117: “...etiamsi caeteras quidem res nunquam intelligamus nisi tanquam existentes, non tamen inde sequi illas existere, sed tantummodo posse existere, quia non intelligimus...”] This also implies, indeed, that inconceivable entities cannot exist and even cannot be said to be as ideas: “I have judged that nothing cannot ever be made by [God], unless because there was contradiction in its being perceived by me.” [From “Meditation VI,” AT VII 78: “[N]ihilque unquam ab illo fieri non posse judicavi, nisi propter hoc quod illud a me distincte percipi repugnaret.”]

⁷⁸ The reader may fairly wonder if I am inventing a term unnecessarily here, as Descartes is clearly referring to something like “possibility” or “contingency” within the well-known topic of *modality*. The latter is true enough, but I also wish to remain close to Descartes’ own terminology; indeed, being able to label these discussions via contemporary terms does not thereby render them any clearer. Even with “modality” having been a hot topic for much of the past century of philosophy, one can turn the question around and ask whether we have made much progress in the basic concepts since Descartes’ time. To be sure, we have done a great deal of debating about formalization and about the metaphysical consequences of modal distinctions - but has this helped us to better understand what Descartes is talking about when he speaks of “existence” in this second sense? To be sure, we can write Descartes’ propositions with boxes and diamonds or translate them into the stipulation of entities in possible worlds, however we construe them - does this tell us what existentiality, as a determination of entities, *is*?

somehow fundamental to our grasping them in any way. Yet Descartes does not offer an answer to the obvious question: *why* is our thinking determined in this way, and *from where*? From the concepts themselves, or somewhere else? He says that existentiality is somehow “contained in the idea or concept” of everything whatsoever - but in what sense? Even if it “fits” the concepts in a certain way, merely given Descartes’ own discussions above this does not rule out the possibility that existentiality could be a determination of concepts by “reason ratiocinatae” - which is to say, not arbitrary, but nevertheless more directly related to *my own thinking* than the proper being of the idea. And, to anticipate, that will eventually be Kant’s diagnosis when he returns to the Cartesian proof nearly two decades later, albeit presenting his case (in Chapter VII) will require a full review of his critical rational theology first.

The move to existentiality, and Leibniz’s more extreme version of it, indeed removes the Cartesian proof from the force of Kant’s 1763 attack, but only by introducing quite new questions. To be sure, even after the “Replies” Descartes’ explicit interpretation is that God’s existentiality (i.e. necessary existence) is something akin to a perfection, and at any rate a determination of the entity’s essence; for example, he attempts a reconciliation of the two approaches (the “Replies” and “Meditation V”) in *Principles* I.14-15.⁷⁹ But the fact that the language of perfection occasionally drops off almost entirely even in Descartes’ own text, i.e. in the “Replies,” strongly indicates that the notion of “ens perfectissimum” is basically idle or even inappropriate in this proof, i.e. that the real issue is not perfection but *necessity*.

So far as I read, Descartes and Leibniz do not ever make any deeper analysis of what “necessity” in this sense (i.e., God’s necessary existence) properly means; it is *Kant* who seems

⁷⁹ Cf AT VIII A 10.

to really chase after the necessity of God as a real issue, and he does so throughout his career. In 1763 we see him wrestle with it in his own proof, as discussed below, and by the critical period the question of God's necessity will be totally transformed. That necessity and the Cartesian proof are, in a sense, inseparable: in the end we will find the Cartesian proof located at the heart of the system of proofs, precisely because God's necessity is to some extent implied in all the proofs to come. Kant will never grant this proof any validity *as an argument*, but by the end it represents far more than a mere mistake.

As a final note, what we will soon find is that all of the other proofs in Descartes' tradition have deep relations to various ontologies. That will turn out to mean that those other proofs can neatly fit into my "crab canon" modification of Heideggerian ontotheology (suggested earlier): for them, proving the existence of God amounts to achieving certainty concerning a θεῖον by way of a given realm of being, yet with that same θεῖον also being somehow presupposed in advance for the sake of the same realm. This is not the case concerning the Cartesian proof: a mere ens necessarium, without further determinations, is ontologically inert. The fact that this proof is both central and at the same time quite empty will become increasingly pressing in the following chapters.

II. The Ontological Proof

The second mode of proof from intellectual concepts in *Beweisgrund* III is the one that Kant himself embraces. He sums it up as follows:

In contrast [to the Cartesian proof], the inference from the possibilities of things as consequences to the existence of God as a ground is of a quite other kind. Here it is examined whether some such existing thing must not be presupposed so that there be anything possible, and whether that

existence, without which even no internal possibility takes place, does not contain such properties as we bind together in the concept of Godhood... That this [proof] can be effected has been indicated in the first division of this work.⁸⁰

It is still a proof performed a priori, but rather than trying to find existence within God's concept it argues that the givenness of any possibility whatsoever (which will mean, in this context, any thinkable content) requires an existing God as a ground.

This proof has always seen some measure of discussion, but recent years have yielded an extended surge of interest.⁸¹ A good deal of this interest is presumably due to a certain puzzlement about it, perhaps lying in the fact that it is not located among the three traditional theistic proofs ("ontological," "cosmological," "physicotheological") of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The "Ideal" in that later text, it appears, does not directly discuss this early proof as a proof. It does not so much as *name* the proof, it gives it no proper signifier. And because the *Critique* has historically served as the main terminological source for discussing these proofs, recent as well as past work on this proof has been preemptively hampered by a certain bafflement about how to so much as *talk* about it, well before any question of the argument's originality or validity. In this third section, however, Kant *does* proffer a name for this proof, although not as one would expect. It is in fact *this* proof, and not the argument above, which is first called "ontological," although I will not argue the point in detail here;⁸²

⁸⁰ 2:157. "Dagegen ist der Schluß von den Möglichkeiten der Dinge als Folgen auf das Dasein Gottes als einen Grund von ganz andrer Art. Hier wird untersucht, ob nicht dazu, daß etwas möglich sei, irgend etwas Existirendes vorausgesetzt sein müsse, und ob dasjenige Dasein, ohne welches selbst keine innere Möglichkeit statt findet, nicht solche Eigenschaften enthalte, als wir zusammen in dem Begriffe der Gottheit verbinden... Daß dieses geschehen könne, ist in der ganzen ersten Abtheilung dieses Werks gewiesen worden."

⁸¹ Chignell "...Most Real Being" appears to have sparked the most recent wave. That piece begat a series of replies all discussed below, but even before this explosion there were already good papers on the same proof (Logan's "...Kant's Ontological Argument?" and Fisher/Watkins, "Kant on the Material Ground of Possibility") and long discussions in books by Laberge, Schmucker Ortiz-Mena and Schönfeld. I assume all of these texts as a background, although my own concerns do not often line up with theirs.

⁸² The reader may consult my forthcoming paper "Kant's Proof from Ontology, from the 'Third Meditation' to the *Critique of Pure Reason*," which shares a great deal with this discussion, for a full argument of this claim. The first

the fact that we today refer to the Cartesian approach as “ontological” is really an artifact of the two proofs being *merged* for the purposes of the 1781 “Ideal of Reason,” and that due to important changes in Kant’s views.

My main intention in this section is to further describe the nature of this proof within the early texts, and then (as above) trace it back to Descartes; specifically I will be arguing that this proof can be identified with the proof from the idea of the infinite in “Meditation III,” once the procedure of that text is better understood (Malebranche helps confirm this connection as an intermediary). Beyond that, however, this proof introduces a series of new elements which will become more crucial in the discussions to come and deserve to be explored in some detail. If the God of the Cartesian proof need not have any relation to anything else, nor do anything whatsoever - that proof only relies on one necessarily *seeing* existence in the concept somehow - this original ontological proof, by contrast, is rooted in the status of a particular realm of entities, namely the ideas (the cogitabilia). If it is, on examination, a fairly straightforward argument to a master entity as a “ground” (performed a priori, yet from the “posteriori” of given thinkable entities), that does suggest that it can be read as “ontotheological” in the modified Heideggerian sense I suggested in the first Chapter, yet at the same time it leaves open the question of what such “grounding” is supposed to amount to. Kant circa 1763 gives very little explanation of this; I look to Descartes, specifically to “Meditation VI,” as a way to redirect the question, one which will be pursued into the next chapters.

reason is that Kant *says, twice*, that it is his own proof that bears this name (at 2:159-161). The second, more subtle reason is that insofar as “ontology” in Kant’s period, following Clauberg, Wolff, and Baumgarten, is precisely the science of mere possibility - in the sense of mere thinkability - then we should expect an “ontological” theistic proof to proceed from thinkability to God. That is precisely what Kant’s argument tries to do.

A. Ontology and Necessity

In one of the last notes where he clearly distinguishes the ontological proof from its “Cartesian” cousin, Kant writes: “The ontological proof must read like so: in relation to possibility in general, a supreme perfection must exist; but not: an entity which we think as supremely perfect must thereby exist. For this latter does not follow.”⁸³ Indeed, it is an ontological proof precisely because it grounds possibility in general (the subject matter of the “ontology” of Kant’s day). I need not provide a full reconstruction of this argument for my purposes, which others have done quite well,⁸⁴ and much is still in dispute concerning the exact

⁸³ Fragment 6027, 18:427: “Der ontologische Beweis würde so heissen müssen: Es muß eine höchste Vollkommenheit existiren in Beziehung auf Möglichkeit überhaupt, nich taber: ein Wesen, welches wir uns als höchst Vollkomen denken, muß darum existiren. Denn dieses letztt erefolgt nicht.” Adickes dates this note ambiguously, as anywhere from 1776 to the 1880s. By its content I suspect this to be prior to the KRV.

⁸⁴ Schönfeld’s *Young Kant*, 197ff, has an excellent historical account of Kant’s proof from its beginnings in the early ‘50s onwards. Ortiz-Mena Dell’Oro (113ff) and Schmucker tries to link the 1755 and 1763 versions of the proof in more philosophical detail, while Laberge (56ff and 89ff), sees deeper differences between the two versions. Stang’s “Kant’s Possibility Proof at 285ff makes a more formal presentation specific to the *Beweisgrund*, comparable to an earlier reconstruction in Fisher/Watkins at 371ff. Chignell’s “...Most Real Being” at 165ff also presents a reconstruction, but it should be noted that Chignell is, at times self-admittedly, bending Kant’s presented argument as much towards contemporary defensibility as possible – cf. e.g. Chignell’s “Kant and the “Monstrous” Ground of Possibility,” 61 and 67.

details.⁸⁵ My intention is only to describe the “outlines” of the proof, which are really all that Kant claims to present⁸⁶ (at least in the *Beweisgrund*).

The opening gambit of Kant’s proof in *Beweisgrund* I is that formal consistency (the absence of contradiction) is not the only requirement for being possible, and not even the most fundamental:

Everything which is self-contradictory is internally impossible... But with contradiction it is clear that aught must stand in logical antagonism with aught, that is, it must deny what is likewise affirmed in the very same [sentence]... I call this repugnance the Formal [part] of unthinkability or impossibility; the Material [part], which is hereby given, and which stands in such a dispute, is in itself an aught and can be thought. A triangle which would be square is absolutely impossible. However, a triangle is nevertheless in itself an aught, and the same for any square.⁸⁷

An entity can surely fail to be possible by the internal repugnance of its qualities, yet in order for any quality to even be asserted or denied (or both) it must be first be *given* as thinkable. There is therefore a *material, contentful* element to possibility: we must be able to think the elements that

⁸⁵ Specifically there has been much dispute regarding exactly how a most real entity “grounds” all content and why it is supposed to be one entity. Chignell (“...Most Real Being”, 172ff) insists that God must *exemplify* all positive predicates on the basis of Kant’s embracing what he calls *real harmony*. Because all predicates would have to be “harmonized” in the one entity, this would get Kant out of trouble with objections that there could be more than one ground of possibility - but later, in Chignell’s “... Threat of Spinoza” at 657ff, he notes that this very reading also pushes Kant’s metaphysics towards Spinozism, a problem also brought up by Laberge (73). Other readers, beginning with Stang’s “Kant’s Possibility Proof” (290ff) and then, in more extended fashion, Abaci’s “Chignell’s Real Harmony” (11ff), and Yong’s “God, Totality and Possibility” (30ff) have found serious problems with both the exemplification point and the real harmony point, most notably that they seem unsupported by the text. I agree with their verdict at least regarding the *Beweisgrund*, yet these readers do not seem to me to offer compelling *alternative* accounts about how “grounding” works or why there’s only a single ground. Abaci and Stang both seem to give up in the face of the “plurality” problem, for different reasons. Yong’s proposal (schematization in the divine mind as the basis for a unity of possibilities) is intriguing if Malebranchian, but still lacks in direct textual support. Ultimately I suspect Fisher and Watkins may be right in simply *not saying* how “grounding” is supposed to work, i.e. that for the purposes of his mere “outline” Kant is keeping his language open-ended. I note that none of these differences in reading seem to me to change the broad strokes of the proof.

⁸⁶ Cf *Beweisgrund* 2:66. Chignell presents an excellent discussion of the *Beweisgrund*’s limited scope at “...Most Real Being” 160-63.

⁸⁷ 2:77. “Alles, was in sich selbst widersprechend ist, ist innerlich unmöglich... Bei diesem Widerspruche aber ist klar, daß Etwas mit Etwas im logischen Widerstreit stehen müsse, das ist, dasjenige verneinen müsse, was in eben demselben zugleich bejaht ist... Diese Repugnanz nenne ich das Formale der Undenklichkeit oder Unmöglichkeit; das Materiale, was hiebei gegeben ist, und welches in solchem Streite steht, ist an sich selber etwas und kann gedacht werden. Ein Triangel, der viereckicht wäre, ist schlechterdings unmöglich. Indessen ist gleichwohl ein Triangel, imgleichen etwas Viereckichtes an sich selber Etwas.” “Aught” is my translation for the German “Etwas” and the latin “aliquid,” since “something” is a bit of a misnomer (not every aught is a thing).

might contradict or not. Yet this same distinction – this is the next step in the proof - opens up the space for a *material* impossibility as well as a formal one. An “ought” with no content may not formally contradict, but only because there is nothing to be contradictory. It is no less “unthinkable” when the content for thinking it is just not there. Kant sums up:

From the preceding it is now clear to see that possibility would fall away not only as logical impossibility, when an inner contradiction is to be found, but also when there is no material, no given to think. For then nothing thinkable is given; but every possibility is something which can be thought, and the logical relation belongs to it as per the principle of contradiction.⁸⁸

The entire proof turns upon this point: once it is granted that possibility requires contentful givenness (perfection/reality, in Kant’s terms) as much as formal nonrepugnance, the direction of the rest of the proof is relatively simple to grasp in its generalities.

Content, Kant says, cannot just float about in the prelogical ether: “It is to be demonstrated, of all possibility in totality and of each in particular, that they presuppose some actuality, be it one thing or many.”⁸⁹ If any content is there (if we can think anything), it must be given by *some* (at least one) *thing*. And this thing – the young Kant assumes – must *exist*: “If all existence now be removed, then nothing is absolutely posited, there is completely nothing given, no material for anything at all thinkable, and all possibility completely falls away.”⁹⁰ The existing things we encounter every day either are themselves the very entities whose being grounds the content we seek to explain,⁹¹ or they somehow receive their content from something else – that is, there is a *hierarchy* of actualities with regard to their relation to possibility (“Either

⁸⁸ 2:78. “Es ist aus dem anjetzt Angeführten deutlich zu ersehen, daß die Möglichkeit wegfalle, nicht allein, wenn ein innerer Widerspruch als das Logische der Unmöglichkeit anzutreffen, sondern auch wenn kein Materiale, kein Datum zu denken da ist. Denn alsdann ist nichts Denkliches gegeben, alles Mögliche aber ist etwas, was gedacht werden kann, und dem die logische Beziehung gemäß dem Satze des Widerspruchs zukommt.”

⁸⁹ 2:79. “Es ist von aller Möglichkeit insgesamt und von jeder insonderheit darzuthun, daß sie etwas Wirkliches, es sei nun ein Ding oder mehrere, voraussetze.”

⁹⁰ 2:78. “Wenn nun alles Dasein aufgehoben wird, so ist nichts schlechthin gesetzt, es ist überhaupt gar nichts gegeben, kein Materiale zu irgend etwas Denklichem, und alle Möglichkeit fällt gänzlich weg.”

⁹¹ On this possibility, see my discussion of “Meditation VI” below.

the possibility is thinkable only insofar as it itself is actual, and then the possibility is given in the actuality as a determination; or it is possible because something else is actual, i.e. its inner possibility is given through another existence as a result”).⁹² *Contingent* entities could evidently be cancelled without thereby cancelling out the thinkable content they exemplify or the realm of possibility in general, but this would not be so of an entity which is (he says) *absolutely necessary*. Whence the crucial step:

All possibility presupposes some actuality wherein and whereby everything thinkable is given. Accordingly there is a certain actuality whose very removal would remove all inner possibility completely. But that whose removal or denial exterminates all possibility is absolutely necessary.⁹³ Accordingly, something exists in an absolutely necessary way.

This existence, Kant says, is a God: singular, simple, eternal and immutable, and most importantly, *maximally real*. This God “grounds” all reality, and thus everything which can be thought: “Since the *data* for all possibility must be found in [the necessary entity], either as determinations of itself or as results given by it as the first ground of reality, one sees that all reality is conceived by it in one manner or another”; “Accordingly the possibility of all other things in respect of what is real in them depends on the necessary entity as a ground of reality...”

⁹⁴ To the extent that any entities are thinkable (including itself), it is ultimately because this entity has given the content to be thought. Moreover, every entity is thinkable only as a kind of privation or limitation of the positive reality which the most real entity embraces.

⁹² 2:79. “Entweder das Mögliche ist nur denklich, in so fern es selber wirklich ist, und dann ist die Möglichkeit in dem Wirklichen als eine Bestimmung gegeben; oder es ist möglich darum, weil etwas anders wirklich ist, d. i. seine innere Möglichkeit ist als eine Folge durch ein ander Dasein gegeben.”

⁹³ 2:83. “Alle Möglichkeit setzt etwas Wirkliches voraus, worin und wodurch alles Denkleiche gegeben ist. Demnach ist eine gewisse Wirklichkeit, deren Aufhebung selbst alle innere Möglichkeit überhaupt aufheben würde. Dasjenige aber, dessen Aufhebung oder Verneinung alle Möglichkeit vertilgt, ist schlechterdings nothwendig. Demnach existirt etwas absolut nothwendiger Weise.”

⁹⁴ 2:85 and 2:87. “Da die *Data* zu aller Möglichkeit in ihm anzutreffen sein müssen, entweder als Bestimmungen desselben, oder als Folgen, die durch ihn als den ersten Realgrund gegeben sind, so sieht man, daß alle Realität auf eine oder andere Art durch ihn begriffen sei.” “Demnach beruht die Möglichkeit aller andern Dinge in Ansehung dessen, was in ihnen real ist, auf dem nothwendigen Wesen als einem Realgrunde...”

Even if *Beweisgrund* I goes into considerable detail it is not, of course, the only text in which Kant presents some variation of this proof, nor is it even the most specific in its explanations. The *first* complete formulation of the same argument⁹⁵ can be found in the 1755 *New Dilucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Thought*, and on its face it actually reads as far more extreme:

PROPOSITION VII. An entity is given whose existence precedes itself and the possibility of itself and of all things, which is therefore said to exist absolutely necessarily. It is called God.

Whereas possibility is made absolute only as the non-contradiction of certain conjoined notions, and indeed the notion of possibility results from a collation; yet in every collation it is necessary that what is to be brought together be supposed, and assuredly when nothing at all is given then both collation and the notion of possibility, which corresponds to [collation], have no place: it follows that nothing can be conceived as so much as possible unless everything which is real in every possible notion [i.e., the positive content] exists, and even exists absolutely necessarily (for, if you abandon this, nothing at all would be possible, i.e. only the impossible would be). Furthermore, it is necessary that all of this reality [i.e., the content] be united in a single entity....

SCHOLIUM. Here is the demonstration of the divine existence - essential, to the greatest degree it can be done, and, although a genetic [proof] properly has no place, proved nevertheless by the maximally primitive evidence, obviously that through the possibility of things. From this is clear that, if you remove God, it utterly abolishes not only the existence of all things but even internal possibility itself.⁹⁶

The “outline” here is the same as in 1763, but this earlier proof – albeit with much denser argumentation – seems to explicitly embrace God’s *positive coinstantiation* of all realities

⁹⁵ Kant hints at the same proof in a still-earlier Fragment (3704) on optimism and Alexander Pope, dated around 1753-4; the argument is not given in strict form. See especially 17:233-4.

⁹⁶ 1:395: “PROP. VII. Datur ens, cuius existentiã prævertit ipsam et ipsius et omnium rerum possibilitatem, quod ideo absolute necessario existere dicitur. Vocatur Deus.

“Cum possibilitas nonnisi notionum quarundam iunctarum non repugnantia absolvatur adeoquë possibilitatis notio collatione resultat; in omni vero collatione quã sint conferenda, suppetant necesse sit, nequë ubi nihil omnino datur, collationi et, quã huic respondet, possibilitatis notioni locus sit: sequitur, quod nihil tanquam possibile concipi possit, nisi, quicquid est in omni possibili notione reale, existat, et quidem (quoniam, si ab hoc discesseris, nihil omnino possibile, h. e. nonnisi impossibile foret,) existet absolute necessario. Porro omnimoda hæc realitas in ente unico adunata sit necesse est...

“SCHOLION. En demonstrationem existentiã divinã, quantum eius maxime fieri potest, essentialem et, quamvis geneticã locus proprie non sit, tamen documento maxime primitivo, ipsa nempe rerum possibilitate, comprobata. Hinc patet, si Deum sustuleris, non existentiam omnem rerum solam, sed et ipsam possibilitatem internam prorsus aboleri..”

whatsoever. Although the language is dense enough that what looks like near-Spinozism might be explained away by roughness of expression, Kant seems to have eliminated these details as of eight years later.⁹⁷ What all of Kant's formulations emphasize is God's *absolute necessity*, which is front and center in his last published variant of the proof, the 1764 *Inquiry*:

The main concept which here presents itself to the metaphysician is the absolutely necessary existence of an entity. To approach upon it, he could first ask whether it is possible that utterly nothing exist. If he now becomes aware that in the case when no existence is given likewise there is nothing to think, and no possibility takes place, by this he is entitled to investigate merely the concept of the existence of that which must lie at the ground of all possibility. This thought shall develop itself and set down the determinate concept of an absolutely necessary entity.⁹⁸

The Kant of this era, to repeat, does not see himself as locating this necessity in God's concept somehow (nor discovering it empirically); this God is only necessary in the sense that, to borrow the later language of the *Critique*, it is the "supreme and complete condition" of possibility, of thinkable content. Necessity here means something like, necessity *for thinkability*. In this particular 1764 text Kant does not even say what this "determinate concept" really amounts to (certainly nothing as specific as the "most real entity" from a year before), only that it is the concept of "the ground of all possibility."⁹⁹

B. "...The perception of the infinite is in me earlier than that of the finite..."

⁹⁷ I am not the only one to notice that the 1755 version of the proof is stronger in this way - Stang's "Kant's Possibility Proof" says much the same at 298. It may well be the case that Chignell's account of the God of this proof (discussed above), and all that follows from it, succeeds in 1755 even where it has difficulty with the cagier language of 1763.

⁹⁸ 2:296-7. "Der Hauptbegriff, der sich hier dem Metaphysiker darbietet, ist die schlechterdings nothwendige Existenz eines Wesens. Um darauf zu kommen, könnte er zuerst fragen: ob es möglich sei, daß ganz und gar nichts existire. Wenn er nun inne wird, daß alsdann gar kein Dasein gegeben ist, auch nichts zu denken, und keine Möglichkeit statt finde, so darf er nur den Begriff von dem Dasein desjenigen, was aller Möglichkeit zum Grunde liegen muß, untersuchen. Dieser Gedanke wird sich erweitern und den bestimmten Begriff des schlechterdings nothwendigen Wesens festsetzen." Importantly, this proof is *not* presented in the 1770 *Sensible and Intelligible World*; if anything, by that point Kant seems to be doubting its cogency.

⁹⁹ Kant does suggest (2:297) that one could work out the "determinations" of this ground on the basis of the same argument, yet without the framing details of the version from a year earlier. On the issue of "grounding," I have more to say below.

Yet even if Kant first names this proof “ontological” and is (so far as I’m aware) the first to put it in such a detailed form, that is still not to say that it *originates* with him. Even if the secondary literature has sometimes treated the proof as autochthonous, at the same time it has also often noticed precedents for it throughout the preceding period.¹⁰⁰ I suggest that this proof is the same in outline as Descartes’ proof in “Meditation III, so that the argument can be traced back at least that far: the differences in emphases and tactics are extreme enough to make the texts sometimes seem nearly irreconcilable, but their relation becomes more evident when read by way of recent scholarship and a few historical intermediaries, especially Malebranche. (This thereby shows a *second* major point of connection between Kant and Descartes on the proofs.)

Let us consider Kant’s more immediate predecessors, of which there are few. The ontological proof, so far as I have found, does not really manifest *as a proof* within the prior German tradition - this, despite the fact that it is this tradition that initially develops the language of ontology. Leibniz comes very close in a number of places, e.g., stating that “If there were no eternal substance there would be no eternal truths; so likewise from this GOD is proved, who is the root of possibilities, for his mind is indeed the very region of ideas or truths.”¹⁰¹ That is, Leibniz grants that God is the ground of essences and possibilities to the point of *suggesting* a proof, but so far as I have found makes no attempt to extend this into a *full realization* as Kant

¹⁰⁰ Chignell and Newlands have rightly noticed that the “ground of possibility” is an operative concept in Leibniz, albeit not a prominent one; Wood’s *Kant’s Rational Theology* (27) already saw the connection I draw to Descartes, but still gave Kant credit as the proof’s inventor: “Descartes, along with various other scholastics and rationalists, had argued that the concept of a supremely perfect being is presupposed by the concepts of less perfect things... Kant’s account of the origin and rational necessity of the idea of God is a version of their argument... but its precise formulation is in fact original with Kant.”

¹⁰¹ From the “Specimen inventorum” in *Philosophischen Schriften VII*, 311: “Si nulla esset substantia aeterna nullae forent aeternae veritates; ita que hinc quoque probatur DEUS, qui est radix possibilitatis, ejus enim mens est ipsa regio idearum sive veritatum.” Also cf, for example, the “De rerum originatione radicali” in the same volume (305) and *Monadologie* §43 in *Bd. VI* (Berlin: Wiedmann, 1885), 614.

will.¹⁰² Even that suggestion seems to drop off in later authors.¹⁰³ I will not, of course, try to prove an absence here, lest another scholar should discover the text I have not seen; even so, I will suggest that this proof does not have much prominence within the prior German tradition.

A more intriguing historical intermediary, and someone who *did* present the thought as a full theistic proof, is Malebranche.¹⁰⁴ In introducing his proof he does not rely on the concepts of German ontology, instead relying upon the language of Descartes and the distinction between finite and infinite being. Nevertheless, all of the central concepts and argumentative moves from Kant's proof (the load-bearing moments) are still present and recognizable in Malebranche's.¹⁰⁵ I quote Malebranche at length:

[W]e conceive infinite being from the sole fact that we conceive being, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite. So in order that we conceive a finite being something must be necessarily subtracted from this general notion of being [i.e. infinite being], which consequently must precede it. Thus the mind apperceives nothing except in the idea which it has of the infinite; and far from this idea being formed from the confused assembly of all the ideas of particular beings, as the Philosophers think, to the contrary all these particular ideas are nothing but participations of the general idea of the infinite: just as God does not take his being from creatures, but rather all creatures are nothing but imperfect participations of the divine being.... It is certain that ideas are effective, for they act in the mind and enlighten it... Now, nothing can act immediately in the

¹⁰² Newlands' "Leibniz" at 173 rightly claims that "Leibniz... noticed that his grounding thesis [about possibilities] could be used to prove the existence of God." But again, this is not yet to construct an *extended proof* of this sort, a project which Leibniz seems not to have engaged in. Chignell's "Threat of Spinoza" at 635-648 is especially helpful on the relation between Kant and Leibniz on this question (with the warning from above about his well-meaning overinterpretation), and readers should also consider the rest of Newlands' response and his broader overview of the topic. I additionally point out a comparable, still more truncated sketch in the *Short Treatise* of Spinoza, which reads: "The essences of things are from all Eternity, and will remain unchanging in all eternity: God's essentialness is essence. THEREFORE..." [*Opera Omnia I*, 15. "De wezenteheden van de zaaken zijn van aller Ewigheid en zullen <van> in alle ewigheid onveranderlijk blijven: De wezentlijkheid Gods is wezenteheid. ERGO..."] The sketch cuts off there, but suggests a theistic proof starting from the being of eternal essences at least as much as Leibniz does.

¹⁰³ Stang's "Kant's Possibility Proof" at 280-1, perhaps following a suggestion from Chignell, poses Crusius's theory of powers as an exception to this, which presents yet another way for God to "ground" possibilities. However, in his *Kant's Modal Metaphysics* at 113 he seems to have abandoned this thought.

¹⁰⁴ I have yet to find other discussions in the literature on the relevance of Malebranche for understanding Kant's proof. Cumming's "Transcendental Epistemology," especially at 19ff, does the reverse, using (mostly the later) Kant to discuss *Malebranche's* proofs - but he focuses on his more famous version (in *Recherche* IV, XI and other places) through the mere perception of God (which is a Cartesian proof) and not the earlier, ontological one I discuss.

¹⁰⁵ Although he does not mention Kant in the process, Guerauld's account of the connection between God's existence and Malebranche's conception of ideas in this proof (in *Malebranche I* at 251-4) does much to support my point about its ontological character.

mind unless it is superior to it: nothing can except God alone. For it is only the Author of our being who can change the modifications [of the mind]. So it is necessary that all our ideas must be found in the efficient substance of the Divinity, which is not only intelligible or capable of enlightening us, because it alone can affect intelligences.¹⁰⁶

The divergences are admittedly many: whereas Kant carefully keeps his discussion to a kind of open space of impersonal possibility, Malebranche instead speaks about the apperception of individual minds; whereas Kant seems to studiously ignore the question of how any entity could “produce” ontological content, Malebranche ties his proof to a theory of God’s exclusive power to act upon minds. But the “outline” of the proof – the “Beweisgrund” – remains the same. We cannot think finite entities, Malebranche says, unless we also think an entity which would comprise all thinkable content, and we cannot think *at all* unless this same entity first gives us such content; thus such an entity must exist. If we are looking for a full ontological proof within texts Kant admitted to being familiar with,¹⁰⁷ then Malebranche seems to offer one. This is not to suggest that Kant directly adapts Malebranche’s argument in any way, only that he is closer to Malebranche than one may think.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ *Recherche* III, II, VI, in *Oeuvres Complètes* I 441-2: “Car nous concevons l’être infini, de cela seul que nous concevons l’être, sans penser s’il est fini ou infini. Mais afin que nous concevions un être fini, il faut nécessairement retrancher quelque chose de cette notion générale de l’être, laquelle par conséquent doit précéder. Ainsi l’esprit n’aperçoit aucune chose que dans l’idée qu’il a de l’infini : et tant s’en faut que cette idée soit formée de l’assemblage confus de toutes les idées des êtres particuliers comme le pensent les philosophes, qu’au contraire toutes ces idées particulières ne sont que des participations de l’idée générale de l’infini, de même que Dieu ne tient pas son être des créatures, mais toutes les créatures ne sont que des participations imparfaites de l’être divin... Il est certain que les idées sont efficaces, puisqu’elles agissent dans l’esprit, et qu’elles l’éclairent, puisqu’elles le rendent heureux ou malheureux par les perceptions agréables ou désagréables dont elles l’affectent. Or rien ne peut agir immédiatement dans l’esprit s’il ne lui est supérieur, rien ne le peut que Dieu seul ; car il n’y a que l’auteur de notre être qui en puisse changer les modifications. Donc il est nécessaire que toutes nos idées se trouvent dans la substance efficace de la divinité, qui seule n’est intelligible ou capable de nous éclairer que parce qu’elle seule peut affecter les intelligences.”

¹⁰⁷ It is uncertain that the early Kant had direct experience with Descartes, but he seems to have been very familiar with Malebranche: one can find discussions of the *Recherche* at *New Dilucidations* 1:415, *Sensible and Intelligible World* 2:409-10, Fragment 4275 17:491-2, The Herder Metaphysics at 28:102-4 and 887-8, and fragmented moments in various early logic lectures (24:37, 222, 337, 613).

¹⁰⁸ Even if he insists on remaining more “prudent” than his predecessor, Kant still claims seven years after the *Beweisgrund* that “[Malebranche’s] sentiment is barely removed from that which is explained [by Kant]: we see all things in God.” [2:410. “Verum consultius videtur littus legere cognitionum per intellectus nostri mediocritatem

But two factors do make it clear that Malebranche's proof is ultimately sourced from Descartes. First, Malebranche introduces this passage by saying, "...the proof of the existence of God [which is] the most beautiful, the most distinctive, the most solid, and the first, or which supposes the least things, is the idea we have of the infinite."¹⁰⁹ Which is to say, Malebranche takes himself to be drawing his proof fairly directly from the *Meditations*. Second, and still more convincingly, Malebranche's proof in fact begins with a shameless paraphrase of Descartes' own comments on "Meditation III" (from a late letter to Clercelier, April 23, 1649), which read:

Now I say that the notion that I have of the *infinite* is in me before that of the *finite* because from this alone, that I conceive of *being*, or *that which is*, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite, it is the *infinite* being that I conceive; but in order that I can conceive a *finite* being, I must subtract something from this general notion of being, which consequently must precede it.¹¹⁰

Even if Malebranche cannot often be relied upon as a faithful reader of Descartes – and there are elements in his proof that Descartes would not accept – a historian of philosophy can rarely hope for better evidence of a connection than near-plagiarism.

Assuming that Malebranche and Descartes' own late letter both evidence the ontological proof and represent "Meditation III" faithfully, then this would show Kant's proof to have a prominent historical and conceptual forerunner in Descartes' proof from the infinite. The major difficulty with identifying the two proofs, even in broad strokes, lies in how Descartes' proof is often read. That reading will have to be corrected before anything else.

nobis concessarum, quam in altum indagacionum eiusmodi mysticarum provehi, quemadmodum fecit Malebranchius, cuius sententia ab ea, quae hic exponitur, proxime abest: nempe nos omnia intueri in Deo."]

¹⁰⁹ *Recherche* III, II, VI, 441: "Enfin la preuve de l'existence de Dieu la plus belle[1], la plus relevée ; la plus solide et la première, ou celle qui suppose le moins de choses, c'est l'idée que nous avons de l'infini."

¹¹⁰ AT V 356: "Or ie dis que la notion que i'ay de l'*infini* est en moy auant celle du *fini*, pource que, de cela seul que ie conçoÿ l'*estre* ou *ce qui est*, sans penser s'il est fini ou infini, c'est l'*estre infini* que ie conçoÿ; mais, afin que ie puisse conceuoir vn *estre fini*, il faut que ie retranche quelque chose de cette notion generale de l'*estre*, laquelle par consequent doit preceder." Also cf. the "Conversation with Burman" (April 16, 1848) at AT V 153.

The argument of the “Third Meditation,” in rudimentary form, is often read something like this: I have an idea of God; it must have come from somewhere; I could not have produced it myself, and neither could anything else; therefore it must originate with the real God; therefore God exists. Granting Descartes the premise that even mere ideas cannot come from nothing,¹¹¹ a huge weight is therefore placed on the other premise (that the meditator in fact has the right idea). On this reading, as Bernard Williams says in passing, “[Descartes’] idea of God... (in his view) requires no proof,”¹¹² i.e. he simply grants himself the premise. But he does so on a very shaky basis, since he must *both* have an idea representing an “actually infinite being” (else the proof does not work) *and* admit that he cannot really conceive of this infinitude.¹¹³ The answers to how Descartes can square these requirements are, for Williams, “not very convincing” and “unsatisfactory.” Other readers, beginning with Hobbes and Gassendi,¹¹⁴ outright reject the brute premise that such an idea of God is mentally on hand, with good justification. What Descartes seems to lack is any substantive argument that he does, should, and/or must have this idea - if there were any such case for the premise, the proof would follow far more easily.

By contrast, recent readers of Descartes - I cite Anat Schechtman in particular - have shown in some detail that Descartes *does* have just such an argument for his not-so-brute premise, albeit this argument shows up several pages after the premise is first suggested. Schechtman emphasizes that the idea of God, although introduced early on, requires a

¹¹¹ AT VII 40-42; the application of “nothing comes from nothing” to ideas already shows the connection to Kant's proof, which relies on much same premise (“all possibility presupposes some actuality” which somehow grounds it). Abaci (2017, 270) points out this same connection.

¹¹² *Descartes* 131.

¹¹³ *Ibid* 129.

¹¹⁴ Cf AT VII 179-80 and 286-88.

considerable amount of *correction* on the meditator's part, i.e. that it cannot even operate as the right kind of premise until much later on:

Although [the meditator] does in fact have an idea of God (as reported in e.g. paragraphs 5 and 13 of the Third Meditation), he may misconceive the idea in a way that undermines his entitlement to certain claims about it — in particular, the crucial claim (initially emphasized in paragraph 13) regarding the objective reality of his idea... In [turning his attention to his other ideas], he comes to realize (in paragraph 24) that (i) having an idea of a finite being depends on—and is therefore posterior, rather than prior, to—having the requisite idea of an infinite being; and (ii) since he has the former idea, he must have the latter idea as well.¹¹⁵

The “brute premise” is thus not that we have an infinite idea, but that we have *finite* ones which then rely on this infinite or maximally perfect one.¹¹⁶ In the language of ontology, we can think all other entities because we first have the concept of an entity that grounds all thinkable content.

The brief but all-important passage in which Descartes presents his case that he can, should, and must have this idea reads:

Nor should I reckon that I do not perceive the infinite through a true idea, but merely through negation of the finite, as I perceive rest and darkness through negation of motion and light; on the contrary, I understand manifestly that there is more reality in infinite substance than in finite [substance], and hence that the perception of the infinite is in me in a certain way earlier than that of the finite, that is, God is [earlier] than I myself. Indeed, for what reason would I understand that I doubt, that I desire, that is, that I lack something, and that I am not altogether perfect, if there were in me no idea of a perfect entity, in comparison with which I recognize my defects?¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ “Descartes ‘Argument,’ 488. Also see the more detailed discussion at 506ff. An earlier “progressive” reading of “Meditation III” can be found in Winkler’s “Names of God” at 458-464, which also extends such a reading into “Meditation V.”

¹¹⁶ Schechtman notes (508-9), if only to flag the point, that the same discussion which justifies the idea of God also shifts Descartes’ language from that of *infinity* to that of *perfection*. In fact Descartes tends to withdraw from the term “infinite,” especially in its negative connotation, almost from the moment he deploys it - for example, cf. the August 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes at AT III 427.

¹¹⁷ AT VII 45-6: “Nec putare debeo me non percipere infinitum per veram ideam, sed tantum per negationem finiti, ut percipio quietem & tenebras per negationem motus & lucis; nam contra manifeste intelligo plus realitatis esse in substantia infinita quam in finita, ac proinde priorem quodammodo in me esse perceptionem infiniti quam finiti, hoc est Dei quam mei ipsius. Quae enim ratione intelligerem me dubitare, me cupere, hoc est, aliquid mihi deesse, & me non esse omnino perfectum, si nulla idea entis perfectioris in me esset, ex cuius comparatione defectus meos agnoscerem?” Nolan and Nelson (2006, 107-8) noticed the role of this paragraph far earlier than Schechtman, but do not explore it at any length.

This is a dense text, but it is more than sufficient to suggest the intentions made more explicit in the letter to Clercelier. One cannot arrive at the idea of *maximal* perfection by way of the manipulation of other concepts (as Gassendi suggests), not even by negation. “Infinite” is not a negative determination, but (on consideration) a *positive* one - it now *just means* *ens perfectissimum*. Any finite idea then turns out to be a privation of the infinite one: Descartes’ example is his idea of himself¹¹⁸ but the same presumably follows for any such idea whatsoever, and Descartes claims that he is surrounded by such ideas at the very opening of this “Meditation” (“But at present I indeed do not deny that these ideas [of various entities] are in my midst”¹¹⁹). The implication is that we could not perceive *any other entity at all*, not even ourselves, not even as merely thinkable, unless the idea of the infinite were in us “in a certain way” earlier than other ideas. The idea of maximal perfection/reality, the argument goes, cannot be a mere fiction because it must precede all other thinking. Descartes thereby does not just help himself to one peculiar and exceptional idea; he instead tries to justify it by way of the availability of the entire field of ideas.

The basic structure of the proof from the infinite, from the *Discourse* on, is to show the dependence of all other ideas (all finite thinkable entities) upon the existence of a most perfect entity. As above with Malebranche, the language is very different from Kant’s: Descartes never speaks of the thinkable, of real possibility, or of a ground of possibility. And to be sure, there are differences in the argumentation: Kant’s version, importantly, only insists on finding a ground for all material possibility *as a whole*, whereas Descartes also insists on locating that whole in a single idea first before grounding it in an actuality. But the basic move, that of grounding the

¹¹⁸ This same point, with far heavier emphasis on Descartes’ own imperfection, is also made in the *Discourse* at AT VI 33-35.

¹¹⁹ AT VII 35: “Sed ne nunc quidem illas ideas in me esse inficior.”

totality of thinkable content in an existence, remains the same between them. What Kant presents just over a century later will then be a descendent of the *Meditations*.

This suggestion has a pair of obvious effects. The first is to render the history of the proofs a bit more continuous: both Kant's 1763 proof and "Meditation III" have always seemed like odd ducks to interpreters, and this reading puts them into one continuous tradition.

The second is more involved, in that it directly assaults (albeit only in a limited sense) a line of interpretation for "Meditation III" stretching back at least to Levinas. For Levinas, of course, the "infinite" in Descartes represents a kind of rupture in the totality of the constituting subject, where I welcome into my thought something more than I can properly (objectively) think; the infinite is a kind of radical and irreducible exteriority that I encounter via responsibility, desire, discourse, religion, even murder, anything but comprehension.¹²⁰ Marion's readings of Descartes sharpen this initial Levinasian thought to a fine point, and it is central to his epochal *Descartes' Metaphysical Prism* (a book which has been no small inspiration for the present effort). But this interpretation of "Meditation III" has the effect of tearing the entire reading of Descartes in two: Descartes must be *both* the definitive modern metaphysician *and* a moment where those metaphysics are overstepped ("*Descartes belongs to metaphysics all the more as he onto-theo-logically establishes its exact limits and sometimes succeeds, under certain conditions, in transgressing them.*")¹²¹ It is certainly true that Descartes deploys the term "infinite," and of all the principal descriptions of God that Descartes gives (excepting some obviously derivative terms) "ininitus" is the only one that is openly a *negation*. Marion notes

¹²⁰ E.g., *Totality and Infinity* 50: "The Cartesian notion of the idea of the Infinite designates a relation with an entity that maintains its total exteriority with respect to him who thinks it. It designates the contact with the intangible, a contact that does not compromise the integrity of what is touched."

¹²¹ *On Descartes' Metaphysical Prism* 349.

that the term could have been (and probably was) borrowed directly from Duns Scotus, Suarez, or Leonardus Lessius,¹²² suggesting a direct lineage with the tradition of *via negativa*. It is precisely the negativity, which at a theological level implies Levinasian excess and distance, that (for Marion) disqualifies the term from a metaphysical role:

The pair infinite/finite... authorizes only the irreparable and inconfusable distinction between God and creatures... The distinction is of no use to the elaboration of the sciences, since it ends up at the incomprehensibility of the infinite by the finite and at the strict delimitation of the sciences practiced by the finite understanding.¹²³

Except that within “Meditation III” Descartes does not stick to his own word. As “progressive” readings (like Schechtman’s) tend to note, even if infinitude leads the way at the *beginning* of the text,¹²⁴ halfway through - and indeed in the very paragraph I identify as the center of the argument - the language suddenly blurs into that of reality and perfection (...*more reality in infinite substance* than in finite [substance]... no idea of a *perfect entity*...).¹²⁵ Later on Descartes even blames his use of the term “infinite” merely on the “usage”¹²⁶ of the time. Marion elsewhere notes, referring to Duns Scotus and Suarez, that “the very thinkers who privilege [the infinite] suspend it just as quickly when it is a matter of establishing a univocal concept of

¹²² See *On Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism* 247ff.

¹²³ *Ibid* 273.

¹²⁴ AT VII 40: “...some highest God, eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, creator of all things besides himself...” (“...summum aliquem Deum, aeternum, infinitum, omniscium, omnipotentem, rerumque omnium, quae praeter ipsum sunt, creatorem...”)

¹²⁵ AT VII 45-6; also cf 46 (“idea entis summe perfecti & infiniti,” “the idea of a *most perfect* and infinite entity”) and 47 (“Deum... esse actu infinitum, ut nihil ejus perfectioni addi possit,” “God is actually infinite, such that *nothing can be added to his perfection*”). Marion is, of course, well aware of these passages - cf *Metaphysical Prism* 240-50 - but I question whether the endless addition of positive perfections, which he admits, can really amount to a negative “infinite” in the radical theological sense.

¹²⁶ See the August 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes at AT III 427: “And when I said it suffices for the infinite to be understood that we understand a thing held within no limits, I was following a mode of speech which is especially common; and as when I retained the word *infinite*, which more rightly could be called *greatest entity* if we wanted all names in conformity to the nature of things; but usage wanted that it be expressed by the negation of negation...” “Et cum dixi... sufficere quod intelligamus rem nullis limitibus comprehensam, ad intelligendum infinitum, sequutus sum modum loquendi quàm maxime usitatum; ut etiam cum retinui nomen infiniti, quod rectius vocari posset ens amplissimum, si nomina omnia naturis rerum vellemus esse conformia; usus autem voluit ut per negationem negationis exprimeretur...”

being” - it’s just that this is also true of Descartes.¹²⁷ Levinas and Marion are certainly right that the word “infinite,” with all of its resonances, is in the text; the fact that Descartes has to *undermine* that term in order to build his metaphysics atop of it suggests that, at a different level, they read the concept quite correctly.

C. The Activa Facultas (Descartes on Existence, Part II)

One question that remains outstanding in this proof - and it is much the same in the next two - is how it is possible for any entity to “ground” anything else, in this case the totality of thinkability. I suggested above that (at least in 1763) Kant is studiously vague about this point, and Descartes is equally vague about the exact sense of there being at least as much “esse” in the efficient cause as the effect (and about exactly what an efficient cause is, and about exactly what it would mean for any aught’s qualities to be “contained” formally or eminently in another entity).¹²⁸ Yet if these are, indeed, interesting and valuable questions, still I suggest that in some sense they are beside the point, especially in Descartes’ eyes (if not Kant’s).

It is distinctive to Descartes’ thinking (and decisive for the tradition that follows) that “proofs for existence” are the highest goal of his philosophy: all of his metaphysical concepts, when they appear, are oriented in this direction and highly precise and illuminating when judged by that standard, albeit that is also the main standard they are meant to be judged by. If the conceptual apparatus in Descartes is usually delayed and pushed off to the margins as it were, that is because they are not doing the most important work. To quote the *Principles*:

¹²⁷ Cf *On Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism* 273.

¹²⁸ Cf, of course, the *Meditations* at AT VII 40-46.

And when I say that this proposition, *I think, so I am*, is the first and most certain of all which anyone encounters through the order of doing philosophy, I do not in fact deny that before this they ought know *what thought is, what existence is, what certitude is*; likewise, *it is impossible that that which thinks does not exist*, and the like; but because these are the most simple notions, and [because] these alone offer notice of no existing thing, I therefore did not suppose them to need enumeration.¹²⁹

Knowing the simple notions is, for Descartes, philosophically trivial, because by itself such knowledge gives us “*nulla res existens*,” no *existing* thing. If the understanding of notions like “existence” come first from a logical point of view, this is not to make them first within the *ordo philosophans*. The *proper* first proposition is, and must be, an existential one: “[T]o hold that that which thinks, at the very same time when it thinks, does not exist, is contrary. And hence this thought, *I think, so I am* is the first and most certain of all which anyone encounters through the order of doing philosophy.”¹³⁰

But a side effect of this remarkable emphasis is that, e.g., for the sake of proving a “ground” there is no deep need to give a strict account of “grounding.” Kant, of course, has a fair reason for not providing many details circa 1763, namely that he intends only an “outline” and not a strict proof. Descartes is rather more transparent. As a penultimate point regarding the ontological proof, I suggest that when we go looking for such details in the texts - I will examine the notion of the “active faculty” - what we find instead of detailed metaphysical explanations is that such notions are there *only* to play a role in the work of proving existences. The way one arrives at such concepts is by way of the *demand for explanation* which tends to characterize the meaning of existence in Descartes (beyond the exceptional case of the Cartesian proof).

¹²⁹ AT VIII A 8: “Atque ubi dixi hanc propositionem, *ego cogito, ergo sum*, esse omnium primam & certissimam, quae cuilibet ordine philosophanti occurrat, non ideò negavi quin ante ipsam scire oporteat, *quid sit cogitatio, quid existentia, quid certitudo*; item, *quòd fieri non possit, ut id quod cogitet non existat*, & talia; sed quia hae sunt simplicissimae notiones, & quae solae nullius rei existentis notitiam praebent, idcirco non censui esse numerandas.”

¹³⁰ AT VIII A 7: “...repugnat enim, ut putemus id quod cogitat, eo ipso tempore quo cogitat, non existere. Ac proinde haec cognitio, *ego cogito, ergo sum*, est omnium prima & certissima, quae cuilibet ordine philosophanti occurrat.”

Descartes introduces the notion of an “active faculty” in his demonstration of the existence of extended material things in “Meditation VI,” the last and perhaps most perspicuous existential demonstration in that text. I quote it in full:

Now a certain passive faculty of sensibility, or [sive] of the receptivity and cognition of the ideas of sensible things, is most certainly in me, but I can have no use of this unless a certain active faculty of producing or even effecting these same ideas also exists, whether in me or in another. But this [active faculty] cannot rightly be in I myself since it plainly presupposes no understanding, and [since] these ideas are produced without my cooperation and often even with my reluctance: therefore it remains that it is in some substance distinct from me, in which all the reality that is *objective* in the ideas produced by that faculty (as I just observed above) ought to be either *formally* or *eminently*. Either this substance is a body, or [sive] a corporeal nature, in which of course is contained *formally* everything that is in the ideas *objectively*; or it is certainly God, or another creature more noble than body, in which it is contained *eminently*. But, since God is not false [fallax], it is wholly manifest that he does not insert these ideas into me either immediately by himself, nor even mediately via another creature in which the objective reality of these [ideas] is contained, not formally, but only *eminently*.... And so, corporeal things exist. Perhaps not everything of the sort exists wholly as I comprehend it through sensation, because sensation’s very comprehension is highly obscure and confused in many cases; but at least everything is in it that I understand clearly and distinctly, that is, viewed generally, everything [in them] that is comprehended as an object in pure mathesis.¹³¹

A few details should be noted. Descartes says that this is a demonstration of the *existence of bodies*, not of an “external world” or *somesuch*. As discussed above, the essence/existence distinction is a formal or conceptual one, not a real one: this proof is not attempting to connect some concrete “extended” entities to previously granted “mental” ones, as with Malebranche. The question is rather: given that extended entities are already given “at me,” can I also think

¹³¹ AT VII 79-80: “Jam verò est quidem in me passiva quaedam facultas sentiendi, sive ideas rerum sensibilibus recipiendi & cognoscendi, sed ejus nullum usum habere possem, nisi quaedam activa etiam existeret, sive in me, sive in alio, facultas istas ideas producendi vel efficiendi. Atque haec sane in me ipso esse non potest, quia nullam plane intellectionem praesupponit, & me non cooperante, sed saepe etiam invito, ideae istae producuntur: ergo superest ut sit in aliquâ substantiâ a me diversâ, in quâ quoniam omnis realitas vel formaliter vel eminenter inesse debet, quae est objective in ideis ab istâ facultate productis (ut jam supra animadverti), vel haec substantia est corpus, sive natura corporea, in quâ nempe omnia formaliter continentur quae in ideis objective; vel certe Deus est, vel aliqua creatura corpore nobilior, in quâ continentur eminenter. Atqui, cùm Deus non sit fallax, omnino manifestum est illum nec per se immediate istas ideas mihi immittere, nec etiam mediante aliquâ creaturâ, in quâ earum realitas objectiva, non formaliter, sed eminenter tantùm contineatur.... Ac proinde res corporeae existunt. Non tamen forte omnes tales omnino existunt, quales illas sensu comprehendo, quoniam ista sensuum comprehensio in multis valde obscura est & confusa; sed saltem illa omnia in iis sunt, quae clare & distincte intelligo, id est omnia, generaliter spectata, quae in purae Matheseos objecto comprehenduntur.” The italics are mine.

these entities as *existing* with any certitude, even if not quite as I sense them? Thus the starting point here, as with “Meditation III,” is that ideas (here, of extended entities) *are already given*, already “at me.”

Yet these ideas’ very being-present, even in that minimal way, *demands explanation*. That an idea has some origin is, for Descartes, not an additional facet added on to the cogitatum afterwards and upon reflection, but marks the idea from the beginning. Judgment concerning the cause of the thought is nearly automatic and almost unavoidable; Descartes even goes so far as to initially classify his ideas according to this (as it were) kneejerk judgment concerning their origin.¹³² Descartes describes the ideas stemming from sensation as “*ideae adventitiae*,” foreign or immigrated: “...moreover, insofar as I now hear a noise, see the sun, sense the fire, I have (until now) judged these to proceed from certain things posited excepted from me...”¹³³ To some extent and with some right I may suspend such judgments, and the worry that the assumptions characterizing my ordinary dealings with these ideas could be wrong lies behind a great deal of the *Meditations*’ efforts. Even then, though, the idea remains marked by its *indication of an origin*. The fact that my thinking these sensible ideas at least *seems* to have its origin “a rebus extra me,” in *other things* - here, in those things which my thinking is about¹³⁴ - is constitutive of how these ideas manifest.

¹³² AT VII 37-8: “Moreover, out of these ideas some appear to me innate, others foreign, still others invented by myself.” [“Ex his autem ideis aliae innatae, aliae adventitiae, aliae a me ipso factae mihi videntur...”]

¹³³ AT VII 38: “...quòd autem nunc strepitum audiam, solem videam, ignem sentiam, a rebus quibusdam extra me positis procedere hactenus judicavi...”

¹³⁴ AT VII 35: “...[affirmabam] nempe res extra me esse, a quibus ideae istae procedebant, & quibus omnio similes erant.” “...indeed, [I used to affirm] that there were things excepted from me from which the ideas at issue [i.e., sensible ideas] proceeded, and which were altogether similar.” Descartes’ attack on the “similitude” between ideas and things was already discussed above.

The important thing to note is that even if my assumptions about exactly where the idea comes from are wrong, still the idea *must* come from somewhere. I can be wrong about *what* the origin is, not *that* there is one: if there is anything at all, an origin for it must exist. That is to say, Descartes assumes an immediate connection between *being an origin for something* and *existing*. Here it is the ideas of bodies that demand an existing cause. But beyond even such specific ideas, *any* manifestation at all, at any level, implies the existence of some entity which can produce that manifestation. When Descartes writes in “Meditation II”...

But I persuade myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies; and so then that there is no me? To the contrary, surely, for if I persuade myself of anything then I am. But there is a supremely powerful, supremely cunning deceiver I am unaware of who is industrious in deceiving me. Then without doubt if he deceives me, I still am...¹³⁵

...he is still moving from manifestation to existence. Even without being able to determine the source (whether world, deceiver, I myself, etc.) of the content of any of ideas at issue, it is at least possible to determine the existence of what makes the *suffering* of the thoughts possible. Even the mere *act of thinking* demands an origin.

The whole argument in “Meditation VI,” then, consists in showing that the “active faculty” which produces my thinking of sensible ideas must somehow lie in the very things which I sense – i.e., in extended things.¹³⁶ What goes unargued, is assumed from the start, is that

¹³⁵ AT VII 25: “Sed mihi persuasi nihil plane esse in mundo, nullum coelum, nullam terram, nullas mentes, nulla corpora; nonne igitur etiam me non esse? Imo certe ego eram, si quid mihi persuasi. Sed est deceptor nescio quis, summe potens, summe callidus, qui de industriâ me semper fallit. Haud dubie igitur ego etiam sum, si me fallit...”

¹³⁶ The concrete details are not especially important for our purposes here, but the strategy is an argument by elimination. Where do my ideas of sensible entities come from? “Meditations III-IV” – whose conclusions I take as granted – already did the work of establishing that God exists and is not a deceiver, thus removing the possibility that the ideas’ source may be God himself or some higher creature created by God. They also cannot be from I myself; Descartes’ other premise, after the impossibility of a deceptive God, is that I consistently sense things *without wishing to*, that sensations are “produced without my cooperation and often even with my reluctance.” The radical *passivity* of sensation is Descartes’ evidence that my thinking is, in this case, not self-generating – presumably no one would generate, by their own resources and their own will, the reek of 17th century urban life. The conclusion is that, since the “active faculty” producing the ideas of material things is not in myself or any conceivable higher entity, it must reside in nothing other than the very material things themselves. And since the material things themselves must be the source of my idea, they must exist. Descartes grants that they do not exist

a bearer of the “*facultas activa existat*,” the active faculty, *should* (or even *must*) *exist*. To discover or prove that a certain body exists means to discover that it has such an active faculty, i.e. that it is a *causally efficacious origin* (here, of our thinking certain ideas): to think something as having an active faculty of this sort *just means* to think it as existing. (The notion of “active faculty,” totally decisive for this proof, is thus also a useful term to deploy more generally for describing being an answer to such demands for explanation - even if it is, so far as I am aware, used nowhere else in Descartes’ writings.)

The reader will note, of course, that Descartes never offers any clarification of what an “active faculty” *is* or why it should be in extended bodies. What I am suggesting, in essence, is that that question is *beside his point*. For Descartes’ purposes - which is to find “notices of existing things” - it is sufficient for there to be something meeting this description. If the paradigm for existing is to be the *cause* for the manifestation of something, that is not to say (e.g.) that entities without active faculties do not exist - but they also don’t much matter. Existence is first of all an answer to a demand for explanation. To make a claim for something’s existence tends to mean making a claim for it as a *why* for something given, as being at least the *local* point of termination for an explanatory demand.

All of this is to say, looking to Descartes (and to a lesser degree Kant) for a more detailed account of what “grounding” or “having an active faculty” means may be a perfectly fair question, but it is also getting their philosophical approach upside down. The starting point is not, e.g., a theory of causal interaction, exemplification, and other simple notions which is then built out to a cosmos, but rather a certain *demand for explanation* that needs to be satisfied. If it

“wholly as I comprehend [them] through sensation” and only as far as I can conceive them clearly and distinctly, but they do exist.

is the ontological proof that has recently gotten scholarship interested in the nature of “grounding,” that is perhaps only because of its novelty (“grounding,” as one effect of this demand, will appear as a problem in all the proofs from here on out).

The demand for explanations will receive further details in the next chapter, and then be totally transformed once we reach the critical period. And as the very last comment on this ontological proof, and another one which will take on more interest later, the reader should notice that this proof - unlike the Cartesian one - necessarily establishes a *relation* between God and a broader ontological realm, i.e. a realm of entities having a specific way to be. This God is, so to speak, the God of “ontology” in the Claubergian sense - of the realm of the cogitabilia, of entities as thinkable. And that is to say, this is the first proof which is evidently *ontotheological* in Heidegger’s sense.¹³⁷ God is “absolutely necessary” in this case not due to the nature of God’s concept, but because without the right entity this realm cannot really *be* at all. Analogous relations will also be found in the two other proofs to follow, and indeed in the *moral* proof still to come.

¹³⁷ In his *Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism* Marion suggests (94ff) that it is in fact the ego itself which acts as $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ in the realm of thinking, at least before God appears to surpass that ego; Descartes would then be a precursor to, say, Fichte, where the self-positing of the I clearly makes all consciousness possible. What defeats this possibility is the passage on AT VII 21 which sets the threat of a “Deus qui potest omnia” upon all ontologies at the very beginning of the *Meditations*, and which - I suggest - also thereby establishes a *non-I* $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$, albeit a vague one, long before anything beyond myself has been proved. That does not leave the I with nothing to do at all, though - after all, it is precisely the I which has to do the work of proving and, indeed, having “ancient opinions.” It also means that Fichte and Reinhold before him were not simply post-Kantian repetitions of Descartes, but perhaps something entirely new.

CHAPTER IV. The Proofs from Empirical Concepts

This Chapter, on Kant's account, consists in a pair of noble failures. It completes the work of the previous one by offering an account of the early Kant's proofs "from the empirical concepts of the existent," namely the proof from contingency and the physicotheological proof. In a sense he views both as failing for the same reason, that of being unable to produce an adequate concept of God - and given his tendency to think of such a concept as inevitably *intellectual* (as discussed in Chapter II) this is perhaps no surprise. But what these proofs will show upon analysis, among other things, is that the "empirical"/"intellectual" distinction is in some ways inapt: both empirical proofs are structurally far more similar to Kant's own ontological proof than that proof is to the Cartesian, in that all three begin from particular ontologies and reveal an ontotheology that the Cartesian proof lacks.

On the other hand these proofs, like the previous, still have similar roots in Descartes, and attention to those roots and the rest of their history will show that the concepts of God at issue in these proofs are adequate in their own right (just not reducible to the "most perfect entity" of the "Meditation III"). These proofs, too, will require consideration of Descartes' interpretations of being, and particularly the demand to ask a "why" of anything that is (as discussed in the previous Chapter). Further developments will supplement the theme of *necessity* from the previous Chapter with the question of *need*.

I. The Contingency Proof

As I mentioned in Chapter II, Kant does not give an abbreviated name to this proof as he does with the others, save brief mention of a “*demonstratio contingentiae*” in the 1755 *New Dilucidation* among other texts;¹ its briefest description in the *Beweisgrund* is as the proof “from the empirical concept of existence via the analysis of the concept of an independent thing”² He pens a richer version of the same description a few pages earlier:

The proof wherein one intends to come to the existence of a first and independent cause from the empirical concepts of that which is according to the rules of causal deduction, but from there to the properties of [the cause] which designate a deity through logical parsing of the concept - [this proof] is famous and has been brought to esteem chiefly through the school of Wolffian philosophers...³

(He adds, dryly, “...only it is quite impossible all the same.”) Of the four proofs discussed in the *Beweisgrund* Kant gives this one the least amount of space and attention, which is perhaps indicative of his attitude towards it. Distinctive of Kant’s characterization of this proof is his insistence on its two-part structure. It *intends* to prove the divine existence causally from “empirical concepts,” i.e. from the experience of existing objects, but in addition to an initial demonstration (via the rule that something must terminate the infinite regress of causes) the proof also calls for work on the *concept* of this cause to make sure that it describes the right sort of entity. This two-part structure is crucial not only for understanding what Kant takes to be the norms of rational theology, but also for his relation to Descartes.

¹ Cf 1:414; also of the discussion of Fragment 4253 (17:482-3) in the following Chapter. In the *Critique*, of course, this is called the *cosmological* proof, taking its name from the proof (discussed below) which, in 1763, follows it. This is yet another signal that the *Beweisgrund* and the *Critique*’s “Ideal” are distinct texts, and should be kept so.

² 2:162. “...aus dem Erfahrungsbegriffe vom Dasein vermittelt der Auflösung des Begriffes von einem unabhängigen Dinge...”

³ 2:157. “Der Beweis, da man aus den Erfahrungsbegriffen von dem, was da ist, auf die Existenz einer ersten und unabhängigen Ursache nach den Regeln der Causalschlüsse, aus dieser aber durch logische Zergliederung des Begriffes auf die Eigenschaften derselben, welche eine Gottheit bezeichnen, kommen will, ist berühmt und vornehmlich durch die Schule der Wolffischen Philosophen sehr in Ansehen gebracht worden, allein er ist gleichwohl ganz unmöglich.”

As I said, I insist on a strong historical link between the two figures in this Chapter as much as the last. But it is a link with certain notable missed connections. Descartes never mentions any need for a “logical parsing” of the first cause’s concept - what one finds instead is the infamous “*causa sui*” as developed in the “Replies.” If Kant never seriously discusses a “*causa sui*” (it is never brought up in 1763, only briefly in 1755), that is perhaps only because the intervening tradition never took it up - indeed basically dropped the question in favor of drawing the proof back into the conceptual sphere of the Cartesian proof - rather than because it is extraneous. As I will suggest at the end of this section, there is also always something *lacking* in Kant’s discussions of this proof which something like a “*causa sui*” would provide. If Kant’s attack in *Beweisgrund* III is quite decisive for the contingency proof according to the broad German tradition, it is highly notable that Descartes’ older formulation ducks the same blow.

What I want to suggest, particularly by way of examining this missed connection and carefully rereading Descartes, is that the contingency proof properly deals with a quite different concept of God - a *potentissimum* more than a *perfectissimum* - and that one cannot leave this out of consideration without distorting the framework. But this proof, like the previous, also has its own *ontotheology*, namely a relationship between this “ens potentissimum” and being as being-caused. An appropriate understanding of this proof will thus turn out to require further consideration of our license to demand a “why” from anything that exists (or indeed anything that is at all), crucial to grasping Descartes’ overall philosophical project. The question of entities’ *need* for a “why” comes to the fore particularly in Descartes’ puzzling discussions of “substance,” as with the concept of substance above all others God’s status is shown to be quite

blurry: God, for Descartes, must be *both* one entity among others *and* the “ground” for an entire ontology.

Before all that, I begin with the proof’s 1763 treatment in Kant.

A. First Cause and Necessity

Kant makes perhaps his most exacting statement as to the proof’s fundamental problem in a side comment relating to the entire methodological approach of *Beweisgrund III*:

It is not my aim to parse the [contingency] proofs themselves, [proofs] as per this method which one variously encounters. It is easy to discover their fallacies, and this has already been done in part by others. However, as one may yet still hope that their errors might be relieved through a few improvements, from our reflection one thus sees that whatever may become of them they can still never be anything other than conclusions from the concepts of possible things, and not from experience, and so at best are to be numbered with the proofs of the first [i.e. Cartesian] kind.⁴

What Kant intends to treat, in this proof and for the others, is not any particular formulation of the proof but the *basis* (“Grund”) of the proving, which might be presented in better or worse form but cannot ever be changed. In this case, he says, one cannot change the fact that the contingency proof ultimately has to go through the same fallacy as the Cartesian one, no matter that one starts in experience. In the worst case, the contingency proof is hardly even a genuine proof in its own right: it is a kind of Cartesian proof upside down, with empirical appendices.

⁴ 2:159. “Es ist meine Absicht nicht, die Beweise selber zu zergliedern, die man dieser Methode gemäß bei verschiedenen antrifft. Es ist leicht ihre Fehlschlüsse aufzudecken, und dieses ist auch schon zum Theil von andern geschehen. Indessen da man gleichwohl noch immer hoffen könnte, daß ihrem Fehler durch einige Verbesserungen abzuhelfen sei, so ersieht man aus unserer Betrachtung, daß, es mag auch aus ihnen werden, was da wolle, sie doch niemals etwas anders als Schlüsse aus Begriffen möglicher Dinge, nicht aber aus Erfahrung werden können und also allenfalls den Beweisen der ersten Art beizuzählen sind.”

The *intention* of the proof, of course, is to be genuinely (if nonspecifically) empirical, to draw its conclusions from the experience of existing entities. And Kant is willing to go surprisingly far in granting those empirical assumptions:

I allow that everything is regularly deduced up to the proposition: if there is anything, likewise something exists which depends on no other thing - thus I grant that the existence of one or more such things, which are not further effects of anything other, is well-proved. Now the second step to the proposition, that this independent thing is absolutely necessary, is already far less reliable, as it must be guided by means of the principle of sufficient reason, which continues to be disputed;⁵ but so far I still have no reservations about signing on.⁶

Kant grudgingly grants that the proponent can show, through the experience of existing objects and a few other assumptions (presumably the impossibility of a regress, etc.), that there must be at least one uncaused cause(s). But that is not enough for the proof to prove *God*, which Kant takes to be the goal here; the proponent may well be satisfied with proving at least one first cause, but without reaching *God* Kant would not take them to be doing rational theology. For example, the cause(s) could still be merely *accidental*: we have proved that something or other must play the role of a “start” for the causal chain leading up to any contingent things we find in experience, but that is not to show that these uncaused causes are anything *necessary*, i.e. could not have been replaced by others. Thus the principle of reason (or something like it) can be used to fix the necessity of the causal chain itself: if the existing empirical objects could not have been caused in any other way, then we may conclude that any first causes must be necessary (at least

⁵ Kant probably refers here to Crucius, but he may also be thinking of his own work. Cf the second section of his *New Dilucidations*, 1:391ff.

⁶ 2:157-8. “Ich räume ein, daß bis zu dem Satze: wenn etwas da ist, so existirt auch etwas, was von keinem andern Dinge abhängt, alles regelmäßig gefolgert sei, ich gebe also zu, daß das Dasein irgend eines oder mehrer Dinge, die weiter keine Wirkungen von einem andern sind, wohl erwiesen darliege. Nun ist der zweite Schritt zu dem Satze, daß dieses unabhängige Ding schlechterdings nothwendig sei, schon viel weniger zuverlässig, da er vermittelst des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde, der noch immer angefochten wird, geführt werden muß; allein ich trage kein Bedenken auch bis so weit alles zu unterschreiben.”

in the sense that the objects we experience cannot be there without this). And, although we still haven't proved that there is only one unique cause, and a God at that, all is still fine.

The problem is that the proponent, with these modest winnings in hand, is then *stuck* unless they then make a conceptual determination which, it turns out, renders the empirical determinations trivial. I quote the entirety of Kant's argument:

Accordingly, something exists in an absolutely necessary manner. Its properties of highest perfection and unity shall now be derived from this concept of an absolutely necessary entity. But the concept of absolute necessity, which lies at the ground here, can be taken in two ways, as shown in the first section. In the first way, which we called logical necessity, it must be shown that the contrary of that thing, in which all perfection or reality is to be found, contradicts itself, and that therefore that entity, whose predicates are all truly affirmative, is the one and only thing absolutely necessary in existence. And since it shall be deduced, from just the same thoroughgoing arrangement of all reality in one entity, that it is a unique one, so it is clear that the parsing of the concept of the necessary [entity] will be based on such grounds that I must inversely be able to deduce: that wherein all reality is, exists in a necessary manner. Now it is not only that this conclusion, according to the last number, is impossible, but it is particularly bizarre that in this way the proof is not even built upon an empirical concept, which is assumed wholly without need - rather, just like the Cartesian, it is built solely upon concepts in which one thinks to find the existence of an entity in the identity or the antagonism of predicates.⁷

He adds in an important footnote:

This [i.e., that the assumptions of the second half of the proof make the empirical half redundant] is the most distinguished thing I'm going after here. If I posit the necessity of a concept in such a way, so that the contrary contradicts itself, and then claim that the infinite is so characterized, it is thus wholly needless to [empirically] assume the existence of the necessary entity in that it already follows from the concept of the infinite. Indeed, whatever existence gets arranged beforehand is utterly idle in the proof itself. For as the concepts of necessity and infinity are considered interchangeable concepts in the progression of the [proof], so therefore infinitude is

⁷ 2:158. "Es existirt demnach etwas schlechterdings nothwendiger Weise. Aus diesem Begriffe des absolut nothwendigen Wesens sollen nun seine Eigenschaften der höchsten Vollkommenheit und Einheit hergeleitet werden. Der Begriff der absoluten Nothwendigkeit aber, der hier zum Grunde liegt, kann auf zwiefache Art genommen werden, wie in der ersten Abtheilung gezeigt ist. In der ersten Art, da sie die logische Nothwendigkeit von uns genannt worden, müßte gezeigt werden: daß das Gegentheil desjenigen Dinges sich selbst widerspreche, in welchem alle Vollkommenheit oder Realität anzutreffen, und also dasjenige Wesen einzig und allein schlechterdings nothwendig im Dasein sei, dessen Prädicate alle wahrhaftig bejahend sind. Und da aus eben derselben durchgängigen Vereinbarung aller Realität in einem Wesen soll geschlossen werden, daß es ein einziges sei, so ist klar, daß die Zergliederung der Begriffe des Nothwendigen auf solchen Gründen beruhen werde, nach denen ich auch umgekehrt müsse schließen können: worin alle Realität ist, das existirt nothwendiger Weise. Nun ist nicht allein diese Schlußart nach der vorigen Nummer unmöglich, sondern es ist insonderheit merkwürdig, daß auf diese Art der Beweis gar nicht auf den Erfahrungsbegriff, der ganz, ohne ihn zu brauchen, voraus gesetzt ist, erbauet wird, sondern eben so wie der Cartesianische lediglich auf Begriffe, in welchen man in der Identität oder dem Widerstreit der Prädicate das Dasein eines Wesens zu finden vermeint."

really deduced from the existence of the necessary [entity], as the infinite (and it alone) exists necessarily.⁸

Despite the density of the prose, the point is a simple one. For the first half of the proof necessity just has to mean something like, “not dependent on anything else and also, presumably, not able to be other than it is.” But when the proponent of the proof has to start working out what sort of entity this cause is (and how there can’t be more than one), “necessity” has to be augmented and reread somehow.⁹ The only “necessity” which is helpful for the proponent, Kant thinks, is namely that of the impossibility of nonexistence - which is to say, the first cause now has to exist because it cannot lack the property of existence, i.e. *it has the property of existence by nature*. And beyond this determination the proof will then show that the only sort of entity which could have this property by nature would be a most perfect, most real, infinite one - i.e., God - and that it must be unique (since there are no possible differentiations in characteristics). But for Kant the fatal mistake has already been made, and unavoidably so. Although this proof moves in the inverse direction of the Cartesian one - from the necessary existence of an entity back to its concept, rather than from the concept to necessary existence - it relies on exactly the fallacy he

⁸ 2:158-9: “Dieses ist das Vornehmste, worauf ich hier ausgehe. Wenn ich die Nothwendigkeit eines Begriffes darin setze, daß sich das Gegentheil widerspricht, und alsdann behaupte, das Unendliche sei so beschaffen, so war es ganz unnöthig die Existenz des nothwendigen Wesens voraus zu setzen, indem sie schon aus dem Begriffe des Unendlichen folgt. Ja jene vorangeschickte Existenz ist in dem Beweise selbst völlig müßig. Denn da in dem Fortgang desselben der Begriff der Nothwendigkeit und Unendlichkeit als Wechselbegriffe angesehen werden, so wird wirklich darum aus der [Seitenumbruch] Existenz des Nothwendigen auf die Unendlichkeit geschlossen, weil das Unendliche (und zwar allein) nothwendig existirt.”

⁹ Ian Proops’ extremely helpful “Kant on the Cosmological Argument,” although discussing the version of this discussion in the *Critique*, rightly points out the decisive importance of this shift for understanding how Kant reads the proof. “[T]he term ‘absolutely necessary being’ shifts its meaning in the course of Kant’s discussion of the cosmological argument. As Kant sees it, the first phase of the argument purports to demonstrate the existence of an absolutely necessary being conceived of only as what I have termed ‘an essentially unimodal being.’ But he treats the argument’s proper ultimate goal as being to demonstrate the existence and attributes of ‘an absolutely necessary being’ in the rather different sense of a being whose non-existence is impossible. It is precisely Kant’s failure to flag this shift in the meaning of the phrase ‘absolutely necessary being’ that, I think, accounts for much of the obscurity in his discussion. The hypothesis of such a shift... enables us to make sense of his reconstruction and, most importantly, to explain why Kant should suppose that the cosmological argument derives all of its force from the ontological argument (A607/B635).” (6)

found earlier, namely treating existence or necessary existence as a conceptual determination. If this supposed proof from experience lands upon an entity which necessarily exists and it then turns out that we could have found this existence in its concept from the start, then the empirical enterprise was superfluous: we really needed no more than that concept.¹⁰

Once it is pointed out, the basic error Kant outlines (that the “empirical concepts” the proof claims to use are redundant) is so obvious that it can be hard to believe that anyone at the time would have committed it. In fact, however, 18th century German thought had a full suite of arguments formulated in exactly this way. §37-41 of Leibniz’ *Monadology* (from half a century earlier) provides a downright textbook example.¹¹ At the turning point of his proof (§40) Leibniz

¹⁰ A glance through the literature will reveal several pieces making basically the same case against Kant’s refutation, if typically in its later presentation; see, for example, Caputo’s “Kant’s Refutation of the Cosmological Argument,” Forgie’s “Kant on the Relation Between the Cosmological and Ontological Arguments,” and Wood’s *Kant’s Rational Theology* at 129-30. The thought goes something like: “If I reject the Cartesian proof’s conclusion to a *genuine* existence but still accept that necessity can be contained in a concept (following something like Crucius’ analysis), then I can take the contingency proof as not only unreliable on the Cartesian but as valid. For then it is only the empirical half of the proof that can grant *genuine* existence, and not the conceptual half. The second half merely matches this existing necessary entity with the concept of an *ens realissimum*.” But this misunderstands the nature of Kant’s objection to the contingency proof by misunderstanding his treatment of the Cartesian one. The point is not that the inference from necessity (as a “perfection,” i.e. an ontic determination) to an entity’s *genuine* existence is not valid, but that necessary existence - existence of any kind, really - just isn’t an ontic determination at all. Once “necessary entity” is just a *denoting phrase* rather than a conceptual determination, and once “perfectissimum” no longer implies such a determination, the two can no longer be identified without question. One can then only drop maximal perfection onto the necessary entity through fiat, not through demonstration. The proponent of either proof can, as I mentioned with the Cartesian, just deny the denial and posit that existence terms *can* be predicates of the right sort in some way after all. The Kant of this era has no proper response to this that I can see, but the theory of “transcendental illusion” to come will soon give him one.

¹¹ *Philosophischen Schriften VI*, 613. “37. ...it is necessary that the sufficient or ultimate reason [of contingent entities] be outside of the sequence or series of these details of contingencies, however infinite it may be. 38. And this is why the ultimate reason of things must be in a necessary substance, in which the details of the changes are but immanent, as in a source, and this is what we call God. 39. Now this substance being a sufficient reason for all these details, which too are bound throughout all, *there is only one God, and this God suffices*. 40. One may also judge that this supreme substance, which is unique, universal, and necessary, having nothing outside of it which is independent, and is [as] a simple consequence of [its] being possible, must be incapable of limits and contain just as much reality as is possible. 41. Whence it follows that God is absolutely perfect, *perfection* being nothing other than the scale of positive reality (in the precise sense), setting aside the limits or bounds within the things that have it. And where there are no bounds, that is to say in God, perfection is absolutely infinite.” [“37. ...il faut que la raison suffisante ou dernière soit hors de la suite ou séries de ce détail des contingences, quelque’infini qu’il pourrait être. 38. Et c’est ainsi que la dernière raison des choses doit être dans une substance nécessaire, dans laquelle le détail des changements ne soit qu’émiment, comme dans la source, et c’est ce que nous appelons Dieu. 39. Or cette substance étant une raison suffisante de tout ce détail, lequel aussi est lié par tout, il n’y a qu’un Dieu, et ce Dieu

quickly moves to say that the necessity of the “ultimate reason” of contingent entities means not only that everything else is dependent on it, but that its *being* should follow from its merely *being possible*, so that it “must be incapable of limits and contain just as much reality as is possible.” That is, Leibniz moves back to the concept of his “ultimate reason” through the pivot of necessary existence, exactly as Kant describes.¹² Baumgarten’s version, which Kant surely had foremost in his mind, splits off the empirical moment of the proof (that the world has a necessary efficient cause¹³) in the “Cosmology” section, not even in the “Natural Theology” to come nearly 500 propositions later. The completion of the proof is technically at §854, and is well worth quoting in full for how transparent it is:

§854. This world has an extramundane efficient cause, §375, §388, which is the necessary substance, §381, §319. Therefore the necessary substance is possible, §333, §69. If the necessary substance is possible, it is actual, §109, and sempiternal, §302. Therefore the necessary substance exists. God is the necessary substance, §836. Therefore god exists.¹⁴

The last moment in the proof, the identification of necessary substance and God, draws on §836 - which ultimately draws on Baumgarten’s *Cartesian* proof (“§811. GOD is the most perfect entity. Therefore God is actual.”¹⁵) through the long chain of §830, §822-5, and §812.

Baumgarten too flips the Cartesian proof around in order to identify God with the necessary

suffit. 40. On peut juger aussi que cette substance suprême qui est unique, universelle et nécessaire, n'ayant rien hors d'elle qui en soit indépendant, et étant une suite simple de l'être possible, doit être incapable de limites et contenir tout autant de réalité qu'il est possible. 41. D'où il s'ensuit, que Dieu est absolument parfait, la perfection n'étant autre chose, que la grandeur de la réalité positive prise précisément, en mettant à part les limites ou bornes dans les choses qui en ont. Et là, où il n'y a point de bornes, c'est-à-dire en Dieu, la perfection est absolument infinie.”]

¹² Nor can one give Leibniz the excuse of merely mixing up a contingency and Cartesian proof by accident, since he introduces the Cartesian proof independently a moment later, in §45: “Thus God (or the necessary being) alone has this privilege, that it must exist if it is possible” [ibid 614: “Ainsi Dieu seul (ou l'être nécessaire) a ce privilège, qu'il faut qu'il existe, s'il est possible.”]

¹³ Cf §375-381 in *Metaphysica* 117-19.

¹⁴ Ibid 348. “§854. Hic mundus habet causam efficientem extramundanam, §375, §388. eamque substantiam necessariam, §381, §319. Ergo substantia necessaria est possibilis, §333, §69. Si substantia necessaria est possibilis, est actualis, §109. et sempiterna, §302. Ergo substantia necessaria existit. Deus est substantia necessaria, §836. Ergo deus existit.”

¹⁵ Ibid 332. “§811. DEUS est ens perfectissimum. Ergo Deus actualis est.”

substance, apparently not noticing that all of the empirical elements of this proof “a posteriori” (§856) are rendered moot by the premise that God *is already* actual (§811), *already has* necessary existence (§823). Yet it would be wrongheaded to simply ridicule these writers as metaphysical bumblers, as their coming up so far short demonstrates just how difficult it is to use empirical evidence to reach the right kind of entity. In their attempt to make this final jump from the first cause to God into a rigorous argument, Leibniz and the others were being far more serious than any theosopher who would simply endow their first cause with divinity with no other question. It is precisely this attempt to be rigorous that drives them into the trap Kant identifies: any way in which one tries to locate the first cause’s necessary existence *within the concept* of that entity basically guarantees redoubling the Cartesian proof.

This would seem to close the door on any attempt to reach a God (and not just a first cause) by this route, at least from the view of Leibnizian metaphysics. Yet Kant’s point, once taken seriously, does invite another question: if it is the “conceptual analysis” which is the problem, might it be possible for a proof “a contingentia mundi” to find a divine first cause *without* that conceptual analysis, i.e. without locating the “necessity” within a concept? One would need to show that the first cause is unique, not dispensable, somehow divine, and so on, and somehow work out these details *solely* through sheer causal potency, without invocation of a concept of God in the strict sense.

Descartes, it turns out, provided an answer to that question (and he is, so far as I read, the only one). What the “Replies” in particular suggest is that the God at the heart of this proof is not first of all about perfections, but rather about *power*, so that appeal to sheer incomprehensible causal “might” allows Descartes to avoid the pitfalls of the German tradition. Appreciating the

nature of that argument, however, will require a good grasp upon Descartes' "petere cur," the license to ask of any entity at all why it is – the details thereof being presented no more clearly than in Descartes' discussions of "substance." The need for a cause manifests in God as much as in any other entity.

B. Asking Why, Substance, Need (Descartes on Existence, Part III)

In the previous chapter I suggested that being a "ground" or featuring an "active faculty" - both marks of existence - are not vague theoretical posits that must be interpretively filled in so much as *answers to a demand*, explanations (local or more general) which we ask for when given something's manifesting (e.g., my thinking a foreign idea). That demand, although present throughout Descartes' work, is perhaps best articulated in the text which also features the most far-reaching presentation of the contingency proof, namely "Replies I": "But surely the light of nature dictates that nothing exists concerning which one is not allowed to ask why [cur] it exists, i.e. to inquire into its efficient cause, or, if it has none, to demand why it is not in need [non indigeat]." ¹⁶ Even beyond mere ideas (which were discussed previously), *everything whatsoever* must be open to a "why?" If some entities, e.g., feature active faculties - and so are already known to exist, perhaps even answering the "why?" for other entities - still this does not exempt them from another "why?" which points to their efficient cause. And there is a *fork* of sorts in the

¹⁶ AT VII 108: "Dictat autem perfecto lumen naturae nullam rem existere, de qua non liceat petere cur existat, sive in ejus causam efficientem inquirere, aut, si non habet, cur illa non indigeat, postulare..." I translate "egere" and "indigere" as "to need" and "to be in need," although those still miss most of the richness of the Latin. "Egeo" does not just mean that I am without something (and need it) or even just destitute in general, but often that there is a *drive* on my part *towards* the thing needed. It should not be missed by the reader that in Descartes a metaphysical "need" is attributed to the things themselves, while in the later Kant that "need" is located within reason.

“why?” with regard to any entity *without* an efficient cause: the “why?” may still be asked and must still receive an answer, albeit the “why” will be different. All entities need a “why,” but that “why” need not always be an efficient cause.

This “forking” of Descartes’ principle exposes something important not only about entities in general, but particularly about God: God is *not* in need with regard to any efficient cause, but *does* still need a “why.” If the reader allows a digression, I submit that we can better understand this strange play between “needing” and “not needing” (and thereby prepare for Descartes’ version of the contingency proof) by way of a text which centralizes those terms, namely the definition of “substance” in the *Principles*. That is, to be sure, a text which has often baffled interpreters: the word “substance” famously plays little significant role in Descartes’ early thought, and it is only quite late that it receives detailed discussion;¹⁷ Marion, e.g., justifiably wonders about the “tactical turnabout” concerning the use of the word, when “Descartes has nowhere commented on this turn nor has he justified it.”¹⁸

Nevertheless that definition does not come out of nowhere, and it is not even the earliest account of substance offered by Descartes. A first appears in the “Synopsis” to the *Meditations* as an aside: “...substances, or things which must be created by God in order to exist...”¹⁹ A second, opposing definition is in the geometrical appendix of “Replies II” - “Every thing is called *substance*... which aught that we perceive is immediately in, as in a subject, or by which [aught that we perceive] exists,”²⁰ and is quickly followed by the proposition that “The substance which we understand to be most perfect, and in which we plainly conceive nothing which

¹⁷ “Substantia” is used during Meditation III and VI, but it is never really *characterized* directly within those texts.

¹⁸ *On the Ego and On God*, 82.

¹⁹ AT VII 14: “...*substantias, sive res quae a Deo creari debent ut existant*...”

²⁰ AT VII 161: “*Omnis res cui inest immediate, ut in subjecto, sive per quam existit aliquid quod percipimus... vocatur Substantia.*”

involves any defect or limitation in perfection, is called *God*.”²¹ The second definition can obviously include God univocally - perhaps *only* include God, given that (as discussed below) every aught exists “by” that God. The first, by contrast, seems to openly *exclude* God, leaving “substance” to created existences (unless, of course, God must create God’s own substance). One is left wondering whether substance is created or not, includes God or not.

The later definition in the *Principles* does not resolve that opposition so much as enshrine it. The first line, by far the most important, reads: “By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists, just so that it is in need of [indigeat] no other thing for its existence [ad existendum].”²² The “ita... ut” that divides the sentence also decides how one interprets it. And, unless one wants Descartes to imply that there should be some *non*-substantial existences (when he never suggests that), reading the second half of the sentence as carving out a kind of specific difference within the general class “things which exist” cannot be right; the “ita... ut” should indicate that what is to follow is a *clarification and characterization* of what came before. “Substantia,” that is, *just means* “res quae existit,” thing which exists. To exist, therefore, *just means* being in need of no other thing for that existence, which would seem to imply outright Spinozism (that nothing exists except God). The next lines resolve this seemingly only at the cost of creating a “pure and simple equivocity”:²³

But indeed, by a substance which is plainly in need of nothing only one can be understood, obviously God. All others we perceive to be able to exist only by God’s might coinciding. And therefore the name of “substance” does not go with God and those [others] *univocally*, as is said in the Schools – that is, no signification of this name may be distinctly understood which would be common to God and creatures.

²¹ AT VII 162: “Substantia, quam summe perfectam esse intelligimus, & in quâ nihil plane concipimus quod aliquem defectum sive perfectionis limitationem involvat, *Deus* vocatur.”

²² AT VIII A 24: “Per *substantiam* nihil aliud intelligere possumus, quàm rem quae ita existit, ut nullâ aliâ re indigeat ad existendum.”

²³ *On the Ego and On God*, 82.

But corporeal substance and mind, or thinking substance, can be understood as created under this common concept, that they are things which need only the coincidence of God for their existence.

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Descartes avoids appearing to lump God together with other substances (on the one hand) as well as seeming to deny substantiality to God (on the other), but evidently only by shattering the coherence of the term he just defined. Substance on the one side means “*nulla alia plane re indigens*,” purely and simply in need of no other thing, and on the other “*solo Dei concursu indigens*,” in need of only the coincidence of God.

Even if one grants that God’s strange status (as an entity among others, yet utterly exceptional among those entities) may have forced Descartes’ hand in this regard, this final definition of “*substantia*” may come across as a disaster, with no remaining commonality left between God and created substances. Yet this need not be the case. If what marks out the character of created substances (minds and bodies) is that they exist by needing only God’s inexhaustible power, as an interpretive maneuver one can also easily point out that *God need not be read as an exception to this*. Indeed, if the *Principles* say that God “*nulla alia re indigeat*,” is in need of no other thing, the emphasis may not lie on the *nulla* but the *alia*. I suggest, then, that God *also* “needs” God’s own “immense and incomprehensible power” or “might”, that which sustains any substance whatsoever. What would thereby make God distinctive among substances is that God is in *identity* with that might: God needs no “*concurus*” because God *is* the power God needs.

²⁴ AT VIII A 24-5: “Et quidem substantia quae nullâ planè re indigeat, unica tantùm potest intelligi, nempe Deus. Alias verò omnes, non nisi ope concursûs Dei existere posse percipimus. Atque ideò nomen substantiae non convenit Deo & illis *univocè*, ut dici solet in Scholis, hoc est, nulla ejus nominis significatio potest distinctè intelligi, quae Deo & creaturis sit communis.

“Possunt autem substantia corporea & mens, sive substantia cogitans, creata, sub hoc communi conceptu intelligi, quòd sint res, quae solo Dei concursu egent ad existendum.”

I suggest below that this is the right way to read Descartes' famous "causa sui." But it also has the paradoxical result that God is, as it were, operating at two levels. On the one hand God's power stands outside of all existing entities, as their ground; on the other God is (as it were) retroactively drawn inside the very ontology which that power just made possible, as highest among needy substances. God must, as it were, straddle the limits of substantial existence: God must be in and out of the ontology all at once, one among the entities (if a special case) as well as radically prior to all of them.

Moreover, even if the discussion of substance is first relevant to the ontology of *causality*, that is not to say that it ends there. With the exception of the Cartesian, all of the theistic proofs are made possible through variations on the "licet petere cur," through it being legitimate to ask why any entity makes itself manifest as the kind of entity it is. That asking why is what finally lands us upon any "active faculty," and indeed upon God. Yet the very fact that entities make themselves manifest in their being suggests that we can *make use* of the various ontological orders long before we have any theoretical confirmation of the entity which sustains them. As suggested in the first Chapter, with Descartes' proofs we seem to move forwards and backwards all at once - we seem to assume God before we prove God.

C. Cause of Itself

Although the decisive presentation of Descartes' contingency proof is to be found in "Replies I," AT VII 110-11, approaching that text still requires a good deal of preparation,

especially via tracing out Descartes' development of the relevant notions. I begin by going back to the *Meditations*.

The most central proof of "Meditation III" is evidently a version of the ontological one (as discussed above), and as such is dependent on a fairly detailed concept of God. That proof does not function without my having the content of my ideas in focus, and particularly the idea of a most perfect entity. But right in the middle of this proof Descartes interrupts to suggest an *additional* proof, one which begins precisely by sidelining that focus:

[B]ut, since when I am not quite attentive and sensible images dim the sight of [my] mind it is thus by no means easy to recall why the idea of an entity more perfect than I necessarily proceeds from some entity which is in truth more perfect, it would be good [libet] to further search for whether I myself, having this idea, would be able to be if no such entity existed.²⁵

It is as if Descartes wants an argument which still functions precisely when my mind is so dimmed that it can no longer "see" the right concept. The first consideration of "aseity" (or, properly, *ameity*) a moment later - when Descartes proposes answering the leading question ("From what, then, would I be?") by saying that he is from himself - indirectly confirms this, by effectively superseding the question of God's determinate qualities. He writes:

[I]f I would be from myself, I would neither doubt, nor desire, nor be missing anything at all; for I would have given myself all the perfections of which any idea is at me, and I would thus be God myself. Nor should I suppose that any such [perfections] which are missing from me might be more difficult to acquire than those which are already in me; for to the contrary, it is manifest that it would be far more difficult for me, that is a thinking thing or a substance, to emerge from nothing, than just to acquire thoughts of any of the many things of which I am ignorant, such [thoughts] being accidents of the substance. And surely if I had done the former, greater [task], [being] from myself, I would at least not have denied myself any of the latter [acquisitions of thoughts], which are quite easily had, but also not [acquisition of] anything else out of those [perfections] which I perceive to be contained in the idea of God; as certainly this seems to me no more difficult to do...²⁶

²⁵ VII 47-8: "...sed quia, cùm minus attendo, & rerum sensibilibus imagines mentis aciem excaecant, non ita facile recordor cur idea entis me perfectioris necessariò ab ente aliquo procedat quod sit revera perfectius, ulterius quaerere libet an ego ipse habens illam ideam esse possem, si tale ens nullum existeret."

²⁶ VII 48: "Nempe a quo essem?... Atqui, si a me essem, nec dubitarem, nec optarem, nec omnino quicquam mihi deesset; omnes enim perfectiones quarum idea aliqua in me est, mihi dedissem, atque ita ipsemet Deus essem. Nec putare debeo illa forsitan quae mihi desunt difficilior acquiri posse, quàm illa quae jam in me sunt; nam contra,

This insistence - that a power sufficient for me to be from myself should also be more than sufficient for me to give myself any and all perfections available - does not just rule me out as an answer to the question of what caused my existence (since I am imperfect), but also renders such perfections *irrelevant* for the purposes of this proof. Any entity with the power to create itself can and will have anything we can think of, and more which we cannot. Having such power means a maximum of perfections too, but it also means that we have no need to consider what those perfections *are*: in a proof of this sort, that is, we can drop the question of this entity's conceptual determinations. If my attention wanes, my mind is blinded, and I can no longer properly see the idea so important for the ontological approach, I can still proceed via a contingency proof that needs no such "sight." And for the reader familiar with Kant, this is obviously crucial: if the proof does not rely on a precisely determined *concept* of the first cause, there can be no "logical parsing" of that concept to attack. Descartes will instead endeavor to interpret the meanings of causality, creation, and power in such a way that the "first cause" he points to could still meet a divine description.

The key notion Descartes must reinterpret is that of *creation*, which is to be read not just in terms of efficient causality (although that is implied) but first of all as "conservation." Creation is not over and done with once the creator has thrown its creature into existence - rather, the creature requires a kind of constant *renewal* of its creation if it is to continue in its being.

With the possibility of a "causa mei" still open, "Meditation III" reads:

...from [the fact] that I somewhat earlier was it does not follow that I must now be, unless some cause would as it were create me again in turn at this moment, that is, would conserve me.

manifestum est longe difficilium fuisse me, hoc est rem sive substantiam cogitantem, ex nihilo emergere, quam multarum rerum quas ignoro cognitiones, quae tantum istius substantiae accidentia sunt, acquirere. Ac certe, si majus illud a me haberem, non mihi illa saltem, quae facilius haberi possunt, denegassem, sed neque etiam ulla alia ex iis, quae in idea Dei contineri percipio; quia nempe nulla difficiliora factu mihi videntur..."

For it is perspicuous to [anyone] attentive to the nature of time that plainly the same force and action is needed to conserve anything at all at any singular moment as was needed to create the same thing anew, were it not yet existing; indeed, conservation differs from creation in reason alone, and this is one among those [items] which is manifest by the natural light.

And so I should now examine I myself as to whether I have some force by which I can bring it about that this I, who now am, will still be somewhat later: for as I am nothing other than a thinking thing, or anyhow as I am now only dealing singularly with the part of me which is a thinking thing, if any such force were in me, I would without doubt be conscious of it. And yet I experience no [such force] to be [in me], and from this itself I recognize most evidently that I depend upon some entity different from me.²⁷

The reinterpretation of creation as conservation means that the first cause cannot have ceased to be at any point in the past (elsewise, all dependent entities would have fallen out of existence) - thus merely remote causes are all ruled out, so that the first cause must be *perpetually present*. In this new sense, then, “creation” and even “cause” do not imply temporal priority: the cause here should be *contemporary* with the effect.

Once creation and causality are reread in terms of contemporaneous conservation, however, suddenly the notion of a *positive causa sui* also becomes a slightly less difficult lift from a metaphysical point of view. It is not that the disqualification of my own “ameity” as above also disqualifies the *characteristics* of that ameity: rather I am simply not the right entity to play the role of a self-cause. The “different entity” who will take on the role of *causa sui*, however, need not (as it were) step outside of itself, prior to its own existence, in order to cause itself, in that Descartes can present the sense of aseity (or ameity) first in terms of *self-conservation*. He does not strongly insist on the point in “Meditation III,” however, and -

²⁷ AT VII 49: “...ex eo quòd paulo ante fuerim, non sequitur me nunc debere esse, nisi aliqua causa me quasi rursus creet ad hoc momentum, hoc est me conservet. Perspicuum enim est attendenti ad temporis naturam, eâdem plane vi & actione opus esse ad rem quamlibet singulis momentis quibus durat conservandam, quâ opus esset ad eandem de novo creandam, si nondum existeret; adeo ut conservationem solâ ratione a creatione differre, sit etiam unum ex iis quae lumine naturali manifesta sunt.

“Itaque debeo nunc interrogare me ipsum, an habeam aliquam vim per quam possim efficere ut ego ille, qui jam sum, paulo post etiam sim futurus: nam, cùm nihil aliud sim quàm res cogitans, vel saltem cùm de eâ tantum meî parte praecise nunc agam quae est res cogitans, si quae talis vis in me esset, ejus proculdubio conscius essem. Sed & nullam esse experior, & ex hoc ipso evidentissime cognosco me ab aliquo ente a me diverso pendere.”

although most of the basic structural elements of a contingency proof are already introduced - this first presentation does not yet make a clean break from the ontological proof which it interrupts.²⁸ More importantly, Descartes does not yet openly argue for a positive meaning to aseity; it is only a direct challenge that pushes him into this.

It is Caterus who rightly notices that Descartes' contingency proof fully depends upon the highly difficult lift of positive aseity, and playfully forces him into a dilemma:

I ask and entreat this man not to conceal himself before the reader who is avid but perhaps not quite understanding. For *from itself* is taken in a twofold way. The first, positive [way], of course [is to be] from its very self as from a cause; and so what is from itself gave its being to its very self, [and] if by a foregoing decision it gave itself whatever it wanted, no doubt it gave itself everything, and to the point that it would be God. The second [way] is taken as the negative *from itself*, such that [from itself] is what is *by itself*, or *not by another*; and it is in this way, so far as I recall, that [the term] is taken by everyone.

Now, however, if something is from itself [in the second way], i.e. not from another, in what way can I prove that such [an entity] encompasses everything and is infinite?...²⁹

On the one side of the dilemma, a *negative* aseity (i.e., merely having no cause) means that Descartes must give up everything that immediately characterizes the first cause as divine: we cannot conclude that a self-caused entity would have any and all perfections without the radical, superlative power which would grant it a right to such perfections.³⁰ He is left with a first cause

²⁸ In this text the contingency proof still relies upon my having the idea of a most perfect being, i.e. upon the very same point of transition as the ontological proof: "Yet altogether it should be concluded that from this alone, that I exist *and that there is in me an idea of a most perfect entity, i.e. of God*, it is most evidently demonstrated that God likewise exists." [AT VII 51: "[S]ed omnino est concludendum, ex hoc solo quò existam, quaedamque idea entis perfectissimi, hoc est Dei, in me sit, evidentissime demonstrari Deum etiam existere..."]

²⁹ AT VII 95: "Rogo virum obsecroque, ut avidum Lectorem, & forte minus intelligentem, se non celet. Accipitur enim *a se* duplici modo. Primo, positive, nempe a seipso ut a causá; atque ita, quod a se esset, sibi que ipsi daret esse suum, si praevio delectu sibi daret quod vellet, haud dubie sibi omnia daret, atque adeo Deus esset. Secundo, accipitur *a se* negative, ut sit idem quod *seipso*, aut *non ab alio*; atque hoc modo, quantum memini, ab omnibus accipitur.

"Nunc verò, si aliquid a se est, id est non ab alio, quomodo probem istud omnia complecti & esse infinitum?" Most commentators take this passage as an *attack* on Descartes, but I suspect they may be reading too much Arnauld into Caterus. It makes better sense, it seems to me, to read this passage as exactly what it claims to be: an attempt to get Descartes to be explicit about exactly what his position is committed to, to either bite a bullet or retreat.

³⁰ Moreover, although Caterus does not mention it, we would also lose any certainty about divine self-preservation, which presumably endangers the conclusion that the first cause continues to exist.

without determinations and (perhaps) even without present existence, and would need to reach divinity via another step.³¹ The other side forces Descartes “not to conceal himself,” to overtly present and defend a strong positive meaning of aseity no matter how paradoxical it may seem.

Descartes takes the second route,³² even though he admits being well aware of the potential for resistance.³³ Everything about a defensible “a se” depends upon successfully transforming the concept of causality, something he already began in “Meditation III” (as above). Positive aseity, being either an efficient cause of oneself or something strongly analogous, begins to make sense only if causality need not imply a real difference between the cause and the effect, nor the temporal priority of the cause:

...I did not say that it was impossible that anything be the efficient cause of its own self; although indeed this would be manifestly true when the signification of efficient [cause] is restricted to those causes which are prior in time to the effects, or which are different from them, yet in this inquiry it does not look like [the signification] should be so restricted. Because the inquiry would then be worthless: who indeed does not know that the same thing can be neither prior to itself nor

³¹ Caterus’ challenge, of course, only has bite for variations of the proof which cannot use the Leibnizian tactic of supplementing the proof with a conceptual analysis. That version can perfectly well remain with a first cause which is a se in the negative sense - it is only Descartes’ variation that stands entirely upon the success or failure of a positive meaning of self-causality.

³² McBrayer’s “Cartesian Aseity in the Third Meditation” has recently argued that Descartes does not have a positive sense of aseity. The case, in brief, is that Descartes’ *causa sui* is not a strict efficient causality - which is true - and that Thomas Aquinas didn’t need positive aseity in his second way, so Descartes shouldn’t either - which is immaterial, since Descartes’ project is rather a different one with (and I think Caterus is correct here) deeper requirements. But positive self-causality need not mean positive *efficient* self-causality. McBrayer fully admits that the notion of formal causation at issue is “innovative” (218), but - as I try to show - it also makes all the difference in terms of rendering positive aseity workable.

³³ AT VII 109-110: “...I will readily respond about the distinction in the term *from itself*, which the most learned Theologian has warned me to be in need of explication. Although indeed some, who attend to none but the proper and strict signification of ‘efficient,’ think it is impossible that anything be the efficient cause of its own self, and here observe no other kind of cause having a place analogous to the efficient, [and so] are not used to understand anything other than that something has no cause when they say that it is *from itself*; yet if they were willing to attend to the thing rather than to the words, they would readily observe that the negative sense of the term *from itself* proceeds only from the imperfection of the human intellect, and has no foundation in the things: but in truth there is another, positive [sense] which is sought from the truth of the things, and my argument advanced from this [sense] alone.” [“Ex quibus facile respondebo ad distinctionem verbi *a se*, quam doctissimus Theologus monuit esse explicandam. Etsi enim ii qui, non nisi ad propriam & strictam efficientis significationem attendentes, cogitant impossibile esse, ut aliquid sit causa efficiens sui ipsius nullumque hic aliud causae genus efficienti analogum locum habere animadvertunt, non soleant aliud intelligere, cum dicunt aliquid *a se* esse, quam quod nullam habeat causam; si tamen iidem ipsi ad rem potius quam ad verba velint attendere, facile advertent negativam verbi *a se* acceptionem a solà intellectus humani imperfectione procedere, nullumque in rebus habere fundamentum: quandam vero aliam esse positivam quae a rerum veritate petita est, & de quà solà meum argumentum processit.”]

different from itself? And also because the natural light does not dictate that the logic [ratio] of efficient [cause] requires that it be prior to its effect; on the contrary, the logic of [efficient] cause properly holds only so long as it is producing the effect, and hence not when it is prior.³⁴

Descartes does not here decide whether a positive “a se” should be understood as an efficient cause in some extended sense or as a totally new kind of cause merely analogous to efficiency. It is only in “Replies IV,” with great awkwardness, that Descartes is forced by Arnauld into dubbing God’s aseity a *formal* causality. Although Descartes responds to Caterus’ challenge with considerable care, this does not keep Arnauld from “attending to none but the proper and strict signification of ‘efficient’” for some six pages in his “Objections,” insisting upon a negative meaning of aseity by insisting that efficient causality of oneself would be incoherent (for exactly the reasons Descartes dismissed above).³⁵ Descartes responds by reminding his fourth objector that “[i]f such an interpretation of the term *from itself* were admitted, no reasoning could be maintained for demonstrating the existence of God by effects, as was rightly proved in the first

³⁴ AT VII 108: “Denique non dixi impossibile esse ut aliquid sit causa efficiens sui ipsius; etsi enim aperte id verum sit, quando restringitur efficientis significatio ad illas causas quae sunt effectibus tempore priores, vel quae ab ipsis sunt diversae, non tamen videtur in hac quaestione ita esse restringenda; tum quia nugatoria quaestio esset: quis enim nescit idem nec seipso prius, nec a seipso diversum esse posse? tum etiam quia lumen naturale non dictat ad rationem efficientis requiri ut tempore prior sit suo effectui; nam contra, non proprie habet rationem causae, nisi quandiu producit effectum, nec proinde illo est prior.”

³⁵ In at least one moment Arnauld himself augments this negative aseity with precisely the kind of conceptual detour that Kant will later attack. AT VII 211: “For it is contained in the idea of an infinite entity that the duration of [this entity] is also infinite, which of course means limited by no restrictions, and in the same way indivisible, permanent, complete at once, and it cannot be conceived, except by the error and imperfection of our intellect, as earlier or later. Whence it manifestly follows that the infinite Entity cannot be conceived as existing even for a moment, without it likewise being conceived as having always existed and continuing to have existence into eternity...” [“In idea enim entis infiniti continetur, quod ejus duratio sit etiam infinita, scilicet nullis clausa limitibus, ac proinde indivisibilis, permanens, tota simul, & in qua non nisi per errorem & intellectus nostri imperfectionem concipi possit prius & posterius. Unde manifeste sequitur concipi non posse Ens infinitum vel per momentum existere, quin simul concipiatur & semper extitisse, & in aeternum existentiam habiturum...”] Which can be converted to say: if we have discovered an efficient cause which must continuously exist, then this existence must be none other than the infinite entity (because only this entity has such continuous existence contained in its idea).

Objections by that author, and therefore it is in no way to be admitted,”³⁶ and then introducing formal causality as the extension of (or alternative to) efficient cause proper to a first entity.

In explaining this new kind of positive causality (for there remains “a concept of cause common to the efficient and formal”),³⁷ Descartes insists that the “why” of the first cause is its *positive essence*: “[W]hatever is from another, is from that as from an efficient cause; but whatever is from itself, is as from a formal cause, that is, because it has such an essence that it is not in need of an efficient cause...”³⁸ Thus Descartes tries to resolve the worries of his more conservative reader not only by disambiguating the term “cause” but by further making it clear that the cause here is not any other entity, nor the same entity somehow prior in time, but simply the “essence” of that entity:

But to bring together these two [positions], one must say that, for the question why God exists, it should indeed not be answered by way of efficient cause properly said, but only by way of the very essence of the thing, or formal cause - [but] because existence is not distinguished from essence in God, [formal cause] will have a great analogy with the efficient, and therefore one may call it a quasi efficient cause.³⁹

At first glance it is tempting to read Descartes’ deployment of “formal cause,” with its accompanying emphasis on essence, either as a purely rhetorical move or as a complete surrender of everything he has built for this proof thus far. By the rhetorical reading Descartes is simply trying to calm his more conservative theological colleague through appeal to Aristotle

³⁶ AT VII 239: “Quae interpretatio verbi *a se* si admitteretur, nulla posset ab effectibus haberi ratio ad existentiam Dei demonstrandam, ut recte in primis Objectionibus ab ipsarum Authore probatum est, ideoque nullo modo est admittenda.” The phrase *by effects* must be emphasized here: it is as if Descartes is well aware that however much more intuitive a proof augmented by presupposed concepts would be, this would no longer properly be a contingency proof but a kind of mongrel.

³⁷ AT VII 238: “...conceptum quendam causae efficienti & formali communem...”

³⁸ AT VII 239: “...quod est ab alio, sit ab ipso tanquam a causa efficiente; quod autem est a se, sit tanquam a causa formali, hoc est, quia talem habet essentiam, ut causâ efficiente non egeat...”

³⁹ VII 243: “Sed ut haec duo simul concilientur, dici debet, quaerenti cur Deus existat, non quidem esse respondendum per causam efficientem proprie dictam, sed tantum per ipsam rei essentiam, sive causam formalem, quae propter hoc ipsum quòd in Deo existentia non distinguatur ab essentia, magnam habet analogiam cum efficiente, ideoque quasi causa efficiens vocari potest.”

and scholastic terminology which really have no place in his own thinking. But if Descartes really means to say that God exists by reason of his essence, that seems tantamount to saying that he exists *due to his concept*.⁴⁰ And this is not only an immediate anticipation of Spinoza,⁴¹ but completely demolishes the non-conceptual status of this proof I suggested above. The causal question is completely nullified in favor of a gross repetition of the Cartesian proof (the first cause existing by way of its concept),⁴² and Descartes is put squarely in the sights of the Kantian objection to both arguments. Yet a rhetorical peace offering or a retreat to mere concepts is not what Descartes has in mind with “*causa formalis*.” Consider Descartes’ phrasing: “*because existence is not distinguished from essence in God, [formal cause] will have a great analogy with the efficient, and therefore one may call it a quasi efficient cause.*” On the reading which takes ‘essence’ as ‘concept,’ therefore moving the text closer to the Cartesian argument (existence as contained in, and logically derived from, the concept), this statement makes no sense: formal cause would then be *all the more removed* from efficient cause, and not closely analogous to it. Descartes insists on a strongly causal element to “essence” at precisely the moment one would

⁴⁰ Tad Schmaltz, commenting on this term and holding something like this take on it, says: “...Descartes could extend the notion of formal causality to cover any case in which a feature of an object derives from that object’s nature or essence. Though he himself does not speak in these terms, he could say that the extension that constitutes the essence of a body is the formal cause of that body’s capacity to have... modes of extension.” If such a reading is right then this is the obvious consequence, and we are indeed in the territory of “Meditation V.” But the fact that Descartes in fact “does not speak in these terms” except in the singular case of God suggests that this interpretation cannot be quite right. See *Descartes on Causation* 60.

⁴¹ See *Ethica* Ip11, second demonstration.

⁴² Robert C. Miner, in “The Dependence of Descartes’ Ontological Proof upon the Doctrine of Causa Sui,” in fact tries to argue (particularly against Marion’s *Metaphysical Prism*) that the *causa sui* proof does not constitute a new theistic proof at all, but a kind of retroactive support for the Cartesian argument of “Meditation V” - this, namely via part of Descartes’ reply to Caterus (AT VII 119). Miner is right to notice a certain fuzziness to the boundaries of the Cartesian proof, i.e. that it can have another argument set underneath its own premises. But the same point about the *causa sui* can be said of the *ontological* proof of “Meditation III,” whose conclusions are simply taken over by “Meditation V.” There is an odd compatibility between the Cartesian and all other proofs, a way in which it can slide back and forth between itself and the others; yet that should not lead one to confuse the contexts and the different concepts of God at issue.

think him to be forced to drop it. That is, Descartes does not think of the “essence” of such a God conceptually.

It is via the question of what God’s “whatness” could be that we can return to “Replies I” for an answer. It is in first fully affirming a “sui causa” that Descartes writes:

But I plainly admit that something might be, in which there is such great and so much inexhaustible power that it never needed the help of anything in order to exist, nor either does it now need [anything] in order to be conserved, and to the point that it is, in a certain sense, cause of itself; and I understand God to be such.⁴³

Descartes never presents a clearer characterization of “formal causality,” and here the “whatness” of this God is nothing other than inexhaustible power. *God’s essentia is potentia*. To be sure, Descartes is stretching his terms to their limits, but the counterintuitive and rather late appearance of formal self-causality does not imply any lack of importance, nor does the fact that this God cannot be conceptualized imply that there is no “essence” to be spoken about. What this God “always already is being” (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι), is causing, conserving, etc., precisely as the “First Replies” describes it. God’s self-causality, then, is not to be conceived as some special *variety* of efficient causality (Arnauld’s worry), but a quite different (albeit analogous) causality where the entity’s own *power* is the reason, and the *positive* reason, why it exists.

Descartes’ definitive version of the contingency proof is therefore a very different beast than the one Kant treats; it appears in a pair of long, serpentine sentences in “Replies I” which we are now equipped to fully appreciate. To some extent this proof is written backwards, with the first part insisting upon God’s self-causality and the second explaining why only God can

⁴³ AT VII 109: “Sed plane admitto aliquid esse posse, in quo sit tanta & tam inexhausta potentia, ut nullius unquam ope egerit ut existeret, neque etiam nunc egeat ut conservetur, atque adeo sit quodammodo sui causa; Deumque talem esse intelligo.”

preserve our own existence. With the reader's permission I reverse the order of these discussions:

[L]et everyone interrogate themselves as to whether they are from themselves by the same sense [as God]; and when they find no power in themselves which would suffice to conserve them even for a moment of time, they will conclude with merit that they themselves are from another; and indeed from another which is from itself, [as] it is not possible to regress to infinity here, for the question is concerned with the present time, not the past or future; and indeed I will here add something I have not yet written before, that it is certainly not any second cause arrived at, but rather that [cause], in which there is altogether so much power that it would conserve a thing set beyond itself, to so much a greater extent conserves itself by its own power, and to the point that it is from itself.

[I]f while attending to the immense and incomprehensible power which is contained in the idea [of God] we first inquired concerning the cause of why [God] is, or why God perseveres in being, [and] we recognized that this [power] is so overwhelming that it is plainly the cause of why [God] perseveres in being, and that nothing else besides this can be so, [then] we say that God is from himself no better in the negative way, but most maximally in the positive way. For although it is not useful to say that [God] is the efficient cause of his own self, lest there be a debate concerning the terms, yet because [God] is from himself or has no cause different from himself, we perceive that [he is] not from nothing but rather from the real immensity of his power, [and] we are wholly allowed to think that in a certain sense he provides in respect to his own self as much as the efficient cause in respect to its effect, and so is from he himself positively...⁴⁴

I must conclude that I lack the power to conserve myself, and thus cannot myself be the “why” of my existence. But beyond this point (already made in “Meditation III”) Descartes makes the additional move to eliminate any *intermediate* cause between myself and God, i.e. anything which might create or conserve me but which itself is from still another entity: conserving me,

⁴⁴ VII 110-11: “...si prius de causa cur sit, sive cur esse perseveret, inquisivimus, attendentesque ad immensam & incomprehensibilem potentiam quae in ejus idea continetur, tam exuperantem illam agnovimus, ut plane sit causa cur ille esse perseveret nec alia praeter ipsam esse possit, dicimus Deum a se esse, non amplius negative, sed quammaxime positive. Quamvis enim dicere non opus sit illum esse causam efficientem sui ipsius, ne forte de verbis disputetur, quia tamen hoc, quòd a se sit, sive quòd nullam a se diversam habeat causam, non a nihilo, sed a reali ejus potentiae immensitate esse percipimus, nobis omnino licet cogitare illum quodammodo idem praestare respectu sui ipsius quod causa efficiens respectu sui effectus, ac proinde esse a seipso positive; licetque etiam unicuique seipsum interrogare, an eodem sensu sit a se; cumque nullam in se invenit potentiam, quae sufficiat ad ipsum vel per momentum temporis conservandum, merito concludit se esse ab alio; & quidem ab alio qui sit a se, quia cum de tempore praesenti, non de praeterito vel futuro, quaestio sit, non potest hic procedi in infinitum; quinimo etiam hic addam, quod tamen ante non scripsi, nequidem ad secundam ullam causam deveniri, sed omnino illam, in qua tantum potentiae est ut rem extra se positam conservet, tanto magis seipsam sua propria potentia conservare, atque adeo a se esse.”

i.e. conserving an external entity, should be *harder* than conserving oneself, so that anything which can do the former should also be doing the latter (and thereby having no trouble). My own existence, or really any existence which cannot sustain itself, therefore proves the external existence of an “immense and incomprehensible power” which is cause of itself, i.e., of God.⁴⁵ To be sure, there may be plenty for readers to take issue with in this argument, but what I emphasize is that it presents a contingency proof without any “logical parsing” of God’s concept. The conceptual analysis in the proofs of the German metaphysicians is instead functionally replaced by the use of formal cause, i.e. by self-preservation as being from one’s essence alone - the “essence” at issue here being nothing but raw causal potency.

This has two noteworthy results, which in their own way continue the ontotheological trend suggested by the ontological proof above. If (first) the contingency proof as Descartes presents it does not require a clearly perceived concept of God in the strict sense, or if it at least holds off the question of “perfection” until later, still there is surely a “concept” of God in the looser sense of a *designation* and a metaphysical *role*. The God of this proof is, if I may use a term that Descartes himself deploys only rarely, an *ens potentissimum*,⁴⁶ an entity of overwhelming power. And yet (second) the confirmation of such an entity as cause of itself, even if in a very special sense, thereby renders all existences as “a Deo,” *from God*.⁴⁷ This confirms

⁴⁵ Admittedly, so far as I read Descartes has not done explicit work to show that there can be *only one* first cause of this sort. But presumably he did not see this as a huge oversight, nor is it difficult to imagine an appropriate expansion of the argument - for example, he could try arguing that a multiplicity of such powers would have nothing to distinguish them, and would thus be the same.

⁴⁶ Cf, e.g., *Principles* I.5 at AT VIII A 6 - or, with a different usage, “Meditation II” at AT VII 26.

⁴⁷ John Carriero rightly points out that Descartes cannot pursue a more limited (e.g. Thomistic) approach to this proof through negative aseity precisely because he needs a *generality* (univocity) of causal being: “[T]he reason why [a more restricted] approach will not work from Descartes’s point of view is that unless one agrees that existing is the sort of thing that *in general* [*my emphasis*] requires some power, some causal support, to sustain it, then it is hard to see why I should suppose that my existing, in particular, requires something to sustain it.” From *Between Two Worlds*, 218.

my proposal above that Descartes famously questionable definition of substance in the *Principles* can be rendered consistent, and not equivocal, if one reads God too as “needing” God’s own power in order to exist. To be sure, Descartes does insist (in “Replies IV”) that this does not render God into a mere “effect,” not even of himself:

And it is to be noted that the dignity of [being a] cause is attributed to God by us in a way that none of the indignity of [being an] effect would follow thereupon in his case... Thus, although I would admit to calling God *cause of himself* in a certain way, still nowhere have I named him *effect of himself* in the same way, for as is known the effect is particularly wont to be referred to its effector, and to be more ignoble, although often it may be nobler than other causes.⁴⁸

And yet God, too, is *caused*, i.e. is located squarely within the ontology of causality: “But it seems to me evident in itself that everything which is is either from a cause or from itself just as well as from a cause.”⁴⁹ If “the light of nature dictates that nothing exists concerning which one is not allowed to ask why it exists,” that includes God as much as anything else.

If the ontotheological proof of the previous chapter discovered a God that was both a ground of all thinkability and the first of all ideas, the contingency proof finds a ground of all causality which is also its own “why.” The fact that there is a fairly evident relation between a God and an ontology in both cases, however, does not mean that we have a clear sense of what that relation amounts to. That God ends up in some respect both inside and outside of causality all at once may be less a problem than a necessity concerning the proofs themselves.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ AT VII 242: “Notandumque est causae dignitatem sic a nobis Deo fuisse tributam, ut nulla effectus indignitas in ipso inde sequeretur... ita, quamvis admiserim Deum dici quodammodo posse *sui causam*, nullibi tamen illum eodem modo *sui effectum* nominavi, quia scilicet effectus ad efficientem praecipue solet referri, & illa esse ignobilior, quamvis saepe sit nobilior aliis causis.”

⁴⁹ AT VII 112: “Per se autem notum mihi videtur, omne id quod est, vel esse a causâ, vel a se tamque a causâ...”

⁵⁰ Jean-Luc Marion writes, “[The invention of the *causa sui*] solely obeys a properly metaphysical necessity: the need to constitute an onto-theology without exception by beginning with the *causa*, in this way elevated to the rank of *causa sive ratio*. The principle of sufficient reason [i.e., everything having a why] hence is not instituted by resolving the objections that the case of God brings up, but by ignoring them. In this way it proves its authority of first reason in making any case of other reasons henceforth relative.” From “The Causa Sui: First and Fourth Replies” in *On the Ego and on God* 159.

D. "...the achievement of the answer...."

As a last word on this proof, I ask the reader to endure a bit of speculation. It is, of course, totally impossible to know how Kant would have reacted to Descartes' version of this argument, had he known about it; if there is an obvious connection between them in treating a proof via causality, still the specific concept of "sui causa formalis" remains missing in Kant. But there is also every good reason, at least at a *philosophical* level, to say that it *should* be present, if only because everything the early Kant says *demands* that absent concept.

To be sure, the 1755 *New Dilucidation* seems to openly reject the concept of self causality by way of attacking the notion (emphasized particularly in Wolff⁵¹) of anything's having the "reason" for its existence within itself:

Proposition VI. It is incongruous that anything have the reason for its existence in itself.

For whatever contains in itself the reason for the existence of a thing, is the cause of this [thing]. Therefore suppose that there is something which would have had the reason for its existence in itself - then it would have been cause of its very self. Because verily the notion of cause must be constituted ["natura est"] as prior to the notion of what is caused, and the latter posterior to the former, the same thing would have been prior and posterior to itself all at once, which is absurd.

In principle this objection is the same as Arnauld's, and is precisely what the efficient/formal distinction is supposed to resolve. More interesting is what Kant adds in the scholion:

Indeed I find this sentiment, that God has the reason for his existence set in himself, constantly echoed in the pleas of the most recent philosophers; but I myself would refuse to render assent to it. For to these good men it seems harsh in a certain way to deny to God, the ultimate and consummate principle of reasons and causes alike, a reason for his own; and therefore, as it is not permitted to recognize any [reason] beyond himself, they assert he has it concealed in himself - of course, hardly anything else more remote from proper reasoning than this can be invented. For

⁵¹ Cf *Theologia Naturalis pars prior*, §67ff at 28-30.

when you arrive at the principle in a chain of reasons, it is evident in itself that the advance stops and the questioning is plainly dispelled by the achievement of the answer.⁵²

But if the young Kant's intention here was to put a stake in the heart of *causa sui* (or *ratio sui*), then if anything he demonstrates that the question is unavoidable. The whole problem consists in *why* it is that one entity in particular does in fact act as the "principle in the chain," *why* it can be singled out as "the answer." For, to speak like Descartes, if we cannot ask for something's efficient cause then we are still obliged to ask why it has no need of one. Kant's suspicions about philosophers somehow "concealing" the reason for God's existence within God surely have good instincts behind them, as he would read something like that as the proof's Achilles' heel some eight years later.⁵³ But Kant's own arguments for his reaching a principle (the argument briefly offered in Section III.2, on 1:414, is closer to a physicotheological proof, and will be discussed in the following section) are suspect in their own way, and by his own later lights.

Yet at the same time Kant isn't quite prepared to give up on first causes, here or (so far as I read) anywhere else in his early work. In *Beweisgrund* III, as above, he is willing to grant the contingency proof its empirical premises, but also as above the proof cannot even really be considered without some claim about why the entity which terminates the chain must be God. Kant seems to lack a good answer. The 1770 *Sensible and Intelligible World* (the so-called "Inaugural Dissertation") brings this problem of a missing answer into particular relief, in that it

⁵² I:394: "PROP. VI. Existentiã suã rationem aliquid habere in se ipso, absonum est.

"Quicquid enim rationem existentiã alicuius rei in se continet, huius causa est. Pone igitur aliquid esse, quod existentiã suã rationem haberet in se ipso, tum sui ipsius causa esset. Quoniam vero causã notio natura sit prior notione causati, et hæc illa posterior: idem se ipso prius simulquã posterius esset, quod est absurdum...

"SCHOLION. Equidem in recentiorum philosophorum placitis subinde recantari hanc sententiam: Deum rationem existentiã suã in se ipso habere positam; verum egomet assensum ipsi præbere nolim. Duriusculum enim bonis hisce viris quodammodo videtur, Deo ceu rationum et causarum ultimo et consummatissimo principio sui rationem denegare; ideoquã, quia non extra se ullam agnoscere licet, in se ipso reconditam habere autumant, quo sane vix quicquam aliud magis a recta ratione remotum reperiri potest. Ubi enim in rationum catena ad principium perveneris, gradum sisti et quãstionem plane aboleri consummatione responsionis, per se patet."

⁵³ This same passage even leads directly into his earliest critique of the Cartesian proof, discussed previously.

is as close as the early Kant comes to presenting an explicit case for the contingency proof.

Although Kant mostly deals with this proof in tandem with a physicotheological proof (as in 1755), he is clear to distinguish the two ontological levels at which the proofs function as concerning either *existence and dependence* or *commerce within a plurality*:

Given a plurality of substances, the principle of [any] possible commerce between them is not constituted by their existence alone... For they do not necessarily relate [respicunt] to anything else due to subsistence itself, except perhaps its cause - but the relation of caused to cause is not commerce, but dependence.⁵⁴

The existence of multiple contingent entities alone cannot, on its own, establish any “commerce” between them (i.e. any harmonious interaction),⁵⁵ only that there is a cause upon which they are dependent. But it does establish that cause - “Worldly substances are entities from another, but not from diverse [others], rather all [of them] are from one” - and that such a cause is *necessary*. This is as close as Kant gets to granting the soundness of any contingency proof in the precritical period. But crucially, Kant does not - and seems to think he *cannot - complete* this proof via an argument that the cause is a God, that there is only one, etc.. He does argue that *a world*, as a totality of worldly entities, implies only a single necessary cause, but he cannot show that there is not a *multiplicity* of such worlds:

For conceive [the substances] to be caused by several necessary entities; the effects, the causes of which are foreign to all mutual relation, would not be in commerce. Therefore the UNITY in the conjunction of the substances of the universe is a consequence of the dependence of all substances on one [entity].

If there were several first, necessary causes along with what they caused, then their product would be worlds, not a world, as they would in no way be connected to the same whole; and vice versa, if there are several actual worlds beyond one another, then several first, necessary causes are given... And so, the several actual worlds beyond one another are not impossible by their very concept... but rather only under this condition - if there only exists a single necessary cause of all

⁵⁴ 2:407: “Datis pluribus substantiis, principium commercii inter illas possibilis non sola ipsarum existentia constat... Nam propter ipsam subsistentiam non respiciunt aliud quicquam necessario, nisi forte sui causam, at causati respectus ad causam non est commercium, sed dependentia.”

⁵⁵ I discuss commerce between entities below; for present purposes it is only important that commerce is something beyond mere existence and causality.

[entities]. Certainly if several [causes] were admitted, then the several worlds beyond one another, in the strictest metaphysical sense, will be possible.⁵⁶

Only one world per necessary cause but, in principle, no limit on such causes: if there were multiple necessary causes then the result would just be *multiple worlds*, with nothing relating any of the entities within them. Kant thus thinks he can rule out multiple necessary causes sharing a single world, or several worlds sharing a single necessary cause, but he cannot rule out that multiplicity of worlds and multiplicity of necessary causes. If he admits here that the contingency proof can successfully move from the totality of worldly entities (as an effect) back to a single necessary cause, then he does so at the price of granting that the same proof would apply to any number of other totalities and thereby any number of other necessary causes. The upshot of the discussion in the 1770 *World* is the same as that of the *Beweisgrund*: we can arrive at a *necessary cause* of the world, but not at a *God* without additional work. Without that work, nothing rules out a non-divine necessary cause, more than one such cause, or even more than one world of effects.

Faced with the choice between a potential multiverse or an illegitimate “logical parsing,” it is no surprise that the early Kant tends to be so cagey on this proof. As an interpreter, then, I am forced to wonder concerning what Kant’s reaction to Descartes’ approach would have been, had the intervening tradition not buried it. I cannot claim that the notion of a positive *sui causa formalis* would have definitively solved any of Kant’s difficulties with this proof, certainly not

⁵⁶ 2:408: “Substantiae mundanae sunt entia ab alio, sed non a diversis, sed omnia ab uno. Fac enim illas esse causata plurium entium necessariorum: in commercio non essent effectus, quorum causae ab omni relatione mutua sunt alienae. Ergo UNITAS in coniunctione substantiarum universi est consecarium dependentiae omnium ab uno... Si plures forent causae primae ac necessariae cum suis causatis, eorum opificia essent mundi, non mundus, quia nullo modo connecterentur ad idem totum; et vice versa si sint plures mundi extra se actuales, dantur plures causae primae ac necessariae... Plures itaque mundi extra se actuales non per ipsum sui conceptum sunt impossibiles... sed sub sola hac condicione, si unica tantum existat causa omnium necessaria. Si vero admittantur plures, erunt plures mundi, in sensu strictissimo metaphysico, extra se possibiles.” Also cf 1:414.

without its creating quite new puzzles. But I can point out that *something* of the sort - some other option - is always demanded in Kant's discussion, and always found lacking.

The effect of the tradition's elimination of a positive *causa sui* from this proof was thus not to save it from a "hard" metaphysical assertion,⁵⁷ I suggest, but to eliminate the notion of God proper to the proof. The Gods of these proofs are *distinctive to* their proofs: the "ens potestissimum" fits a contingency proof because that proof, in turn, fits an ontology of being-caused. Descartes' conceiving a positive *causa sui* merely renders God consistent with the universal application of the question, "cur existat?," such that God is as it were twisted back and redoubled upon its being. If this is the most historically scandalous example, it is not unique to this proof. What should most be considered is not so much that redoubling, but the status of the "cur?" question which requires it.

II. The Physicotheological Proof

Beweisgrund III's initial description of this fourth proof is oddly vague. Kant writes:

...both existence as well as the properties [of God] will be immediately deduced from what experience teaches.⁵⁸

...the second proof of this [empirical] kind [is that in which] the existence of God and likewise his properties are concluded from the empirical concepts of existing things... The things of the world, which reveal themselves to our senses, exhibit both obvious marks of their contingency [Zufälligkeit], as well as - by way of the grandeur, order, and purposive arrangements which one observes everywhere - proofs of a rational author with great wisdom, power, and goodness. The great unity in such an extensive whole allows [one] to accept that there is only one author of all these things...⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Cf the "Fourth Replies" at AT VII 208.

⁵⁸ 2:156: "...es werden aus dem, was die Erfahrung lehrt, sowohl das Dasein als auch die Eigenschaften desselben unmittelbar gefolgert."

⁵⁹ 2:159: "Was nun den zweiten Beweis von derjenigen Art anlangt, da aus Erfahrungsbegriffen von existirenden Dingen auf das Dasein Gottes und zugleich seine Eigenschaften geschlossen wird, so verhält es sich hiemit ganz anders... Die Dinge der Welt, welche sich unsern Sinnen offenbaren, zeigen sowohl deutliche Merkmale ihrer

Although a certain vaguery is common enough in proofs of this sort (perhaps not without reason, as below), the details of this “immediate deduction” can be further filled in by appealing (e.g.) to a long, twisting sentence in Kant’s *New Dilucidations*:

Thus, with the existence of substances simpliciter being plainly insufficient to [reach] mutual commerce and relations of determinations, to the point that [this existence], via external connectivity, argues for a common cause of everything (in accordance with which [the substances’] existence has been formed as related, so to speak), and nor [with] this universal connectivity being conceivable without this community of principle - so the most evident testimony of the highest cause of all things, i.e. of God, and indeed of one [God], is thence brought forth, which in my opinion seems to far surpass the well-known demonstration from contingency.⁶⁰

The proof does not just draw qualities out of natural objects and project them onto a God, as *Beweisgrund* III seems to say - it concerns the “great unity,” not the individuals. Beyond the question of why anything exists (the contingency proof), this proof asks how nature is able to meaningfully *function as a whole* with mutual utility and interaction between elements.

Especially in the other texts, the theme of this proof is explicitly described as the “commerce” within, the “harmony” between, the “grandeur, order, and purposive arrangements” of, natural entities. God’s existence, singularity and nature (as a wise and benevolent author), are inferred from the “connectivity” of nature.⁶¹

Zufälligkeit, als auch durch die Größe, die Ordnung und zweckmäßige Anstalten, die man allenthalben gewahr wird, Beweisthümer eines vernünftigen Urhebers von großer Weisheit, Macht und Güte. Die große Einheit in einem so weitläufigen Ganzen läßt abnehmen, daß nur ein einziger Urheber aller dieser Dinge sei...”

⁶⁰ 1:414: “Cum itaq̄ exsistentia substantiarum simpliciter ad commercium mutuum et determinationum respectus plane sit insufficiens, adeoq̄ nexu externo arguat communem omnium causam, in qua respective informata sit earum exsistentia, neq̄ sine hac principii communionem nexus universalis concipi possit, evidentissimum inde depromitur summā rerum omnium causā, i.e. Dei, et quidem unius, testimonium, quod mea quidem sententia demonstrationem illam contingentia longe antecellere videtur.” The *Sensible and Intelligible World* deploys much this same language, as does - with important modifications - the second section of the *Beweisgrund*; both texts will be discussed below in some detail.

⁶¹ Elsewhere, of course, this is described as a proof “from design” or a proof “from final causes,” but in many respects those names are misleading. This, because “design” and “final cause” in normal usage tend toward making some claim about the purposes of the designer. But the cleverest proponents of this proof will in principle remain agnostic about whatever was finally intended in the creation; this is an argument not from design, but from *designedness*.

The attentive reader will have noticed by now that my whole project relies on drawing strong connections between Kant and Descartes, and they will rightly pause with regard to this one. When it comes to a theistic proof from “final causes,” how is it possible (they will ask) to draw any connection back to Descartes when Descartes denies the validity of final causes? It is certainly true that physicotheology stems far more from the traditions of scientific empiricism in England and elsewhere - Kant explicitly cites Derham and Nieuwentyt - than the Cartesians. Yet Robert Boyle in fact already made that connection for me. In fact Boyle has the prestige of having rather ingeniously discovered a *hidden route* to physicotheology within Descartes himself, and it is a route Descartes himself grants in certain asides.

But in Descartes as much as in Kant the physicotheological proof is left with a tenuous status. Although Kant consistently grants the proof his respect, he also sees it as incapable of demonstrating a truly divine existence *on its own*. In a way that will remain consistent for decades, his most characteristic approach to this proof is to marry it to others in a way that is hardly successful. Descartes, of course, does not even try this. This lack of any self-standing status, however, may be less due to the proof itself than to the fact that its basic concepts have never been set out or clarified adequately - that, despite its simplistic appearance, the proof hides a whole nest of underdeveloped conceptual questions.

A. The Failings and Supplementations of Physicotheology

Kant's approach to the physicotheological proof stays quite consistent throughout his career (even if we still ignore the Critical period), and tends to proceed in two related directions. The proof is respectfully denied self-standing status, and then married off to other proofs.

To the first, Kant repeatedly says that the proof is "sound and very beautiful" but that "it will never be capable of the sharpness of a demonstration."⁶² In terms of its ability to actually produce *conviction* in the ordinary run of people, Kant considers the "cosmological" approach to be superior to his own ontological one:

[I]f the question were, then which among the two is the best overall?, one would answer thusly: as soon as what matters is logical precision and thoroughness, then it is the ontological, but [as soon as] one requires comprehensibility for straightforward common conception [gemeinen richtigen Begriff], vivacity of impression, beauty, and motivating power for the moral driving forces of human nature, then the cosmological proof is conceded the advantage... [I]f one wishes to proceed honestly, the advantage of more general usability is not to be denied to the well-known cosmological proof.⁶³

Its "worldliness" is its power, albeit also its weakness. This proof apparently need not employ any distant and abstract metaphysics: because it can appeal instead to everyday natural operations, it is far more convincing and motivating for the general public. But on the other side of the same coin, it is not rigorously demonstrative of any God that Kant is interested in. I quote Kant's full discussion, which is as good a summary on the topic as he ever writes:

For all of [its] excellence, this mode of proof is nevertheless always incapable of mathematical certainty and precision. At any time one will merely be able to conclude upon some inconceivably great author of the whole which serves itself to our senses, not however upon the

⁶² 2:162: "...der Beweis aus den Eigenschaften der Dinge der Welt auf das Dasein und die Eigenschaften der Gottheit zu schließen einen tüchtigen und sehr schönen Beweisgrund enthalte, nur daß er nimmermehr der Schärfe einer Demonstration fähig ist."

⁶³ 2:161: "Indessen wenn die Frage wäre, welcher denn überhaupt unter beiden der beste sei, so würde man antworten: so bald es auf logische Genauigkeit und Vollständigkeit ankommt, so ist es der ontologische, verlangt man aber Faßlichkeit für den gemeinen richtigen Begriff, Lebhaftigkeit des Eindrucks, Schönheit und Bewegkraft auf die moralische Triebfedern der menschlichen Natur, so ist dem kosmologischen Beweise der Vorzug zuzugestehen... [W]enn man aufrichtig verfahren will, dem bekannten kosmologischen Beweise der Vorzug der allgemeineren Nutzbarkeit nicht abzusprechen." As I noted in Chapter II, "cosmological" here designates Kant's term for the proof he later calls "physicotheological," *not* the "cosmological" proof of the *Critique* (referred to, as above, as the contingency proof). I try to avoid the ambiguities of this earlier term by simply skipping it, instead using the name from later texts.

existence of the most perfect of all possible entities. That there is only a single first author will be the greatest prospect in the world, but this conviction alone will lack much in the details that [could] defy the boldest skepticism. What matters is this: we cannot conclude that there are more or greater properties in the cause than just what we need to claim in order to understand the degree and condition of the effects thereof; provided, namely, that we have no other occasion to judge of the existence of this cause than that which the effects give us. Now we recognize much perfection, greatness, and order in the world, and from that we can conclude with logical sharpness no more than this - that the cause of it must have much understanding, power, and goodness, but in no way that it knows all, can do all, etc. etc.. It is an immeasurable whole in which we perceive unity and thoroughgoing interrelation, and with great reason we can estimate from this that there is a single author of the same. But we must keep ourselves humble that we do not know all created things, and hence judge like so - what is known to us only evidences [blicken lasse] one author, from which we presume that even what is not known to us will end up being just the same; which is indeed very reasonable thinking, but is not a strict conclusion.⁶⁴

The proof is an inference from the particularities of what we have experienced, yet that always remains limited in space and time. We can *assume* a greater whole, but we do not have that whole in the flesh. What we have grants us the demonstrative right only to an entity sufficiently great to create just what we have: we can only strictly make inferences from the harmony, connectivity, and unity of the whole as experienced *so far*, and thus justifiably arrive only at the existence of an author with exactly the degree of greatness required for that “so far.” Keeping within the bounds of probative rigor, we only reach a demiurge: we cannot grant this entity the superlatives which would allow it to be (e.g.) maximally perfect or incomprehensibly powerful

⁶⁴ 2:160-1: “Bei aller dieser Vortrefflichkeit ist diese Beweisart doch immer der mathematischen Gewißheit und Genauigkeit unfähig. Man wird jederzeit nur auf irgend einen unbegreiflich großen Urheber desjenigen Ganzen, was sich unsern Sinnen darbietet, schließen können, nicht aber auf das Dasein des vollkommensten unter allen möglichen Wesen. Es wird die größte Wahrscheinlichkeit von der Welt sein, daß nur ein einiger erster Urheber sei, allein dieser Überzeugung wird viel an der Ausführlichkeit, die der frechsten Zweifelsucht trotz, ermangeln. Das macht: wir können nicht auf mehr oder größere Eigenschaften in der Ursache schließen, als wir gerade nöthig finden, um den Grad und Beschaffenheit der Wirkungen daraus zu verstehen; wenn wir nämlich von dem Dasein dieser Ursache keinen andern Anlaß zu urtheilen haben, als den, so uns die Wirkungen geben. Nun erkennen wir viel Vollkommenheit, Größe und Ordnung in der Welt und können daraus nichts mehr mit logischer Schärfe schließen, als daß die Ursache derselben viel Verstand, Macht und Güte besitzen müsse, keinesweges aber daß sie alles wisse, vermöge etc. etc. Es ist ein unermessliches Ganze, in welchem wir Einheit und durchgängige Verknüpfung wahrnehmen, und wir können mit großem Grunde daraus ermessen, daß ein einiger Urheber desselben sei. Allein wir müssen uns bescheiden, daß wir nicht alles Erschaffene kennen, und daher urtheilen, daß, was uns bekannt ist, nur einen Urheber blicken lasse, woraus wir vermuthen, was uns auch nicht bekannt ist, werde eben so bewandt sein; welches zwar sehr vernünftig gedacht ist, aber nicht strenge schließt.”

without overreaching ourselves. This “physical” proof, as reasonable as it is, cannot reach a “metaphysical” God.

I pause to emphasize Kant’s exact difficulty with this proof. It is not based in some subtle error (as he reads the Cartesian proof to be), and it is not even that the proof as such, proceeding from our limited range of experience, is not demonstrative *at all*. But it is not demonstrative of an entity that Kant *wants*. If the proof does reach the author of the harmony of nature as seen thus far - if it does so with sufficient “logical sharpness” to convince the hypothetical bold skeptic that such an author must indeed exist - that is no small thing, and it is hard to justify why Kant would classify this as a failure. If the existence of an “author” is not sufficient, then we may ask why such an entity should not qualify for the title of “God.” This question, rather obvious and apparently minor, conceals another one, a puzzle which has come up before: *exactly what kind of “God” are the proofs looking for?* And, more to the present topic: if the proofs are basically *ontotheological* somehow, why should an *ontotheology of natural harmony* be bound by a God who “knows all, can do all, etc.”?

But within that paired praise and dismissal of the proof Kant includes a small but crucial qualification: the physicotheological proof cannot rigorously prove the cause Kant wants “provided... that we have *no other occasion* to judge of the existence of this cause.” That is no idle suggestion on his part: Kant, throughout his career, views this proof as most useful in providing other, more rigorous proofs with support, in being *wedded* to additional “occasions” for concluding God’s existence. This was already briefly brought up at the end of the previous section, and readers more familiar with Kant’s later work have also seen examples.⁶⁵ The young

⁶⁵ In the Third *Critique* (5:475ff) the order of nature is related back to the moral proof, and in the “Ideal of Pure Reason” Kant insists (A625/B653, in 3:416) that physicotheology cannot claim to reach a necessary being without eventually (via the contingency proof) going through the Cartesian proof. Cf the next two Chapters.

Kant is quite broad in his attempts to marry this proof off: in the *Sensible and Intelligible World* and also the *New Dilucidations* the physicotheological approach is wedded to the contingency proof (perhaps as in the *First Critique*), but in the second section of the *Beweisgrund* itself Kant also attempts to wed it to his own *ontological* proof. The Cartesian proof, up until the *Critique*, will remain the exception.

First to the weddings with the *contingency* approach, which Kant performs in rather simple fashion. In the chapter of the *Sensible and Intelligible World* discussed above Kant had already made the point that the mere existence of substances does not yet imply the “commerce” (mutually effective interactivity) of the substances - the entity which causes their existence apparently need not be the author the harmony of nature, and vice versa. By this point in his career Kant had already pointed out myriad problems with both proofs given in isolation, but here he suggests that the shortcomings of the physicotheological approach (the lack of a rigorous conclusion to a necessary God) as well as the causal (the difficulty of establishing the necessary entity’s concept) can be fixed by *combining* them. He writes:

Worldly substances are entities from another, but not from diverse [others], rather all [of them] are from one. For conceive them to be caused by several necessary entities; the effects, the causes of which are foreign to all mutual relation, would not be in commerce. Therefore the UNITY in the conjunction of the substances of the universe is a consequence of the dependence of all substances on one [entity]. Hence the form of the entirety testifies to the cause of its material, and only the unique cause of the entireties is the cause of the universe, and there is no architect of the world which would not likewise be [its] creator.⁶⁶

If there were multiple (necessary) causes for the various substances making up the material of the world, then there would be no commerce between those substances; the different necessary

⁶⁶ 2:408: “Substantiae mundanae sunt entia ab alio, sed non a diversis, sed omnia ab uno. Fac enim illas esse causata plurium entium necessariorum: in commercio non essent effectus, quorum causae ab omni relatione mutua sunt alienae. Ergo UNITAS in coniunctione substantiarum universi est consecretarium dependentiae omnium ab uno. Hinc forma universi testatur de causa materiae et non nisi causa universorum unica est causa universitatis, neque est mundi architectus, qui non sit simul creator.”

causes could not, as it were, coordinate their effects to make them mutually interactive.

Moreover a demiurge distinct from the first cause could not step in after the fact to organize things :the first cause would first have needed to give the demiurge the capacity for relating to other substances and give the other substances the capacity for being so organized, which would still render the first cause the source of all relationality. Innerworldly substantial commerce is therefore only possible if the material of the world is not merely caused but also (at the same moment) *crafted* so as to be in mutual harmony, and all this by the same entity. If there is real substantial commerce in the world, then the necessary cause must also be the “architect” of that order. The same conclusion - that the cause of the world cannot differ from the architect of its order - is also made, if anything more boldly, fifteen years earlier in the *New Dilucidations* (already briefly quoted in the introduction to this section).⁶⁷

⁶⁷ 1:412-4. “PROPOSITION XIII. Finite substances provide for [respiciunt] no relations to one another through their existence alone, and they would plainly be held together by no commerce, except insofar as they are sustained in mutual relations [respectibus] of conformation by the common principle of their existence, namely the divine intellect. DEMONSTRATION. Singular substances, of which none is the cause of the existence of another, have their existence separated, i.e. entirely intelligible without any others. Therefore nothing lies in the existence of anything whatsoever, posited simpliciter, which argues for the existence of others different from itself. Since it is true that a relation is a relative determination, i.e. not at all intelligible in an entity considered absolutely, it and equally its determining ground cannot be understood through the existence of the substance posited in itself. Consequently, if nothing besides this is added in addition, there would be no relation and plainly no commerce between anything. Thus, whereas insofar as singular [entities] among substances have an existence independent from others there is no place for their mutual connectivity, [whereas] it certainly does not fall to finite [entities] to be the causes of other substances, [whereas] nevertheless nothing less than everything in the entirety is discovered to be bound together by mutual connectivity, it must be admitted that this relationship depends upon a common cause, namely God, the general principle of existences. Thenceforth, since it is true that just because God may stabilize [substances’] existence simpliciter a mutual relation [respectus] between [substances] still does not follow - unless the scheme of the divine intellect, which gives existence, would establish the relations [of everything] insofar as it conceives their existences as correlated - it is most clearly evident that the universal commerce of all things is borne by the conception of this divine idea alone... Thus, with the existence of substances simpliciter being plainly insufficient to [reach] mutual commerce and relations of determinations, to the point that [this existence], via external connectivity, argues for a common cause of everything (in accordance with which [the substances’] existence has been formed as related, so to speak), and nor [with] this universal connectivity being conceivable without this community of principle - so the most evident testimony of the highest cause of all things, i.e. of God, and indeed of one [God], is thence brought forth, which in my opinion seems to far surpass the well-known demonstration from contingency. “PROP. XIII Substantiã finitã per solam ipsarum existentiã nullis se relationibus respiciunt, nulloquẽ plane commercio continentur, nisi quatenus a communi existentiã suã principio, divino nempe intellectu, mutuis respectibus conformatã sustinentur.

Yet this marriage does not quite succeed. While in 1755 Kant is quite convinced that he has dispatched both Leibnizian preestablished harmony as well as Malebranchean occasionalism⁶⁸ - i.e., firmly established that any commerce of substances must be a *real* interactivity, i.e. not a merely apparent one - the *Sensible and Intelligible World* is more modest. Kant is forced to grant that the order we experience may not be as it seems, and that Leibniz and Malebranche - under the common name of “singularly established harmony” - at least present legitimate possibilities.⁶⁹

“DEMONSTRATIO. Substantiä singulä, quarum neutra est causa existentiä alterius, existentiäm habent separatam h. e. absq̄ omnibus aliis prorsus intelligibilem. Posita igitur cuiuslibet existentiä simpliciter, nihil ipsi inest, quod arguat existentiäm aliarum a se diversarum. Quoniam vero relatio est determinatio respectiva, h. e. in ente absolute spectato haud intelligibilis, häc pariter ac ratio eius determinans per existentiäm substantiä in se positam intelligi nequit. Si präter hanc igitur nihil insuper accesserit, nulla inter omnes relatio nullumq̄ plane commercium foret. Cum ergo, quatenus substantiarum singulä independentem ab aliis habent existentiäm, nexui earum mutuo locus non sit, in finita vero utiq̄ non cadat, substantiarum aliarum causas esse, nihilo tamen minus omnia in universo mutuo nexu colligata reperiantur, relationem hanc a communionem causä, nempe Deo, existentium generali principio, pendere confitendum est. Quoniam vero inde, quia Deus simpliciter ipsarum stabiliverit existentiäm, mutuus inter easdem respectus etiam non consequitur, nisi idem, quod existentiäm dat, intellectus divini schema, quatenus existentiäs ipsarum correlatas concepit, eorum respectus firmaverit, universale rerum omnium commercium huius divinä ideä conceptui soli acceptum ferri, liquidissime apparet... Cum itaq̄ existentiä substantiarum simpliciter ad commercium mutuum et determinationum respectus plane sit insufficiens, adeoq̄ nexu externo arguat communem omnium causam, in qua respective informata sit earum existentiä, neq̄ sine hac principii communionem nexus universalis concipi possit, evidentissimum inde depromitur summä rerum omnium causä, i.e. Dei, et quidem unius, testimonium, quod mea quidem sententiä demonstrationem illam contingentia longe antecellere videtur.”

⁶⁸ Cf 1:412 and 415, respectively.

⁶⁹ 2:409. “To the extent that the progression from a given world to the unique cause of all its parts is valid, if so too the argument would similarly proceed vice versa from a given cause common to all to the connectivity between them, and indeed to the form of the world (although I confess that this conclusion does not seem equally perspicuous to me), then the basic connectivity of substances would not be contingent, but rather necessary due to the sustainment of all by a common principle, to the point that the harmony set out according to their very subsistences, founded in a common cause, would proceed following common rules. Moreover I call such a harmony generally established, while that [harmony] which does not take place except so far as any individual state of a substance is fit to the state of another, is singularly established harmony, and the commerce as a result of the former harmony is real and physical, that as a result of the latter is ideal and sympathetic... Therefore if, through the sustainment of all substances by one [entity], the conjunction of all, which constitute one [unity], were necessary, then the universal commerce of substances will be through physical influence, and the world a real whole; but if not, then the commerce will be sympathetic (i.e., harmony without true commerce) and the world only an ideal whole.” [“Si, quemadmodum a dato mundo ad causam omnium ipsius partium unicam valet consequentia, ita etiam vice versa a data causa communi omnibus ad nexum horum inter se, adeoque ad formam mundi, similiter procederet argumentatio (quanquam fateor hanc conclusionem mihi non aequè perspicuam videri), nexus substantiarum primitivus non foret contingens, sed per sustentationem omnium a principio communi necessarius, adeoque harmonia proficiscens ab ipsa earum subsistentia, fundata in causa communi, procederet secundum regulas communes. Harmoniam autem talem voco generaliter stabilitam, cum illa, quae locum non habet, nisi quatenus status quilibet substantiae individuales adaptantur statui alterius, sit harmonia singulariter stabilita et commercium e priori harmonia sit reale et physicum, e posteriori autem ideale et sympatheticum... Si itaque per sustentationem

The problem, if I read correctly, is that our observation of an apparently rule-governed “real” world does not guarantee that that world is really so, i.e. not merely ideal. He does add, “Indeed for me, although it is not demonstrated, still the former [i.e., that the world is a real whole] is abundantly proved for different reasons” - presumably because a merely apparent regulation of the world and its substances would be repugnant. If you grant him that, then he still sees the move to a common cause of the world which is also the source of its connectivity as an easy next step. But he cannot *demonstrate* that the commerce of substances is real and physical, nor is this as “perspicuous” as Kant would like.

Kant surely sees this combined proof as “far surpassing” the contingency proof on its own because physicotheology would seem to remedy the basic problems of that proof. If we can read the connectivity of the world and the harmony of nature as *bound up with* the existences of entities from the beginning, as stemming from the same creator, then just as we can legitimately affirm divine (or near-divine) degrees of wisdom, goodness, skill, etc.. in the author of nature, so we can affirm them of that same entity as a first cause. We thereby better define our necessary entity while avoiding the fallacy of an inverted Cartesian proof. But that is only so provided that Kant can conclusively show a real commerce in nature, i.e. that the interactivity of worldly entities really occurs physically, i.e. *that there really is a world*. And he admits he cannot do this, cannot deny that the Leibnizian and Malebranchean accounts remain legitimate alternatives. Thus although Kant finds edification in the identification of an architect of nature with the necessary cause, he still cannot strictly *demonstrate* it - which was presumably the whole point

omnium substantiarum ab uno necessaria esset coniunctio omnium, qua constituunt unum, commercium substantiarum universale erit per influxum physicum, et mundus totum reale; sin minus, commercium erit sympatheticum (h. e. harmonia absque vero commercio) et mundus nonnisi totum ideale. Mihi quidem, quanquam non demonstratum, tamen abunde etiam aliis ex rationibus probatum est prius.”]

of the combination of proofs in the first place. The paradox of the physicotheological proof is that the general harmony of the world has to be *cognized* via experience, but can never be fully *confirmed or proved* by experience.

It would, by contrast, require its own book to discuss all the intricacies of Kant's wedding of physicotheology with the *ontological* proof, although once again the basic approach is quite simple. "[The first cause of nature] is precisely a God," Kant writes in his earliest attempt (at 1:225-8 in the *General Natural History* of 1755), "because nature, even in chaos, cannot [be] except as regular and orderly processes."⁷⁰ What we should look towards in our physicotheology, that is, is less the contingent order of nature so much as *what possibilities make that order even thinkable*. I limit myself to a few central points, all drawn from the long second section of the *Beweisgrund* (his most detailed account).

Kant insists in *Beweisgrund* II that there are three approaches for proving God's existence from specific effects: via miracles, via the contingency of the natural order, or via "the necessary unity which is perceived in nature and the essential order of things which is in accordance of great rules of perfection, in short what is necessary in the regularity of nature." Kant's third way, that is, begins in nature, but then draws the harmony of nature as experienced back into the harmony of the *necessary* structures given within possibility as such, i.e. it replants our awe before nature into the soil of pure thinkability. The first approach is quickly ruled out and the second has all the problems of basic physicotheology, but the third "leads to a supreme principle not only of this existence, but even of all possibility."⁷¹ To supplement the limitations

⁷⁰ 1:228. "[Die Ursache] ist ein Gott eben deswegen, weil die Natur auch selbst im Chaos nicht anders als regelmäßig und ordentlich Verfahren kann."

⁷¹ 2:116-7: "Alle Arten, das Dasein Gottes aus den Wirkungen desselben zu erkennen, lassen sich auf die drei folgende bringen. Entweder man gelangt zu dieser Erkenntniß durch die Wahrnehmung desjenigen, was die Ordnung der Natur unterbricht und diejenige Macht unmittelbar bezeichnet, welcher die Natur unterworfen ist, diese

of ordinary physicotheology one must recognize the relationships which constitute the harmony of nature (e.g., at 2:94-5, mere circles) as *redoubled* within the realm of mere possibility. The harmony of nature, as much as the things of nature (the material), is first established *within possibility* before it can be realized in some form or other. One thus, as it were, looks *through* the sensory experience towards the immutable natures behind it, and that same move reveals an author:

[B]ecause this [necessary unity of nature] is nevertheless itself grounded in the possibilities of things, there must be a wise entity, without which all these natural things themselves are not possible and in which, as a great ground, the essences of so many natural things arrange themselves into such regular relations. But thereupon it is clear that not only the manner of the connection but also the things themselves are only possible through this being, that is, can exist only as its effects, which first adequately reveals [zu erkennen giebt] the full dependence of nature upon God.⁷²

We thereby read the author of nature - according to this variation of the proof - as not just willing a relational unity upon a set of things already given, but as first crafting the details of that unity *within possibility* (along with crafting the more individual essences). This revised approach does not deny the wisdom that traditional physicotheology would seek to find in the author of nature, but it does insist upon making it secondary, as “wisdom” merely does contingent work upon a set of options already given:

That there are things which have so many beautiful relations is to be attributed to the wise choice of the one who brought them forth for the sake of this harmony, yet that every one of the same, by

Überzeugung wird durch Wunder veranlaßt; oder die zufällige Ordnung der Natur, von der man deutlich einsieht, daß sie auf vielerlei andere Art möglich war, in der gleichwohl große Kunst, Macht und Güte hervorleuchtet, führt auf den göttlichen Urheber, oder drittens die nothwendige Einheit, die in der Natur wahrgenommen wird, und die wesentliche Ordnung der Dinge, welche großen Regeln der Vollkommenheit gemäß ist, kurz das, was in der Regelmäßigkeit der Natur Nothwendiges ist, leitet auf ein oberstes Principium nicht allein dieses Daseins, sondern selbst aller Möglichkeit... Die beide letztere Arten kann man physikotheologische Methoden nennen; denn sie zeigen beide den Weg, aus den Betrachtungen über die Natur zur Erkenntniß Gottes hinauf zu steigen.”

⁷² 2:125-6: “...Weil indessen diese Einheit gleichwohl selbst in den Möglichkeiten der Dinge gegründet ist, so muß ein weises Wesen sein, ohne welches alle diese Naturdinge selbst nicht möglich sind, und in welchem als einem großen Grunde sich die Wesen so mancher Naturdinge zu so regelmäßigen Beziehungen vereinbaren. Alsdann aber ist klar, daß nicht allein die Art der Verbindung, sondern die Dinge selbst nur durch dieses Wesen möglich sind, das ist, nur als Wirkungen von ihm existieren können, welches die völlige Abhängigkeit der Natur von Gott allererst hinreichend zu erkennen giebt.”

way of modest grounds, contains such a broad appropriateness to the varied common accordance, and that thereby an admirable unity in the whole might be preserved, this lies in the possibility of things - and since here the contingent, which must be presupposed by any choice, disappears, so the ground of this unity can indeed be sought in a wise entity, but not by means of its wisdom.⁷³

What matters is not so much the harmony of nature but the “the great and infinitely widespread joint accordance [Zusammenstimmung]” which makes any such harmony *possible*. If the wise author of nature can also be read as the creator of *the very possibility of nature*, as the entity which made the elements in nature mutually meaningful *as possibilities*, God’s mere “wisdom” in the worldly sense ceases to much matter and physicotheology is then more rigorously reseeded on the ground of the ontological proof. The whole project here is to drive the admiration of nature away from the contingent facts and relations, even if willed by an entity of great wisdom, and back to the necessity of the *essences* of nature, and in particular the simple rules (e.g., geometrical laws) which make them fit together.

Once again, the thought is clearly that the strengths of the two proofs are supposed to support one another: the ontological proof is used to lend rigor to the looser physicotheological proof, while the latter adds a visceral common sensibility to the former’s extreme abstraction. We get the right God *and* popular interest, accessibility *and* rigorous metaphysics. Yet if Kant indeed abstracts the essential rules and relations of the world from natural experience, this remains an abstraction, and the move to abstract from given natural facts towards an ideal content is presumably as alien to everyday common sense as beginning from that content in the first place. Kant himself grants, “It is necessary to conclude that wisdom of the world [i.e.

⁷³ 2:103: “Daß Dinge da sind, die so viel schöne Beziehung haben, ist der weisen Wahl desjenigen, der sie um dieser Harmonie willen hervorbrachte, beizumessen, daß aber ein jedes derselben eine so ausgebreitete Schicklichkeit zu vielfältiger Übereinstimmung durch einfache Gründe enthielte, und dadurch eine bewundernswürdige Einheit im Ganzen konnte erhalten werden, liegt selbst in der Möglichkeit der Dinge, und da hier das Zufällige, was bei jeder Wahl voraus gesetzt werden muß, verschwindet, so kann der Grund dieser Einheit zwar in einem weisen Wesen, aber nicht vermittelst seiner Weisheit gesucht werden.”

philosophy] is necessary to [the revised physicotheology], and also that only a higher degree of the same is capable of attaining the specific object with a clearness and conviction which is in accord with the greatness of the truth.”⁷⁴ And that is to admit that the only thinkers for whom an onto-physico-theology of this sort would have any appeal or even comprehensibility are the philosophically world-wise, those who would presumably already approve the ontological proof on its own or, if they opposed it, would not be tricked by appending a prefix from nature.

But if neither combination really results in success, it does show Kant to be something of a mad scientist with regard to this proof, if not also all of the others. In fact the above slightly oversimplifies the situation, as there are moments in the texts quoted above where Kant hints at vating *all three* non-Cartesian proofs into one, using the physicotheological proof as a base. The *New Dilucidations*’ physico-contingency wedding also contains a reference to the “scheme of the divine intellect” (1:414), and *Beweisgrund* II’s physico-ontological wedding mentions God as “an author even of the matter and the basic stuff of all natural things”⁷⁵ as much as of their order and essences. He is remarkably vague in this, however (and I cannot see how a triple proof succeeds where a double proof does not).

The proof’s failure to reach success in Kant’s eyes, or even add anything of great value to the other proofs, may lead the reader to take it as metaphysically rather impotent. But I insist that this is not physicotheology’s fault. As above, this proof is actually successful by Kant’s own lights, only it concludes merely upon a superlatively wise and artful architect rather than any God Kant wants - and if it does not marry well with others, I suggest this rather indicates that

⁷⁴ 2:116: “Zu der dritten Art zu schließen wird nothwendiger Weise Weltweisheit erfordert, und es ist auch einzig und allein ein höherer Grad derselben fähig, mit einer Klarheit und Überzeugung, die der Größe der Wahrheit gemäß ist, zu dem nämlichen Gegenstande zu gelangen.”

⁷⁵ 2:127: “...einen Urheber sogar der Materie und des Grundstoffes aller Naturdinge.”

one cannot simply blend these proofs as one blends teas or tobaccos. The failure, that is to say, may be on the side of Kant and his tradition. The basic misstep in Kant's approach to the physicotheological proof, that is to say, may simply be that he does not take the field of nature - the field of connectivity, of entities as mutually interactive - as a special and legitimate ontological field in its own right. Natural harmony, *as a mode of the entityness of entities*, is not taken seriously - instead the author of nature must always be rooted in some other God, and (equally so) natural harmony must always be rooted in some other mode of being. Despite all his oft-mentioned "respect" for this proof, Kant actually stands quite close to Descartes' much more explicit rejection of final causality as anything philosophically serious.

And yet, as I suggest below, Descartes turns out to be the (unwitting) source of the physicotheological proof as much as he is of all the others.

B. Descartes and Boyle on Final Causes

It is hardly ever a disputed point in scholarship that Descartes declares the philosophical use of final causality to be null and void. On this point I confidently lean on two well-known texts, first from the *Meditations*...

As I carefully weigh these [matters], first it occurs to me that I must not be surprised if I do not understand the reasons for certain things if they are done by God; and I must not therefore be doubtful of his existence insofar as I perchance experience certain other things to be, [but] I do not comprehend why or how they were made by him... And for this reason alone I esteem the whole of that kind of cause, which is wont to be sought for from an end, to have no use in matters of Physics; indeed I believe one cannot investigate the ends of God without recklessness.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ VII 55: "Dum hæc perpendo attentius, occurrit primo non mihi esse mirandum, si quædam a Deo fiant quorum rationes non intelligam; nec de ejus existentia ideo esse dubitandum, quod forte quædam alia esse experiar, quæ quare vel quomodo ab illo facta sint non comprehendo... [A]tque ob hanc unicam rationem totum illud causarum genus, quod a fine peti solet, in rebus Physicis nullum usum habere existimo; non enim absque temeritate me puto posse investigare fines Dei."

...and then even more forcefully from *Principles of Philosophy* I.28, that “It is not the final causes of created things that must be examined, but the efficient”:

Thus in short [because much exceeds our capacity], concerning natural things we will never assume any reasons from an end that either God or nature proposed to themselves regarding [the things'] needing fashioning; for we should not be so arrogant as to believe that we are partners in his deliberations. Considering him as the efficient cause of all things, rather, we shall see whatever conclusion the natural light, which was distributed in us, may show concerning those effects of his which appear to our senses, from those attributes of his which he willed us to have some notice of..⁷⁷

Importantly, however, Descartes' refusal is quite specific: unlike (say) Spinoza, he does not deny that there may be divine final causes, nor argue that the concept is nonsense. For Descartes, God may still perfectly well have ends in mind for creation as a whole and for various individual aspects of it. But we can never *know* - and that always means, perceive clearly and distinctly - what those ends are. Final causality *as such* is not wholly delegitimized, but the claim to *know* any such purposes certainly is. In addition, as the “Conversation with Burman” notes, the search for divine ends is also *theologically dangerous*:

[K]nowledge of the end does not lead us into knowledge of the thing itself, rather its nature lies hidden nevertheless... All the ends of God lie hidden to us, and it is reckless to want to rush at them... But here we err most greatly. We conceive God as if [he were] some great person who proposes [something] to himself and consequently strives [towards it] by such-and-such means, which is surely the greatest indignity to God.⁷⁸

The search for divine ends in fact gives us the wrong sense of God. The moment one conceives of God on the model of a mere artisan, one strays dangerously close to anthropomorphism.

⁷⁷ VIII A 15-16: “Ita denique nullas unquam rationes, circa res naturales, a fine quem Deus aut natura in iis faciendis sibi proposuit, desumemus: quia non tantum nobis debemus arrogare, ut ejus consiliorum participes esse putemus. Sed ipsum ut causam efficientem rerum omnium considerantes, videbimus quidnam ex iis eius attributis, quorum nos nonnullam notitiam voluit habere, circa illos eius effectus qui sensibus nostris apparent, lumen naturale, quod nobis indidit, concludendum esse ostendat...” Also cf *Principles* III.2.

⁷⁸ V 158: “...cognitio finis non inducit nos in cognitionem ipsius rei, sed ejus natura nihilominus latet... Omnes Dei fines nos latent, et temerarium est in eos involare velle... Sed nos hic maxime erramus. Concipimus Deum tanquam magnum aliquem hominem, qui hoc sibi proponit, et eo his et his mediis tendit, quod certe Deo maxime indignum.”

Descartes therefore sees the field of final causality as scientifically useless, unattainable, and tending towards blasphemy,⁷⁹ which would seem to rule out any place for a physicotheology. And yet the reader will note that the physicotheological proof, as Kant describes it, does not deploy terms like “final cause” or “purpose”: its terms of art much more often tend to be “harmony,” “connectivity,” “joint attunement,” “commerce,” and the like. Those are not the same: my viewing entities as seemingly “meant” to work together, my seeing a “purposiveness,” even my inferring a reasonably skilled artisan for these items, is not yet to say that I *know* the ultimate purpose of their existence or their interactivity nor peer into the aims of the artisan. We thereby find a small but evident gap between the *final causality* (purpose) of nature and the *harmony* (purposiveness) of nature. If Descartes rejects the former, does he reject the latter? Given that the language of “harmony” at least does not involve the same epistemic leaps - the claim to be a “partner in God’s deliberations” - is it possible that there is room for, or even the presence of, a physicotheological proof in Descartes?

As a point of transition, I point to Robert Boyle. Boyle is most well-known now, beyond his work in chemistry, as the endower of the Boyle Lectures for natural theology (which directly produced important work by Samuel Clarke, William Derham, and others, and indirectly inspired the entire field of physicotheology up to and beyond Kant). But Boyle himself, through his humble but highly clever *Disquisition About the Final Causes of Natural Things* (1688), not only “endowed” this tradition but was himself one of its first writers.⁸⁰ The actual terminology of “the

⁷⁹ Alison Simmons has a much more thorough account of what Descartes does and doesn’t reject in final causality at 63ff in her “Sensible Ends: Latent Teleology in Descartes’ Account of Sensation”; what she means when she says that Descartes accepts a kind of “functional analysis” (73) is a bit vague, but should become clearer in my subsequent discussions via Boyle.

⁸⁰ It is crucial to take the understanding of final causality (purposiveness) at work in modern philosophy as something fundamentally *new*. The concept is not at all a survival simply carried over from Aristotle and scholasticism into a new context; rather, within that context the terms involved are radically transformed. As

magnificent harmony of the universe, and the great design and infinite goodness of the Architect”⁸¹ may stem more from (say) Locke’s *Essay*, published the following year, but the concepts behind that later language find clearer expression in Boyle. And this entire text is written *in conversation with Descartes* - it intends to drag a physicotheology out of the depths of Cartesian thought whether Descartes wants it there or not. Boyle is not the first to present a theistic proof from “final causes,” but he is still thereby the first to produce one in the (broad) Cartesian tradition.⁸² It is by way of this text, extended through Boyle’s lineage (Nieuwentyt, Derham...), that Kant’s thinking finds root in Descartes one last time.

Boyle’s *Disquisition*, albeit published in 1688, has far earlier origins, ultimately going back nearly thirty years to a detailed study of Descartes’ works done alongside his one-time assistant, Robert Hooke.⁸³ The book’s objective is to work out what aspects of final causality can be reconstituted in the context of modern natural philosophy. His chosen adversaries are the Epicureans (basically stand-ins for atheists of all sorts) and Descartes; the former are almost immediately dismissed, but the latter’s judgment (“...that God being an Omniscient Agent, 'tis

Margaret Osler puts it, “[F]inal causes did not disappear in the new natural philosophy of the seventeenth century... [Rather,] The reinterpretation of final causes in seventeenth-century natural philosophy embodied a transformation in the concept of nature...” (“From Immanent Natures to Nature as Artifice,” 402-3) To be sure, Lawrence Carlin (“Boyle’s teleological mechanism”) rightly points out that that scholasticism never really embraced the “immanent teleology” Osler associates with it, and certainly neither did Boyle - but for all that I think he is premature to conclude that “Boyle endorsed final causes in *precisely* the same way that these Scholastics endorsed them, and therefore there was no transition from medieval to modern on this score.” (58) For Boyle and the tradition that follows him begin precisely by *cutting off* grander maneuvers “ex gubernatione rerum” and instead focus upon minute scientific findings, the *uses* of precise natural details within a precise context, always crowding up against the study of efficient causes.

⁸¹ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Bk. 3 Ch. 6 §12, 483.

⁸² As above, and although I cannot argue for the point in depth, one should not locate any legitimate precedent for what Boyle and his descendents are doing in, say, Thomas Aquinas’ fifth way, as the understanding of the “nature” to be “teleologically” interpreted is radically different. Given how much “nature” has changed, I would rather suggest that it is Boyle (or at least Gassendi - see below) who properly poses the first proof of exactly this kind.

⁸³ Edward Davis, one of the editors of Boyle’s *Works*, has an insightful piece (“‘Parcere nominibus’”) on the circumstances surrounding the *Disquisition*, the motivations for its strategy, and Boyle’s relations to Hooke, More, and Descartes.

rash and presumptuous for men to think that they know, or can investigate, what Ends he propos'd to himself in his Actings about his Creatures...")⁸⁴ serves as a point of reference for Boyle's entire book. If Boyle intends Descartes to be an "adversary," though, this is not to say that he sees himself in deep *disagreement* with him.⁸⁵ At moments he is strikingly Cartesian. The very last proposition of Boyle's book, which could almost be a direct quotation from the supposed adversary, reads, "*That the Naturalist should not suffer the Search or the Discovery of a Final Cause of Nature's Works, to make him Undervalue or Neglect the studious Indagation of their Efficient Causes.*"⁸⁶ That is, whatever the value of the final, efficient causality still takes scientific priority. Going still further in an astonishing passage, Boyle repeats the same point using an analogy that would later be abused ad nauseum by the natural theological tradition to come:

...the *English Countryman*, that knows no more of a Watch than that 'twas made to shew the Hour of the Day, does very little understand the Nature of It. And whereas the two Scopes, that Men are wont to Aim at in the Study of Physicks, are to Understand, *how* and after what manner Nature Produces the *Phenomenon* we Contemplate; and, in case it be Imitable by Us, *how* We may, if Occasion require, Produce the Like Effect, or come as Near it as may be: These Ends cannot be attained by the bare Knowledge of the Final Causes of Things nor of the General Efficient. But to Answer those Aims, we must know the Particular Efficients, and the Manner and PrOgress of their Operating, and what Dispositions they either Find or Produce in the Matter they work upon: as, He that would thoroughly understand the Nature of a Watch, must not rest satisfied with knowing in General, that a Man Made it, and that he Made it for such uses; but he must Particularly know, of what Materials, the Spring, the Wheels, the String or Chain, and the Ballance, are made: He must know the Number of the Wheels, their Bigness, their Shape, their Situation and Connexion in the Engine, and after what manner One Part Moves the Other in the whole *Series* of Motions, from the Expansive Endeavour of the *Spring*, to the Motion of the *Index* that Points at the Hours. And much more must a Mechanician know this, if he means to be able to

⁸⁴ *Works* Vol. 11, 85-6. This is, of course, a close paraphrase of *Principles* I.28, quoted directly in Boyle's "Preface."

⁸⁵ As Shanahan usefully points out, Boyle is choosing "adversaries" who are otherwise rather close to him: "Despite the differences between Epicureans, Cartesians, and Boyle himself, they all represent "sects" of one fundamental approach to nature... Aristotelians, on the other hand, could be expected to assent to Boyle's general claims about final causes, but to do so on grounds that he finds unacceptable. Despite their common endorsement of final causality in nature, there is nonetheless a greater divide between Boyle and the Aristotelians than between him and the other sects of mechanical philosophy..." ("Teleological Reasoning..." 179) Boyle's problem, that is to say, is not to defend Aristotelianism, but to defend a final causality *within* mechanical philosophy.

⁸⁶ *Works* 11, 149.

Make a Watch Himself, or Give sufficient Instructions to Another Man, that is more Handy, to do it for him. In short, the Neglect of *Efficient Causes* would render Physiology useless...⁸⁷

Boyle is not only one of the first to deploy the famous analogy of watch and watchmaker,⁸⁸ but here he actually *reverses* it: he uses it to show that knowledge of the mere purpose of something is tantamount to no knowledge that all, and that physics and associated sciences properly speaking must be the investigation of efficient rather than final causes. A Descartes could not fail to applaud the sentiment, nor the case made for it. I point out all of the above to emphasize that one must read Boyle not as simply *opposing* Descartes (for whom he has “great esteem”),⁸⁹ but as *reinterpreting* him for his own purposes. For Boyle one need not *supplant* efficient causality, only *supplement* it with something else.

Boyle thus tries to render physicotheological approach a logical extension of *what Descartes was already doing*, starting with an explicit nod to the penultimate paragraph of “Meditation III” and the *causa sui* discussion in “Replies I”:

I know the *Cartesians* say, That their Master has demonstrated the Existence of a God, by the Innate Idea that Men have of a Being infinitely perfect; who left it upon the mind of Man, as the mark of an *Artist imprest upon his Work*: And also that they ascribe to God, the having made Matter out of nothing, and alone put it into Motion; which sufficiently argue the Immensity of his Power. But, *tho'* I would by no means weaken the Argument, drawn from the *Inbred Notion* of God, since I know, that divers Learned Men have Acquiesc'd in it; *yet*, on the other side, I see not, why we may not reasonably think, that God, who, as themselves confess, has been pleas'd to take care, Men should acknowledge Him, may also have provided for the securing of a Truth of so great Consequence, by stamping Characters, or leaving Impresses, that Men may know his Wisdom and Goodness by, as well *without*, upon the *World*, as *within*, upon the *Mind*.⁹⁰

If God set a mark upon the thinking I in the form of an infinite idea which makes all thought possible, Boyle asks, why would God not have set analogous marks upon *worldly* entities, marks

⁸⁷ Ibid 150.

⁸⁸ An analogy also used, e.g., on p.91.

⁸⁹ Ibid 94.

⁹⁰ Ibid 94-5.

which - precisely by giving things “uses,” i.e. capacities for interaction - would make a *world* as such possible for the first time? This would render God not just powerful but also *wise*:

The bare Speculation of the Fabrick of the World, without considering any part of it as destined to certain (or determinate) Uses, may still leave Men unconvinc'd, that there is any Intelligent, Wise, and Provident Author and Disposer of Things... the *Cartesian* way of considering the World, is very proper indeed to shew the Greatness of God's Power, but not, like the way I plead for, to manifest that of his Wisdom and Beneficence.⁹¹

Boyle is proposing, that is, an *additional ontological field* - another way of understanding how entities *are* - beyond Descartes' usual options (thinking and causality), and thereby an additional ontotheology.⁹² Yet that is not, as he insists above, a field of *scientific certainty*. If Boyle is willing to speculate on the ends of various elements in nature, he is also quite cautious about hastily jumping to conclusions. Just because we find something suited to some particular use does not allow us to conclude it was intended for that use and for no other, when other purposes may have been possible. We do not and even cannot understand the whole situation in such cases, and such cases are common. We may find “hints” from such uses at most, and any further claim is conjecture.⁹³ Such cautions in hand, Boyle gets around Descartes' seemingly exceptionless rejection of all final causes by way of a distinction (albeit initially less than clear) between seeing *a use* for a thing - and seeing that use *as intended* - versus claiming to *know* the uses and intentions for something in a way that amounts to claiming to know the *ultimate ends* for everything. Boyle writes:

[W]hereas Monsieur *Des-Cartes* objects, that 'tis a Presumption for Man, to pretend to be able to investigate the Ends, that the Omniscient God propos'd to himself in the making of his Creatures; I consider by way of Answer, That there are two very differing ways, wherein a Man may pretend to know the Ends of God in his visible Works: For, he may either pretend to know only *some* of God's Ends, in some of his Works; or, he may pretend to know *all* his Ends. He that arrogates to

⁹¹ Ibid 95.

⁹² Needless to say, this is exactly the field that Kant will speak about in terms of natural harmony, commerce, connectivity, and so on.

⁹³ Cf *Works* 11 149.

himself, to discover God's Ends in this *latter* sense; will scarce be excus'd from a high Presumption, and no less a Folly, from the reason lately intimated in the *Cartesian* Objection. But to pretend to know God's Ends in the *former* sense, is not a *Presumption*, but rather, to take notice of them is a *Duty*.⁹⁴

But Boyle's point is not really about the number of ends known: indeed, it is not considerably less bold to claim to know only one (or a few) of God's ends as to know all of them (as either way one is trying to peek into the divine mind). This is not quite what he is saying. Boyle may grant that a natural entity has one or more uses in some way *designed in*, but will never go so far as to claim that anything is *the* proper use or represents any ultimate end, and shares Descartes' lack of patience with theosophers who do. Boyle takes it as undeniable, for example, that the human eye is "exquisitely fitted" for human sight, even as he also grants that God may have put other uses in it and perhaps a purpose which we will never fathom: "Tis not to be deny'd that he may have more uses for [the eye] than one, and perhaps such uses as we cannot divine; but this hinders not, but that among its several uses, this, to which we see it so admirably adapted, should be thought one." Even if we must not presume to know God's plans, we can still (as it were) read a kind of designedness off of the obvious functions. Even if an entity may have other functions we do not see and even though we can make no claim about *why* it may have been set up like it is, the thing *is* set up, and set up in just such-and-such a way,: "...tho' [the things of nature] may have been design'd for *other*, and perhaps higher Uses; yet they *were* design'd for *this* Use."⁹⁵

Boyle rests his case with the situation of an ignoramus stumbling upon a complex scientific instrument:

...Suppose that a Country Man, being in a clear day brought into the Garden of some famous Mathematician, should see there, one of those curious Gnomonick Instruments, that show at once, the *place* of the *Sun* in the *Zodiack*, his *Declination* from the *Aequator*, the *Day of the Month*, the *Length of the Day*, &c. It would indeed be presumption in him, being unacquainted both with the

⁹⁴ Ibid 89.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

Mathematical Disciplines, and the several Intentions of the Artist, to pretend or think himself able, to discover all the Ends, for which so Curious and Elaborate a Piece was framed. But when he sees it furnished with a Stile, with Horary Lines and Numbers, and in short, with all the Requisites of a Sun *Dial*, and manifestly perceives the Shadow to mark from time to time, the Hour of the Day; t'would be no more a Presumption than an Error in him to conclude, that (whatever other Uses the Instrument is fit, or was design'd for) it is a Sun-*Dial*, that was meant to shew the Hour of the Day.⁹⁶

Our baffled Country Man does not *know* why this object was created, nor what any of its other functions are, nor which are more important. But he is able to *recognize* the one function which is (to him) unmistakable, namely telling the time of the day, and thereby that the tool was at least partly made - who knows why - for that purpose. We are, Boyle implies, in exactly the same situation with regard to a thing of nature: as ignorant as we are we may still recognize a few functions, and thereby an *intendedness* behind those functions, without ever knowing the final purpose or even having anything past bare surface appreciation. Yet that is all we require to infer a wise architect.

But if Boyle were only attempting to widen Cartesianism and escape Descartes' worries by limiting what sorts of "final causes" we may discover, and what we may infer from them, then of course Descartes in fact receives and responds to a tonally similar objection from *Gassendi* - nevertheless, Boyle proves himself far more clever than his predecessor. Gassendi, like Boyle, takes issue with the rejection of final cause because it endangers "the principal argument through which divine wisdom, providence, and even existence can be established by the natural light"⁹⁷ and abandons praise of the divine "artisan" (*opifex*). If most of Gassendi's objections do not go very deep and amount to pointing out the usefulness of this proof and the

⁹⁶ Ibid 90.

⁹⁷ VII 309: "...verendum profecto ne praecipuum argumentum rejicias, quo divina sapientia, providentia, potentia, atque adeo existentia lumine naturae stabiliri potest. Quippe, ut mundum universum, ut caelum & alias ejus praecipuas partes praeteream, undenam aut quomodo melius argumentari valeas, quam ex usu partium in plantis, in animalibus, in hominibus, in teipsa (aut corpore tuo) quae similitudinem Dei geris?"

limitations of physics, he does briefly consider a better argument, and one with a clear affinity to Boyle's distinction. It is written out in a short paragraph of two sentences:

You say, "it is recklessness to investigate the ends of God." But while this could be true if the ends understood were any which God himself wanted hidden, or rather prohibited investigation, yet certainly not if they are any which he as it were set in the open, and which become clear without much labor, and otherwise are of those kind to have great praise be referred to God himself as author.⁹⁸

One can easily read this passage, underdeveloped as it is, as the kernel from which Boyle's distinction (and much of the *Disquisition*) originally springs.⁹⁹ Yet Descartes still crushes the objection as stated, writing: "Nor can one pretend that some of God's ends are more in the open than others; indeed, all [of them] are hidden in the inscrutable abyss of his wisdom in the same way."¹⁰⁰ That is, Descartes insists upon taking "ends" in the specific sense of *purposes*, i.e. the reasons for actions which agents propose to themselves; thus, excluding the special case of revelation,¹⁰¹ all of God's purposes should remain inscrutable. Gassendi fails to convince, that is, insofar he does not make a sufficient distinction within the concept of final cause itself. What is quite remarkable in the exact wording of Boyle's reply to Descartes' reply, then, is that Boyle overtly makes the distinction that Gassendi did not. Boyle does not challenge Descartes directly so much as gradually shift the terms of the debate:

And indeed I can by no means assent to that Assertion of Mr. Des-Cartes, That it cannot be said, that some of **Gods Ends** (in his Corporeal Works) are more manifest than Others; but that all of them lie equally hid in the Abyss of the Divine Wisdom: since there are many of his Creatures,

⁹⁸ VII 310: "Dicis *temeritatem esse investigare fines Dei*. Sed, cum id possit esse verum, si intelligantur fines quos ipse Deus occultos voluit aut investigare prohibuit, non profecto tamen, si illi quos quasi in propatulo posuit, quique non multo labore innotescunt, ac sunt aliunde hujusmodi ut laus magna ad ipsum Deum, tanquam authorem, referatur."

⁹⁹ Boyle was certainly well aware of this exchange: in the "Preface" he explicitly mentions Gassendi as an Epicurean who nevertheless defends final causality, and Descartes' reply is directly quoted in the body of the text. Boyle seems to have gone to great pains to understand Descartes' position, so that the entire first Section of the *Disquisition* can be read as trying to escape it in a way that Gassendi cannot. See *Works* vol. 11, p. 81 and 90 respectively.

¹⁰⁰ VII 375: "Nec fingi potest aliquos Dei fines, magis quam alios, in propatulo esse; omnes enim in imperscrutabili ejus sapientiae abyso sunt eodem modo reconditi." I discuss more of Descartes' "Reply" below.

¹⁰¹ On this point, see again the "Conversation with Berman" (V 158).

some of whose **Uses** are so manifest and obvious, that the generality of Mankind, both Philosophers and Plebeians, have in all Ages, and almost in all Countries, **taken Notice of**, and **Acknowledg'd** them. And as to what he adds, (by which he seems to intimate the motive that led him to make the foremention'd Assertion,) That in Physicks, all things ought to be made out by certain and solid Reasons... I see not why the **admitting**, that the Author of Things design'd some of his Works for these or those **Uses**, amongst others, may not consist with the Physical Accounts of making of those things...¹⁰²

In the very same sentence Boyle switches the topic from a question from *knowing God's ends* - i.e. God's purposes, i.e. what Descartes is worried about - to a question about the *notice and acknowledgement of uses* which have been designed into nature, *without* claims to knowledge. Boyle seems to find a space outside "certain and solid Reasons" where a limited kind of purposiveness can manifest without raising Cartesian ire.

But if Boyle successfully finds a place within Descartes where a limited physicotheology might be acceptable, what is still more surprising is that in a few places Descartes can even be read to *accept* Boyle's point if not to grant him more than he wants. In the same passage in "Replies V" Descartes writes to Gassendi...

Everything you next allege on behalf of final cause should be referred to the efficient; thus it is suitable that God be revered as effector by reason of the use of the parts in plants, in animals, etc., and to recognize and glorify the artisan by reason of inspection of [his] works, but not to divine by what end [God] fashions anything. *And although in Ethics, where often it is right to use conjectures, it may sometimes be pious to consider what end we can conjecture God proposed to himself in ruling the universe*, in Physics, where everything needs to rest upon the firmest grounds, certainly it is inept.¹⁰³ [my emphasis]

Boyle has already granted the impotence of final causality in physics; he also would not likely dispute that the production of natural elements for various uses is a matter of efficient causality.

What Descartes gives up is that God may indeed be "revered" and "glorified" as an artisan due to

¹⁰² Ibid 90.

¹⁰³ VII 374-5: "Quaecunque deinde affers pro causa finali, ad efficientem sunt referenda; ita ex usu partium in plantis, in animalibus &c., effectorem Deum mirari & ex inspectione operum cognoscere ac glorificare opificem, par est, non autem quo fine quidque fecerit divinare. Ac quamvis in Ethicis, ubi saepe conjecturis uti licet, aliquando sit pium considerare quem finem conjicere possimus Deum sibi in regendo universo proposuisse, certe in Physicis, ubi omnia firmissimis rationibus niti debent, est ineptum."

the greatness of his works, in particular the uses of natural things, and that outside of the field of physics, in “Ethics,” it is even *pious* to put God’s plans under conjecture (if not to claim to know them). Elsewhere, in other telling disclaimers, Descartes even repeats and magnifies this particular admission about “Ethics”:

And although it may be true in respect to us humans, as it would be in Ethics, that all things are made for the glory of God - as certainly God is to be praised by us due to all his works - and that the Sun is made for us to be illuminated - as we experience ourselves illuminated by the Sun...¹⁰⁴

Although indeed in Ethics it may be pious to say that all things are made by God because of us, in order of course that we be driven that much more to giving him thanks, and inflamed with love for him; and although likewise in [the ethical] sense it may be true, insofar as it is certain that we can make use of all things in some way, at least up to exercising our character regarding [things] to be contemplated, and looking up to God for the sake of his admirable works...¹⁰⁵

The constant use of “*quamvis*” in these passages shows that Descartes is making admissions, and does not want to set his emphasis on them. But what admissions they are. Not only does Descartes grant that there is an entirely different way of reading the world, a “human” or “ethical” point of view where it is downright pious to recognize the uses of various natural entities and to conjecture about God’s purposes - not only that, but in this sense it can even be true that all things were made *for our sake* (that we may “use” all things), and additionally made *for the glory of God*.

These admissions grant Boyle everything he wants. He only calls for a space for the mere contemplation of the functions of natural entities with regard to their being-purposive, devoid of any full-blooded epistemic claims, and in the texts I quote (some of which Boyle certainly read)

¹⁰⁴ “To Hyperaspistes,” August 1641, in III 431: “Et quamvis verum sit, respiciendo ad nos homines, vt sit in Ethicis, omnia ad Dei gloriam facta esse, quia nempe Deus propter omnia opera sua est a nobis laudandus, Solemque ad nos illuminandos factum esse, quia experimur nos a Sole illuminari...”

¹⁰⁵ *Principles* III.3, in VIII 81: “Quamvis enim in Ethicis sit pium dicere, omnia a Deo propter nos facta esse, ut nempe tanto magis ad agendas ei gratias impellamur, eiusque amore incendamur; ac quamvis etiam suo sensu sit verum, quatenus scilicet rebus omnibus uti possumus aliquo modo, saltem ad ingenium nostrum in iis considerandis exercendum, Deumque ob admiranda eius opera suspiciendum...”

Descartes quietly and grudgingly gives him this and more.¹⁰⁶ (Boyle, like Descartes, is typically annoyed with “[those] who teach, that God hath no other End in making the World, but that of being prais’d by Men”¹⁰⁷ as well as those who judge “as if there were no Creature in the world that was not solely, or at least chiefly, design’d for the Service or Benefit of Man”¹⁰⁸; thus he may even have taken some of these “ethical” admissions to be going too far.) Thus if Boyle lays the foundations for an ontology of natural harmony and the tradition of physicotheology that follows him (up to Kant), it is only because Descartes - in those small moments of qualification - provided some first materials.

C. “...true in respect to us humans...”

Nevertheless, we ought to fully appreciate just how secondary and unsteady this ontology finally ends up being.

If one asks how it is even possible that Descartes can grant the “ethical” view that he does (given the more typical focus of his philosophy), this is actually rather easily explained with attention to what Descartes calls sensation or passive thought, the only mode of thinking that is oriented towards usefulness.¹⁰⁹ The *Meditations* famously and mistakenly begin by accusing the

¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, it is important not to read final causality into just any context in which Descartes talks about “uses” or “functions,” e.g. as in *Discourse V*. For a fuller discussion of the senses of these terms as Descartes uses them, see Distelzweig, “The Use of *Usus* and the Function of *Functio*,” 379ff.

¹⁰⁷ *Works* vol. 11, 92.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid* 86.

¹⁰⁹ Whence Alison Simmons’ point that Descartes’ use of teleology (and limited legitimization of it) is centered around the mind-body union and sensation: “As Descartes sees it, sensations arise not only *from* but also *for* the mind-body union. Human beings have an interest in their own continued survival as mind-body unions... And it is only in this teleological context that it makes sense for Descartes to speak, as he often does, of the “health” and “harm” of the body... The embodied mind must therefore dedicate most of its cognitive labor to monitoring and protecting the body.” (“Sensible Ends,” 55) Distelzweig (“Use of *Usus*,” 388ff) helpfully corrects some of Simmons’ overextensions of her case into physiology, but it seems to me that her broader point remains correct.

sensory faculty of being misleading and false - but in fact the fault is ours. When I try to directly use sensations as a direct source of knowledge it is I myself who am “perverting the order of nature,” as this is not how they are supposed to be used. Instead (my emphasis), “[the perceptions of the senses] are given by nature properly only so far that [things] get signified to the mind which are *advantageous or disadvantageous to the composite of which [the mind] is a part*, and to that extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct...”¹¹⁰ Years later this same point, that sensation is properly about informing the mind of the *utility* of entities, is repeated and further broadened in application to the “passions”:

I remark, in addition, that the objects which move the senses do not excite diverse passions in us by reason of all the diversities which are in them, but only by reason of the diverse fashions in which they can *harm or profit us*, or at least *be important in general*; and that the use of all the passions consists in this alone, that they dispose the soul to will the things which nature deems to be useful to us, and to persist in this volition...¹¹¹ [*my emphasis*]

The “harm,” “profit,” and “usefulness” of things is not meant to apply only narrowly, i.e. only to things which pose an immediate threat or improvement to my body. (“Wonder,” for example, does no such thing, and some of the other passions described are so distant from immediate personal relevance that it would be a chore to trace them back to it.)¹¹² Objects of passion really need only “be important in general,” I need only take some *interest* in them; thus Descartes takes passions generally to disclose the *function* of things more rather than their knowable qualities.

The possibility of any legitimate teleological orientation in Descartes’ thought, such as it is, is

¹¹⁰ From “Meditation VI”, AT VII 83: “...nempe sensuum perceptionibus, quae proprie tantum a natura datae sunt ad menti significandum quaenam composito, cujus pars est, commoda sint vel incommoda, & eatenus sunt satis clarae & distinctae...”

¹¹¹ From *The Passions of the Soul*, AT XI 372: “Je remarque, outre cela, que les objets qui meuvent les sens, n'excitent pas en nous diverses passions à raison de toutes les diversitez qui sont en eux, mais seulement à raison des diverses façons qu'ils nous peuvent nuire ou profiter, ou bien en général estre importants; & que l'usage de toutes les passions consiste en cela seul, qu'elles disposent l'ame à vouloir les choses que la nature dicte nous estre utiles, & à persister en cette volonté...”

¹¹² On wonder, esteem, and contempt, cf XI 373, 380-6, and 443-5.

based in sensation and passive thinking.¹¹³ And the fact that this relation was not seized upon and thought through more fully, by Boyle or really by anyone, represents something of a missed opportunity in the history of philosophy.

Yet precisely by locating teleology within a perfectly legitimate mode of thinking, at the same time Descartes totally divorces that teleology from *the things themselves*, the entities. If there is room enough in Descartes to “glorify” the artisan of nature, even to the point that a physicotheological proof may become legitimate, still the legitimate use of teleology is totally limited to *ourselves*, to our own feelings, because limited to the modes of thinking which are centrally *about* ourselves. There is no way to locate the purposiveness of nature *within* the entities in any secure way: even the young Kant, who expressly intends to do this, has no way to eliminate the threat of a Malebranche or a Leibniz.¹¹⁴ The ontology of “usefulness” (or however we wish to describe it) has no self-standing status: it is a late addition to a field already occupied

¹¹³ Yet passive thinking, as Descartes insists, is in turn based in the mind-body union (“Meditation VI” at AT VII 72 and 81; various Letters at III 479, V 402); indeed, one only “learns to conceive” this union through sensation and the use of everyday life (“to Elizabeth,” III 691-2). Natural teleology and the mind-body unity are thus intertwined from the beginning. Thus it is rather extraordinary that in his attempt to catch Descartes in making *hidden appeals* to teleology Boyle (at *Works* Vol. 11, 88) spends almost all his effort on the premise of the constant quantity of motion found in *Principles* II.36 (AT VIII 61-2), while a moment later he mentions the far stronger case of the union of mind and body as a mere aside (“...according to the Opinion of most of the *Cartesians* themselves, [God] does daily create multitudes of Rational Souls, to unite them to Human Bodies... [T]hese newly created substances, are, according to *Des-Cartes*, endow'd with a power, to determine and regulate the motions of the Spirits and the [pineal gland]; which are things clearly Corporeal...”). It is rather shocking that Boyle says nothing more on the topic, given how perfectly suited it is to his aims. By Descartes’ own account (“Replies VI,” VII 445), the human being is a case where God himself must have stepped in to join (and must later separate) the substances in question into an “ens per se” (cf the letters to Regius at AT III 460-1 and 492-3), where the relation is not comparable to that between bodies (“Replies V,” VII 390) but is rather totally bespoke. We do not really *understand* the union, although he equally insists that experience is enough to make it totally obvious as a *fact* (III 693; also of the “Conversations with Burman,” V 163). That is, Boyle here has a case where Descartes admits two natural entities so perfectly crafted in their function as to become one, with the evidence of God’s handiwork all over them (metaphysically speaking) and an inability on our part to understand the details of how it works - yet he moves past it in the space of a few lines, without further consideration. (On the topic of passive thinking and the mind-body union in Descartes more generally I can also now point the reader to Jean-Luc Marion’s dense but excellent *On Descartes’ Passive Thought*.)

¹¹⁴ At least not before the development of his critical conceptions of teleology; see the relevant discussions in my Chapter VI.

by thinking and causality, and parasitic upon them. Even Boyle shows no particular intention to bring this ontology to a more full-fledged position. And while Boyle is happy to merely point out our “duty” to “acknowledge” a wise world-author, the two thinkers more interested in strict proofs are thoroughly cagey on the use of teleology within such arguments: Descartes, whatever his admissions, develops no explicit theistic proof on its basis, and Kant, even if he repeatedly praises the physicotheological proof, effectively disallows it any legitimate ability to stand on its own.

And yet if the topic of physicotheology strikes both Descartes and Kant as (in different respects) uncertain and obscure, as I hinted at above this may be the fault of the thinkers rather than of the ontotheology in question. If Kant never lets the proof stand on its own, instead preferring to marry it to other proofs (as something like teleological arm candy), this may be because he does not take “natural harmony,” “purposiveness,” and so forth seriously *as an ontological field*, as a way for entities to be. And it is not just him and Descartes: indeed, the entire tradition fails to really develop, clarify, or master the *concepts* that any such proof had to base itself in. That the terms describing the proof’s associated mode of being - purposiveness, final causality, connectivity, commerce, and still more - remain basically vague, more colorful and picturesque than actually descriptive, is evidence of this. The God associated with this proof stands as equally vague, never being characterized more deeply than via analogy with a human craftsman. If consideration of the previous proofs has shown that the God of each proof (excepting the special case of the Cartesian) has a relationship to a particular ontological field - a particular sort of ontotheology - then the physicotheological proof shows that this need not imply

that the proponents of an argument will have any fundamental understanding of the field, the God, or the relationship involved.¹¹⁵

For present purposes the above will have to suffice. As with the last two proofs we find a functioning ontotheology and an origin in Descartes, yet the physicotheological is clearly the runt among them. If Kant does with it what he can in his 1763 account, still it has historically never been given the conceptual-developmental treatment granted to the others. For the rest, the historian can only speculate. What if its mode of being (“usefulness,” etc.) had been reassociated with sensation and passion as foundational modes of thinking, and those common phenomena driven in turn back to still more essential roots (if there be any)? Has this proof ever been fully worked out? To borrow Kant’s phrase, what exactly does “experience” so immediately “teach,” if experience is shot through with teleology?

The last three Chapters together constitute a reasonably full review of the third section of the *Beweisgrund* and the tradition it draws upon. The goals of the discussion, hopefully reached with a bit of success, have been to provide a fresh glance at these proofs, to provide a terminological basis for further work, to show Kant’s early attempt at a systematic presentation, to offer some initial sketches as to the structures and key issues at work in each proof, and to suggest some overall hints that can be followed up on later.

If the thinkers in these proofs’ golden age may have wanted to see them as universally available to any rational being at any time, by now one should get the sense that these proofs did

¹¹⁵ But the same applies to the *opponents*. If developments (e.g.) in biology over the last century and a half have made old-fashioned physicotheology wearisome, and surely with much justification, still perhaps we have not done away with the phenomena which first gave rise to that culture. That is to say, we still struggle with the same basic Cartesian paradoxes involving “passive thinking,” the mind-body union, and the world as a field of use.

not manifest themselves out of nowhere (not for Kant and his tradition, nor for us). In some way, for reasons yet to become clear, these proofs - *in the specific forms named above* - in fact came into focus with one particular event, that event being Descartes and the distinctive turns that philosophy took during his era. Of course other arguments for God's "being" were around before that, some of which I discussed in the previous Chapter, and I do not intend to dismiss the efforts of Avicenna, Anselm, and all the rest. But they are also beyond my topic. Those proofs, as I argued, do not play the same *role*, and if we talk about them today it is all too typically by retranslating them into something else. *The* proofs, those proofs which Kant later named and systematized and which still get taught in first year philosophy classes, are the ones presently at issue. *The* proofs have a *history*, and it is the history of Cartesian thought in the broad sense, and that tradition of *the* proofs runs up to us. Kant's special role in the tradition, and his connection to Descartes, is presumed to lie in his catching the *best glimpse* at where that tradition is rooted. Our job is to, so to speak, follow his line of sight.

A few of the more prominent hints may be summed up. First, it should be clear that the proofs for the existence of God, save one major exception, are based in Cartesian understandings of *the being of entities* - i.e., of various ways in which it is possible to be. The ontological proof is based in being as possibility or thinkability; the contingency in being as being-caused, as existing with a "why"; the physicotheological in being as something like purposive being-useful, (a mode of being which Descartes himself admittedly never developed). Second, that the God at issue in most of these proofs has a distinctive relation to these modes of being - often both "in" and "out" of them at the same time - indicates that Heidegger's notion of "ontotheology" will prove itself relevant in some form. Third, many of the proofs (perhaps even the indeterminate

physicotheological one) center around questions of *need or necessity*. And that is true most of all in the proof which turns out to be the most unusual, namely the Cartesian: that proof turns out to be, on analysis and by way of Descartes' and Leibniz' later formulations, a characterization of God as necessary entity pure and simple.

Many of these concepts, especially those of “need,” remain rather unexplained. But as we bid the text farewell, I point out that the very last line of the *Beweisgrund* offers a remarkable and perhaps unknowing foreshadowing of where Kant (and we with him) will soon go. It reads: “It is thoroughly necessary that one convince oneself of the existence of God; but it is not quite so necessary that one demonstrate it.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ 2:163: “Es ist durchaus nöthig, daß man sich vom Dasein Gottes überzeuge; es ist aber nicht eben so nöthig, daß man es demonstrire.”

CHAPTER V. The Moral Proof and Rational Faith

The earliest mention of the moral proof that I have found in Kant is Fragment 4253, written as a note in the “Prolegomena” to Baumgarten’s “Theologia Naturalis”; Adickes dates it somewhere between 1769 and 1771. The whole note, so far as I am aware, is the only full collection of all five theistic proofs in Kant’s work, and it is crucial to understanding Kant’s changing conception of rational theology. I present it in full:

a. The proof: 1. that all possibility must be considered as a determination of the highest reality and presupposes such an entity, bases itself upon this - because *omnimoda determinatio* [determination in all ways] is only possible through the *omnitudinem metaphysicam* [metaphysical totality], in which, however, the negative predicates presuppose the *realia* [realities]; and since every *ens limitatum* [limited entity] is only possible through the presupposition of a reality, everything presupposes a *realissimum* [most real]; but this is the necessary subordination of concepts according to the law of human understanding.

2. The absolute necessity of a thing is a boundary concept. It cannot be perceived by means of a contradiction. That which contains the material for all possibility is the real ground of the same and is *realiter* [really] necessary.

In itself the necessity of a perfect entity is perceived no better than an imperfect one.

b. The proof *a contingentia* [from contingency] infers from concepts: namely, that the restricted cannot be necessary. Thus it must presuppose necessity in the *realissimo* [most real]. The reason [Ursache] is that the general concept of an entity which has restrictions conceives many things under itself, but the unrestricted is a *conceptus singularis* [singular concept].

c. The physico-theological infers from incomplete knowledge of the perfection of the world to the highest God, and from there back to the greatest perfection of the world.

d. The moral [infers] from the geometrical but objective necessity of actions under moral laws, but also to the necessary assumption of a ruler.

[The proof] from the *primo motore* [prime mover], namely that the world is not from itself, belongs to the negative proofs.

That the *ens realissimum* or *summum* [most real or highest entity] has understanding.¹

¹ 17:482-3. “a. Der Beweis: 1. daß alle Möglichkeit als eine Bestimmung der höchsten realitaet angesehen werden muß und ein solches Wesen voraussetzt, gründet sich darauf, weil die *omnimoda determinatio* nur durch die *omnitudinem metaphysicam* möglich ist, in dieser aber die negative praedicate die *realia* voraussetzen; und da ein jedes *ens limitatum* nur durch Voraussetzung eines *realis* möglich ist, so setzt alles ein *realissimum* voraus; dieses aber ist die Nothwendige subordination der Begriffe nach dem Gesetz des Menschlichen Verstandes.

“2. Die absolute Nothwendigkeit eines Dinges ist ein Grentzbegrif. Er kan nicht durch den Widerspruch eingesehen werden. Das, was die Materie zu aller Möglichkeit enthält, ist der realgrund derselben und *realiter* nothwendig.

“An sich selbst ist die Nothwendigkeit eines Vollkommenen Wesens nicht besser einzusehen als eines unvollkommenen.

“b. Der Beweis *a contingentia* schließt aus Begriffen: daß nemlich das eingeschränkte nicht nothwendig seyn könne. Folglich muß er die Nothwendigkeit im *realissimo* voraussetzen. Die Ursache ist diese, weil der allgemeine Begrif

The reader will notice that there is no attempt at a *system* here, as in the *Beweisgrund* - we have a fairly disconnected *list*, nothing more. Presented on it are (in order) the ontological, Cartesian, contingency, physicotheological, and moral proofs all together, along with additional comments about a possible “prime mover” proof and on the nature of a *realissimum*.² The ontological and Cartesian proofs are now much more closely related (under the same letter “a”); the latter is treated as a kind of aberration from the former, effectively no longer even an argument in its own right (something which perhaps foreshadows the outright merging of the two proofs to come). Even more surprisingly, Kant suggests some skepticism about *his own ontological proof*. For him to add that “the necessary subordination of concepts” is “according to the law of human understanding” hints that this subordination in itself - all conceptual material under the *ens realissimum* - may not be enough to prove a genuine *existence*. The *Sensible and Intelligible Worlds* of the same period similarly reads, “But since the ideal of perfection is the principle of what is to be thought, God, *insofar as he really exists*, is also the principle of altogether everything that is to be realized among perfection”³ (my emphasis) - as if being the ideal of

eines Wesens, was schranken hat, vielerley Dinge unter sich begreift; aber das Unbeschränkte ist *conceptus singularis*.

“c. Der physico-theologische schließt von der unvollständigen Kenntnis der Vollkommenheit der Welt auf die höchste Gottes und von da zurück auf die Größte Vollkommenheit der Welt.

“d. Der moralische von der geometrischen, aber objectiven Nothwendigkeit der Handlungen unter den sittlichen Gesetzen, aber auch auf die nothwendige annehmung eines Regierers.

“Zu negativen Beweisen, daß nemlich die Welt nicht von sich selbst sey, gehoret der vom *primo motore*.

“Daß das *ens realissimum* oder *sumum* Verstand habe.”

² The final two lines, which should be read together, give us further clues about what Kant would even begin to consider as a legitimate probative ground. The “prime mover” proof that he mentions, something like a contingency proof with only its empirical elements left intact, is dismissed as a merely “negative” proof. He provides no list of these negative proofs, but the line that follows suggests why they must be ruled out: the highest or most real entity should have something like “understanding,” i.e. beyond being the central piece in the metaphysical machine it must also be a *mind*. A legitimate approach thus cannot just point out the need for some entity - it must also determine something of the *nature* of that entity, and in the right way.

³ 2:396. “Deus autem, cum ut ideale perfectionis sit principium cognoscendi, ut realiter existens simul est omnis omnino perfectionis principium fiendi.” If Kant was indeed already having doubts about his own proof, this would do much to explain its otherwise anomalous absence from the 1770 dissertation.

perfection, even with the givenness of the field of thinkability, were perhaps not enough to prove existence on its own.⁴

And then there is the moral proof, at the very end of the lettered list. The mere appearance of an entirely new probative ground, to be sure, is enough on its own to shatter the argument of the 1763 system. But this manifestation of a moral proof breaks Kant's old approach in more subtle ways, the doubts concerning his ontological proof perhaps not even being the most notable. Still more strange is that Kant never again tries to unite these five proofs into a single system (e.g., the infamous "system" of proofs in the "Ideal," which I discuss in the next Chapter, skips the moral proof entirely). For it is not as if that approach became hopeless, as if the moral proof could not possibly have been integrated into a new system; in the *Sensible and Intelligible Worlds*, for a start, Kant writes, "[The measure for all things] is NOUMENAL PERFECTION. This, however, is such either in a theoretical or a practical sense. In the former it is the highest entity, GOD, in the latter sense it is MORAL PERFECTION."⁵ The latter simply sounds like a novel way to deploy the concept of God - theoretically thought the noumenally perfect is the God of the ontological proof, while morally thought the same perfection can ground a moral proof - so that with this simple distinction Kant could have easily declared that there was an additional way of using our concepts to reach God's existence, and thereby made a new addition to his 1763 system. Yet he never does this, nor does he explain why. Instead he will completely change his approach to rational theology to focus on its *intentions*, particularly on a division between speculative and practical approaches. Even if the concepts and some of the

⁴ On the other hand, fragments in Kant's copy of Baumgarten which Adickes dates well into the 1770s seem to grant the ontological proof at least a shaky continued legitimacy, especially Fragments 5500-5527 in 18:199-208. Many of these fragments will be dealt with in the following chapter.

⁵ 2:396. "...quod est PERFECTIO NOUMENON. Haec autem est vel in sensu theoretico, vel practico talis. In priori est ens summum. DEUS, in posteriori sensu PERFECTIO MORALIS."

terms of the old system still remain in use - indeed, one must understand the old system in order to understand that later use - the project of exhaustive derivation and systemization has dried up. To the extent that Kant will still want to systematize at least the *speculative* proofs, it will be by ever more strongly defining the whole set by the Cartesian one and its special significance.

This moral proof therefore marks a fundamental turn towards, and places us within, criticism proper, and on the road towards the *Critiques* - so that the present Chapter marks the pivot of my entire project. From its first beginnings in notes and lectures to its main statements in the “Canon of Pure Reason” and Second *Critique*, essentially - beyond shifts in formulation - the moral proof does not much change. This proof always took on a format radically different from the other four: not only is it intimately tied up from the beginning with the problematics of moral law and the “highest good,” but it explicitly “proves” not an existence but a *practical assumption*. The latter characteristic foreshadows the entire critical approach to the proofs, and indeed to metaphysics: when Kant famously insists in the Second Edition’s “Preface” that he “had to repeal knowledge in order to get a place for faith,”⁶ he is not proposing epistemic modesty but quite radically *replacing* the kind of cognition at the center of philosophy.

In the first section below I will discuss the moral proof itself, with much attention paid to the concept of a highest good but still more given to this notion of faith; I must not only explain the moral proof in isolation, but bring out those aspects of it which are basic and operative more generally (namely the radically practical structure of the faith it deploys). The second section, dealing with “rational faith” (Vernunftglaube) and particularly *doctrinal* faith, makes a case for

⁶ Bxxx, in 3:19. “Ich mußte also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen...”

the extension of the procedures of the moral proof to the others, thus setting up a critical rehabilitation of the older proofs in the following Chapter.

I. The Moral Proof

This is not the place to present any adequate history of the development of Kant's moral thinking, and I will not try.⁷ Suffice it to say, after an initial spur (apparently from Rousseau) in 1763-4 we find a series of increasingly concrete considerations throughout the decade, breaking out into some first published hints in the 1770 dissertation. I quote the end of the passage above, along with its relevant footnote:

[Noumenal perfection], however, is such either in a theoretical or a practical sense. In the former it is the highest entity, GOD, in the latter sense it is MORAL PERFECTION. Therefore moral philosophy, insofar as it supplies the first principles of decision [diudicandi], is not cognized except through the pure understanding and itself pertains to pure philosophy...⁸

We see something theoretically insofar as we do not attend except to those [matters] which are relevant to entity[ness], but practically if we consider [those matters] which ought themselves to be in being via freedom.⁹

Already we have a focus squarely on “pure” philosophy, on what ought to be, and on freedom, all kept sharply distinct from experience and mere feeling. This strongly suggests that many rudiments of Kantian moral philosophy were actually worked out quite early, a decade and more

⁷ I despair of finding a both recent and exhaustive study of the history of this development, but a very good start is Allen Wood's excellent “General Introduction” to the Cambridge *Practical Philosophy*, especially Xiii-xx, and the first and especially second chapters of Ameriks' *Kant's Elliptical Path*. An older but more extensive study may be found in Ward's, *The Development of Kant's View of Ethics*, especially the first four chapters; as a synoptic text it remains highly useful.

⁸ 2:396. “Haec autem est vel in sensu theoretico, vel practico talis. In priori est ens summum. DEUS, in posteriori sensu PERFECTIO MORALIS. Philosophia igitur moralis, quatenus principia diudicandi prima suppeditat, non cognoscitur nisi per intellectum purum et pertinet ipsa ad philosophiam puram...”

⁹ Ibid. “Theoretice aliquid spectamus, quatenus non attendimus nisi ad ea, quae enti competunt, practice autem, si ea, quae ipsi per libertatem inesse debebant, dispicimus.” This passage should be compared to the same distinction made in the Critique at A633/B661.

prior to their canonical presentations in the *Groundwork* (1785) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). The first *publications* of Kant's moral thinking do not necessarily coincide with his first *arrival* at that thinking, and the broad details of Kant's moral proof (in this case) appear to have been pretty well worked out during the 1770s. On that basis I consider it fully justifiable to read the "critical" texts on this proof right alongside the fragmentary "precritical" texts. Better put, there is no "precritical" moral proof: the moral proof already puts us within the bounds of critical metaphysics.

What, then, do we find in Kant's very earliest example of a moral proof? Fragment 4253 (as above) states that this proof infers "from the geometrical but objective necessity of actions under moral laws, but also to the necessary assumption of a ruler," with the statement splitting roughly into two parts (separated by the comma). Repeating a common theme from previous chapters, the "moral laws" and the "ruler" are both named as necessary, but now at completely different levels. It is the second phrase, "to the necessary assumption of a ruler," that is the most novel: although regarding the ontological and contingency proofs Kant speaks in passing of merely "presupposing" a god or the necessity of a god, the moral proof is the only one which openly and explicitly concludes upon merely a *necessary assumption* of such an entity's existence rather than upon *knowledge* of this. In all of his discussions of this proof, from this first statement until the final variations in the early 1790s, Kant never for a moment believes that the proof could (or should even try to) directly reach knowledge of an existence,¹⁰ something

¹⁰ It is true that in a footnote early on in "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" (1791) Kant concludes that "it is clear enough that the proof of the existence of [a moral God] can be none other than a moral one." (8:256. "...so leuchtet genugsam ein, daß der Beweis des Daseins eines solchen Wesens kein anderer als ein moralischer sein könne.") But Kant's concern in this footnote is only to distinguish moral wisdom from the kind of wisdom involved in nature (the cosmological/physico-theological), and thus to distinguish two concepts of God. He is not making a statement about what a moral proof as such can do, only pointing out that a moral God requires a proof of a distinctively moral sort. I'll have more to say on "wisdom" in the next chapter. But the fact that *explicitly*

distinctive to this proof in Kant's corpus. And if the first phrase's mention of a "geometrical but objective necessity" is difficult to understand in exact detail,¹¹ the fact that it is applied to *moral laws* evidently points to the Kantian point, soon to come in more detail, that moral law and the actions it commands apply to any rational actor whatsoever (even and especially those who make themselves an exception to it)¹²; as he will write nearly two decades later in the Second *Critique*, "The moral law... is thought to be objectively necessary just because it shall be valid for anyone who has reason and will."¹³ And even here Kant, crucially, does not base the objective necessity of the law in the assumption of a ruler, but exactly the reverse.

Much of the labor of understanding the moral proof involves thinking through the nature of the "necessary assumption" that is mentioned here, which will eventually become the Kantian term of art *faith*¹⁴ (of which moral faith will be the highest example). Faith, and (later) "rational" faith, is really the heart of this book. As it is a far trickier notion to grasp than one might initially expect and as I suspect that most misunderstandings of (and objections to) my overall project will begin by way of this one concept, I therefore spend considerable time in discussion of it.

Once one appreciates that faith is a wholly practical kind of holding-for-true, one of the

theoretical or at least probabilistic "moral proofs" have been on the upswing in recent decades should be taken as evidence of just how badly Kant's intentions here have been misunderstood.

¹¹ In the *Worlds* at 2:395 Kant calls geometry "sensitivae cognitionis prototypus," the prototype of sensitive cognition, while moral philosophy is supposed to be exclusively intellectual.

¹² See, e.g., the *Groundwork* at 4:424.

¹³ 5:36. "Das moralische Gesetz wird aber nur darum als objectiv nothwendig gedacht, weil es für jedermann gelten soll, der Vernunft und Willen hat." If the reader needs a good secondary introduction to Kantian ethics, they are spoiled for choice; I have checked several and they're all excellent. More important may be the choice of a *second* text, where the beginner can further start to think upon the ideas they've absorbed. For this purpose I point to the entirety of O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, the first half of Korsgaard's *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, and Pawel Łuków's short piece "The Fact of Reason."

¹⁴ Here and throughout I translate "Glaube" by "faith" instead of "belief," in that the latter seems to me the more dangerously loaded term. "Belief" to an extent means whatever the writer wishes it to mean, but it is typically a kind of halfway mark on the way to knowledge and thus tends to have an epistemic, theoretical ring to it which is almost impossible to eliminate. Kant's "Glaube," though, has a *practical* meaning going in exactly the opposite direction, so that translating it as "belief" seems to me to render his discussions of the concept far more difficult. "Faith" is itself no innocent term by any means, but at least it avoids this more fatal confusion.

consequences of that is the potential for a radical disconnect (or at least a quite complicated relation) between what we practically presuppose and our more explicit theoretical beliefs and claims; this comes out particularly with Kant's approach to his interlocutors and in his diagnosis of certain kinds of “atheism,” and is crucial for appreciating his critical appropriation of the pre-critical proofs. The other important detail in the moral proof is the “highest good,” which over the centuries has created considerable headaches for scholars of Kant’s ethics. I will not much venture into the debates in that sphere, except to point out that the highest good is in fact a *metaphysical* concept in the strong sense - that is, it recapitulates all of the classical elements of modern metaphysics, including a theology, cosmology, psychology, and ontology. That latter - the fact that the highest good constitutes a distinctive *moral* ontology, an understanding of entities as *ends* - is important for relating this proof to the concepts developed in the previous chapters. The moral proof, too, is “ontotheological,” but in a much more direct and evident fashion than the proofs of 1763.

A. Having Faith, Part I (Hypothetical Necessity)

What makes Kantian “Glaube” so very difficult to talk about is not its complexity (the point is in fact elegantly simple) but our own tendency to give theoretical commitments a priority over practice. *Practical* commitments are not always treated as mere negatives (“non-theoretical”),¹⁵ but they are typically treated as something *additional* to our theory, something on top of it or modifying it (as if we always make claims *first*). This is, to a degree,

¹⁵ Cf *Sein und Zeit* 59.

unavoidable: in order to have any good theory about our practice we must, after all, *theorize* about practice, so that the practice takes on a more theoretical appearance. Getting the right sense for “faith,” which is practical through and through, requires that the reader, as it were, turn their eye upon practical conduct while it is at its own home and unthreatened by the worst theoretical prejudices. Rather than taking a direct approach I introduce the concept by way of facing down just such a prejudice, thereby helping the reader get their weight in the right place.

In order to give the objector more teeth I first present the moral proof in fully developed form, and here I quote the version in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.¹⁶ Kant’s mature argument rests in a complex way on the duty to promote a “highest good,” which will be discussed below; for now let us consider Kant’s proof purely with regard to the “assumption” it’s supposed to reveal to us:

...It follows that the postulate of the possibility of the highest derived good (the best world) is likewise the postulate of the actuality of a highest original good, namely the existence of God. Now, it was a duty for us to promote the highest good - thus it is not only a warrant but also a necessity, as a need bound up with duty, to presuppose the possibility of the highest good, which, as it takes place only under the condition of the existence of God, inseparably binds the presupposition of the existence [of God] with duty, i.e. it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God.

Now it is well to note here that this moral necessity is subjective, i.e. a need, and not objective, i.e. itself a duty; as there can be no duty at all to assume the existence of anything (since this involves merely the theoretical use of reason)... in view of [theoretical reason] alone [the assumption of the existence of God], regarded as a ground of explanation, can be called a hypothesis, but in relation to the intelligibility of an object yet assigned to us through the moral law (the highest good), thus of a need in practical intention, it can be called faith and indeed pure rational faith, as merely pure reason (both in its theoretical and practical use) is the source from which it springs.¹⁷

¹⁶ There are different variations of this proof throughout Kant’s writings. Most prominently it is in the First *Critique* (in much rougher form) at A809-14/B837-42 (3:525-8); it is in the Third *Critique* at 5:447-50; in the *Lectures* at 28:1082-4; and in the *Religion* at 6:4-6. Wood (*Kant’s Moral Religion* 10) counts “no fewer than eleven” statements of this proof in Kant’s writings.

¹⁷ 5:125-6. “Folglich ist das Postulat der Möglichkeit des höchsten abgeleiteten Guts (der besten Welt) zugleich das Postulat der Wirklichkeit eines höchsten ursprünglichen Guts, nämlich der Existenz Gottes. Nun war es Pflicht für uns das höchste Gut zu befördern, mithin nicht allein Befugniß, sondern auch mit der Pflicht als Bedürfniß verbundene Nothwendigkeit, die Möglichkeit dieses höchsten Guts vorauszusetzen, welches, da es nur unter der Bedingung des Daseins Gottes stattfindet, die Voraussetzung desselben mit der Pflicht unzertrennlich verbindet, d.i. es ist moralisch nothwendig, das Dasein Gottes anzunehmen.

Kant says that the assumption of God's existence is a *need* ("Bedürfnis").¹⁸ At a practical level this assumption is "rational faith," albeit theoretically it is merely a hypothesis. Kant thus admits that the assumption cannot be considered objective - it is not in itself any moral duty (i.e., binding on any rational actor), and is even farther away from being something I could claim to know. The faith that results can only be *subjectively* binding: it is quite decisive and convincing *for myself* as an actor, but I can claim legitimacy only at this level of personal certainty.

And it is at just this point that the objector will attack. "If the moral proof wants me to believe that God exists," they say, "what it should be arguing is *that God exists*, not that I have some 'need' for faith in this. Anything like 'Glaube' should just mean for me to think I know something and think I know it *objectively*. It does not follow from my merely *needing* to believe something (for whatever reasons I may have) that the fact in question is actually true or, more importantly in this case, even that I myself believe it to be true. Either I must think that the existence of God is open to objective judgment and that I know it for certain (even if I'm wrong), or I'm not really believing it at all; I could instead just *suppose* that God exists, of course, but that's a different stance and doesn't seem to be what Kant is after. If he wants me to believe something is true, he must *convince* me *that it is true*: convincing me that I 'need' it only gets me to the point of thinking that its being true would be really nice."¹⁹ On this account, just by the

"Hier ist nun wohl zu merken, daß diese moralische Nothwendigkeit subjectiv, d.i. Bedürfnis, und nicht objectiv, d.i. selbst Pflicht, sei; denn es kann gar keine Pflicht geben, die Existenz eines Dinges anzunehmen (weil dieses blos den theoretischen Gebrauch der Vernunft angeht)... in Ansehung derer allein sie, als Erklärungsgrund betrachtet, Hypothese, in Beziehung aber auf die Verständlichkeit eines uns doch durchs moralische Gesetz aufgegebenen Objects (des höchsten Guts), mithin eines Bedürfnisses in praktischer Absicht, Glaube und zwar reiner Vernunftglaube heißen kann, weil blos reine Vernunft (sowohl ihrem theoretischen als praktischen Gebrauche nach) die Quelle ist, daraus er entspringt."

¹⁸ See my final chapter for an exploration of this concept.

¹⁹ The reader may find an example of this objection in the wild in Byrne's "Kant's Moral Proof of the Existence of God," especially 340-42.

grammar of belief-words Kant's moral proof fails to prove not just the existence of God but even that I must have any faith in that existence. Theoretically speaking, it fails to prove *anything*.

But that it is precisely a *theoretical* notion of "faith" under consideration is why the objection misses the point. Kant writes that "it is only in a practical respect that the theoretically insufficient holding-of-something-to-be-true can be called faith."²⁰ Taking that statement seriously means reading faith as concerned with *conduct*²¹ rather than judging knowable *facts*, and the moral "proof" as something radically different from theoretical demonstrations. Kant has a discussion on the concept of "Glaube" towards the end of the first *Critique* which tries to address this very question, thereby clarifying the nature of the moral proof.²²

²⁰ A823/B851, in 3:533. "Es kann aber überall bloß in praktischer Beziehung das theoretisch unzureichende Fürwahrhalten Glauben genannt werden."

²¹ In this and the following chapters I will often speak about practice in terms of *conduct* or *action*, which in a strict technical sense is not correct. Particularly in the *Groundwork* Kant instead emphasizes *wollen*, "willing," with no additional *moral worth* given by what the "willing" accomplishes - the passage to this effect on 4:394 is so well-known that it barely needs mentioning. And yet especially in English the language of willing can sound like "mere" willing, as if it should make no difference *to us* (beyond vague hopefulness) whether our willing succeeds or not. Thus it is important to remember that in the very same passage Kant insists that willing is "nicht etwa als ein bloßer Wunsch, sondern als die Aufbietung aller Mittel, so weit sie in unserer Gewalt sind" - that willing always means *throwing* oneself at one's end with all one's powers and the full intention of realizing it. However much I would debate certain details argued by post-formalist readers of Kant's ethics roughly in the tradition of Yovel's *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, their basic impulse - taking to its conclusions the point already noted (e.g.) by Rawls, that "wollen" must also mean *trying to change the world* - is quite right. "Willing" always means acting on the world, on history, if not necessarily successfully. I thus intend my language of "conduct," "action," etc. to express this wide sense of *wollen* better than "willing" seems to do, even if they are strictly speaking the wrong words.

²² The following account, I confess in advance, only amounts to a kind of radicalization of a reading previously advanced by Wood in *Kant's Moral Religion*; cf especially p. 16-25. My insistence on the the fundamentally practical dimension of faith is already argued by Wood, but I also insist that faith in the strict sense need not always be *recognized* by the actor - which is crucial for my later arguments and not discussed by Wood himself (even at his remarks on atheism at p.31-2). For comparison I also refer the reader to several other, more recent and more detailed accounts of Kantian faith, namely Beiser's "Moral Faith and the Highest Good," Stevenson's "Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge," Chignell's "Belief in Kant," and Pasternack's "The Development and Scope of Kantian Belief." I will refer to all of these in passing, and Chignell's is particularly valuable in its connection of this concept to earlier texts. I also point the reader to two other, Kant-inspired, less text-critical discussions of moral faith as a general topic, namely Robert Adams' "Moral Faith" and John Hare's *The Moral Gap*, especially 91-96. (All of these texts read to me as less willing to follow Kant into the radically practical than Wood or the reading myself I present.)

Now, the objector is not entirely wrong: in the same discussion Kant is willing to grant the point at the relevant level. Albeit called “Reckoning, Knowing, and Having Faith,”²³ Kant actually opens the relevant section of the “Canon of Pure Reason” with a distinction between what he calls *conviction* (Überzeugung), wherein my judgment is “valid for everyone merely so far as they have reason,” and *presumption* (Überredung), wherein the ground is “merely in the particular character of the subject.”²⁴ Both of these are “belief” in exactly the sense that the objector wants, wherein I am convinced of the truth of my judgment (the one difference, irrelevant for the objector’s purposes, is that “[p]resumption is a mere illusion, because the ground of the judgment, which lies only solely in the subject, is held for objective”).²⁵ From there we might begin to *check* upon the grounds of our judgment, e.g. by asking others about their own opinions, and perhaps make the nature of those judgements more clear. My holding something to be true now splits into three new kinds. *Reckoning*, “consciously both subjectively and objectively insufficient,” and *knowing*, “both subjectively and objectively sufficient,” will still make sense to the objector: if I investigate the basis of my convictions, either the evidence checks out and I will continue to feel secure (knowledge) or my confidence will be shaken and I am left only with a best guess (reckoning). In the latter case, my subjective insufficiency *follows* from my consciousness of the objective insufficiency (else I am presuming).

²³ I translate “Meinen” by “reckon” rather than the usual “opine” as it seems to me to better fit the wider everyday sense of the German. (E.g., one could in good English translate “Wie meinen?” or “Ich meine, dass...” by “How do you reckon?” and “I reckon that...,” but not “How do you opine?” and “I opine that...”)

²⁴ A820/B848, in 3:531-2. “Wenn es für jedermann gültig ist, so fern er nur Vernunft hat, so ist der Grund desselben objectiv hinreichend, und das Fürwahrhalten heißt alsdann Überzeugung. Hat es nur in der besonderen Beschaffenheit des Subjects seinen Grund, so wird es Überredung genannt.” Strictly speaking, Kant is being misleading here: he seems to say that conviction always has objective grounds, but on A822/B850 he formally defines conviction merely in terms of *subjective* sufficiency. But the error is not unforced: Kant wants to say that even some merely subjectively sufficient cognitions should still be generally valid, which borders on the objective.

²⁵ A820/B848, in 3:532. “Überredung ist ein bloßer Schein, weil der Grund des Urtheils, welcher lediglich im Subjecte liegt, für objectiv gehalten wird.”

What the objector would rule out as making no sense is precisely what Kant posits as a third possibility, namely *having faith*, which is “only subjectively sufficient and at the same time held for objectively insufficient.”²⁶ That is, I myself may still have faith in something, with strong or even absolute firmness, while being conscious that the empirical facts do not support it. Yet this ceases to be so strange once one appreciates faith’s inherently practical dimension. As a kind of second characterization Kant writes, “Once an end is set forth, so the conditions for reaching it are hypothetically necessary,”²⁷ and this hypothetical necessity is central to the concept. To first illustrate the point, he provides the dual examples of a doctor making an uncertain diagnosis for the treatment of a patient’s illness and of someone gambling increasingly dire amounts of money. Theoretically speaking the doctor and the gambler cannot make any claim to know the fate of either the patient or the dice roll, but their *faith*, the “subjective sufficiency” of their judgment, does not consist in their epistemic stance but in *what they do*. Theoretically speaking the doctor may only be making her best guess that the patient has tuberculosis and that a round of antibiotics will help - she does not *know* this, but neither does she *reckon* it. Instead she *acts* on that guess. When the doctor prescribes her treatment, she does not claim to know or estimate but instead *supposes and uses* the treatment as the means necessary to her proposed end, namely curing the patient’s illness.

²⁶ A822/B850, in 3:533. “Meinen ist ein mit Bewußtsein sowohl subjectiv, als objectiv unzureichendes Fürwahrhalten. Ist das letztere nur subjectiv zureichend und wird zugleich für objectiv unzureichend gehalten, so heißt es Glauben. Endlich heißt das sowohl subjectiv als objectiv zureichende Fürwahrhalten das Wissen.” The reader may compare this definition and the rest of the discussion in the *Critique* with the fascinating variations in the Logic lectures at 16:148-50, 242-5, 732-3, and 851-3, and in the *Jäsche Logic* at at 9:67-9.

²⁷ A823/B851, in 3:533. “Wenn einmal ein Zweck vorgesetzt ist, so sind die Bedingungen der Erreichung desselben hypothetisch nothwendig.”

Faith, in Kant's sense, describes this kind of practical supposition that underlies "the actual use of the means for certain actions,"²⁸ "sufficient" for that use. It is always grounded in conduct (willing) by way of what I call the *faith structure*: I presuppose something in the way distinctive to faith only by *acting towards some end*, since faith's object is always the *condition* for that end. And this implies that without this structure, i.e. without its practical context, faith must collapse back into either reckoning or presumption.

The objector from before is thus missing the point, but it is an easy point to miss even for careful readers. Kant's initial language of "subjective sufficiency," even his mixing it into the other kinds of holding-for-true, does not help this: especially combined with the usual way we deploy terms like "faith" or "belief," his opening discussion does not by itself underline the radical divide between faith and all other kinds of truth claims made later in the passage. This is perhaps why Kant, redescribing faith later in life, will drop the language of sufficiency and drop faith squarely within practical conduct from the start:

The meaning of this holding-for-true, distinct from reckoning and knowing [as holdings-for-true] grounded on judgment in a theoretical view, can now be set in the expression 'faith,' under which is understood an assumption or presupposition (hypothesis) which is therefore only necessary because an objective, practical rule of conduct lies at its ground as necessary - upon which we indeed do not theoretically perceive the possibility of achievement and of the object in itself given forth from it, but still subjectively cognize the only kind of joint conformity of [that possibility] with the final end.²⁹

²⁸ A824/B852, in 3:534. "Ich nenne dergleichen zufälligen Glauben, der aber dem wirklichen Gebrauche der Mittel zu gewissen Handlungen zum Grunde liegt, den pragmatischen Glauben."

²⁹ In *What is the Actual Progress...?*, 20:297. "Die Bedeutung dieses, vom Meynen und Wissen, als eines auf Beurtheilung in theoretischer Absicht gegründeten, verschiedenen Fürwahrhaltens, kann nun in den Ausdruck Glauben gelegt werden, worunter eine Annehmung, Voraussetzung (Hypothese) verstanden wird, die nur darum nothwendig ist, weil eine objective praktische Regel des Verhaltens als nothwendig zum Grunde liegt, bey der wir die Möglichkeit der Ausführung und des daraus hervorgehenden Objectes an sich, zwar nicht theoretisch einsehen, aber doch die einzige Art der Zusammenstimmung derselben zum Endzweck subjectiv erkennen." For another passage that also drops "sufficiency" see the Third *Critique* at 5:471-2, albeit by this point Kant's focus is clearly and exclusively on *moral* kind of faith. I discuss that passage in more detail below.

Here we have entirely shifted away from theoretical *claiming* and towards *taking up* whatever our conduct has need of. Thus, to repeat the point: it is not that the objector is utterly wrong. From a theoretical point of view, it is indeed true even for Kant that either we “believe” (with certainty) that something is the case or we don’t. What the objector misses is that in faith there is a wholly different kind of certainty and sufficiency at stake, namely our *practical* certainty in the means we use to reach an end and (more broadly) the conditions which allow that end to stand as meaningful. One may not really *believe* (epistemically) that one will win a blackjack game by taking another card, but one *has faith* in the card one takes. Even when we are theoretically uncertain, we place practical trust in the means and conditions which make our end possible. We *must* do so, on pain of our actions being senseless.³⁰ And if I spend so long emphasizing this point and playing up the potential objector’s threat, it is precisely because the point is so easily missed. Everything Kant has to say about “faith” and “rational faith,” and everything I myself will say on the back of that concept, rests on this distinction between sufficiency for claiming to know and sufficiency for *conduct*.³¹ Should the concept slide back towards the theoretical, then it evidences exactly the incoherence the objector points out.

So far Kant has only discussed cases like gambling and medical care, which of course represent neither the only species of faith nor the most metaphysically interesting. In these first cases my faith is obviously *contingent* upon some mix of knowing, reckoning, and presumption

³⁰ Frederick Beiser speaks of a “logical” (as opposed to “epistemological”) dependency of moral ends upon moral faith, while Wood similarly speaks of a “rational relation” (not a “psychological relation”) between faith and action, both granting this general point (while not carrying it quite as far as I want). In this case, however, I think Kant’s own language of the “hypothetical necessity” of the conditions and means for an end might actually get the better of both as far as precision goes. See “Moral Faith and the Highest Good” 607, and *Kant’s Moral Religion* 20-21.

³¹ Stevenson expresses this nicely in saying, “Kant sees *meinen* and *wissen* as different grades on the same scale of theoretical justification, so that an accretion of evidence can convert one into the other. But, according to his conception, *glauben* is not on that scale at all, it does not compete in the theoretical stakes; it involves a distinctively practical kind of ground that can be had only in the absence of ‘objective’, theoretical justification.” From her “Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge,” 86-87.

(e.g., that such-and-such are the symptoms of tuberculosis, that the patient really shows those symptoms, that it is unlikely to be anything other than tuberculosis, that tuberculosis can be treated with such-and-such antibiotics, and so on); these judgments are thus always open to revision by way of new information, and with them the choice of means for my end (e.g., a fellow doctor may point out that another diagnosis is more likely, or that another treatment would work better). Faith with only this “comparative” subjective sufficiency - where only *I personally* cannot see better conditions for my end, or find better means - is what Kant calls contingent or *pragmatic* faith. But in addition there is also “necessary” faith, one which would be “sufficient simply and for everyone, if I know for sure that no one can cognize other conditions which lead to the end set forth.”³² This, then, would be having faith in conditions (perhaps including means) for which no serious epistemic revisions to my premises are possible - where no one, including myself, could ever have access to better hypotheses than I have at the present moment. Kant, in turn, divides this “necessary” faith into two further possibilities, namely *doctrinal* faith and *moral* faith. Doctrinal faith would be a faith where there is nothing on hand to ever ultimately decide the rightness of my ends or the conditions thereof - Kant thinks of this faith as characteristically oriented towards the *theoretical*, in a sense that will need to be further discussed. And finally, moral faith would have *objectively* necessary *ends* as much as *hypothetically* necessary *conditions* for those ends.³³

³² A823-4/B851-2, in 3:533-4. “Diese Nothwendigkeit ist subjectiv, aber doch nur comparativ zureichend, wenn ich gar keine andere Bedingungen weiß, unter denen der Zweck zu erreichen wäre; aber sie ist schlechthin und für jedermann zureichend, wenn ich gewiß weiß, daß niemand andere Bedingungen kennen könne, die auf den vorgesetzten Zweck führen. Im ersten Falle ist meine Voraussetzung und das Fürwahrhalten gewisser Bedingungen ein bloß zufälliger, im zweiten Falle aber ein nothwendiger Glaube.”

³³ Pasternack helpfully points out that Kant's use of the term “Glaube” is in flux even up through the 1880s, and that there is a degree of confusion between his own senses of the term and those borrowed from G.F. Meier (whose textbook Kant followed). For example, Kant will passingly use the phrase “historical faith” (e.g. in the “Orientation” essay at 8:141) while imparting little practical intent to it. This flux is key to remember when considering Kant's texts; on all this see “Development and Scope,” 296-303. Pasternack also argues, however, that the *final* doctrine of

Moral faith thus constitutes a *necessary correlation* between my acting towards objective moral ends and the conditions which make the ends possible. I noted earlier that in the moral proof faith constitutes the necessary assumption of God's existence for the sake of my objective moral ends. It turns out that this assumption not only can never be challenged, but that our practice outright demands it:

...The end [i.e. the highest good] is inescapably established, and according to all of my insight only one condition is possible under which this end would be connected with the entirety of all ends and thereby have practical validity, namely that there be a God and a future world; I also know quite certainly that no one cognizes other conditions that lead to the same unity of ends under the moral law. But since the moral prescription is equally my maxim (as reason demands that it should be), I shall inevitably have faith in an existence of God and a future life - and I am sure that this faith cannot be made to waver, for thereby my moral principles, which I cannot forsake without being detestable in my own eyes, would themselves be toppled.

In such a way, after the defeat of all the overambitious intentions of a reason that rambles out beyond the limits of all experience, it remains to us that we thereby have cause to be content for practical intentions.³⁴

To generalize the point: supposing there is a moral end (or set of ends) which is objectively valid for absolutely all rational agents, and supposing that the conditions which could ever make such an end (or set of ends) possible would have to include the existence of God,³⁵ then presupposing

faith that Kant arrives at around 1890 excludes not only all non-practical senses of the term but even pragmatic faith and doctrinal faith (so that faith simpliciter lines up with what Kant previously restricted to moral faith). It seems to me that Kant's position is a bit more complex than this, however. The concept of doctrinal faith, and how far it could ever be considered a full-blooded "rational faith" in its own right, will be further discussed in detail.

³⁴ A828/B856, in 3:536. "Der Zweck ist hier unumgänglich festgestellt, und es ist nur eine einzige Bedingung nach aller meiner Einsicht möglich, unter welcher dieser Zweck mit allen gesammten Zwecken zusammenhängt und dadurch praktische Gültigkeit habe, nämlich daß ein Gott und eine künftige Welt sei; ich weiß auch ganz gewiß, daß niemand andere Bedingungen kenne, die auf dieselbe Einheit der Zwecke unter dem moralischen Gesetze führen. Da aber also die sittliche Vorschrift zugleich meine Maxime ist (wie denn die Vernunft gebietet, daß sie es sein soll), so werde ich unausbleiblich ein Dasein Gottes und ein künftiges Leben glauben und bin sicher, daß diesen Glauben nichts wankend machen könne, weil dadurch meine sittliche Grundsätze selbst umgestürzt werden würden, denen ich nicht entsagen kann, ohne in meinen eigenen Augen verabscheuungswürdig zu sein.

"Auf solche Weise bleibt uns nach Vereitelung aller ehrsüchtigen Absichten einer über die Grenzen aller Erfahrung hinaus herumschweifenden Vernunft noch genug übrig, daß wir damit in praktischer Absicht zufrieden zu sein Ursache haben."

³⁵ Peter Byrne, among many others, rightly points out that this requires a liberal use of an "Ought Implies Can" (better: "Obligation Implies Realizability") principle, something potentially questionable even by Kant's own lights. See his "Kant and the Moral Argument" at 91ff.

that existence would be necessary for all actors.³⁶ It is not an argument that such actors *ought* to have faith in a God, but that they *already do*.

B. Having Faith, Part II (Heads and Hearts)

The above seems a preposterous claim, and it is one which should be appreciated both for its audacity and a certain subtlety. The notion that anyone who wills higher moral ends must have faith in God seems to be proved false by the presence of any morally upright nonbeliever - but Kant's definition of faith as a *merely practical* holding-to-be-true makes his claim far sneakier, and far more closely targeted, than it may appear. It is not concerned about *theoretical, epistemic statements* of belief, of my *claiming* that God exists or not for such-and-such reasons (valid or otherwise). "God" is here not at issue in that sense; "God" is more like the laws of thermodynamics I assume will hold out when I boil water for coffee, or the ground under my feet as I walk to work. For Kant, I take such an entity for granted in my willing the relevant moral ends *regardless of whether this assumption is theoretically explicit or not*. If this is correct, though, moral faith is generalized only at the price of a possible break between the demands of my practical reason and my own *understanding* of what I actually assume in my moral conduct. I would not then need to *recognize* what I have faith in. Commentators have tended to shy away

³⁶ The argument for rational moral faith, i.e. the moral proof, then wholly turns on the case that there is just such an end, which Kant will describe under the title of the "highest good." For a much longer and pickier discussion of the proof itself, in all its variations and details, I point the reader straight to Kuehn's "Kant's Transcendental Deduction of God's Existence as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason." Kuehn is often harsh on his predecessors and the discussion in the last third is so dense as to be almost indecipherable to anyone unfamiliar with the trickiest moments of the Second *Critique*, yet it is still the best piece on the proof I have read. Wood's account (*Kant's Moral Religion* 10-34) as a whole is also still well worth reading, as is Beiser's in "Moral Faith..." 604-7.

from such a conclusion,³⁷ but that Kant himself bites this bullet already seems implied by his formulations in the *Critique*: the fact that faith in something must always go hand in hand with the *recognition* of its objective insufficiency (on pain of becoming a “practical presumption”) means that one's theoretical stance is free to roam anywhere from uncertain endorsement to agnosticism to outright denial of what one “unconsciously” assumes in practice.

Admittedly Kant never speaks of “unconscious faith” or the like, but I see little other way of making sense (e.g.) of certain comments on his contemporaries and on “atheism.” Many of his replies to others’ relevant theoretical and speculative positions really amount to the claim that what they say (theoretically) cannot possibly match up with what they in fact take for granted *practically*. Consider his reply to Garve’s attacks on his moral philosophy:

Now as regards the confession of Mr. Garve just prior, that he does not find that division [between happiness and worthiness to be happy] in his heart [although he can conceive it in his head]: I have no reservation in outright contradicting him in his self-incrimination and taking the defense of his heart against his head. He, a righteous man, has actually found this [division] in his heart (in his will's determinations) at any moment; but it did not wish itself harmonized in his head with the customary principles of psychological explanation... solely for the purpose of speculation and for the conceptualizing of what is inconceivable (inexplicable)...³⁸

³⁷ E.g., Chignell rightly notices that the meaning of “Glaube” departs from contemporary meanings of “belief,” but then says no more on the topic after noting that “we should remain neutral” on the question of whether someone who has faith in something also believes it. (See “Belief in Kant” at 341.) The closest suggestion I have found to my own reading is via a hypothetical posed by John Hare, made to explain the situation of “Spinoza” at 5:452-3 (discussed below). Hare writes of a man who acts as if he is going to marry someone but constantly denies it explicitly, and he terms this an *instability* in the man’s belief; I would instead say that he does not *believe* (theoretically) but *has faith* (practically), and the “instability” is in the dischord between the two levels. See “Kant on the Rational Instability of Atheism,” 63-4.

³⁸ From 1793’s “On the Common Saying...,” in 8:285: “Was nun das kurz vorhergehende Bekenntniß des Hrn. G. betrifft, jene Theilung (eigentlich Sonderung) nicht in seinem Herzen zu finden: so trage ich kein Bedenken, ihm in seiner Selbstbeschuldigung geradezu zu widersprechen und sein Herz wider seinen Kopf in Schutz zu nehmen. Er, der rechtschaffene Mann, fand sie wirklich jederzeit in seinem Herzen (in seinen Willensbestimmungen); aber sie wollte sich nur nicht zum Behuf der Speculation und zur Begreifung dessen, was unbegreiflich (unerklärlich) ist, nämlich der Möglichkeit kategorischer Imperative (dergleichen die der Pflicht sind), in seinem Kopf mit den gewohnten Principien psychologischer Erklärungen (die insgesamt den Mechanism der Naturnothwendigkeit zum Grunde legen) zusammen reimen.”

Characteristic for Kant, his point is not that Garve has the wrong moral theory but that he *misunderstands* (mistheorizes) *his own morality*. Garve, assuming certain psychological (i.e., necessitarian) premises “in his head,” cannot explicitly recognize another principle which is “inconceivable” and “inexplicable” by those premises - even though it is a principle which he *actually holds* in all of his actions, “in his heart.” Kant does not contradict Garve so much as claim that, in practice, Garve contradicts himself. He makes the same move even more strikingly at the other end of his critical career, in his early review of the deterministic J.H. Schulz:

The practical concept of freedom has in fact nothing at all to do with the metaphysical [one], which remains entirely abandoned to the metaphysicians... Even the most stubborn skeptic confesses that when it comes to action, all sophisticated hesitations due to some generally deceptive illusion must be dropped. Just so the most resolute fatalist, who is this so long as he gives himself to mere speculation, must nevertheless, as soon as he has to do with wisdom and duty, always so act as if he were free, and this idea actually also brings forth the fact concordant with [the idea], and also can alone bring it forth. It is hard to completely cast off the human... At the ground of his soul, however, although he would not confess it himself, [Schulz] presupposed that the understanding has the capability to determine his judgment according to objective grounds which are valid at all time, and does not stand under the mechanism of merely subjective determining causes, which can change in succession; therefore he always assumes the freedom to think, without which there is no reason. Just so must he also presuppose freedom of the will in action, without which there is no morality, once he - as I do not doubt - wants to proceed in his righteous way of life according to eternal laws of duty, and not to be a sport of his instincts and inclinations, whether [or not] he really at the same time agrees upon this freedom himself, since he is otherwise not capable of bringing his practical principles into harmony with the speculative ones - but if no one at all succeeded thereof, in fact not much would be lost.³⁹

³⁹ 8:13-14. “Der praktische Begriff der Freiheit hat in der That mit dem speculativen, der den Metaphysikern gänzlich überlassen bleibt, gar nichts zu thun... Eben so muß der entschlossenste Fatalist, der es ist, so lange er sich der bloßen Speculation ergiebt, dennoch, so bald es ihm um Weisheit und Pflicht zu thun ist, jederzeit so handeln, als ob er frei wäre, und diese Idee bringt auch wirklich die damit einstimmige That hervor und kann sie auch allein hervorbringen. Es ist schwer, den Menschen ganz abzulegen... Er hat aber im Grunde seiner Seele, obgleich er es sich selbst nicht gestehen wollte, voraus gesetzt: daß der Verstand nach objectiven Gründen, die jederzeit gültig sind, sein Urtheil zu bestimmen das Vermögen habe und nicht unter dem Mechanism der blos subjectiv bestimmenden Ursachen, die sich in der Folge ändern können, stehe; mithin nahm er immer Freiheit zu denken an, ohne welche es keine Vernunft giebt. Eben so muß er auch Freiheit des Willens im Handeln voraus setzen, ohne welche es keine Sitten giebt, wenn er in seinem, wie ich nicht zweifle, rechtschaffenen Lebenswandel den ewigen Gesetzen der Pflicht gemäß verfahren und nicht ein Spiel seiner Instincte und Neigungen sein will, ob er schon zu gleicher Zeit sich selbst diese Freiheit abspricht, weil er seine praktische Grundsätze mit den speculativen sonst nicht in Einstimmung zu bringen vermag, woran aber, wenn es auch niemanden gelänge, in der That nicht viel verloren sein würde.”

Those last lines, if one insists on a strict match between epistemic belief and practical faith, should be a shock: not only does Kant seem to think that faith can detach itself from what we explicitly believe, but he states that the “Einstimmung” between speculative claims and practical conduct is not especially important.⁴⁰

And what goes for Kant’s philosophical rivals and freedom also goes for the explicit “non-believer” and God. Kant’s main point is that even a *theoretically doubtful* faith remains fully compatible with morality, especially when put in check by the work of criticism:

[A] dogmatic non-faith [Unglaube] cannot persist together with a moral maxim prevailing in the mode of thinking (for reason cannot command an end to be pursued which is cognized as nothing but a weaving of the brain); but a doubtful faith [Zweifelglaube], however, for which the lack of conviction on grounds of speculative reason is only a hindrance, for which a critical insight into the limits of [speculative reason] can remove the influence on conduct and set up an overriding practical holding-for-true as a substitute, [can do so].⁴¹

Behind this is a distinction between “dogmatic” and “skeptical” atheists, made in the *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* among other places. The two atheisms require very different treatment.

The dogmatic atheist, the less interesting case for present purposes, is someone who would not only explicitly deny any existence of God but would also (far more importantly) *not have even practical faith in any such entity*, and so would not be able to will the highest good (as they lack the conditions for it). At least in the First *Critique* Kant seems to deny the existence of

⁴⁰ Ameriks brings up an obvious and underdiscussed puzzle in Kant’s position as normally understood: “[W]e may ask how it is that so many common people and philosophers... have appeared to live a life of ‘healthy and sound understanding’ without seeing any need to assert, or even to be able to understand, the absolute notions of freedom and morality on which Kant relies.” In other words, how can it be, on Kant’s account, that everyone acts *as if* following the entire practical philosophy when they haven’t read it, wouldn’t understand it, and may well disagree with it? The answer, on my reading, is that Kant thinks that this philosophy need only be relevant to what they *do*, not what they *believe* about what they do. It is not, e.g., that no one had ever acted morally before Kant, rather that no one had yet given a good account of what that actually amounted to. See *Kant’s Elliptical Path*, 276.

⁴¹ From the Third *Critique*, 5:472-3. “Ein dogmatischer Unglaube kann aber mit einer in der Denkungsart herrschenden sittlichen Maxime nicht zusammen bestehen (denn einem Zwecke, der für nichts als Hirngespinnst erkannt wird, nachzugehen, kann die Vernunft nicht gebieten); wohl aber ein Zweifelglaube, dem der Mangel der Überzeugung durch Gründe der speculativen Vernunft nur Hinderniß ist, welchem eine kritische Einsicht in die Schranken der letztern den Einfluß auf das Verhalten benehmen und ihm ein überwiegendes praktisches Fürwahrhalten zum Ersatz hinstellen kann.”

such “fancied monsters” (to lift a phrase from Hume) as everyone is supposed to have some degree of moral interest,⁴² but in the *Lectures* he opens the door a bit: “Such dogmatic atheists have either never been, or they were the most evil of people. With them, all driving forces for morality fall away...”⁴³ It is, Kant thinks, easy enough to theoretically *refute* the dogmatic atheist by showing that God is at least possible,⁴⁴ although by his own lights one must wonder whether this would matter. Theory is not the central problem: if I am right that for Kant what matters is practical faith (and not explicit belief) in God, then what’s important about the dogmatic atheist is not their “dogmatism” but the breakdown of their moral attitude. One might expect to see a complement to Kant’s (immoral) dogmatic atheist in the form of an immoral actor who is still, theoretically, a *positive believer*. This character, the reverse of the skeptic below (who has faith but thinks they don’t), would think themselves faithful but in fact have neither practical faith nor moral motive, and thereby be in the same situation as the dogmatic atheist in all important respects. And Kant discusses such a figure at least once: “Godlessness [Ohngötterey] is still open to remedy [abzuhelfen]. But on the other side is the man who is, again, so evil that, although he knows that there is a God, he still lives as if there were none... and such acts are

⁴² At A829-30/B857-8 (3:537) Kant writes, “The only thing questionable that is to be found [in this account] is that this rational faith is grounded in the presupposition of moral attitudes... However, there is no man who is free of all interest in these questions.” [“Das einzige Bedenkliche, das sich hiebei findet, ist, daß sich dieser Vernunftglaube auf die Voraussetzung moralischer Gesinnungen gründet... Es ist aber kein Mensch bei diesen Fragen frei von allem Interesse.”] Intriguingly this passage displays an undefined and unexplained use of the term “Vernunftglaube” prior to its more detailed description five years later; see the next section of this Chapter.

⁴³ 28:1010: “Solche dogmatische Atheisten hat es entweder nie gegeben, oder sie sind die boshaftesten Menschen gewesen. Bei ihnen fallen alle Triebfedern zur Moralität weg...” In the *Collins Ethics* (27:327) Kant also calls these characters, more appropriately, *practical* atheists.

⁴⁴ 28:1026.

contrary to religion and not empty of religion.”⁴⁵ (Either character, by having a faulty moral interest, could presumably escape the moral proof.)

The *skeptical* atheist, by contrast, would be the one whose doubts about God’s existence are *purely theoretical*. Kant says that this particular atheist “disputes only the proofs for the existence of a God, in particular the apodictic certainty of the same,” and “because speculative reason cannot prove the existence of God to our satisfaction, he even doubts that there is any proof for the same at all, and hence he equally doubts the existence of a God itself.”⁴⁶ The point is that this atheist is otherwise a person of good intentions who (rightly) has serious problems with speculative theological conclusions,⁴⁷ and tends to *put all their emphasis* on those speculative failures:

Atheism can be in mere speculation - in practice however such a [person] can be a theist or a devotee of God whose error stretches to theology, not to religion. Such people, who have fallen into atheism out of speculation, are not to be painted out so wickedly as one maintains - only their

⁴⁵ *Collins Ethics*, 27:311-2. “Der Ohngötterey ist also noch abzuhelfen. Auf der andern Seite aber ist der Mensch wieder so böse, daß, obgleich er weiß daß ein Gott ist, er doch so lebt als wenn keiner wäre... und eines solchen Handlungen sind religionswidrig und nicht religionsleer.” Alternatively, consider the Third Critique at 5:452: “...if [someone], as one of the faithful, follows their conscience sincerely and selflessly and nevertheless has faith, as often as they attempt to make the case, that if they could someday be convinced that there is no God then they would free themselves straightaway from all moral obligation: something involving the inner moral attitude in them must yet be badly set up.” [“Umgekehrt, wenn er sie als Gläubiger seinem Bewußtsein nach aufrichtig und uneigennützig befolgt und gleichwohl, so oft er zum Versuche den Fall setzt, er könnte einmal überzeugt werden, es sei kein Gott, sich sogleich von aller sittlichen Verbindlichkeit frei glaubte: müßte es doch mit der innern moralischen Gesinnung in ihm nur schlecht bestellt sein.”]

⁴⁶ 28:1010 and 28:1026-7: “Jener bestreitet nur die Beweise für das Daseyn eines Gottes, insonderheit die apodiktische Gewißheit derselben...”; “Denn dieser zweifelt, daß, weil die spekulative Vernunft nicht das Daseyn Gottes zu unserer Befriedigung beweisen könne, auch wohl überall keine Beweise für dasselbe statt finden, und zweifelt eben daher zugleich an der Existenz eines Gottes selbst.” Also cf the *Lectures on Ethics*, e.g. 27:530-1.

⁴⁷ Stijn Van Impe notes, tongue perhaps half in cheek, that this nicely describes *Kant himself*: “[G]iven Kant’s philosophical views on the existence of God as defended throughout his entire mature *oeuvre* and lectures, Kant himself is a ‘sceptical atheist’ from the standpoint of theoretical reason, i.e., one who stays unconvinced by the theoretical arguments for God’s existence, but who is open to positing this existence if it in fact proves necessary to conceive the realisability of the highest good, a condition which Kant firmly asserts and which makes him therefore a ‘moral theist’ from the standpoint of practical reason. Kant’s own position thus also implies that the only kind of theism that is at all intellectually honest and respectable is ‘moral theism’, never ‘dogmatic’ or ‘theoretical theism’.” See “Kant’s Moral Theism and Moral Despair Argument Against Atheism,” 760. Kant surely wouldn’t call himself an atheist, but this still invites the question of where the line between “moral theist” and “skeptical atheist” really is, if both are morally faithful. The answer presumably lies in the *theoretical* acceptance of the legitimacy of the practical postulates - which, as I have suggested, can really only be defended by the work of critique.

understanding was corrupted, but not their will, e.g. Spinoza did what a man of religion should do. His heart was good and would have been easy to bring to right - he only trusted speculative grounds too much.⁴⁸

With “Spinoza,” as with Garve and Schulz, if the question shifts from speculation to practice then their “heart” suddenly takes a stand against their “head”⁴⁹ and they will persist in “doubtful faith.” Here, too, Kant generally gives the sense that such theoretical non-belief just doesn’t amount to much. Such an “atheist” could agree that the existence of a God is at least not totally impossible, but grant nothing more theoretically - but this is already, Kant says, the “minimum of theology” necessary for moral faith.⁵⁰ Alternatively, perhaps such an atheist simply has an allergy to words like “God” or “immortality” while still accepting the same functional premises posed in other terms (a possibility which, so far as I’m aware, Kant doesn’t mention).⁵¹ In the worst case the skeptic merely contradicts themselves in performance, i.e. believes something

⁴⁸ From the *Collins Ethics* at 27:312: “Der Atheismus kann in der bloßen Speculation seyn, in der Praxis aber kann ein solcher ein Theist, oder ein Verehrer Gottes seyn, deßen Irrthum erstreckt sich auf die Theologie, nicht auf die Religion. Solche Personen die aus Speculation in den Atheismus verfallen sind nicht so böse auszustreichen, als man pflegt, ihr Verstand war nur corrupirt, nicht aber ihr Wille, z. E. Spinoza that das, was ein Mann von Religion thun soll. Sein Herz war gut und wäre leicht zurecht zu bringen gewesen, er traute nur den speculativen Gründen zu viel zu.”

⁴⁹ Lara Denis chastises Kant for not further clarifying this category of atheist: “[Kant] never systematically distinguishes between skeptical atheists who embrace faith in God, and those who do not – i.e., those who live with the recognition that God may exist, without themselves affirming that God does exist.” But on my reading this distinction would not make sense, as this skeptic is always someone who has faith *practically* while disbelieving *theoretically*. The confusion is in the two levels of cognition, not in two kinds of skepticism. See “Kant’s Criticisms of Atheism,” 204.

⁵⁰ 28:1010; also cf 28:998-9. At moments in the *Lectures* Kant even seems to grant that assuming a practical God does not require assuming even this God’s possibility, e.g.: “We can now confute [the skeptical atheist] in this way, when we straightaway grant him the insufficiency of all speculative proofs for the existence of God as an *ens realissimi*, yet on practical grounds still feel most deeply convinced that a God must be. We must assume a God and have faith in him, without reason daring to venture assuming his possibility and his existence a priori.” [28:1027. “Diesen können wir nun dadurch widerlegen, daß, wenn wir ihm gleich die Unzulänglichkeit aller spekulativen Beweise für das Daseyn Gottes als eines *entis realissimi* zugeben, wir dennoch uns durch praktische Gründe auf’s innigste davon überzeugt fühlen, daß ein Gott seyn müsse. Wir müssen einen Gott annehmen und an ihn glauben, ohne daß die Vernunft es wagen darf, seine Möglichkeit und sein Daseyn a priori anzunehmen.”]

⁵¹ Denis (“Kant’s Criticisms...” at 210ff) and Van Impe (“Kant’s Moral Theism...” at 762ff) both suggest that atheists of all stripes, including dogmatic atheists, could do exactly this, simply assuming something in place of God to get them to the highest good. Perhaps, but if it is to work by Kant’s rules then I suggest that the name “God” is most of what goes missing in that case - so that they would surely no longer be dogmatic atheists in the strict sense or even, as I suggest below, stuck in absurdity. By contrast, John Hare (“...Rational Instability...” 74ff), in response to Denis, suggests that anything of the sort would be unacceptable for Kant.

directly opposed to what they assume in their actions. But even such “absurdity” would not be the worst situation.

“Absurdity”, more exactly a theoretical opposition towards what one actually assumes in one’s actions,⁵² does come with a cost, but not a moral one; the cost is rather in, for lack of better terms, self-comprehensibility and ontological vision. Kant’s discussion of “Spinoza” in the Third *Critique* (a stand-in for any morally righteous person insisting on God’s theoretical impossibility),⁵³ on its surface one of the most difficult texts for my reading, in fact suggests that the consequence of following the moral law while explicitly denying any God or future life is that *one cannot make sense of one’s own moral conduct*, nor “see” the realm of ends whose being is nevertheless assumed. Kant writes in his conclusion to the text:

The end, then, which this well-meaning person has and should have before his eyes in following the moral law, he must indeed give up as impossible; or, if he still wishes herein to remain devoted to the call of his moral inner determination and not weaken the respect by which the moral law immediately instills in him for obedience (which cannot happen without a demolition

⁵² Hare calls this, as the title of his paper suggests, a “rational instability.”

⁵³ 5:452-3; I quote the entire text. “Wir können also einen rechtschaffenen Mann (wie etwa den Spinoza) annehmen, der sich fest überredet hält: es sei kein Gott und (weil es in Ansehung des Objects der Moralität auf einerlei Folge hinausläuft) auch kein künftiges Leben; wie wird er seine eigene innere Zweckbestimmung durch das moralische Gesetz, welches er thätig verehrt, beurtheilen? er verlangt von Befolgung desselben für sich keinen Vortheil, weder in dieser noch in einer andern Welt; uneigennützig will er vielmehr nur das Gute stiften, wozu jenes heilige Gesetz allen seinen Kräften die Richtung giebt. Aber sein Bestreben ist begränzt; und von der Natur kann er zwar hin und wieder einen zufälligen Beitritt, niemals aber eine gesetzmäßige und nach beständigen Regeln (so wie innerlich seine Maximen sind und sein müssen) eintreffende Zusammenstimmung zu dem Zwecke erwarten, welchen zu bewirken er sich doch verbunden und angetrieben fühlt. Betrug, Gewaltthätigkeit und Neid werden immer um ihn im Schwange gehen, ob er gleich selbst redlich, friedfertig und wohlwollend ist; und die Rechtschaffenen, die er außer sich noch antrifft, werden unangesehen aller ihrer Würdigkeit glücklich zu sein dennoch durch die Natur, die darauf nicht achtet, allen Übeln des Mangels, der Krankheiten und des unzeitigen Todes gleich den übrigen Thieren der Erde unterworfen sein und es auch immer bleiben, bis ein weites Grab sie insgesamt (redlich oder unredlich, das gilt hier gleichviel) verschlingt und sie, die da glauben konnten, Endzweck der Schöpfung zu sein, in den Schlund des zwecklosen Chaos der Materie zurück wirft, aus dem sie gezogen waren. - Den Zweck also, den dieser Wohlgesinnte in Befolgung der moralischen Gesetze vor Augen hatte und haben sollte, müßte er allerdings als unmöglich aufgeben; oder will er auch hierin dem Rufe seiner sittlichen inneren Bestimmung anhänglich bleiben und die Achtung, welche das sittliche Gesetz ihm unmittelbar zum Gehorchen einflößt, nicht durch die Nichtigkeit des einzigen ihrer hohen Forderung angemessenen idealischen Endzwecks schwächen (welches ohne einen der moralischen Gesinnung widerfahrenden Abbruch nicht geschehen kann): so muß er, welches er auch gar wohl thun kann, indem es an sich wenigstens nicht widersprechend ist, in praktischer Absicht, d.i. um sich wenigstens von der Möglichkeit des ihm moralisch vorgeschriebenen Endzwecks einen Begriff zu machen, das Dasein eines moralischen Welturhebers, d.i. Gottes, annehmen.”

befalling the moral attitude) by the nullification of the only idealistic end adequate to its high demand; so must he assume the existence of a moral author of the world, i.e. God, in practical intention - which he can very well do, in that it is at least not contradictory in itself - i.e. so as to make himself a concept of at least the possibility of the end morally prescribed to him.

But this “giving up as impossible” can go two ways. The obvious meaning is that he must renounce the moral law, and “demolishing” his own moral interest is indeed one way out. But the “Unmöglichkeit” could better be taken to mean that the end is inconceivable, unthinkable - the atheist cannot *understand* (theoretically) what he nevertheless cognizes in his conduct, i.e. he cannot even understand that conduct. If the price to be paid is not moral, it must be *ontological*. Kant asks, “How will he judge his own inner determination of purposes through the moral law which he actually reveres?,” and answers that the righteous atheist is of course acting for the sake of the law alone - but that “his endeavor is restricted [begränzt].” This must not be understood to say that this atheist would simply lack the *motivation* to act morally, as if the hypothetically necessary conditions of moral conduct were simply there to provide encouragement to otherwise blasé finite actors and that “Spinoza” is doomed to run his reserves dry. Such a reading smothers everything Kant says about acting “from duty”: confessing believers should suffer exactly the same motives against morality as the confessing atheist, and they should have the same motive for it.⁵⁴ What Kant means, if I understand his point, is that this

⁵⁴ I should note, against myself, that many other readers of this passage see Kant as expressing exactly the kind of position that I so strongly caution against. So, e.g., most of Lara Denis’ “Kant’s Criticisms...” is based on this psychological-motivational reading taken more broadly. Beiser’s “Moral Faith...” says at 617: “The [psychological] problem is posed with great clarity in §87 of the third *Critique*... where Kant imagines whether a righteous atheist – someone like Spinoza – would find sufficient motivation to act morally. He concludes that he would not have sufficient motivation, not because he would receive no reward for virtue... but because he would have no assurance that his efforts came to anything (5:452). A Spinozist has to reckon not with the prospect of divine punishment but sheer futility.” And Pasternack’s *Guidebook* at 35: “Kant... argues that the Righteous Atheist will succumb to despair and lose his motivation to follow morality.” And, with the consequences more clear, David Sussman, “Something to Love” at 144: “In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant [with the case of Spinoza] suggests that faith serves only to psychologically buttress failing moral resolve.” Thus: “Most normal people might indeed find that trust in the highest good is what best shores up their commitment to morality. But insofar as the issue here is purely one of

atheist can only understand his own morality *in isolation*, i.e. basically not at all. They can theoretically recognize no broader context which would allow them to make sense of their own moral behavior: the good guys are constantly losing, the bad guys are constantly being rewarded, everyone eventually suffers and dies, and nature as a whole lacks the morality which he himself feels. (“From nature he can indeed here and there expect an accidental accession but never any joint conformity... towards the ends which he himself nevertheless still feels bound and driven to effect.”) The moral atheist is alone; it is not that he cannot act morally (he does), but that he cannot make sense of his own relation *to the whole, to entities*.⁵⁵ Theoretical refusal of the conditions for one’s moral ends undermines (blinds) any understanding of entities as ends in themselves, as what “ought to be” (something I discuss below).

To be clear, I intend the above paragraphs to present Kant’s own position, not to endorse an argument that non-believers are incoherent or somesuch.⁵⁶ There is perhaps something unjust

motivational effectiveness, then any of the wide range of fantasies might have morally salutary effects, given the right background psychology.” Sussman’s last point, which clearly and quite fairly follows from such a reading, seems to me totally anathema to much of what Kant otherwise says, and that by itself should provide good reason to look for other interpretations. Beyond my own, one may find another excellent exception to this kind of reading in Andrea Marlin Esser’s “Applying the Concept of the Good,” although she does not draw the theoretical/practical divide as sharply as I do. E.g., 247: “[The atheist’s] ‘endeavour’ would still be limited or ‘circumscribed’ in a quite specific sense... This is not because such a virtuous atheist has a sufficient psychological motive for moral conduct only if he assumes that a final end and a highest good are possible... Rather, his endeavour is circumscribed because, given the particular way in which he sees the world and himself, he is incapable of appropriately articulating ‘his own inner purposive determination by the moral law’ (KU 5:452).”

⁵⁵ This hopefully answers the concern of Peter Byrne, who rightly noticed that the “motivational” reading of this passage starkly breaks with the pages beforehand. From *Kant on God*, 134: “...Kant appears to say contradictory things. On the one hand, the atheist cannot escape the force of the moral law through denying the existence of God; on the other hand, moral despair awaits those who deny the real possibility of the highest good. It is tempting to argue that Kant must have a consistent thought animating both of these assertions, for he enters both claims within a few pages of each other [in 5:450-453].” Byrne proposes that this thought might be that *individual* moral acts (not the highest good) are still possible for the atheist, but doubts whether this reading “saves Kant’s bacon” (135). A better way to find a “consistent thought,” as I suggest, is to read the atheist’s problem as not moral or motivational or even despairing at all, but a kind of theoretical blindness and self-inconsistency.

⁵⁶ Although I disagree with many of her readings, I myself wholly endorse Denis’ conclusion that “Moral theism is not so obviously superior to skeptical atheism as to justify morally condemning a skeptic’s refusal to become a moral theist.” (“Kant’s Criticisms...” 219) I refer readers more sympathetic to the other side of the argument to especially Chapter IX of Charles Kielkopf’s *A Kantian Condemnation of Atheistic Despair: A Declaration of Dependence*, which declares its intentions quite loudly in its title.

in Kant's characterization and more than a small portion of metaphysical assumptions behind it. Nevertheless, surely there is something to the thought that theoretical endorsement of something, either way, may not always be crucial, and surely it is true and remarkable that explicit atheists sometimes act *as if* there were a God and that explicit believers sometimes act *as if* there were none (*as if* Kant had been reading Simone Weil). For Kant, the assumptions we make for the sake of our practical projects can very well trump our explicit beliefs.

Yet it should be no shock that for the critical Kant we are not self-transparent in what we "believe" - he is already infamous for warning that we can never fully know our own practical maxims,⁵⁷ and the above is an extension of that same point. Indeed, a disconnect between faith and theory can and even occasionally must happen, if only due to the very nature of theoretical discourse itself. To take a holding-for-true native to practice and place it in the theoretical sphere is to submit it to the game of "justifying and being able to justify what one says" via theoretical grounds, where by nature it is not at all well-equipped. What was a mere practical assumption will there take on all the appearance of a factual *claim*: pragmatic faith can be read as, at best, a mere piece of reckoning, while moral faith looks like exactly the sort of speculative overreach that Kant was at pains to dismantle. Although Kant says that the case of moral faith is "quite different," what he says of doctrinal faith - that it has "something wavering in it," that "one is often put out of it by the difficulties which one finds in speculation, though indeed one inevitably turns back to it again and again"⁵⁸ - should apply *generally* in some degree: faith will *always* be

⁵⁷ See most famously the First *Critique* at A551/B579 at 3:373 and the *Groundwork* at 4:407.

⁵⁸ A827-8/B855-6, in 3:536. "Aber der bloß doctrinale Glaube hat etwas Wankendes in sich; man wird oft durch Schwierigkeiten, die sich in der Speculation vorfinden, aus demselben gesetzt, ob man zwar unausbleiblich dazu immer wiederum zurück kehrt."

theoretically shaky, even when one can never (practically) be put out of it.⁵⁹ Activity can have grounds quite different from theoretical claims, so that we act in ways that blatantly override our theory – and when we bring that reasoning into the theoretical light, it can seem indefensible. *How* we may nevertheless justify it is another question.⁶⁰

C. “The Highest Good” as Ontotheology

The introduction of a moral proof as a move beyond the 1763 system is therefore a radical transformation in how the Cartesian project of proving God’s existence is even to be conceived, and that above all in the introduction of “Glaube.” With “faith” now being one of the variables at play, it suddenly becomes possible to consider any theistic probative ground not just in terms of argumentative rigor (i.e. in terms of whether it actually terminates in knowledge) but in terms of its *intention*. Even if I cannot convince someone of a certain truth, or even demonstrate it to any measure of satisfaction, I may still show that they *presuppose* it in their practical conduct. And if such demonstration can be shown to suffer from fundamental problems - if theory turns out to be impossible - still one may shift the argumentative emphasis of rational

⁵⁹ For example, one could object to my reading by pointing out that the postulates of practical reason are supposed to be theoretical, i.e. that they should somehow be made explicit: “...by [postulate of pure practical reason] I understand a theoretical but as such unprovable proposition, insofar as it inseparably hangs onto an a priori unconditionally valid practical law.” (5:122: “...worunter ich einen theoretischen, als solchen aber nicht erweislichen Satz verstehe, so fern er einem a priori unbedingt geltenden praktischen Gesetze unzertrennlich anhängt...”) But the very admission that the *theoretical expression* (the Satz) of a practical presupposition cannot be proved shows that it really has no theoretical validity in itself; it would be laughed out of the schools were it not connected to something we necessarily *do*. Even that requires defense at a theoretical level, in some form or other. In any case, the faith itself (and its related activities) is more basic than any theoretical formulation of it.

⁶⁰ A practically necessary faith can indeed justify itself on a theoretical level by way of “postulation,” i.e. critically indicating grounds beyond the limits of theoretical evidence - which is, as I read him, exactly what Kant is up to in the “Doctrine of Method” and the Second *Critique*. But that is not to rule out the metaphysician’s being driven by other needs into the *demonstration* of what they presuppose for practice, i.e. the attempt to show that they *know* it. I speak on this phenomenon again in the final Chapter, as (on my account) it is crucial for understanding how and why the theistic proofs theoretically manifest themselves.

theology away from from such demonstration and towards *the clarification of our practice*, i.e., towards merely trying to make *theoretically* explicit our unavoidable *practical* commitments. Proving becomes “postulation.” It remains to be seen whether and how that is possible regarding any of the old proofs of 1763 (the topic of the next Chapter). But in contrast to them, I repeat that that is the *only* form in which Kant presents the moral proof: we are not given evidence and argumentation to support the existence of a moral lawgiver so much as shown that, insofar as we admit any final end to our willing, we *already do* support such an existence.

Yet it is precisely the nature of that final end, “the highest good,” which shows the continuity between the moral proof and the proofs from the previous chapters. “The highest good” is one of the most notoriously smoky and problem-prone concepts in the entire corpus;⁶¹ what makes it clearer almost immediately, however, is if one reads it as a *metaphysical* concept as much as a *moral* one. Those two things obviously cannot be really separated in Kant’s case, given that his ethics is precisely a “metaphysics of morals,” but I mean the point quite literally. Indeed, Kant even tells us that this is his project in the “Canon of Pure Reason”:

[Reason] has premonitions of objects which are a great interest for it. It treads the way of mere speculation in order to draw itself closer to them; but they flee before it. Presumably there will be hope of better luck for [reason] in the only way which is still left to it, namely that of its practical use.⁶²

One trial still remains left for us: namely, whether pure reason can also be found in practical use, whether it leads to the ideas which reach those highest ends of pure reason which we have just

⁶¹ I will not attempt to deal with the importance or unimportance of the highest good within Kant’s moral thought proper, which would take me afield from my present project (which concerns moral philosophy only obliquely). I will instead point the reader to several excellent recent papers on the topic, Beiser’s “Moral Faith and the Highest Good” and two recent efforts both collected together, namely Federica Basaglia’s “The Highest Good and the Notion of the Good as Object of Pure Practical Reason” and Pauline Kleingeld’s “Kant on ‘Good’, the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good.”

⁶² A796/B824, in 3:517. “Sie ahndet Gegenstände, die ein großes Interesse für sie bei sich führen. Sie tritt den Weg der bloßen Speculation an, um sich ihnen zu nähern; aber diese fliehen vor ihr. Vermuthlich wird auf dem einzigen Wege, der ihr noch übrig ist, nämlich dem des praktischen Gebrauchs, besseres Glück für sie zu hoffen sein.”

quoted, and thus whether, from the point of view of its practical interest, it may not grant the very thing it completely and utterly refuses us in view of the speculative.⁶³

Moral faith and what he will eventually call the “highest good” are precisely the first *Critique’s* answer to these metaphysical interests. “The highest good,” taken as a whole, perfectly recapitulates modern metaphysics in a new system composed of a special metaphysics - cosmology, psychology, and theology - with a general ontology. Certainly the items of special metaphysics are quite evident in the postulates, and a moral world, moral will, and moral God each even receives the title “highest good” from Kant at various points of terminological experimentation.⁶⁴ The leading and most extensive sense of the highest good, however, is precisely that of a *unity of all ends*, e.g.:

...the need for a final end assigned by pure reason, seizing the whole of all ends under one principle (a world as the highest good even possible through our cooperation) is a need of an unselfish will widening itself still beyond the observation of the formal law towards the production of an object (the highest good). - This is a determination of the will of a particular kind, namely through the idea of the whole of all ends...⁶⁵

⁶³ A804/B832, in 3:522. “Nun bleibt uns noch ein Versuch übrig: ob nämlich auch reine Vernunft im praktischen Gebrauche anzutreffen sei, ob sie in demselben zu den Ideen führe, welche die höchsten Zwecke der reinen Vernunft, die wir eben angeführt haben, erreichen, und diese also aus dem Gesichtspunkte ihres praktischen Interesse nicht dasjenige gewähren könne, was sie uns in Ansehung des speculativen ganz und gar abschlägt.”

⁶⁴ The highest good as *world*, *Second Critique* 5:110: “...virtue and happiness together constitute the possession of the highest good in a person, but also happiness distributed exactly in proportion of morality (as the worth of a person and their worthiness to be happy) constitutes the highest good of a possible world...” [“So fern nun Tugend und Glückseligkeit zusammen den Besitz des höchsten Guts in einer Person, hiebei aber auch Glückseligkeit, ganz genau in Proportion der Sittlichkeit (als Werth der Person und deren Würdigkeit glücklich zu sein) ausgetheilt, das höchste Gut einer möglichen Welt ausmachen...”] As *will*, *Groundwork* 4:396. “Thus [the good will] may indeed not be the only and entire good, but it must nevertheless be the highest good and the condition for all the rest, even all longing for happiness...” [“Dieser Wille darf also zwar nicht das einzige und das ganze, aber er muß doch das höchste Gut und zu allem Übrigen, selbst allem Verlangen nach Glückseligkeit die Bedingung sein...”] As *God*, *Groundwork* 4:408-9. “But whence do we have the concept of God as the highest good? Solely from the idea of moral perfection which reason projects a priori and intertwines inseparably with the concept of a free will.” [“Woher aber haben wir den Begriff von Gott als dem höchsten Gut? Lediglich aus der Idee, die die Vernunft a priori von sittlicher Vollkommenheit entwirft und mit dem Begriffe eines freien Willens unzertrennlich verknüpft.”]

⁶⁵ “On the Common Saying” at 8:279-80. “Aber nicht jeder Zweck ist moralisch (z. B. nicht der der eigenen Glückseligkeit), sondern dieser muß uneigennützig sein; und das Bedürfniß eines durch reine Vernunft aufgegebenen, das Ganze aller Zwecke unter einem Princip befassenden Endzwecks (eine Welt als das höchste auch durch unsere Mitwirkung mögliche Gut) ist ein Bedürfniß des sich noch über die Beobachtung der formalen Gesetze zu Hervorbringung eines Objects (das höchste Gut) erweiternden uneigennütigen Willens. - Dieses ist eine Willensbestimmung von besonderer Art, nämlich durch die Idee des Ganzen aller Zwecke...” Also of the *Second Critique* at 5:109 and the *Religion* at 6:5.

Given still further chance to develop this last sense, Kant also calls this “highest good” a *kingdom of grace, or kingdom or glory of God*:

[The final end of creation] is the glory of God, by which nothing else can be understood but that in the actual world there is a conjunction of ends of a sort which, taken as a whole, contains the highest good possible in a world, therefore the teleological supreme condition of the existence of the same, and is worthy of a divinity as moral author.⁶⁶

This final notion in particular reveals the highest good to present a relationship between a God and a particular *ontology* embracing a whole of entities, those entities being *ends*. It presents, by way of a moral lawgiver, an understanding of a way to be, not according to what there *is* but according to what *ought* to be. The moral proof of this God’s existence, then, even and precisely accounting for the innovations of “faith,” constitutes a *moral ontotheology*, and this still keeps it neatly alongside the ontotheologies of the previous proofs.

Fully exploring the *metaphysics* of Kant’s metaphysics of morals would require its own study, which is unnecessary for present purposes. What is of interest is the relationship between a certain God and a certain ontology, in this case an ontology of *supersensible* entities.

To be sure, one may worry that the notion of an “ontology” of any sort is to be tabled in the late Kant, since the topic became a matter of great ambiguity. This is most evident in the later *Metaphysics* lectures, where at first glance Kant almost reads as wanting to eliminate the term altogether. He says that ontology is “the science of the properties of all things in general,”⁶⁷ which seems simple enough, and yet this “farrago” of a concept immediately presents a problem:

⁶⁶ From *What is the Actual Progress...?* in 20:306. “...dieser Endzweck die Ehre Gottes sey, enthalten, wodurch nichts andres verstanden werden kann, als daß in der wirklichen Welt eine solche Zweckverbindung sey, die, im Ganzen genommen, das höchste in einer Welt mögliche Gut, mithin die teleologische oberste Bedingung des Daseyns derselben enthalte, und einer Gottheit als moralischen Urhebers würdig sey.” Also of the First *Critique*, A811-2/B839-40 at 3:526-7, and the Second *Critique* at 5:127-8, and the *Mrongovius Ethics*, 29:629

⁶⁷ From *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 29:784. “Wir fangen itzt die Wissenschaft von den Eigenschaften aller Dinge überhaupt an, die man Ontologie nennt.”

The science which should treat the properties of all things in general must be an a priori science... as ontology has no determinate object, so it can contain nothing but the principles of a priori cognition in general: thus ontology is the science of all the basic concepts and principles upon which all our pure rational cognition. But this science will not actually be called ontology... [for] the name indicates that it has a determinate object. But it has no object that would differ from the essence of reason, rather it considers the understanding and reason itself, namely the basic concepts and principles of the same in their pure use (or of pure reason and of pure understanding); the most becoming name would be transcendental philosophy.⁶⁸

Because ontology treats of *everything*, every object whatsoever, there is no specific difference to distinguish it from any other science. The “object” it deals with, since it is so general, effaces itself from consideration. Thus all one is left with is the particular nature of the *thinking* that directs itself *towards* objects. Ontology, the science of entities,⁶⁹ turns around on itself and becomes a science of the possibility of any thinking about entities whatsoever - it becomes transcendental philosophy. But transcendental philosophy, if it is to be what it is - the truth of ontology, as it were - is always first of all *critique of pure reason*.⁷⁰ Thus ontology, strictly thought through, goes from a science of being to a science of the principles of thinking (transcendental philosophy) to a critique of reason.⁷¹ The farthest implication is that transcendental philosophy and critique should simply *take over* the role of the old ontology and render it empty, since ontology properly has “no object.” The science of entities as entities should blow away like smoke.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 29:785-6. “Die Wissenschaft, die die Eigenschaften aller Dinge überhaupt abhandeln soll, muß eine Wissenschaft a priori seyn... dieweil die Ontologie keinen bestimmten Gegenstand hat, so kann sie nichts als die principien des Erkennens a priori überhaupt enthalten: die Wissenschaft also aller Grund Begriffe und Grund Sätze worauf alle unsre Reine Vernunft Erkenntniß beruht, ist Ontologie. Diese Wissenschaft wird aber nicht eigentlich Ontologie heißen... Der Name aber zeigt an, als hätte sie einen bestimmten Gegenstand. Sie hat aber keinen Gegenstand, der vom Wesen der Vernunft unterschieden wäre, sondern sie betrachtet Verstand und Vernunft selbst, nemlich die Grund Begriffe und Grund Sätze derselben in ihrem reinen Gebrauch (oder der Reinen Vernunft und des Reinen Verstandes); der schicklichste Name würde seyn transcendental Philosophie.”

⁶⁹ Cf *Metaphysik L2*, at 28:542.

⁷⁰ Cf *Metaphysik Mrongovius* 29:752-4.

⁷¹ In essence Kant is arguing that the science of being always faltered because it was never preceded by an adequate analytic of the “understanding of being” itself, a century and a half before Heidegger.

And yet in the published works “ontology” still remains present. In the “Architectonic” of the *First Critique*, notably, “ontology” is still listed first among the parts of the system of metaphysics,⁷² and indeed just before the “Dialectic” we find the unusual “On the Ground of the Differentiation of All Objects in General into Phenomena and Noumena” and a lengthy Appendix, “Of the Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection” - which together amount to a quite distinctive general ontology, insofar as they explore the meaning of “object” and the different distinctions within it (Kant using the term “object” to speak of entityness at the most general level.)⁷³ Thus even if transcendental philosophy and especially critique, as the proper investigation of the capacities of reason, have taken over *most* of ontology’s old load, this need not completely erase the task of interpreting the being of entities. If anything it *focuses* that job by making it better defined and more carefully directed.⁷⁴

The supersensible noumenon remains an object, i.e. an entity; there should be a distinctive way of conceiving that object (understanding its being), and with that a distinctive way for it to be.⁷⁵ Yet the highest good *unites* all such objects by way of the moral law:

For [through practical intent] we indeed cognize neither the nature of our soul, nor the intelligible world, nor the highest entity according to what they are in themselves, but rather have only united the concepts of them into the practical concept of the highest good as the object of our will, and [this] fully a priori through pure reason, but only by means of the moral law, and also merely in relation to the same in regard to the object that it demands.⁷⁶

⁷² A846/B874, at 2:546.

⁷³ Cf *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:218 - “[T]he teachers of ontology start at the top from Aught and Nothing, without being aware that these are already members of a division for which the divided concept is missing, which can be no other than the concept of an Object in general.” (“So wie die Lehrer der Ontologie vom Etwas und Nichts zu oberst anfangen, ohne inne zu werden, daß dieses schon Glieder einer Eintheilung sind, dazu noch der eingetheilte Begriff fehlt, der kein anderer, als der Begriff von einem Gegenstande überhaupt sein kann.”) Also cf *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 29:811.

⁷⁴ For a discussion of Kant’s ontology in more specifics the reader may refer to Karl Ameriks’ “The Critique of Metaphysics: Kant and Traditional Ontology,” especially 257ff.

⁷⁵ Kant, as is fairly well-accepted, insists that we have access to supersensible entities only through practical cognition; strictly speaking, it is *practical reason itself* which “gives” these objects. (See my final chapter.) Thus an ontology of the supersensible can only be an ontology of practical ends - and, for different reasons, vice versa.

⁷⁶ 5:133. “Denn wir erkennen zwar dadurch weder unserer Seele Natur, noch die intelligibele Welt, noch das höchste Wesen nach dem, was sie an sich selbst sind, sondern haben nur die Begriffe von ihnen im praktischen Begriffe des

At the extreme, *even the moral law itself* must be drawn into this highest good:

...if the moral law is already enclosed in the concept of the highest good as the supreme condition, then the highest good is not merely an object, but also its concept and the representation of its possible existence through our practical reason is equally the determining ground of the pure will: for then in fact the moral law, already enclosed in this concept and thought with it, and no other object, determines the will according to the principle of autonomy.⁷⁷

Not only are all of the elements of traditional metaphysics included within the highest good as a metaphysical whole, but this whole itself determines practical willing. Yet as I briefly discussed above, this totality of the supersensible embraces its objects by understanding them as *moral ends* - it is itself the most ultimate of those ends. The kind of ontology at issue, then, seems to involve *being an end*.

Being an end in this sense cannot mean, being an empirical result of some action; indeed, Kant quips that “one of the unavoidable limitations of man and of his practical rational capacity (perhaps also of all other worldly entities) is, with all actions, to look for a result from the same in order to discover something in it which could serve some end for him, and even prove the purity of [his] intention.”⁷⁸ Kant never claims that results “don’t matter” (since willing precisely means *acting to realize one’s ends*), but the end of a willing is not to be found in the result but *interior to the willing*. In some sense a willing just cannot *be* a willing without having an end for

höchsten Guts vereinigt, als dem Objecte unseres Willens, und völlig a priori durch reine Vernunft, aber nur mittelst des moralischen Gesetzes und auch bloß in Beziehung auf dasselbe, in Ansehung des Objects, das es gebietet.”

⁷⁷ 5:109-10. “Es versteht sich aber von selbst, daß, wenn im Begriffe des höchsten Guts das moralische Gesetz als oberste Bedingung schon mit eingeschlossen ist, alsdann das höchste Gut nicht bloß Object, sondern auch sein Begriff und die Vorstellung der durch unsere praktische Vernunft möglichen Existenz desselben zugleich der Bestimmungsgrund des reinen Willens sei: weil alsdann in der That das in diesem Begriffe schon eingeschlossene und mitgedachte moralische Gesetz und kein anderer Gegenstand nach dem Princip der Autonomie den Willen bestimmt.”

⁷⁸ From the *Religion*, 6:7. “Nun ist aber eine von den unvermeidlichen Einschränkungen des Menschen und seines (vielleicht auch aller andern Weltwesen) praktischen Vernunftvermögens, sich bei allen Handlungen nach dem Erfolg aus denselben umzusehen, um in diesem etwas aufzufinden, was zum Zweck für ihn dienen und auch die Reinigkeit der Absicht beweisen könnte...”

the sake of which one wills. If we are, so to speak, “result-oriented” (albeit not always in the right way), it is because we are more basically *end-oriented*, i.e. *teleological*:

Now we have in the world only a single kind of entity whose causality is teleological, i.e. directed towards ends, and yet at the same time is so characterized that the law, according to which they have to determine ends, is represented by them as unconditional and independent of natural conditions, though in itself as necessary.⁷⁹

We are the entities that we are, for Kant, only due to this - “Rational nature excepts itself from all the rest in this way, that it sets itself an end.”⁸⁰ But ends are not, for all that, necessarily something arbitrary. *Some* ends, what Kant in the *Groundwork* calls ends *in themselves* or *objective* ends, “depend upon motivic grounds which are valid for any rational entity,”⁸¹ i.e. they are determined by pure law. What makes those ends objective is that they, as it were, emerge from the nature of willing itself. In the *Religion’s* hierarchy of ends Kant writes:

An end is always the object of a tending-towards, that is, an immediate desire towards possession of a matter by means of [one’s] action... An objective end (i.e. the one which we ought to have) is that which is given upon us by mere reason as such. The end which contains the inescapable and equally sufficient condition of all others is the final end.⁸²

Thus the ends given purely by reason (and not as a matter of my own interest) have a special priority, and a being which distinguishes them from all other mere objects of possession:

An end is an object of voluntary choice (of a rational entity), by representation of which this [choice] is determined to bring forth this object with an action. - Now indeed I can be directed to actions as a means to an end, but [I can] never be compelled by others to have an end, rather I can

⁷⁹ From the Third *Critique*, 5:435. “Nun haben wir nur eine einzige Art Wesen in der Welt, deren Causalität teleologisch, d.i. auf Zwecke gerichtet, und doch zugleich so beschaffen ist, daß das Gesetz, nach welchem sie sich Zwecke zu bestimmen haben, von ihnen selbst als unbedingt und von Naturbedingungen unabhängig, an sich aber als nothwendig vorgestellt wird.”

⁸⁰ From the *Groundwork*, 4:437. “Die vernünftige Natur nimmt sich dadurch vor den übrigen aus, daß sie ihr selbst einen Zweck setzt.”

⁸¹ 4:427. “...objectiven [Zwecken], die auf Bewegungsgründe ankommen, welche für jedes vernünftige Wesen gelten.”

⁸² 6:6. “Zweck ist jederzeit der Gegenstand einer Zuneigung, das ist, einer unmittelbaren Begierde zum Besitz einer Sache vermittelt seiner Handlung, so wie das Gesetz (das praktisch gebietet) ein Gegenstand der Achtung ist. Ein objectiver Zweck (d. i. derjenige, den wir haben sollen) ist der, welcher uns von der bloßen Vernunft als ein solcher aufgegeben wird. Der Zweck, welcher die unumgängliche und zugleich zureichende Bedingung aller übrigen enthält, ist der Endzweck.” The final line at least *terminologically* confirms why the moral law must be “enclosed” in the highest good.

only myself make something into an end for me. - But that I am also bound to make something which lies in the concepts of practical reason into an end for me, and thus to have beyond the formal determining ground of voluntary choice (as right contains the like) a material [one] as well, an end which could be set against the end from sensible drives: this would be the concept of an end which is in itself a duty.⁸³

These ends, in their relation to *pure will* itself (practical reason), have an objective worth regardless of whether everyone agrees to value them or not, regardless of whether they are achieved: "...the end here is not as one to be effected, but rather a self-standing end."⁸⁴ "End in itself," "objective end," and the like, are Kant's names for *the supersensible entity as such* as given by practical reason.⁸⁵

Thus in Kant's moral ontology the "supernatural" entities (things-in-themselves, etc.) must not be conceived as, so to speak, shadowy copies of the usual entities of experience, outside of our vision but sharing basically the same kind of being. These entities *are* insofar as they are *ends* tended-towards in willing ("end" being an *ontological* concept).⁸⁶ Kant famously writes:

Now I say: man and every rational entity in general exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will - rather it must always be, in all its actions directed both towards itself and towards other rational entities, regarded equally as an end... Hence these are not merely subjective ends, whose existence as an effect of our action has a worth for us; rather [these are] objective ends, that is, things whose existence is an end in itself, and indeed one

⁸³ From the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:381. "Zweck ist ein Gegenstand der Willkür (eines vernünftigen Wesens), durch dessen Vorstellung diese zu einer Handlung diesen Gegenstand hervorzubringen bestimmt wird. - Nun kann ich zwar zu Handlungen, die als Mittel auf einen Zweck gerichtet sind, nie aber einen Zweck zu haben von anderen gezwungen werden, sondern ich kann nur selbst mir etwas zum Zweck machen. - Daß ich aber auch verbunden bin mir irgend etwas, was in den Begriffen der praktischen Vernunft liegt, zum Zwecke zu machen, mithin außer dem formalen Bestimmungsgrunde der Willkür (wie das Recht dergleichen enthält) noch einen materialen, einen Zweck zu haben, der dem Zweck aus sinnlichen Antrieben entgegengesetzt werden könne: dieses würde der Begriff von einem Zweck sein, der an sich selbst Pflicht ist."

⁸⁴ *Groundwork* 4:437. "...so wird der Zweck hier nicht als ein zu bewirkender, sondern selbstständiger Zweck..."

⁸⁵ Thus "ethics can even be defined as the system of the ends of pure practical reason," and the *highest good* would then be this unification of the objects of ethics. [6:381. "Aus diesem Grunde kann die Ethik auch als das System der Zwecke der reinen praktischen Vernunft definiert werden."]

⁸⁶ To his credit, Heidegger noticed this same point (that "end in itself" first of all has an ontological signification) in the 1927 *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* - cf §13.c through §14, p.137-154. But there he immediately tries to read Kant as attempting to do something like an ontology of the Dasein, and takes him to fail because the language of "end" still relies on the inappropriate use of an understanding the thing as product (according to production, ποιησις). I am not completely unsympathetic to his point but he totally ignores the original context, i.e. the complex of questions surrounding the highest good and the ought, i.e. the whole issue of *ethics*. Heidegger, for all his insight, characteristically never approaches Kant on his own terms.

of a sort that no other end can be set in its place to which they shall stand merely as a means for service, as without this nothing whatsoever of absolute worth would be encountered anywhere...⁸⁷

This is not just a cliché about “irreducible human value” but an account of what it means *to be* a supersensible or (here) a *rational* entity: it means to be *willed unconditionally*. This status, and the accompanying rule to never misuse such ends, even applies to God:

...hence [one must] never use this [subject of the moral law, i.e. rational entity] as a means, but likewise as an end alone. With right we attach this condition even to the divine will in view of the rational entities in the world as its creatures, as this rests on the personhood [i.e. the being an end in itself] of the same, through which alone they are ends in themselves.⁸⁸

All rational entities, finite or otherwise, *are* as ends in themselves.⁸⁹ To say that we do not “know” anything supersensible, as Kant evidently does, is not to deny them their own kind of being: “[I]s our cognition actually extended in such a way through pure practical reason, and is that which was transcendent for the speculative immanent within the practical? Indeed, though only in practical intent.”⁹⁰ They are properly given (“immanent”) when we shift from speculation to action. The best metaphysical term for the being of these entities (ends), then, is the *ought*. In his canonical definition of the practical as such Kant writes:

I here content myself to explain theoretical cognition as that whereby I know what there is, but practical [cognition as that] by which I represent to myself what ought to exist [was *dasein* soll]. According to this, the theoretical use of reason is that through which I cognize a priori (as

⁸⁷ From the *Groundwork*, 4:428. “Nun sage ich: der Mensch und überhaupt jedes vernünftige Wesen existirt als Zweck an sich selbst, nicht bloß als Mittel zum beliebigen Gebrauche für diesen oder jenen Willen, sondern muß in allen seinen sowohl auf sich selbst, als auch auf andere vernünftige Wesen gerichteten Handlungen jederzeit zugleich als Zweck betrachtet werden... Dies sind also nicht bloß subjective Zwecke, deren Existenz als Wirkung unserer Handlung für uns einen Werth hat; sondern objective Zwecke, d. i. Dinge, deren Dasein an sich selbst Zweck ist und zwar ein solcher, an dessen statt kein anderer Zweck gesetzt werden kann, dem sie bloß als Mittel zu Diensten stehen sollten, weil ohne dieses überall gar nichts von absolutem Werthe würde angetroffen werden...”

⁸⁸ From the *Second Critique*, 5:87. “...also dieses niemals bloß als Mittel, sondern zugleich selbst als Zweck zu gebrauchen. Diese Bedingung legen wir mit Recht sogar dem göttlichen Willen in Ansehung der vernünftigen Wesen in der Welt als seiner Geschöpfe bei, indem sie auf der Persönlichkeit derselben beruht, dadurch allein sie Zwecke an sich selbst sind.”

⁸⁹ “World,” insofar as it can be included among these entities, is thus not a self-standing thing; it is merely *the whole* of finite rational beings.

⁹⁰ In the *Second Critique*, 5:133. “Wird nun aber unser Erkenntniß auf solche Art durch reine praktische Vernunft wirklich erweitert, und ist das, was für die speculative transcendent war, in der praktischen immanent? Allerdings, aber nur in praktischer Absicht.”

necessary) that something is; but the practical [is that] through which what ought happen [was geschehen solle] is cognized.⁹¹

What Kant means by “what ought exist,” “what ought happen,” is not that these ends just “are not” until they actually exist or happen. They *are* precisely in their self-standing *as* that ought. Their proper being *just is* “oughting” (if one permits), permanent subsistence as a generally valid object of practical rational desire. Far from abandoning ontology, then, in his moral thinking Kant has produced one of the most rich and novel ontologies in the history of philosophy.

And I now repeat that the highest good, as the systematic whole of these ends, is described by Kant as a *kingdom of God*. If being an end has a special kind of being of its own, then it is precisely God, as a moral lawgiver, who secures that mode of being by making that highest good possible:

[We represent] the world in which rational entities dedicate themselves to the moral laws with their whole soul as a kingdom of God, in which nature and morals come into a harmony foreign to each of them by themselves through a holy author, who makes the derivative highest good possible.⁹²

[The final end of creation] is the glory of God, by which nothing else can be understood but that in the actual world there is a conjunction of ends of a sort which, taken as a whole, contains the highest good possible in a world, therefore the teleological supreme condition of the existence of the same, and is worthy of a divinity as moral author.⁹³

Leibniz called the world, so far as one takes heed only for the rational entities and their coherence according to moral laws under the rulership of the highest good [*i.e.* *God*], the kingdom of grace... Thus to see oneself in the kingdom of grace, where all happiness awaits us save so far as we do

⁹¹ A633/B661, 3:421. “Ich begnüge mich hier, die theoretische Erkenntniß durch eine solche zu erklären, wodurch ich erkenne, was da ist, die praktische aber, dadurch ich mir vorstelle, was dasein soll. Diesemnach ist der theoretische Gebrauch der Vernunft derjenige, durch den ich a priori (als nothwendig) erkenne, daß etwas sei; der praktische aber, durch den a priori erkannt wird, was geschehen solle.” Also cf the *Prolegomena* at 4:344.

⁹² From the *Second Critique*, 5:28. “Die christliche Sittenlehre ergänzt nun diesen Mangel (des zweiten unentbehrlichen Bestandstücks des höchsten Guts) durch die Darstellung der Welt, darin vernünftige Wesen sich dem sittlichen Gesetze von ganzer Seele weihen, als eines Reichs Gottes, in welchem Natur und Sitten in eine jeder von beiden für sich selbst fremde Harmonie durch einen heiligen Urheber kommen, der das abgeleitete höchste Gut möglich macht.”

⁹³ From *What is the Actual Progress...?*, 20:306, quoted above.

not ourselves limit our share in the same through unworthiness to be happy, is a practically necessary idea of reason.⁹⁴

Kant's metaphysics of morals is therefore, rather openly, its own kind of ontotheology, and the moral proof of God's existence precisely a critical postulation of this ontotheology. It is not the case, of course, that God in any way "decides" what is moral or not (Kant's is not a divine command theory of morality),⁹⁵ and he insists quite strongly that *moral theology* [Moraltheologie] must not be confused with *theological ethics* [theologische Moral]: "...for [theological ethics] contains moral laws which presuppose the existence of a highest ruler of the world, whereas moral theology by contrast is a conviction in the existence of a highest entity which grounds itself on moral laws."⁹⁶ Faith in the existence of God, and even the right concept of God, must be drawn from morality as we give it to ourselves - i.e., the concept of God must be in harmony with our moral ontology, and one must understand God through that kind of being.

But if God's necessity has been secondary to that of the moral law since the proof's first manifestation, the ontology of morality nevertheless has an immediate relationship to the presupposition of this God: "Morality, then, inevitably leads to religion, through which it extends itself towards the the idea of a powerful moral lawgiver beyond man, in whose will that final end (of the creation of the world) is what can and ought be likewise the final end of man."⁹⁷ The one

⁹⁴ A812/B840, in 3:527. "Leibniz nannte die Welt, so fern man darin nur auf die vernünftigen Wesen und ihren Zusammenhang nach moralischen Gesetzen unter der Regierung des höchsten Guts Acht hat, das Reich der Gnaden... Sich also im Reiche der Gnaden zu sehen, wo alle Glückseligkeit auf uns wartet, außer so fern wir unsern Antheil an derselben durch die Unwürdigkeit, glücklich zu sein, nicht selbst einschränken, ist eine praktisch nothwendige Idee der Vernunft."

⁹⁵ Cf, e.g., Insole's *Intolerable God* at 41-3.

⁹⁶ A632/B660, 3:421. "Nicht theologische Moral; denn die enthält sittliche Gesetze, welche das Dasein eines höchsten Weltregierers voraussetzen, da hingegen die Moraltheologie eine Überzeugung vom Dasein eines höchsten Wesens ist, welche sich auf sittliche Gesetze gründet."

⁹⁷ From the *Religion*, 6:6. "Moral also führt unumgänglich zur Religion, wodurch sie sich zur Idee eines machthabenden moralischen Gesetzgebers außer dem Menschen erweitert, in dessen Willen dasjenige Endzweck (der Weltschöpfung) ist, was zugleich der Endzweck des Menschen sein kann und soll."

calls for the other (“*To prescribe all human duties as divine commands already lies in each categorical imperative*”).⁹⁸ The extension of morality beyond my own willing, towards a highest good, ethical community, and ontology of ends, *needs* a divine moral ruler:

...the moral law leads to religion through the concept of the highest good as the object and final purpose of pure practical reason, i.e. to the cognition of all duties as divine commands, not as sanctions, i.e. as ordinances of a foreign will voluntary and contingent by themselves, but as the essential laws of every free will by itself, but which still must be regarded as commands of the highest entity, for we can only hope to attain the highest good, which the moral law makes a duty for us to set as the object of our striving, from a morally perfect (holy and benevolent) and likewise also omnipotent will, and hence through harmony with this will as well.⁹⁹

So only one such [ruler] can be thought as the supreme lawgiver of an ethical community; in view of which all true duties, thus also the ethical [ones], must equally be represented as his commands; [the same ruler] must also be an expert of the heart, so as to see through even the innermost of the attitudes of each and, as it must be in any community, to let come to each what their actions are worth. But this is the concept of God as a moral ruler of the world.¹⁰⁰

“Moral ruler of the world” is the name for the θεῖον of this ontotheology. In order to will the totality of rational ends - which is to say, in order for the *being* of those ends to be secured - I must presuppose the existence of the right kind of God.

The broader name for this kind of presupposition is *rational faith*, which is the topic of the next section. Before that, however, I make one final note in anticipation of discussions to come. I tried to show above that, just as the moral proof is not an argument for God’s existence,

⁹⁸ From the *Opus Postumum*, 22:120. “Alle Menschenpflichten als Gottliche Gebote vorzuschreiben liegt schon in jedem categorischen Imperativ.”

⁹⁹ From the *Second Critique*, 5:129. “Auf solche Weise führt das moralische Gesetz durch den Begriff des höchsten Guts, als das Object und den Endzweck der reinen praktischen Vernunft, zur Religion, d. i. zur Erkenntniß aller Pflichten als göttlicher Gebote, nicht als Sanctionen, d. i. willkürliche, für sich selbst zufällige Verordnungen eines fremden Willens, sondern als wesentlicher Gesetze eines jeden freien Willens für sich selbst, die aber dennoch als Gebote des höchsten Wesens angesehen werden müssen, weil wir nur von einem moralisch vollkommenen (heiligen und gütigen), zugleich auch allgewaltigen Willen das höchste Gut, welches zum Gegenstande unserer Bestrebung zu setzen uns das moralische Gesetz zur Pflicht macht, und also durch Übereinstimmung mit diesem Willen dazu zu gelangen hoffen können.”

¹⁰⁰ From the *Religion*, 6:99.” Also kann nur ein solcher als oberster Gesetzgeber eines ethischen gemeinen Wesens gedacht werden, in Ansehung dessen alle wahren Pflichten, mithin auch die ethischen), zugleich als seine Gebote vorgestellt werden müssen; welcher daher auch ein Herzenskündiger sein muß, um auch das Innerste der Gesinnungen eines jeden zu durchschauen und, wie es in jedem gemeinen Wesen sein muß, jedem, was seine Thaten werth sind, zukommen zu lassen. Dieses ist aber der Begriff von Gott als einem moralischen Weltherrscher.”

so it is not an argument that one ought to believe in God; instead it is the argument that we *already presuppose* God in our willing a highest good. That also means, insofar as we understand being in terms of the “ought.” But this notion of “presupposition,” of “a certain ancient opinion” fixed in my mind independently of any clear and distinct perception, has come up before. What we now stumble across in Kant’s moral proof, and more specifically in the concept of moral faith, is exactly what we found in our *retrograde* reading of Descartes’ *Meditations*: an ontotheology that has been presupposed *from the beginning*, long before any question of explicit theoretical decision. With the concept of “faith,” that is, Kant has now turned the problematic of the proofs the other way around.

II. Rational Faith and the Practice of Theory

If the moral proof, via its concept of “faith,” introduces something profoundly new into modern discourse on the proofs, in a certain way it also presents a *simpler picture* than the older proofs. In the first four Chapters we were able to make those proofs fit with the Heideggerian notion of ontotheology - that metaphysics secures any general ontology by way of assuming a θεῖον, a highest entity - at the price of our reading the proofs *backwards* as well as forwards. If a relationship clearly emerged in those proofs between their Gods and their various modes of being (thinking, causality, natural purposiveness), still that relation remained strange and unexplained, and the Cartesian proof in particular remained a mystery. What we have in the moral proof is the presentation of a much more straightforward ontotheology: we presuppose God’s existence for

the sake of the “ought,” God renders our ends *comprehensible* as the ends in themselves that they are. There is no call to “prove” God after the fact.

And yet this presupposition - moral faith - is a *practical* one, so that God is presupposed precisely as a *condition* for those ends; Heidegger’s tone, by contrast, often suggests that the relationship to the θεῖον is basically “theo-retical” (ontology is supposed to be an *understanding* of being, after all). Kantian faith and Heideggerian ontotheology do evidently have a structural kinship, in that they involve the presupposition of something for the sake of something else. But it remains to be seen whether and how Heidegger’s ontotheology can be reread as more practical, i.e. translated more exactly into Kant’s structures and terms.

Although my final Kantian correction of Heidegger will have to wait until the final Chapter, there is a more immediate question regarding the “theoretical.” Faith, as a distinctively practical holding for true, is evidently well-suited to morality - morality is, after all, “pure practice.” But at least in the *Critique* faith is by no means limited to the merely moral, gambling providing just one example. Thus, could there be some modality of “rational faith” which extends beyond the moral? Could the notion of Vernunftglaube (that word which famously closes the canonical presentation of the moral proof in the Second *Critique*) apply to something higher than mere gambling and medical diagnostics, but not to the heights of pure practice? To be sure, nothing theoretical would seem to apply; theory is “that whereby I know what there is,”¹⁰¹ and knowing and reckoning do not involve the faith structure. But it is quite otherwise with the practical conduct *relevant* to theory, namely *science*. For even if it *aims* at knowledge, science is surely not “purely” theoretical (as in Aristotle) in the sense of an activity that is

¹⁰¹ A633/B661, 3:421.

self-sufficient and has only itself as its result.¹⁰² Rather science is the curious middle area named above, a practical (but not immediately moral) activity that *concerns* itself with knowing albeit perhaps not even finally *for the sake of* that knowledge. But “just as practice owns its specific [kind of] sight (‘theory’), so theoretical research is not without its own practice.”¹⁰³

In the next chapter I intend to show the relevance of “rational faith” to the old proofs. This section first explores that concept’s limits, particularly by showing that *doctrinal* faith - a kind of *theoretically attuned* faith briefly mentioned above - is fully qualified to be a rational faith in the proper sense. Part of the difficulty lies in resolving how such a “theoretical” faith would even be a coherent concept. Beyond that I will show how such theological presuppositions could actually be relevant to science, and indeed make the case that even theoretical work, for Kant, still draws its worth ultimately (teleologically) from moral ends. All of this preparatory work will involve a brief tour around the entire critical system.

A. Doctrinal Rational Faith, Part I (An Analogon of the Practical)

“Vernunftglaube” is used only a few times in the *Second Critique*, cryptically so. But despite gaining a notoriety due to its deployment in that text’s moral proof,¹⁰⁴ the *Critique of Practical Reason* is not even the term’s first appearance.¹⁰⁵ Its real conceptual development

¹⁰² *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b. “And it would seem that [theory] alone is treated lovingly for its own sake: for it produces from itself nothing beyond the theorizing, and from practice we acquire for ourselves something greater or lesser beyond the act.” [“δόξαι τ’ ἂν αὐτῇ μόνῃ δι’ αὐτὴν ἀγαπᾶσθαι: οὐδὲν γὰρ ἀπ’ αὐτῆς γίνεται παρὰ τὸ θεωρῆσαι, ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν πρακτικῶν ἢ πλεῖον ἢ ἕλαττον περιποιούμεθα παρὰ τὴν πράξιν.”]

¹⁰³ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* 358. “Und wie der Praxis ihre spezifische Sicht (>>Theorie<<) eignet, so ist die theoretische Forschung nicht ohne ihre eigene Praxis.”

¹⁰⁴ At 5:126, quoted above.

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas Stang seems to think that the entire discussion of “Glaube” in the First *Critique* is really about “Vernunftglaube,” but his textual reasons are not clear to me (as Kant does not deploy the term there save in an atypical passage at A829/B857). Stang also suggests that the distinction between mere faith and rational faith is that

occurs two years earlier in the short 1786 essay “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?,” one of several texts written in response to the controversy between Jacobi and Mendelssohn and an essay which in many ways constitutes the apex of Kant’s critical considerations on rational theology (not surprisingly so given its relation to Mendelssohn, arguably the last great defender of the proofs in their traditional form). The very term “rational faith,” when it is introduced, shows itself to be a twist upon terminology previously deployed by Mendelssohn and Jacobi, and not autochthonous to Kant’s own vocabulary. In trying to clarify what it could mean that Mendelssohn tries to draw a theology from mere reason, Kant writes:

But since the expression ‘dictum of sound reason’ is yet always equivocal in the present question, and can be taken for either, as Mendelssohn himself misunderstood it, a judgment from rational perception [Vernunftesicht], or, as [Jacobi] appears to take it, a judgment from rational inspiration [Vernunfteingebung]: thus it shall be necessary to give this source of judgment another name, and none is more adequate than that of a rational faith.¹⁰⁶

Kant is quite clearly fusing together the “Vernunft-” prefix borrowed from his fellow writers with his own concept of faith as introduced in the *Critique*, even pointing out the initial and obvious vagueness in this term before getting clear on exactly what he means. “Every faith,” he adds, “must be reasonable [vernünftig] (for the final touchstone of truth is always reason); a rational faith alone is that which grounds itself on no other data than that which is contained in pure reason” - that is, in the very broadest sense every kind of faith must justify itself by

the latter has “intersubjective validity,” which also seems to me to have only tenuous support, relying as it does on a passage outside of the later discussion of faith itself. I agree that Vernunftglaube will in fact be intersubjectively valid, but that is far from saying that such validity is itself the *grounds* for rational faith - if anything, I suspect it is the *shared conduct* that such faith makes possible which first produces any intersubjective agreement. On all this see *Kant’s Modal Metaphysics*, especially 281-285.

¹⁰⁶ 8:140-1. “Da aber der Ausdruck: Ausspruch der gesunden Vernunft, in vorliegender Frage immer noch zweideutig ist und entweder, wie ihn selbst Mendelssohn mißverstand, für ein Urtheil aus Vernunftesicht, oder, wie ihn der Verfasser der Resultate zu nehmen scheint, ein Urtheil aus Vernunfteingebung genommen werden kann: so wird nöthig sein, dieser Quelle der Beurtheilung eine andere Benennung zu geben, und keine ist ihr angemessener, als die eines Vernunftglaubens. Ein jeder Glaube, selbst der historische muß zwar vernünftig sein (denn der letzte Probestein der Wahrheit ist immer die Vernunft); allein ein Vernunftglaube ist der, welcher sich auf keine andere Data gründet als die, so in der reinen Vernunft enthalten sind.”

something like “reasonability,” but not every kind of faith has its grounds *exclusively* in reason itself. Certain kinds of faith or holdings-to-be-true in general, as he has said in regard to pragmatic faith (here he speaks instead of “historical” faith), could be improved by better empirical data, but rational faith in the strict sense can and will never “know” anything further:

[I]f something is held to be true on objective although consciously insufficient grounds, hence is merely reckoned, so this reckoning can still eventually become knowledge by gradual supplementation in the same kind of grounds. Against this, if the grounds of the holding-for-true are just not objectively valid according to their kind, then faith can never become knowledge through any use of reason... pure rational faith can never be converted into knowledge by all the natural data of reason and experience, for the ground of the holding-to-be-true is (and, so long as we are human, will always remain) here merely subjective, namely a necessary need of reason only to presuppose, not to demonstrate, the existence of a highest entity.¹⁰⁷

This subjectively necessary presupposition of a highest entity, the reader will notice, lines up with what the First *Critique* previously called *necessary* faith, any faith opposed to the pragmatic in that it is “sufficient simply and for everyone” and “no one can cognize other conditions which lead to the end set forth.”¹⁰⁸ Necessary faith, as described there, comprises both *moral* faith and *doctrinal* faith.

And that reintroduces the question above: should rational faith include *only* moral faith, or (as a renaming of the awkward “necessary faith”) include doctrinal faith as well? That

¹⁰⁷ 8:141. “Andrerseits, wenn aus objectiven, obzwar mit Bewußtsein unzureichenden, Gründen etwas für wahr gehalten, mithin bloß gemeint wird: so kann dieses Meinen doch durch allmähliche Ergänzung in derselben Art von Gründen endlich ein Wissen werden. Dagegen wenn die Gründe des Fürwahrhaltens ihrer Art nach gar nicht objectiv gültig sind, so kann der Glaube durch keinen Gebrauch der Vernunft jemals ein Wissen werden. Der historische Glaube z. B. von dem Tode eines großen Mannes, den einige Briefe berichten, kann ein Wissen werden, wenn die Obrigkeit des Orts denselben, sein Begräbniß, Testament etc. meldet. Daß daher etwas historisch bloß auf Zeugnisse für wahr gehalten, d. i. geglaubt wird, z. B. daß eine Stadt Rom in der Welt sei, und doch derjenige, der niemals da gewesen, sagen kann: ich weiß, und nicht bloß: ich glaube, es existire ein Rom, das steht ganz wohl beisammen. Dagegen kann der reine Vernunftglaube durch alle natürliche Data der Vernunft und Erfahrung niemals in ein Wissen verwandelt werden, weil der Grund des Fürwahrhaltens hier bloß subjectiv, nämlich ein nothwendiges Bedürfniß der Vernunft, ist (und, so lange wir Menschen sind, immer bleiben wird), das Dasein eines höchsten Wesens nur vorauszusetzen, nicht zu demonstrieren.” Kant’s mention of “historical faith” in this discussion may presumably also be explained by reference to Pasternack’s discussion of the influence of Meier at “Development and Scope,” 296-303.

¹⁰⁸ Cf A823-4/B851-2, in 3:533-4.

“middle” category of faith, between (merely contingent) pragmatic faith and (necessary) moral faith, is necessary only in that the *conditions* are necessary - impossible to improve - given the particular end, not that that *end* is necessary in itself.¹⁰⁹ Doctrinal faith concerns *skill*, not morality. As I discuss below, this faith is more complicated still in that it is characteristically oriented towards the *theoretical*. A few recent readers of Kant (I specifically mention Andrew Chignell and Nicholas Stang), to be sure, have taken a deep interest in the concept of doctrinal faith and have even tried to include it within the broader scope of rational faith,¹¹⁰ but this is a difficult procedure indeed. Yet when Chignell says of “Doctrinal Belief” (worried as he is about the sectarian tone of the phrase) that he will simply call it “*Theoretical Belief*” “so as not to invite confusion,”¹¹¹ he seems to me to glide over the most knotted confusion inherent in the term - namely, how a cognitive structure evidently purpose-built for *practical* conduct can now apply to situations of *knowing*. Leslie Stevenson and Lawrence Pasternack (with much justification) both balk at the very idea of such a “theoretical” faith, precisely because if it is itself theoretical, i.e. making claims about what there is, then it breaks Kant’s well-established rules about the limits of theoretical speculation.¹¹² Yet the concept is there in the text all the same. If Kant here

¹⁰⁹ A823/B851, in 3:533. “This practical intent [of faith] is now either that of skill or morality, the first for discretionary and contingent ends, but the second for ends necessary per se.” [“Diese praktische Absicht ist nun entweder die der Geschicklichkeit, oder der Sittlichkeit, die erste zu beliebigen und zufälligen, die zweite aber zu schlechthin nothwendigen Zwecken.”]

¹¹⁰ See “Belief in Kant,” especially 345-354 and 357-9, and *Kant’s Modal Metaphysics*, 280-296. I particularly give Chignell high praise for noticing quite early that the redemption of the precritical proofs, shorn of their speculative ambitions, can only really make sense within the scope of doctrinal faith; this is the working premise of my next Chapter.

¹¹¹ “Belief in Kant” 245. In fact the text says “*theological belief*” here, which is surely a typo.

¹¹² Stevenson: “[T]he conception of doctrinal belief seems a mongrel one, trying to combine what for most of the time Kant sharply distinguishes, namely propositions within the limits of possible experience and those that go beyond those bounds. ‘Doctrinal belief’ does not itself seem to be a stable conception in his thought, and as far as I know it does not recur in the Critical philosophy.” (“Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge,” 95) She is right that the term does not recur (this is true of many discussions in the *Critique*), yet if the conception is read as only relating to theoretical *practice* rather than *claims* about “what there is” - which is what I will suggest - then the apparent mongrelhood vanishes. And Pasternack, writing directly against Chignell’s reading, quotes the late Kant against the very idea of a ‘theoretical’ faith: “[Chignell’s] thesis is severely impaired by Kant’s 1796 essay ‘On a Recently

seems to advocate something which goes entirely against its context and many of his other positions (here, the limits of theoretical reason), one should neither cheer on nor marginalize that thing until one is sure there is no other way to read it. If Kant has not taken a cognitive structure evidently purpose-built for practical conduct and then applied it to epistemic claims beyond experience, then perhaps something else is going on.

Thus the presence of doctrinal faith and its role within Kant's system is certainly a fun bit of trivia, but it is also (I will argue) utterly central to understanding Kant's interpretation of rational theology. I will argue that in the next Chapter that Kant ultimately *rehabilitates* most of the old 1763 system of the proofs by way of what he here characterizes as rational faith, and ultimately roots them in *rational need*: "... the ground of the [pure rational faith] is (and, so long as we are human, will always remain) here merely subjective, namely a necessary need of reason only to presuppose, not to demonstrate, the existence of a highest entity."¹¹³ But it is necessary to understand how that should be possible - i.e., we need a "theoretical" faith to match our "theoretical" proofs. To clarify, then, my objection to Chignell's "liberal" interpretive position that "theoretical reason itself" - by way of "theoretical" faith - "can provide grounds on which to

Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy'... In a long note on belief, Kant contrasts its theoretical and moral-practical senses and outright rejects the legitimacy of the former: 'the word "belief" does not occur at all in a theoretical sense' and "there is no theoretical belief in the super-sensible'" ("Development and Scope," 301) I completely agree about Kant's rejection of *theoretical* faith, but that is not yet tantamount to *doctrinal* faith. Here it is worth quoting Kant's full context: "One sometimes helps oneself to [the word 'faith'] in a theoretical understanding, as tantamount to something held as probable; and it must be marked well that of what lies out beyond all possible empirical limits it can neither be said that it probable nor that it is improbable, hence also that the word 'faith' in regard to such an object does not find any place in theoretical meaning. - Under the expression, 'this or that is probable,' one understands a middle thing (in holding-for-true) between reckoning and knowledge..." [8:396: "Man bedient sich des mittelsten Worts im theoretischen Verstande auch bisweilen als gleichbedeutend mit dem etwas für wahrscheinlich halten; und da muß wohl bemerkt werden, daß von dem, was über alle mögliche Erfahrungsgränze hinausliegt, weder gesagt werden kann, es sei wahrscheinlich, noch es sei unwahrscheinlich, mithin auch das Wort Glaube in Ansehung eines solchen Gegenstandes in theoretischer Bedeutung gar nicht Statt findet. - Unter dem Ausdruck: dieses oder jenes ist wahrscheinlich, versteht man ein Mittelding (des Fürwahrhaltens) zwischen Meinen und Wissen."}] Kant's reaction is clearly about faith being used in terms of *probability* - yet the notion of probability is nowhere used in the discussion of doctrinal faith.

¹¹³ 8:141.

form assertoric rather than merely problematic assents about certain things-in-themselves”,¹¹⁴ is that “doctrinal” should not be elided into “theoretical.” I don’t think he or Stang shows that it is finally theoretical reason that drives such faith, and I don’t think it’s quite what Kant says. But if I question his “liberal” Kantianism, I also depart from what Chignell calls the “moderate” position (that only pure morality allows for legitimate holdings-for-true beyond sensibility). Rather, I will make the case that doctrinal faith concerns *practice beyond the purely moral*, particularly the “contingent but still not inconsiderable intentions” behind practice in science. (One could call this Kantianism “middle left.”) I will therefore ultimately make the case that doctrinal faith can indeed be considered rational faith in Kant’s terms, albeit in this section I can only set the groundwork for it.

Faith, to recall, is never mere “belief” that something is the case - it is always part of what I have called the *faith structure*. It is only by *acting towards some intention* that we presuppose anything in the way distinctive to faith, as faith’s object is a *condition* for my end.

With that in mind, consider Kant’s exact language in his presentation of “doctrinal faith”:

But because in many cases - when in relation to an object where we cannot undertake anything at all, hence the holding-for-true is merely theoretical - we can yet seize and surmise for ourselves an undertaking in thought for which we reckon that we have sufficient grounds, if there is any means to make out [ausmachen] the certainty of the matter - so there is in mere theoretical judgments an analogon of the practical, the holding-for-true of which fits the word ‘faith,’ and which we can name doctrinal faith. If it were possible to decide [ausmachen] through any sort of experience, so I might gamble everything of mine [on the fact] that there are inhabitants on at least one of the planets which we see. Whence I say that it is not mere reckoning but a strong faith (on whose correctness I would yet risk plenty of life assets) that there are also inhabitants on other worlds.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ “Belief in Kant” 257.

¹¹⁵ A825/B853, in 3:535. “Weil aber, ob wir gleich in Beziehung auf ein Object gar nichts unternehmen können, also das Fürwahrhalten bloß theoretisch ist, wir doch in vielen Fällen eine Unternehmung in Gedanken fassen und uns einbilden können, zu welcher wir hinreichende Gründe zu haben vermeinen, wenn es ein Mittel gäbe, die Gewißheit der Sache auszumachen, so giebt es in bloß theoretischen Urtheilen ein Analogon von praktischen, auf deren Fürwahrhaltung das Wort Glauben paßt, und den wir den doctrinalen Glauben nennen können. Wenn es möglich wäre durch irgend eine Erfahrung auszumachen, so möchte ich wohl alles das Meinige darauf verwetten, daß es wenigstens in irgend einem von den Planeten, die wir sehen, Einwohner gebe. Daher sage ich, ist es nicht bloß

Extraterrestrials aside,¹¹⁶ this language does not at all describe doctrinal faith as “theoretical,” but in fact maps out a *transition* from mere speculation into faith. We *begin* in a “merely theoretical” situation where we can do nothing but guess about whatever is under consideration, albeit in a way where experience will never contradict us (“...when in relation to an object *where we cannot undertake anything at all*, hence the holding-for-true is merely theoretical...”), but from there we *act* by “undertaking” something (if only “in thought”) for which the unknown object becomes a *condition*. The thing at issue is *now* no longer just an object for speculation, but that whereby my undertaking becomes meaningful. The actual sequence described in the passage (from inaction to action) is, of course, rather accidental, and could well go in reverse: Kant’s point is the contrast in *attitudes*. The thing at issue, even if quite unknown, is now no longer just an object of contemplation: it now renders a *sense* to my actions by rendering my ends possible. (Whence Kant can say at the end of this same discussion that “[t]he word faith, however, goes only for the direction which an idea gives me and the subjective influence on the advancement of my rational actions, which firmly holds me to the same although just the same I am not in any standing to give an account of it in speculative intent.”)¹¹⁷

What I argue, then, is that doctrinal faith may be *thematically and divisionally* theoretical but also *structurally* practical - i.e., that doctrinal faith always requires the faith structure, hence

Meinung, sondern ein starker Glaube (auf dessen Richtigkeit ich schon viele Vortheile des Lebens wagen würde), daß es auch Bewohner anderer Welten gebe.”

¹¹⁶ Faith in the existence of extraterrestrials is doctrinal, presumably, because Kant thought (for reasons questionable to the contemporary reader) that there could never be any experience to decide the matter. Why this is faith and not mere reckoning - why Kant does not simply *suspect* life on other planets, but instead has “a strong faith (on whose correctness I would yet risk plenty of life assets),” that he would “gamble everything” on it - is not clear. But presumably there is *some* for-the-sake-of-which, *some* conduct for which this bet would be the condition; perhaps Kant is here a zoologist for whom alien life provides a useful limit case to work towards.

¹¹⁷ A827/B855, in 3:526. “Das Wort Glauben aber geht nur auf die Leitung, die mir eine Idee giebt, und den subjectiven Einfluß auf die Beförderung meiner Vernunftthandlungen, die mich an derselben festhält, ob ich gleich von ihr nicht im Stande bin in speculativer Absicht Rechenschaft zu geben.”

a practical conduct of some kind, but that if one were to assign it to a *place* in the division of sciences (philosophy) it would nevertheless fall on the theoretical side.¹¹⁸ One must keep this tension in place in order to understand the phenomenon. As Kant makes clear at the beginning of the Third *Critique*, the fact that theoretical disciplines have certain practical conducts associated with them does not thereby relocate any such conduct into practical philosophy proper; rather, anything of the kind remains a practical conduct *within* a theoretical context. I quote:

All technical-practical rules (i.e. those of art and skill overall, or also of prudence as a skill in having influence on men and their will), so far as their principles are based on concepts, must be counted only as corollaries to theoretical philosophy. For they concern only the possibility of things according to natural concepts...

Thus so little does the solving of the problems of pure geometry belong to a special part of the same, or the art of measuring fields deserve the name of a practical geometry as a second part of geometry in distinction from the pure: so, and still less, may the mechanical or chemical art of experiments or observations be counted for a practical part of natural science, [and] finally [not] home, farm, and state economics, the art of society, the prescriptions of dialectics, not even the general doctrine of happiness, yet not even the restraint of inclinations and the taming of the affects for the purpose of the latter [may be counted] as practical philosophy, or the latter even make up the second part of philosophy overall; for they together contain only rules of skill, which are therefore only technical-practical, for bringing forth effects that are possible according to natural concepts of causes and effects, which, as they belong to theoretical philosophy, are subject to those prescriptions as mere corollaries from the same (natural science), and thus can claim no place in a special philosophy which is called practical...

From this one sees that an inclusive concept of practical prescriptions, which philosophy gives, does not make up a special part of the same, set to the side of the theoretical, just because they are practical; for they could be that [even] if their principles were now taken wholly out of the theoretical cognition of nature (as technical-practical rules)...¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ To clarify: if I argue that there is no “theoretical faith” in the strict sense - that faith is always practical in some way - it is tempting to imagine a kind of sliding scale going from the purely practical (the moral) to the purely theoretical, with doctrinal faith perhaps being able to indefinitely approach mere theory without ever touching it. Yet this is not the right picture. The point is that faith as such implies an end for which it is assumed, and any end is given only in practical conduct - even if that conduct is done *for the sake of* theory. It is not a question of admixture, but of structure. Considered the other way around, this point also shows how doctrinal faith can still be the *theoretical* analogon of practice while not being a piece of theory - it is the *context* which is theoretical, not the holding-for-true.

¹¹⁹ 5:172-3. “Alle technisch=praktische Regeln (d.i. die der Kunst und Geschicklichkeit überhaupt, oder auch der Klugheit, als einer Geschicklichkeit auf Menschen und ihren Willen Einfluß zu haben), so fern ihre Principien auf Begriffen beruhen, müssen nur als Corollarien zur theoretischen Philosophie gezählt werden. Denn sie betreffen nur die Möglichkeit der Dinge nach Naturbegriffen...

“So wenig also die Auflösung der Probleme der reinen Geometrie zu einem besonderen Theile derselben gehört, oder die Feldmeßkunst den Namen einer praktischen Geometrie zum Unterschiede von der reinen als ein zweiter Theil der Geometrie überhaupt verdient: so und noch weniger darf die mechanische oder chemische Kunst der Experimente oder der Beobachtungen für einen praktischen Theil der Naturlehre, endlich die Haus=, Land=,

The practical activities at work in theoretical spheres are still *within* those theoretical spheres, and what goes for the activities relevant to theory also goes for the faith relevant to those activities. Doctrinal faith, as a “*theoretical* analogon of practical judgments” is always tied to activity which is theoretically committed¹²⁰ - tet it is always tied *to that activity*, not a claim to knowledge.

Faith always provides the condition for an activity’s end, even if that activity and end are theoretically oriented; although it remains completely possible to “presuppose” something in non-practical, purely speculative cognition, still that is not faith. Kant briefly airs exactly this kind of contrast in the “Orientation” essay:

In the use [of reason] which theoretically satisfies it, this need of reason [to presuppose God’s existence] would be nothing other than a pure rational hypothesis, i.e. a reckoning which would be sufficient for holding-for-true on subjective grounds: this, because one can never expect any other ground than this for explaining given effects, and reason yet needs an explanatory ground. Against this, rational faith, which rests upon the need of [reason’s] use in practical intention, could be called a postulate of reason: not as if it were a perception which makes sufficient all logical requirement for certainty, but because this holding-for-true (if only everything is set up well in the human being morally) stands inferior in grade to no knowledge, although it is equally completely different from it in kind.¹²¹

Staatwirthschaft, die Kunst des Umganges, die Vorschrift der Diätetik, selbst nicht die allgemeine Glückseligkeitslehre, sogar nicht einmal die Bezähmung der Neigungen und Bändigung der Affecten zum Behuf der letzteren zur praktischen Philosophie gezählt werden, oder die letzteren wohl gar den zweiten Theil der Philosophie überhaupt ausmachen; weil sie insgesamt nur Regeln der Geschicklichkeit, die mithin nur technisch=praktisch sind, enthalten, um eine Wirkung hervorzubringen, die nach Naturbegriffen der Ursachen und Wirkungen möglich ist, welche, da sie zur theoretischen Philosophie gehören, jenen Vorschriften als bloßen Corollarien aus derselben (der Naturwissenschaft) unterworfen sind und also keine Stelle in einer besonderen Philosophie, die praktische genannt, verlangen können...

“Man sieht hieraus, daß ein Inbegriff praktischer Vorschriften, welche die Philosophie giebt, nicht einen besonderen, dem theoretischen zur Seite gesetzten Theil derselben darum ausmache, weil sie praktisch sind; denn das könnten sie sein, wenn ihre Principien gleich gänzlich aus der theoretischen Erkenntniß der Natur hergenommen wären (als technisch=praktische Regeln)...”

¹²⁰ Yet one should not thereby grant that Chignell and Stang are right after all, i.e. that the theoretical use of reason (by way of doctrinal faith) can now legitimately hold something for true beyond the realm of sensibility. The supersensible use of doctrinal faith is more like a peculiar *widening of the use of practical reason* - I still presuppose something for the sake of a practical end, except that the end is here merely contingent (but not without validity for all that).

¹²¹ 8:141. “Dieses Bedürfniß der Vernunft zu ihrem sie befriedigenden theoretischen Gebrauche würde nichts anders als reine Vernunfthypothese sein, d. i. eine Meinung, die aus subjectiven Gründen zum Fürwahrhalten zureichend wäre: darum, weil man gegebene Wirkungen zu erklären niemals einen andern als diesen Grund erwarten kann, und

The holding-for-true (“hypothesis”) which would satisfy a merely *theoretical* reason is not faith at all, but a *reckoning*, albeit a special kind of reckoning wherein there is no experience available to decide the issue. This “speculative reckoning” (if the reader needs a term) is in some ways comparable to doctrinal faith - as a mere reckoning it is not dogmatic, as it makes no claim to certainty (only to likelihood) - yet it has somehow gone astray. Doctrinal faith still has something which a mere speculative reckoning lacks, namely a purpose beyond immediate theoretical satisfaction: the only thing reason is looking for in this case is an “explanatory ground,” the termination of a chain of effects, and once reason settles upon a highest entity as providing this ground (albeit only via a shaky reckoning) its job is done. Here I hold the existence of God for true only for the sake of making whole my *explanatory theories*, not for the sake of anything I try to *do*. Indeed, this is far from the most extreme case of such presuppositions: elsewhere Kant speaks of what he calls “lazy reason” and “perverse reason” in science, the errors of a constitutive (rather than regulative) use of the idea of a highest entity wherein I declare further scientific work unnecessary because (through God) I already have the answers.¹²² What such theosophical hubris has done, Kant says, is taken a presupposition meant to spur forward our *work* and *impose* it theoretically upon nature. This error might be called, if one likes, *speculative presumption*. Both phenomena (speculative reckoning or presumption) show that much the same

die Vernunft doch einen Erklärungsgrund bedarf. Dagegen der Vernunftglaube, der auf dem Bedürfnis ihres Gebrauchs in praktischer Absicht beruht, ein Postulat der Vernunft heißen könnte: nicht als ob es eine Einsicht wäre, welche aller logischen Forderung zur Gewißheit Genüge thäte, sondern weil dieses Fürwahrhalten (wenn in dem Menschen alles nur moralisch gut bestellt ist) dem Grade nach keinem Wissen nachsteht, ob es gleich der Art nach davon völlig unterschieden ist.” One can also refer to the Second *Critique* at 5:142-3 for a reiteration of the point. I hold off on that comment about “moral set-up” for a moment, on the promise to address it further on.

¹²² Cf A689-92/B717-20, in 3:453-5; also cf the *Lectures* at 28:997 and 28:1071.

presuppositions can be deployed in entirely different practical or theoretical structures and directions, either for faith or for epistemic claims.

But in the *Critique's* discussions of faith the practical structure *never* turns into any mere epistemic claim, even in the more scientific context of doctrinal faith. It is obvious in the “Canon” that the crucial case is that of the existence of God:

Now we must confess that the doctrine [Lehre] of the existence of God belongs to doctrinal faith. For though in regard to theoretical knowledge of the world I have nothing at my disposal which necessarily presupposes this thought as the condition of my explanations of the appearances of the world, rather on the contrary I am bound to so use my reason as if everything were mere nature: yet endful unity is such a great condition of the application of reason to nature that I cannot at all pass it by, inasmuch as experience moreover presents me abundant examples thereof. But I cognize no other condition for this unity which made it my guide for natural science, except if I presuppose that a highest intelligence ordered everything according to the wisest ends. It follows that it is a condition of one indeed contingent but still not inconsiderable intention, namely having a direction in the investigation of nature, to presuppose a wise world author. Moreover the outcome of my endeavors [in investigating nature] so often bear out the usefulness of this presupposition, and nothing can be invoked against it in a decisive way, that I say far too little if I would name my holding-for-true merely a reckoning; rather even in these theoretical circumstances it can be said that I firmly have faith in a God; but thereupon this faith is not yet practical in the strict meaning, rather it must be called a doctrinal faith, which the theology of nature (physicotheology) must everywhere necessarily effect.¹²³

The relation that this faith (here a critically limited physicotheological proof) has to knowledge turns out to be quite indirect. Obviously faith in God is itself not knowledge, but more than that it

¹²³ A826-7/B854-5, in 3:535. “Nun müssen wir gestehen, daß die Lehre vom Dasein Gottes zum doctrinalen Glauben gehöre. Denn ob ich gleich in Ansehung der theoretischen Weltkenntniß nichts zu verfügen habe, was diesen Gedanken als Bedingung meiner Erklärungen der Erscheinungen der Welt nothwendig voraussetze, sondern vielmehr verbunden bin, meiner Vernunft mich so zu bedienen, als ob alles bloß Natur sei: so ist doch die zweckmäßige Einheit eine so große Bedingung der Anwendung der Vernunft auf Natur, daß ich, da mir überdem Erfahrung reichlich davon Beispiele darbietet, sie gar nicht vorbeigehen kann. Zu dieser Einheit aber kenne ich keine andere Bedingung, die sie mir zum Leitfaden der Naturforschung machte, als wenn ich voraussetze, daß eine höchste Intelligenz alles nach den weisesten Zwecken so geordnet habe. Folglich ist es eine Bedingung einer zwar zufälligen, aber doch nicht unerheblichen Absicht, nämlich um eine Leitung in der Nachforschung der Natur zu haben, einen weisen Welturheber vorzusetzen. Der Ausgang meiner Versuche bestätigt auch so oft die Brauchbarkeit dieser Voraussetzung, und nichts kann auf entscheidende Art dawider angeführt werden, daß ich viel zu wenig sage, wenn ich mein Fürwahrhalten bloß ein Meinen nennen wollte; sondern es kann selbst in diesem theoretischen Verhältnisse gesagt werden, daß ich festiglich einen Gott glaube; aber alsdann ist dieser Glaube in strenger Bedeutung dennoch nicht praktisch, sondern muß ein doctrinaler Glaube genannt werden, den die Theologie der Natur (Physikotheologie) nothwendig allerwärts bewirken muß.”

does not even supply the *condition* for any knowledge - to the contrary, I gain whatever knowledge I have through observation of the facts of nature, not by way of reflective judgment or critique (“Teleology as science therefore belongs to no doctrine at all [i.e. neither theology nor natural science], but only to critique, and indeed to a particular cognitive capacity, namely judgmental power”¹²⁴). This faith is instead the condition for “having a direction [Leitung] in the investigation of nature,” “the application [Anwendung] of reason to nature” - not a condition for *knowing* anything, but rather for *doing science*. Faithful presupposition, as Kant describes it here, only acts as the “guide [Leitfaden] for natural science,” i.e. it “yields” new relationships which might otherwise have been passed over and thus opens up avenues for concrete research even if it is totally disallowed from saying anything in advance about the *results* of such research (which can only be discovered empirically).¹²⁵ The presupposition of God (the faith) always relates to the *science*, as a *condition* for the ends of scientific work, not as a replacement for that work. And if Kant insists, justifiably, that the “theoretical circumstances” keep this faith from being purely practical in the strict meaning - i.e., *moral* - then he also cannot say that it is purely theoretical, i.e. only making claims about “what there is.” Presumably this is why he uses the

¹²⁴ From the Third *Critique*, 5:417. “Die Teleologie als Wissenschaft gehört also zu gar keiner Doctrin, sondern nur zur Kritik und zwar eines besondern Erkenntnißvermögens, nämlich der Urtheilskraft.”

¹²⁵ This seems to me to partly resolve a problem brought up by Sebastian Gardner in his “Primacy of Practical Reason”. Gardner writes, “If Kant's thesis of the primacy of practical reason has a deeper meaning – if practical reason is explanatory of the constitution of theoretical reason, and/or properly determinative of its operations – then more must go into the idea, and it is natural to think that this must have to do with Kant's claim about the telos of reason... the onus is on Kant to give some account [of why theory has need of the theological postulates]... to the extent that theoretical reason has an interest *of its own* in the postulates, due to their giving application to its own highest but problematic Ideas, this interest lies in its *being true* that there is a God, etc.: and the postulates can serve this interest only if theoretical reason can be assured that it is indeed true that there is a God, etc.” (267-8) But the theoretical interest in God properly lies not in *knowing* that God exists, but in being able to *presuppose* God (through doctrinal faith) for the purpose of theoretical work (science). Thus even without being pointed to any directly moral ends, theory always still relies at least on a kind of *technical-practical* primacy - more is said to the details of this below. But Gardner is also quite right to think that this should have something to do with the teleological union of reason, and I make a case for how even theoretical reason should be (teleologically, indirectly) moral below as well.

term “doctrinal” (something that merely *instructs*) rather than speaking of a “theoretical” faith, even though it would have been a more obvious terminological parallel to the “moral” one.

B. Doctrinal Rational Faith, Part II (The Value of Science)

Even if its accompanying activity is characteristically scientific and theoretical, doctrinal faith therefore *remains faith*, always only positing the condition for the end of some practical activity. This faith is practical, albeit not *divisionally and thematically* practical, in that Kant limits *the* practical as a sphere (i.e. practical philosophy) to pure morality.

But even if the above seems evident, it still presents a serious problem regarding *doctrinal* faith’s relation to *rational* faith. Doctrinal faith is not a part of morality, while in various asides Kant implies that rational faith involves being moral: “[R]ational faith... (*if only everything is set up well in the human being morally*) stands inferior in grade to no knowledge, although it is equally completely different from it in kind”;¹²⁶ “A pure rational faith is thus the waymarker or compass whereby... *the man of common yet (morally) sound reason* can fully adequately predetermine his way both in theoretical and practical intention to the whole end of his determination...”¹²⁷ (my emphases). Kant stops short of saying that rational faith *only* belongs to morality, i.e. that moral faith alone can be rational, but here and elsewhere he at least

¹²⁶ 8:141.

¹²⁷ 8:142. “Ein reiner Vernunftglaube ist also der Wegweiser oder Compaß, wodurch der speculative Denker sich auf seinen Vernunftstreifereien im Felde übersinnlicher Gegenstände orientiren, der Mensch von gemeiner, doch (moralisch) gesunder Vernunft aber seinen Weg sowohl in theoretischer als praktischer Absicht dem ganzen Zwecke seiner Bestimmung völlig angemessen vorzeichnen kann; und dieser Vernunftglaube ist es auch, der jedem anderen Glauben, ja jeder Offenbarung zum Grunde gelegt werden muß.”

puts emphasis on a deep *connection* between rational faith and morality. How, then, could merely doctrinal faith count as a “Vernunftglaube”?

To twist the knife still further, it could be objected that most of the texts I have quoted are still early in Kant’s critical career, whereas the later Kant takes an even harder turn towards the moral (rendering any doctrinal rational faith completely moot). Most relevantly, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* not only seems to totally omit the theoretical use of reason from the table of the higher faculties¹²⁸ (notwithstanding his continuing to talk about it), but the discussion of faith in the same book, in contrast to earlier texts, now limits that concept *exclusively to morality*.

Kant writes:

Faith (as *habitus*, not as *actus*) is reason's moral way of thinking in the holding-for-true of that which is inaccessible for theoretical cognition. It is thus the tenacious principle of the mind to accept as true what is necessary to presuppose as a condition for the possibility of the highest moral final end, due to the bindingness of [that final end]... Faith (simply so named) is a trust in reaching an intent whose advancement is a duty, but the possibility of carrying it out is for us not to be perceived. Thus faith which bears upon particular objects that are not objects of possible knowledge or reckoning... is wholly moral. It is a free holding-for-true, not of that for which one encounters dogmatic proofs for the theoretically determined judgmental power, nor of that to which we hold ourselves to be bound, but of what we accept for the purpose of an intent according to the laws of freedom; but still not as a reckoning without a sufficient ground, but as grounded in reason (although only in regard to its practical use) sufficiently for its intent: for without it the moral way of thinking has no firm tenacity in its offence against the demand of theoretical reason for proof (of the possibility of the object of morality), rather it wavers between practical commands and theoretical doubts.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Cf 5:195-8.

¹²⁹ Cf 5:471-2. “Glaube (als habitus, nicht als actus) ist die moralische Denkungsart der Vernunft im Fürwahrhalten desjenigen, was für das theoretische Erkenntniß unzugänglich ist. Er ist also der beharrliche Grundsatz des Gemüths, das, was zur Möglichkeit des höchsten moralischen Endzwecks als Bedingung voraussetzen nothwendig ist, wegen der Verbindlichkeit zu demselben als wahr anzunehmen; obzwar die Möglichkeit desselben, aber eben so wohl auch die Unmöglichkeit von uns nicht eingesehen werden kann. Der Glaube (schlechthin so genannt) ist ein Vertrauen zu der Erreichung einer Absicht, deren Beförderung Pflicht, die Möglichkeit der Ausführung derselben aber für uns nicht einzusehen ist (folglich auch nicht die der einzigen für uns denkbaren Bedingungen). Der Glaube also, der sich auf besondere Gegenstände, die nicht Gegenstände des möglichen Wissens oder Meinens sind, bezieht (in welchem letztern Falle er, vornehmlich im historischen, Leichtgläubigkeit und nicht Glaube heißen müßte), ist ganz moralisch. Er ist ein freies Fürwahrhalten nicht dessen, wozu dogmatische Beweise für die theoretisch bestimmende Urtheilskraft anzutreffen sind, noch wozu wir uns verbunden halten, sondern dessen, was wir zum Behuf einer Absicht nach Gesetzen der Freiheit annehmen; aber doch nicht wie etwa eine Meinung ohne hinreichenden Grund, sondern als in der Vernunft (obwohl nur in Ansehung ihres praktischen Gebrauchs), für die Absicht derselben hinreichend, gegründet: denn ohne ihn hat die moralische Denkungsart bei dem Verstoß gegen die

One will notice that Kant drops all talk of “sufficiency” here (as if recognizing its difficulties) and limits the term solely to the presuppositions involved in a final moral end. This would seem to dismiss doctrinal faith without hope of appeal.

Yet even if this sets up moral faith as faith per se - something I read Kant as endorsing in some form since the beginning - unless one reads that “ganz moralisch” very strongly (e.g., as “purely moral”) it may not totally exclude all other modes of faith.¹³⁰ What we might consider is a faith which helps to realize “the possibility of the highest moral final end,” but *indirectly*. Committing oneself to the validity of doctrinal faith, as rational faith or (circa 1790) just faith simpliciter, means committing oneself to its “morality” in some extended sense.

“Rational faith,” as a phrase, has nothing inherently hallowed about it, but here it is especially useful in highlighting a particular distance between the activity and ends of *science* versus *moral* activity and ends. For readers familiar with Kant there is no need to explain our interest in the latter: in an important sense it is meaningless to ask why one should be moral, as if there should be something else beyond the moral willing itself which would give it worth. And the same immediacy of worth is to be found nowhere else, to the point that Lewis White Beck could write (wrongly, but not obviously so): “The final purpose of the world, that which is end and should not be merely means, Kant finds in man, rational man legislating and obeying moral

Aufforderung der theoretischen Vernunft zum Beweise (der Möglichkeit des Objects der Moralität) keine feste Beharrlichkeit, sondern schwankt zwischen praktischen Geboten und theoretischen Zweifeln.” Also cf, e.g., the various (highly morally inflected) discussions of faith in the third part of the *Religion*.

¹³⁰ Even humble pragmatic faith may not completely fall off the map. Kant does say here that the relation to merely empirical objects (where knowledge remains possible) should not be called “Glaube” in the strong sense, but should rather be called “Leichtgläubigkeit” (5:472). This term is often translated as “gullibility” and usually has that sense, yet here Kant seems to mean the phrase literally. One could reasonably call it “faith lite.” The use of this term, even a bit derisively, suggests that pragmatic faith remains in the system if only in this “lite” form (it is characteristic of Kant that even when he radically shifts terms and contexts, he never really eliminates anything).

law in an otherwise meaningless world.”¹³¹ Yet at the same time Kant evidently cared deeply about the science of his day, continuing to teach and write on it up until his last years; he tells us in the “Canon” that the investigation of nature is a “contingent but still not inconsiderable intention,”¹³² although he does not tell us why.

If doctrinal faith is the native practical holding-for-true for *science*, then the question of whether doctrinal faith could be indirectly moral is the question of whether science and theory have any relation to the final end of practical reason. (It is thus also to ask, contra Beck, whether and why the world is meaningful.) The answer goes through Kant’s concept of *wisdom*. A full account of that answer will run the entire length of the critical system, and as I must take a long detour in order to do it any justice at all I hope the reader will forgive me a few shortcuts.

Whence the value of theory, then, and why do science? A first series of answers might be found directly in the moral philosophy. Theory, e.g., could be a *means*, an “indirect duty” for something else,¹³³ except Kant never deploys that concept beyond happiness and, more importantly, one would need to explain *why* any given theory might be such a means.

Alternatively, Kant does say (briefly in the *Groundwork* and then in far more depth in the *Metaphysics of Morals*) that there is a direct duty “to make one’s end... the perfection belonging to human being overall (properly to humanity),”¹³⁴ including the development of *natural* perfection - “the cultivation of all capacities overall for the advancement of the ends laid forth by

¹³¹ In Beck's “Introduction” to Kant, *On History*, xvii.

¹³² A826/B854, in 3:535.

¹³³ Cf the *Groundwork* at 4:399 and *Metaphysics of Morals* at 6:389

¹³⁴ From the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:386. “Wenn von der dem Menschen überhaupt (eigentlich der Menschheit) zugehörigen Vollkommenheit gesagt wird: daß, sie sich zum Zweck zu machen, an sich selbst Pflicht sei, so muß sie in demjenigen gesetzt werden, was Wirkung von seiner That sein kann, nicht was bloß Geschenk ist, das er der Natur verdanken muß; denn sonst wäre sie nicht Pflicht.”

reason.”¹³⁵ This is a duty in itself to *become more capable* of actually achieving any ends set out by reason: “[I]t is not only that technical-practical reason advises this to [the human being] for his other intentions (of art), rather moral-practical [reason] utterly commands it to him and makes this end his duty, so as to be worthy of the humanity which dwells in him.”¹³⁶ The development of our theoretical capabilities can easily fit this, due to the “wideness” of this duty.

¹³⁷ But that very “wideness” also confers nothing *special* upon scientific work: as with its just being a means, the practical *option* of doing science as a duty does not yet imply any good justification for the *choice* of doing science - there is nothing in the duty towards self-perfection itself that makes scientific work any better choice for the development of my capacities than bodybuilding or competitive eating. The whole problem lies in the fact that the activities which make up a science are, in themselves, mere *skills*, and the direction given by skills has no meaning except when we take up their ends *for some other reason*:

All sciences have some practical part which consists of tasks, [i.e.] that some end is possible for us, and of imperatives, [i.e.] how it can be reached. These can therefore overall be called imperatives of skill. Whether the end is reasonable and good is not the question here, but only what one must do in order to reach it. The prescriptions for a physician, so as to make his man healthy in a grounded way, and for a poisoner, so as to reliably kill him, are of equal worth insofar as each serves to perfectly actualize their intention.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ *ibid* , 6:391. “Physische, d. i. Cultur aller Vermögen überhaupt zu Beförderung der durch die Vernunft vorgelegten Zwecke.”

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 6:387: “...und dieses ist ihm nicht bloß die technisch=praktische Vernunft zu seinen anderweitigen Absichten (der Kunst) anrätlich, sondern die moralisch=praktische gebietet es ihm schlechthin und macht diesen Zweck ihm zur Pflicht, um der Menschheit, die in ihm wohnt, würdig zu sein.” Also cf 6:444-5, and cf the *Groundwork* at 4:423 - “[A]s a rational entity [the human being] necessarily wills that all capacities be developed in him, for they are yet serviceable to him, and given to him, for all sorts of intentions.” [“Denn als ein vernünftiges Wesen will er nothwendig, daß alle Vermögen in ihm entwickelt werden, weil sie ihm doch zu allerlei möglichen Absichten dienlich und gegeben sind.”]

¹³⁷ Cf 6:392 and 6:445-6.

¹³⁸ From the *Groundwork*, in 4:415. “Alle Wissenschaften haben irgend einen praktischen Theil, der aus Aufgaben besteht, daß irgend ein Zweck für uns möglich sei, und aus Imperativen, wie er erreicht werden könne. Diese können daher überhaupt Imperativen der Geschicklichkeit heißen. Ob der Zweck vernünftig und gut sei, davon ist hier gar nicht die Frage, sondern nur was man thun müsse, um ihn zu erreichen. Die Vorschriften für den Arzt, um seinen Mann auf gründliche Art gesund zu machen, und für einen Giftmischer, um ihn sicher zu tödten, sind in so fern von gleichem Werth, als eine jede dazu dient, ihre Absicht vollkommen zu bewirken.” Also cf the *Mrongovius Ethics*, 29:606.

What would give scientific work its value, then, must be found in that “other reason,” i.e. whatever it is that ever drives us to develop one set of powers or deploy one set of means in any given concrete circumstances - which is not a question for pure morality.

But elsewhere Kant suggests that it *is* a question for *philosophy and metaphysics*, at least in their proper role as doctrines of wisdom. I quote the end of the “Architectonic of Reason”:

Metaphysics... alone properly makes up all that we can name philosophy in the genuine sense. It draws everything towards wisdom, but through the path of science, the only one which, once it is pioneered, never grows over and allows no going astray. Mathematics, natural science, even the empirical cognition of human beings have a high value as means largely to contingent ends, but ultimately yet to necessary and essential ends of humankind - but then only through the mediation of a rational cognition from mere concepts which, one may name it whatever one wishes, is properly nothing but metaphysics.¹³⁹

The crucial term here is not really metaphysics or even philosophy, but wisdom (Weisheit) itself. If one wanted to find a single notion to link critical thought together, that serves as the joint articulating the two limbs of theoretical and practical philosophy, “wisdom” is a good candidate. In the final notes of the *Opus Postumum* Kant writes that “[w]isdom is here the highest principle of reason,”¹⁴⁰ the proper concept behind philosophy (as the doctrine of wisdom)¹⁴¹ and what metaphysics aspires to.¹⁴² Wisdom is the capacity to utilize all the elements of human life for the

¹³⁹ “A850/B878, in 3:549. Metaphysik... machen eigentlich allein dasjenige aus, was wir im ächten Verstande Philosophie nennen können. Diese bezieht alles auf Weisheit, aber durch den Weg der Wissenschaft, den einzigen, der, wenn er einmal gebahnt ist, niemals verwächst und keine Verirrungen verstattet. Mathematik, Naturwissenschaft, selbst die empirische Kenntniß des Menschen haben einen hohen Werth als Mittel größtentheils zu zufälligen, am Ende aber doch zu nothwendigen und wesentlichen Zwecken der Menschheit, aber alsdann nur durch Vermittelung einer Vernunftkenntniß aus bloßen Begriffen, die, man mag sie benennen, wie man will, eigentlich nichts als Metaphysik ist.”

¹⁴⁰ 22:38. “Weisheit ist da höchste Vernunftprincip.”

¹⁴¹ “Even if philosophy is represented merely as the doctrine of wisdom (which is also its proper meaning)...”; “[Philosophy] is what her name indicates: the search for wisdom.” From the “Proclamation,” in 8:421 and 8:417. “Wenn auch Philosophie bloß als Weisheitslehre (was auch ihre eigentliche Bedeutung ist) vorgestellt wird...”; “Sie ist das, was schon ihr Name anzeigt: Weisheitsforschung.”

¹⁴² See above, and also the *Prolegomena* in 4:256. “[...]Metaphysics], which yet wants to be wisdom itself...”; “Thus metaphysics, of nature as well as morals... alone properly makes up that which we can name philosophy in the genuine understanding. This refers everything to wisdom, but by way of science...” [“...jede andre Wissenschaft

sake of the final end of reason, and it thereby gives an objective value to those elements in doing so.¹⁴³ There is no single master text articulating Kant's account of wisdom (or indeed philosophy or metaphysics in this sense), unless it is the entire critical corpus - instead it is discussed here and there in crucial side comments, which tend to be quite consistent.¹⁴⁴ Here, for example, are a few of these statements, starting with the first two *Critiques*:

To sufficiently determine this idea [of the highest good] practically, i.e. for the maxim of our rational behavior, is the doctrine of wisdom, and this in turn, as science, is philosophy in the meaning in which the ancients understood the word, for whom it was a direction towards the concept wherein the highest good is to be placed, and towards the behavior through which it is to be acquired.¹⁴⁵

But [beyond the concept of the schools] there is yet a world-concept (*conceptus cosmicus*) [of philosophy], which has at all times laid at the ground of this name, above all when one as it were personified it and represented it in the ideal of the philosopher as an archetype [Urbild]. In this intent, philosophy is the science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*)....¹⁴⁶

unaufhörlich fortrückt, sich in dieser, die doch die Weisheit selbst sein will, deren Orakel jeder Mensch befragt, beständig auf derselben Stelle herumzudrehen, ohne einen Schritt weiter zu kommen.”]

¹⁴³ This is in contrast to mere prudence (Klugheit), which in its proper sense only directs life towards *happiness* - cf, e.g., the footnote at *Groundwork* 4:416. It is obvious that both Weisheit and Klugheit could be translations of φρόνησις, and indeed both of Kant's terms take up aspects of the Greek in quite different ways. On the question of how these terms line up with Greek ethics the reader may refer to Stephen Engstrom, “Kant's Conception of Practical Wisdom,” especially 36ff, who also presents a quite different account of the relation of the terms. Contra my position, Engstrom argues that wisdom needs the *addition* of prudence, as practical savvy, to “complete” it; yet while the Kant of the 1760s seemed to hold exactly this view - cf, e.g., the the *Herder Ethics* at 27:36 - I don't think the same can be supported by the *critical* texts (where the two are chiefly distinguished by their *ends*, not by their *functions*). If anything, it is wisdom that “completes” prudence, albeit in a very different way.

¹⁴⁴ Other readers have sometimes taken notice of the concept, but its scattered and decentralized status seems to have created serious difficulties in pinning it down. For example, G.F. Munzel often points to the importance of wisdom, albeit (so far as I read her) only in short comments by way of her interest in Kant's pedagogy. See, e.g., *Kant's Conception of Moral Character* at 57ff (focused on the *Anthropology*), and fairly consistently throughout *Kant's Conception of Pedagogy*. There is also a suggestive but frustratingly truncated discussion in Yovel's *Kant and the Philosophy of History* at roughly 230-6.

¹⁴⁵ 5:108. “Diese Idee praktisch, d. i. für die Maxime unseres vernünftigen Verhaltens, hinreichend zu bestimmen, ist die Weisheitslehre, und diese wiederum als Wissenschaft ist Philosophie in der Bedeutung, wie die Alten das Wort verstanden, bei denen sie eine Anweisung zu dem Begriffe war, worin das höchste Gut zu setzen, und zum Verhalten, durch welches es zu erwerben sei.”

¹⁴⁶ A838-9/B866-7, in 3:542. “Es giebt aber noch einen Weltbegriff (*conceptus cosmicus*), der dieser Benennung jederzeit zum Grunde gelegen hat, vornehmlich wenn man ihn gleichsam personificirte und in dem Ideal des Philosophen sich als ein Urbild vorstellte. In dieser Absicht ist Philosophie die Wissenschaft von der Beziehung aller Erkenntniß auf die wesentlichen Zwecke der menschlichen Vernunft (*teleologia rationis humanae*), und der Philosoph ist nicht ein Vernunftkünstler, sondern der Gesetzgeber der menschlichen Vernunft. In solcher Bedeutung wäre es sehr ruhmredig, sich selbst einen Philosophen zu nennen und sich anzumaßen, dem Urbilde, das nur in der Idee liegt, gleichgekommen zu sein.”

According to the world-concept [of philosophy], it is the science of the ultimate ends of human reason. This high concept gives philosophy dignity, i.e. an absolute worth. And it is really also [philosophy] which alone only has inner worth, and alone first gives a worth to all other cognitions..¹⁴⁷

But philosophy in the literal meaning of the word, as doctrine of wisdom, has an unconditional worth; for it is the doctrine of the final end of human reason, which can only be the single one which all other ends must stand for [nachstehen] or be subordinated to, and the consummate practical philosopher (an ideal) is he who fulfills this demand on himself...¹⁴⁸

Wisdom [is] the perfection of cognition in the derivation of each end from the system of all ends... But if one also wants to predicate wisdom of human beings; so one can understand nothing more than the setting of all our ends together with morality. For morality has for its object the consideration of how each end can stand together with the idea of a whole of all ends, and it judges all actions as common rules. - Thus in so far as our cognition of human actions is derived from the principle of a possible system of all ends; so far can it be called human wisdom..¹⁴⁹

Wisdom, that is, practical reason in the adequation of its rules of measure, which fully correspond with the final end of all things, the highest good, dwells in God alone; and what one could perhaps name human wisdom is only to act [in a way] not visibly opposed to its idea.¹⁵⁰

[T]he peculiar concept of wisdom only represents the property of a will to tune [everything] together towards the highest good as the final end of all things..¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ From the *Jäsche-Logik*, 9:23-24. “Nach dem Weltbegriffe ist sie die Wissenschaft von den letzten Zwecken der menschlichen Vernunft. Dieser hohe Begriff giebt der Philosophie Würde, d. i. einen absoluten Werth. Und wirklich ist sie es auch, die allein nur innern Werth hat, und allen andern Erkenntnissen erst einen Werth giebt.”

¹⁴⁸ From the “Preface” to Jachmann’s *Examination...*, in 8:441. “Aber Philosophie in buchstäblicher Bedeutung des Worts, als Weisheitslehre, hat einen unbedingten Werth; denn sie ist die Lehre vom Endzweck der menschlichen Vernunft, welcher nur ein einziger sein kann, dem alle andere Zwecke nachstehen oder untergeordnet werden müssen, und der vollendete praktische Philosoph (ein Ideal) ist der, welcher diese Forderung an ihm selbst erfüllt.”

¹⁴⁹ From the *Lectures*, 28:1057. “Weisheit; d. i. Vollkommenheit der Erkenntniß in der Ableitung eines jeden Zweckes aus dem Systeme aller Zwecke... Will man aber auch von Menschen Weisheit prädiciren; so kann man darunter nichts weiter, als die Zusammensetzung aller unserer Zwecke mit der Moralität verstehen. Denn eben die Moral hat die Betrachtung zum Gegenstande, wie ein jeder Zweck mit der Idee des Ganzen aller Zwecke zusammen stehen kann, und beurtheilet alle Handlungen als gemeine Regeln. — In so fern also unsere Erkenntniß von den menschlichen Handlungen aus dem Princip eines möglichen Systems aller Zwecke abgeleitet wird; in so fern kann sie menschliche Weisheit heißen.”

¹⁵⁰ From “The End of All Things,” in 8:336. “Weisheit, d. i. praktische Vernunft in der Angemessenheit ihrer dem Endzweck aller Dinge, dem höchsten Gut, völlig entsprechenden Maßregeln, wohnt allein bei Gott; und ihrer Idee nur nicht sichtbarlich entgegen zu handeln, ist das, was man etwa menschliche Weisheit nennen könnte.”

¹⁵¹ From “On the Miscarriage...”, in 8:256. “Obgleich der eigenthümliche Begriff einer Weisheit nur die Eigenschaft eines Willens vorstellt, zum höchsten Gut als dem Endzweck aller Dinge zusammen zu stimmen...”

{Wisdom is the agreement with the final ends of all things. All other cognition has its use only as means. - Only philosophy leads to the ultimate final end - wisdom. (The doctrine of the highest good.) Philosophy - love of wisdom}¹⁵²

Wisdom thus has an architectonic importance far surpassing the space Kant gives for discussion of it; we find fragments placing it at the core of the critical system going back to the mid- to late 1770s.¹⁵³ The leading meaning of the highest good, discussed above, was that of a *whole* of all rational ends taken together into a unity; it now turns out to be wisdom (and philosophy) which not only does the work of crafting such a unity, but also orients everything towards it.

Philosophy is properly the doctrine or science of wisdom, and wisdom is the *organized direction* of all human behavior and cognition (all means either on hand or merely possible) towards a unified final end. It is the ideal *systematization* of human life under the principle of realizing the highest good. For anything to have a legitimate value - at least beyond the immediate moral worth of duty - it must therefore have an ultimate *reference* to this final end within the context of a singularly directed totality; wisdom is nothing other than the work of this teleological direction performed in some approximation to the divine or philosophical ideal.¹⁵⁴ In much the same way

¹⁵² From the *Dohna-Wundlacken Logic*, 24:698. “{Weisheit ist die Übereinstimmung mit den Endzwecken aller Dinge. Alle andern Erkenntnisse haben ihren Nutzen nur als Mittel — nur die Philosophie führt auf den letzten Endzweck — Weisheit. (Die Lehre vom höchsten Gut.) Philosophie — Liebe zur Weisheit}”

¹⁵³ Cf, e.g., Fragment 4849 at 18:5-8, which amounts to a sketch of the entire system. Courtney Fugate discusses this text in some detail in his *Teleology of Reason* at 20-24, and his last chapter is really entirely about this topic. Fugate’s effort is probably the most comprehensive approach to the topic of teleology and “wisdom” as a principle for the unity of Kant’s system currently available, and is most highly recommended.

¹⁵⁴ For an excellent recent discussion of this same topic heading in a quite different direction, see Ferrarin’s *The Powers of Pure Reason* at 80-103. Ferrarin makes much more of the divide between divine and human wisdom than I do, to the point that his concluding worries land on the question of whether world-philosophy is “real or ideal” (94). He resolves the issue by pointing out that “...the realization of the highest good is not in our control,” (100) - “...we cannot rely on our powers alone. The compensation for the deprivation of self-confidence is hope in a benevolent supreme judge rewarding us in another life.” (102) That is to say, wisdom’s aims are rendered *possible* (thus legitimate) by the existence of God, albeit strangely enough Ferrarin does not mention the moral proof here. This seems to me basically right: as Ferrarin well knows, “ideal” in Kant never means illusory and nothing else - there is always a *teleology* at work in ideas, rightly or wrongly used, so that the genuine realizability of the highest good legitimizes the idea of systemizing human life towards that end. Yet Ferrarin’s answer seems to me incomplete without further consideration of *rational theology*, which in turn points to related questions on the faith-structure, on eternal life, etc., none of which are addressed by him in detail. (Perhaps my own work on such topics here can act as a supplement.)

in which Husserl speaks of consciousness as the source of “Sinnggebung,” one could speak of wisdom as the source of “Wertgebung.” And most relevantly for present purposes, it is the only element in the critical system which could ever give any distinctive value to theory, and thus to science.

Thus what one would expect to see throughout Kant’s corpus, in much the same fashion as the opening quote from the “Architectonic,” is the claim that the sciences need something like wisdom in order to save them from merely arbitrary ends.¹⁵⁵ And yet if anything, Kant’s writings actually tend to emphasize the reverse point: that it is wisdom, in summoning all human work toward the final end, which needs science. Here I may quote a passage from the *Groundwork* as an example:

There is something wonderful about innocence, only in turn it is very dire that it does not let itself be preserved and is led astray easily. Due to this, even wisdom - which otherwise surely stands more within doing and permitting [Thun und Lassen] than within knowing - yet also needs science, not in order to learn from it but to furnish its prescription with some input and stability [Eingang und Dauerhaftigkeit].¹⁵⁶

If the reader objects that Kant is a bit cagey in this passage about the sense of the “science” at issue (he could mean that wisdom itself needs to be a strict philosophy, as the next paragraph of the text suggests), he speaks of wisdom’s need for science still more clearly in the *Jäsche Logic*:

[S]cience has an inner, true worth only as the organ of wisdom. But as such it is also indispensable to her, so that one may well say: wisdom without science is a shadow of a perfection which we will never reach.

The one who hates science so as to love wisdom all the more is called a misologist. Misology commonly springs from an emptiness of scientific cognitions and a certain kind of conceit bound up with that. Occasionally, however, those ones who fall into the error of misology had also initially pursued the sciences with great industry and bliss, but finally found no gratification in the whole of their knowledge.

¹⁵⁵ See Fragment 4445 in 17:552 as one (rare) example of this.

¹⁵⁶ 4:404-5. “Es ist eine herrliche Sache um die Unschuld, nur ist es auch wiederum sehr schlimm, daß sie sich nicht wohl bewahren läßt und leicht verführt wird. Deswegen bedarf selbst die Weisheit - die sonst wohl mehr im Thun und Lassen, als im Wissen besteht - doch auch der Wissenschaft, nicht um von ihr zu lernen, sondern ihrer Vorschrift Eingang und Dauerhaftigkeit zu verschaffen.”

Philosophy is the only science which knows how to provide us this inner satisfaction, for it (as it were) closes the scientific circle, and only thereupon, through it, do the sciences receive order and coherence.¹⁵⁷

Philosophy and wisdom are still ultimately what give the individual sciences “order and coherence” as much as “inner, true worth” (that is to say, a direction towards the final end of humanity that might satisfy even a misologist) - yet science, in turn, is indispensable for wisdom, in that it makes the ends of wisdom *reachable*.¹⁵⁸ Kant is not just saying that science and theoretical knowledge can “help” in the realization of wisdom’s ultimate purposes;¹⁵⁹ rather, science is given a certain *priority* among means that, so far as I read, Kant does not express for anything else. Science finds value and direction within wisdom, yes, but wisdom in turn finds in science the foremost means for attaining its ends.

¹⁵⁷ From the *Jäsche-Logik*, 9:26. “Denn Wissenschaft hat einen innern, wahren Werth nur als Organ der Weisheit. Als solches ist sie ihr aber auch unentbehrlich, so da man wohl behaupten darf: Weisheit ohne Wissenschaft sei ein Schattenri von einer Vollkommenheit, zu der wir nie gelangen werden.

“Der die Wissenschaft haßt, um desto mehr aber die Weisheit liebt, den nennt man einen Misologen. Die Misologie entspringt gemeinlich aus einer Leerheit von wissenschaftlichen Kenntnissen und einer gewissen damit verbundenen Art von Eitelkeit. Zuweilen verfallen aber auch diejenigen in den Fehler der Misologie, welche anfangs mit großem Fleiße und Glücke den Wissenschaften nachgegangen waren, am Ende aber in ihrem ganzen Wissen keine Befriedigung fanden.

“Philosophie ist die einzige Wissenschaft, die uns diese innere Genugthuung zu verschaffen weiß, denn sie schließt gleichsam den wissenschaftlichen Zirkel und durch sie erhalten sodann erst die Wissenschaften Ordnung und Zusammenhang.”

¹⁵⁸ Ferrarin (*Powers of Pure Reason* 92) points to a late note which seems to run against this, where he claims that “Kant almost lapses into misology himself.” The note runs, “*Philosophia (doctrina sapientiae)* is not an art of what is to make up man, but what he should make out of himself [*sapere aude*]. Seek you to serve your own reason towards your true absolute ends. - For this no science (*scientia*) is required. Each knows the doctrine of the supreme end (command).” But in context that second-to-last sentence does not seem inconsistent with his broader point - the sciences may not be required for *knowing* (wissen) the highest ends or that everything should be directed toward them, while they may be needed for its *realization* nevertheless. 21:117 - “*Philosophia (doctrina sapientiae)* ist nicht eine Kunst von dem was aus dem Menschen zu machen ist sondern was er aus sich selbst machen soll [*sapere aude*] Versuche dich Deiner eigenen Vernunft zu Deinen wahren absoluten Zwecken zu bedienen. — Dazu wird keine Wissenschaft (*scientia*) erfordert. Die Lehre des obersten Zwecks (Gebot) weiß jeder.”

¹⁵⁹ Although he says that too - “[Theoretical philosophy] indeed does not mean thereupon, as the literal letter reads, the doctrine of wisdom, rather it only means science - but [science] can still be advantageous for [the doctrine of wisdom's] ends.” From the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:445. [“Philosophie, nämlich der theoretischen... die zwar alsdann nicht, wie der Buchstabe lautet, Weisheitslehre, sondern nur Wissenschaft bedeutet, aber doch der ersteren zu ihrem Zwecke beförderlich sein kann.”]

And there is presumably no surprise in this: while Kant famously saw little but stagnation and chasing one's own tail within his beloved metaphysics, within the other sciences there was in turn nothing but staggering progress and extraordinary increase in power (the discovery of oxygen, the development of statistics and probability, the harnessing of electricity, new advancements in mechanics, astronomy, medicine...). If the task of wisdom is to use whatever leverage it has to change the world, one would surely expect the forces of science to be used for a preeminent role therein - and it is precisely by being a *part* of such a task that science has objective worth. This double need, the one for the other, is perhaps why Kant could have written at a crucial moment in the Second *Critique*: “[T]he way to wisdom, if it shall be secure and not impassable or misleading, must for us humans inevitably go through science - but whereof one can only be convinced that this [way] leads to that goal after the completion of [science].”¹⁶⁰ The systematicity of science is only possible under the guiding principle of the final end of human reason (i.e. by wisdom), which itself calls for the actualization of science.

The implication is that even theoretical work is “ultimately” directed towards “the necessary and essential ends of humankind,” i.e. *theory is indirectly moral*. Kant's point in such a thought is not, of course, that all theoretical and scientific activity must henceforth justify itself by its moral “impact” - we are in no position to know what that impact may be - but only that there is, if the reader will allow me, a *teleology of theory*. Experience alone, of course, can never find any teleology within sensible nature; whatever purposes actually inhere in nature are perpetually unknown to us, and we can take our guesses about them only by way of reflective

¹⁶⁰ 5:141. “...der Weg zur Weisheit, wenn er gesichert und nicht ungangbar oder irreleitend werden soll, bei uns Menschen unvermeidlich durch die Wissenschaft durchgehen müsse, wovon man aber, daß diese zu jenem Ziele führe, nur nach Vollendung derselben überzeugt werden kann.” Also of the famous concluding paragraph at 5:163.

judgment.¹⁶¹ But given that *we ourselves* are teleological - that we set ends for ourselves - we are capable of *reinterpreting* the closed box of nature by way of our own moral teleology, so that nature reads as oriented towards the realization of the ends of practical reason:

But because a pure practical teleology, i.e. a moral [one], is determined to make its ends actual in the world, so shall it not be allowed to neglect their possibility in the same - both concerning the final causes given therein and also the adequacy of the supreme world-cause to the whole of all ends as an effect, hence both natural natural teleology and also the possibility of nature in general, i.e. transcendental philosophy - in order to secure the objective reality of the practically pure doctrine of ends in view [Absicht] of the possibility of the object in performance, namely [the objective reality] of the end which it prescribes to effect as [something] in the world.¹⁶²

In the *Critique* Kant says that such a reinterpretation “unifies practical reason with speculative [reason],”¹⁶³ which is no small achievement.¹⁶⁴ Through the lens of morality we can view the natural world *as if* it contained the resources for the realization of our final end, and this teleology unifies theory with morality: “[The practical philosopher] is the one who makes the final end of reason the principle of his actions, by thereby likewise conjoining it with the knowledge necessary for it... [The practical philosopher] intertwines this principle of wisdom with his knowledge...”¹⁶⁵ The development of my theoretical capacities is, read from the point of

¹⁶¹ Here, of course, I refer to the “Second Part” of the Third *Critique*.

¹⁶² From “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy,” 8:182-3. “Weil aber eine reine praktische Teleologie, d. i. eine Moral, ihre Zwecke in der Welt wirklich zu machen bestimmt ist, so wird sie deren Möglichkeit in derselben, sowohl was die darin gegebene Endursachen betrifft, als auch die Angemessenheit der obersten Weltursache zu einem Ganzen aller Zwecke als Wirkung, mithin sowohl die natürliche Teleologie, als auch die Möglichkeit einer Natur überhaupt, d. i. die Transscendental=Philosophie, nicht verabsäumen dürfen, um der praktischen reinen Zweckslehre objective Realität in Absicht auf die Möglichkeit des Objects in der Ausübung, nämlich die des Zwecks, den sie als in der Welt zu bewirken vorschreibt, zu sichern.” See the rest of this passage for a good (and shorter) overview of Kant's take on teleology.

¹⁶³ A815/B843, in 3:529: “Aber diese systematische Einheit der Zwecke in dieser Welt der Intelligenzen... führt unausbleiblich auch auf die zweckmäßige Einheit aller Dinge, die dieses große Ganze ausmachen, nach allgemeinen Naturgesetzen... und vereinigt die praktische Vernunft mit der speculativen.”

¹⁶⁴ On this topic I point the reader to Kleingeld's “Kant on the Unity of Theoretical and Practical Reason,” especially 322ff.

¹⁶⁵ From the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:375. “Ein der praktischen Philosophie Kundiger ist darum eben nicht ein praktischer Philosoph. Der letztere ist derjenige, welcher sich den Vernunftendzweck zum Grundsatz seiner Handlungen macht, indem er damit zugleich das dazu nöthige Wissen verbindet. ...um von dem, der mit seinem Wissen dieses Weisheitsprincip verknüpft, zu sagen: daß er ein praktischer Philosoph sei.”

view of this teleology, also the development of my capacity to *harness* that knowledge - as well as nature itself - towards realizing the final end of reason.

And this will surely not happen quickly. In the 1784 “Idea for a General History in Cosmopolitan Intent,” an experimental and fiercely difficult text I don’t presume to fully grasp, Kant writes:

All natural assets of a creature are determined to unwind themselves completely and endfully [zweckmäßig]... Reason in a creature is a capacity for widening the rules and intentions for the use of all its powers far beyond the natural instinct, and cognizes no limits to its projects. But it does not itself work instinctively, rather it needs experiments, practice, and instruction in order to progress gradually from one stage of perception to another.¹⁶⁶

As a rational creature I too have my own teleology, in that my capacities are bound to develop. But my development - the realization of my *rational* capacities (science, a moral temperament, etc.) - demands far more time and scope than, say, the development of the assets of a microbe. It demands a near-endless amount of “experiments, practice, and instruction” - I need an *indefinite* rational extension of my powers going far into the future, to the point of my attaining mastery over everything in reason's reach. And this, presumably, is why Kant emphasizes science and theoretical attainment above all other means we might potentially deploy. If reason is the capability to “widen the rules and intentions for the use of all its powers far beyond the natural instinct,” finding “no limits to its projects,”¹⁶⁷ then all our other abilities are null in comparison: it is reason alone that stretches human power over the totality of being, furthering its own strength until it can leverage that power into the realization of the highest good.

¹⁶⁶ 8:18-9. “Alle Naturanlagen eines Geschöpfes sind bestimmt, sich einmal vollständig und zweckmäßig auszuwickeln... Die Vernunft in einem Geschöpfe ist ein Vermögen, die Regeln und Absichten des Gebrauchs aller seiner Kräfte weit über den Naturinstinct zu erweitern, und kennt keine Grenzen ihrer Entwürfe. Sie wirkt aber selbst nicht instinctmäßig, sondern bedarf Versuche, Übung und Unterricht, um von einer Stufe der Einsicht zur andern allmählig fortzuschreiten..”

¹⁶⁷ Presumably from a practical point of view, of course, not a critically limited theoretical-epistemic one.

I repeat what I initially asked, then: whence the value of theory, then, and why do science? Science, representing an indefinitely increasing power over being, always needs wisdom for a master. The theoretical can itself only have its own proper status (its satisfaction) as something eventually (teleologically) relevant to the ends of practical reason, even if it first requires countless centuries of development and self-clarification. Yet one should never say that science and the knowledge produced by science (and presumably all of theoretical philosophy) are just a preeminent means for the realization of the final end of reason. Properly understood, they are *the* means: the moral virtues involved in self-constraint, etc. are evidently crucial, but they do not provide the sheer theoretico-technical power to transform a world. I don't think Kant ever articulated the relation between practice and theory just so, but he could well have said that practical philosophy ever has a "direct" relation to the ends of morality, while theoretical philosophy (science) ever has an "indirect" relation.¹⁶⁸ Yet both have their value from the same source.

And that implies, in answer my first question here, that doctrinal faith could well be a legitimate kind of rational faith. Doctrinal faith is oriented towards science (theoretical philosophy) in that its practical presuppositions can somehow guide the concrete everyday *conduct* of science - e.g. by opening up fields of investigation which otherwise may not have made sense (insofar as faith provides the hypothetical conditions which make an end possible). But that does not mean that it is purely *amoral*; it may only be faith in a theoretical intent, but

¹⁶⁸ He comes close to saying this in the *Jäsche Logic*: "Everything finally comes down to the practical, and the practical worth of all our cognition stands in this tendency of all the theoretical and all speculation in regard to its use. But this worth is only an unconditional one if the end for which the practical use of our cognition is directed is an unconditioned end." [9:87. "Alles läuft zuletzt auf das Praktische hinaus, und in dieser Tendenz alles Theoretischen und aller Speculation in Ansehung ihres Gebrauchs besteht der praktische Werth unsers Erkenntnisses. Dieser Werth ist aber nur alsdann ein unbedingter, wenn der Zweck, worauf der praktische Gebrauch des Erkenntnisses gerichtet ist, ein unbedingter Zweck ist."]

theory too (albeit only teleologically) must take any genuine value it has from practical philosophy and the necessary drive towards the highest good: “[A]t last all interest is practical, and even that of speculative reason is only conditional, and complete solely in practical use.”¹⁶⁹ Kant would surely have thought of rational faith in a God’s existence first in terms of the moral proof, of course - but that does not render other kinds of “proofs” null. They, too, might answer “a necessary need of reason only to presuppose, not to demonstrate, the existence of a highest entity,” yet even as cases of doctrinal faith they can do so with an eye towards morality.

C. The Theoretical “As If” and the Unities of Science

In raising the very idea that science could ever rely on “faith,” especially faith in God, I am very much in hazardous territory.¹⁷⁰ Defenders of science might have good grounds (including precisely the “lazy” and “perverse” reasoning Kant mentions) to try to distance it from anything that sounds religious: even if well-intentioned, speaking of “faith” within science can have the tone of the grotesque misconception that science has to rely on unjustifiable “beliefs” as much as religion does. No one, from Anthropology to Zoology, needs to posit the existence of God in their studies, and if God does manifest in order to solve some problem it is an occasion to at least ask the writer to revise and resubmit. Save for the possibility of divine intervention (the radical nullification of mathematical law, say) - a possibility which no theory

¹⁶⁹ From the Second *Critique*, 5:121. “...alles Interesse zuletzt praktisch ist, und selbst das der speculativen Vernunft nur bedingt und im praktischen Gebrauche allein vollständig ist.”

¹⁷⁰ Chignell himself puts on the brakes here even as he otherwise races the concept forward, e.g.: “Although the *textual* case for Theoretical Belief in a world-author is quite strong in the first *Critique*, it is not perhaps the strongest philosophical example. That’s because Kant’s conception of teleology is infected with a kind of ‘mentalism’ (i.e., the assumption that the very use of teleological concepts implies a commitment to an actual designer), and this can seem archaic in a contemporary context.” (“Belief in Kant” 347)

could account for anyways - whether God exists or not seems to make no difference to our observations, calculations, conclusions, etc.. Today's researchers, like Laplace, need never call upon theological hypotheses.

Yet it does no justice to Kant to thereby skip over his position as if it were a quaint survival from theological rule over the university: Kant is no revivalist luddite, and to criticize science (in his sense) is by no means to undermine it. If scientists do not - indeed, *should* not - cite God in their work, that does not necessarily rule out faith in his sense (the practical assumption of the conditions necessary for the achievement of one's practical ends), as it need not line up with what the actor "believes" in the ordinary meaning.¹⁷¹ If Kant is right, even if every scientist were an explicit atheist they would still "have faith" in the God at issue *if the ends of their science required it*.

My goals here are therefore quite modest. I want to show that Kant's basic argument concerning doctrinal faith - that the *conduct* of science or theoretical philosophy assumes an ur-entity, even if never the *claims to knowledge* of that theory - at least makes a certain sense.¹⁷² This will involve exploration of the regulative use of reason, particularly in the application of systematic unity and the "as if." But I also want to show, in a precise way that Kant himself

¹⁷¹ In his less-remembered first book, for example, Thomas Kuhn explores the thought that it was partly a *theological* shift during the Renaissance - from a "Thomist" or "Aristotelian" God to a "Neoplatonist" God - which "set the conceptual stage" for the radical developments in astronomy and physics of the next several centuries (a thought which is far too rough as he presents it, but compelling nevertheless). What Kuhn is getting at, more generally put, is that the existence of God may indeed never be an explicit *premise* for any particular scientific theory, yet the presupposition of a certain kind of God can still act upon the deep conceptual background which grounds a science as a whole enterprise - which is to say, it can contribute to the *conceivability* of its directions for research. To put that back in Kantian terms, God acts on the practice, not on the theory. See *The Copernican Revolution*, 127-133.

¹⁷² This is to say, I can have no intention of securing a more rigorous conclusion here as it would have to involve a deeper analysis of the actual conduct of modern scientific research (for which this is not the place, and which I am by no means equipped to supply).

doesn't outline, that certain tendencies concretely at work in the sciences - tendencies I will call the *unities* of science - may also line up with the topics of the old precritical proofs.

If the question, simply put, is whether science (in the conduct of researchers) might act *as if* there were gods corresponding to the three proofs, then the argument turns on the nature of this "as if" and the work it is doing.¹⁷³ For Kant the theoretical "as if" is always connected to the regulative use of the ideas of reason, and this is true also in the case of God. Thinking specifically about the contingency proof (but with more general application), Kant says:

We have not the minimum ground to simply assume (to suppose in itself) the object of this idea [of God]; for what can possibly make us able, or even only give us the right, to have faith in or claim from its mere concept in itself an entity of the highest perfection, and necessary per se according to its nature - were it not [for] the world, in relation to which this supposition alone can be necessary; and there it is clearly shown that the idea of the same, like all speculative ideas, would say nothing more than that reason commands all intertwining of the world be regarded according to the principles of a systematic unity, hence *as if* it had sprung forth collectively from a single all-embracing entity as the supreme and all-sufficient cause. From here it is clear that reason can hereby have nothing for its intention except its own formal rule in the widening of its empirical use, but never a widening beyond all limits of empirical use...¹⁷⁴ [*my emphasis*]

¹⁷³ K.A. Appiah's recent book on the subject (*As If*), while impressively wide-ranging and well worth reading, seems to me to depart from Kant in its tacit assumption that "as if" idealizations are "false" or at least "untrue" (however useful). In Kant (as I read him) the "as if" is deployed precisely in situations where knowledge (and theoretical claims about truth or falsity more broadly) cannot reach, where theory can at best say only that the fact in question is *possible* - or where any strong theoretical claim even amounts to a sort of *confusion*. "As if" just means *assumed*, not *untrue*: even the object of mere pragmatic faith, e.g. a heuristic rule, is not judged true or untrue so much as it is *relied* upon until it stops working or we find something better. To say that anything "ideal" is *false* would presumably be either a kind of confusion of levels or based in the assumption that anything thought about the unknown (or unknowable) is false by default - which is far from Kant's view. This is something of a nitpick, but a crucial one, and it again points to the crucial break between practical and theoretical levels of discourse (levels which, if I understand Appiah, Vaihinger tends to confuse).

¹⁷⁴ A685-6/B713-4, in 3:451-2. "Den Gegenstand dieser Idee haben wir nicht den mindesten Grund schlechthin anzunehmen (an sich zu supponiren); denn was kann uns wohl dazu vermögen, oder auch nur berechtigen, ein Wesen von der höchsten Vollkommenheit und als seiner Natur nach schlechthin nothwendig aus dessen bloßem Begriffe an sich selbst zu glauben oder zu behaupten, wäre es nicht die Welt, in Beziehung auf welche diese Supposition allein nothwendig sein kann; und da zeigt es sich klar, daß die Idee desselben, so wie alle speculative Ideen, nichts weiter sagen wolle, als daß die Vernunft gebiete, alle Verknüpfung der Welt nach Principien einer systematischen Einheit zu betrachten, mithin als ob sie insgesamt aus einem einzigen allbefassenden Wesen als oberster und allgenugsamer Ursache entsprungen wären. Hieraus ist klar, daß die Vernunft hiebei nichts als ihre eigene formale Regel in Erweiterung ihres empirischen Gebrauchs zur Absicht haben könne, niemals aber eine Erweiterung über alle Grenzen des empirischen Gebrauchs...."

Faith in God ultimately finds its ground only in reason's demand to to *extend* its empirical application by way of a rule; reason needs something like God to justify its systematic empirical employment. The point can be put like this: even if experience (and knowledge) is perfectly possible by its own grounds, that is not yet to make it *meaningful*. There's a sense in which mere "knowing" is quite easy in Kant: if you wave objects in front of my face, e.g., and I apply the right concepts to them ("baby bottle," "umbrella"...), I thereby have perfectly good examples of Wissen (the first half of the *Critique* mostly concerns the story of how this is possible).¹⁷⁵ But there is nothing in that experience alone which requires that it make sense within a more holistic scheme, and nothing which demands that I expand any such knowledge or better order the knowledge I have. Those issues concern *unity and systematicity*, which are not experienced as such but which saturate all experience as we have it. The understanding can never be deployed in anything but a piecemeal way without reason insisting on its systematic unification:

For the law of reason seeking [systematic unity] is necessary, as without it we would have no reason at all, but without [reason] no use of the understanding which would hang together [zusammenhängenden Verstandesgebrauch] and, in want of that, no sufficient marker for empirical truth - and thus in view of the latter we must indeed presuppose the systematic unity of nature as objectively valid and necessary.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ But at the extreme even this example of passive object-witnessing as knowledge free of reason is a bit too optimistic, as it presumes my already having empirical concepts on hand to apply. But *even that* requires a rational, transcendental principle for "Gleichartigkeit": "[S]imilarity is presupposed in the manifold of a possible experience (although we equally cannot determine its degree *a priori*), for without it no empirical concepts, and hence no experience, would be possible." [A654/B682 in 3:433: "...wird in dem Mannigfaltigen einer möglichen Erfahrung nothwendig Gleichartigkeit vorausgesetzt (ob wir gleich ihren Grad *a priori* nicht bestimmen können), weil ohne dieselbe keine empirische Begriffe, mithin keine Erfahrung möglich wäre."] A discussion on these depths is impossible for present purposes, but Ido Geiger does this topic much justice in his "Is the Assumption of a Systematic Whole of Empirical Concepts a Necessary Condition of Knowledge?"

¹⁷⁶ A651/B679, in 3:432. "Denn das Gesetz der Vernunft, sie zu suchen, ist nothwendig, weil wir ohne dasselbe gar keine Vernunft, ohne diese aber keinen zusammenhängenden Verstandesgebrauch und in dessen Ermangelung kein zureichendes Merkmal empirischer Wahrheit haben würden, und wir also in Ansehung des letzteren die systematische Einheit der Natur durchaus als objectiv gültig und nothwendig voraussetzen müssen."

“Using” one’s understanding in any meaningful way thus tacitly assumes systematic unity. We (as it were) *project* a system into the world of experience *in advance* while then also expecting to *find* (and being *driven* to find) that system realized in our empirical explorations:

Rational unity is the unity of system, and this systematic unity serves reason not objectively as a principle, so as to spread it over objects, but rather subjectively as a maxim, so as to spread it over all possible empirical cognition of objects. All the same, the systematic connection that reason can give to the empirical use of the understanding not only advances its spread, but also equally protects the veracity [Richtigkeit] of the same; and the principle of such a systematic unity is also objective, but in an indeterminate way (*Principium vagum*); not as a constitutive principle, so as to determine something in regard to its direct object, rather so as to advance and consolidate ad infinitum (indeterminately) the empirical use of reason as a merely regulative principle, by opening new ways which the understanding does not cognize, without ever thereby being in the least contrary to the laws of [its] empirical use.¹⁷⁷

The theoretical “as if” is precisely this indeterminate objective applicability: it is *as if* system were within the phenomena in advance of our investigations, simply waiting to be found, thereby

¹⁷⁷ A680/B708, in 3:448-9. “Die Vernunfteinheit ist die Einheit des Systems, und diese systematische Einheit dient der Vernunft nicht objectiv zu einem Grundsatz, um sie über die Gegenstände, sondern subjectiv als Maxime, um sie über alles mögliche empirische Erkenntniß der Gegenstände zu verbreiten. Gleichwohl befördert der systematische Zusammenhang, den die Vernunft dem empirischen Verstandesgebrauche geben kann, nicht allein dessen Ausbreitung, sondern bewährt auch zugleich die Richtigkeit desselben; und das Principium einer solchen systematischen Einheit ist auch objectiv, aber auf unbestimmte Art (*Principium vagum*); nicht als constitutives Princip, um etwas in Ansehung seines directen Gegenstandes zu bestimmen, sondern um als bloß regulativer Grundsatz und Maxime den empirischen Gebrauch der Vernunft durch Eröffnung neuer Wege, die der Verstand nicht kennt, ins Unendliche (Unbestimmte) zu befördern und zu befestigen, ohne dabei jemals den Gesetzen des empirischen Gebrauchs im Mindesten zuwider zu sein.”

drawing us towards it beyond what we already know.¹⁷⁸ And it is only on behalf of such a unity that one would need to presuppose the existence of a God which could *ground* such a unity.

It seems to me that Kant's basic point - that the sciences, perhaps including even mathematics,¹⁷⁹ always already project meaningful systems (kept necessarily vague) upon the field and behind the phenomena - has to be accepted, even accepted in several ways. Certain

¹⁷⁸ If all this sounds like I am taking Kant too far, it is worth briefly referring to Derrida as a counterexample who - although he struggles with the "as if" throughout his career and sees much of what Kant is doing - never gives Kant himself credit for how far his own concepts go. Here see "The University Without Condition" in *Without Alibi*, esp. 210-14. Derrida connects the "as if" to the "thinking of an event" which will always remain "perhaps to come" (213), says that the "as if" "would be something like an agent of deconstructive ferment, since it in some way exceeds and comes close to disqualifying the two orders that are so often distinguished and opposed, the order of nature and the order of freedom" (211) - all of this "as if" it were not exactly what Kant himself had in mind with the "as if." More relevantly for the present topic, Derrida also asks: "Does not the 'as if' mark, in thousands of ways, the structure and the mode of being of all objects belonging to the academic field called the Humanities...?" (212) No doubt - yet as should be clear from the above, in the *Critique* the "as if" already marks the manifestation of *all* objects in *any* science whatsoever, insofar as those objects are something manifested in our conduct. If anything, then, Kant's own position is actually more extreme than Derrida's so-called "deconstructive" use of Kant's concepts. And this, assisted by ample attention to the texts, should be sufficient warning against assumptions that Kant is less of a radical figure than he really is. Kant's system remains a metaphysics, but one knit together by *rational need* rather than self-evidence.

¹⁷⁹ Mathematics is the most difficult case for my reading, as Kant himself at times seems to resist the application of ideas therein. See, e.g., Fragment 943 in 15:418 - "**Mathematics is not the land of ideas**, rather of concepts made intuitive; it goes not from the whole to the parts, rather from the general to the particular." ["**Die Mathematik ist nicht das Land der Ideen**, sondern der anschauend gemachten Begriffe; sie geht nicht vom Ganzen zu den Theilen, sondern vom allgemeinen zum besonderen."]. Even there, however, he adds a moment later that "a wholly new method presupposes an idea," ["Doch setzt eine ganz neue Methode eine Idee voraus."] thereby wobbling in the face of the need for possible new methods. Even what looks like a straightforward dismissal of the mathematical use of "ideas of the understanding" as proposed by Maimon, found in a letter to Herz (May 26, 1789) is not quite the total rejection it seems: "[I]t is just not necessary to accept ideas of the understanding with Herr Maimon... That [a circular] line allows division into the infinite is also still no idea, it refers only to the continuation of the division, which is not at all limited by the [continuation] of the line - but to view this infinite division of its totality, and hence as completed, is a rational idea of an absolute totality of conditions (of synthesis) which are demanded of an object of sense, which is impossible, as the unconditioned cannot be found in appearances." [11:52-3: "Nur bemerke ich, daß es eben nicht nöthig mit Hr. Maimon Verstandesideen anzunehmen... Da diese Linie ins unendliche theilen lasse ist auch noch keine Idee es bedeutet nur einen Fortgang der Theilung, der durch die der Linie garnicht beschränkt wird, aber diese Unendliche Theilung ihrer Totalität und sie mithin als vollendet anzusehen, ist eine Vernunftidee von einer Absoluten Totalität der Bedingungen (der Synthese) welche an einem Gegenstande der Sinne gefodert welches unmöglich ist, weil an Erscheinungen das Unbedingte nicht angetroffen werden kan."] Indefinite mathematical progression is not itself an idea, but the thought of the *completion* of that progression is. Yet such a thought hardly seems dispensable in the geometry of Kant's day (wouldn't I need to think the totality of division, e.g., in order to make sense of myself dividing?). Perhaps Kant's objection here is less to the use of rational ideas in mathematics than to Maimon's notion of "Verstandesideen." For my own part, I see little difficulty in following Kant's wobble through and simply admitting the regulative use of ideas in mathematical fields. To say there is no *Empfindung* there is not to say there is no *Sinnlichkeit* sufficient for intuition, and perhaps even an "experience" of a limited sort. And wherever there is an "empirical" use of the understanding, presumably there can and should be a regulative use of ideas.

species of positivism may, for example, object that statements must be either tautological or nonsensical unless they can be backed up by experience, and within limits (especially within science) this insistence is correct. Yet if science, *at least in its conduct*, does not step beyond its present findings - assuming a *whole* in doing so, albeit one which it will never attain - then it is not doing science, i.e. has hardly advanced beyond having objects waved in front of its face.¹⁸⁰

But we can also try to extend Kant's point in some specific directions. If reason always insists on systematic unity, as if there really were such a system at work in the entities themselves, I propose that in science we do so in at least three ways:

1. At minimum, not as if every element in the field is *known* in advance, but as if the field as a whole must be *thinkable*. This does not mean that everything is factually measurable or calculable, as there may be quite fundamental reasons why something will remain to some extent beyond our access (albeit we can conceive that very inaccessibility). But the broad *thinkability* of the field, at least, must never disappear. All our discoveries may turn against our theories and eventually bring them down, but even in order to do so the revolutionary data *must make sense* within the conduct and cognitions of the science.
2. Not as if the behavior of every element in the field can be *predicted* in advance, but as if the field as a whole must remain *consistent according to laws*. For some (not all) sciences, the given phenomena of their field are understood as behaving in such-and-such

¹⁸⁰ Husserl and Heidegger, too, also take considerable interest in this same issue, albeit so far as I read without ever taking up the question of what "regulation" or a "maxim" would be; the question of a "mathematical projection" onto nature is a narrow case of systematization. Cf, for example, "Idealization and the Science of Reality" in *The Crisis* and §18 of *The Question Concerning the Thing*. For a broader approach to the constitution of the scientific field I should also refer to John Haugeland's epochal "Truth and Rule-Following" in *Having Thought*, esp. 318-38, which develops much the same thought.

ways according to various facts concerning them and the surrounding system. Some of those facts may be unavailable for various reasons (although in principle they are subject to the same laws). But in order for our experiments and theorizing to mean anything, the laws that govern the field cannot *themselves* be subject to change or negation. It would make no sense to try to improve our theories and predictions (i.e. to do this science) if the laws we were trying to approximate changed every few days or somehow dropped out.

3. Not as if every element of the field can be fully *explained* according to its place in context, but as if every element must be *interpretable* according to that contextual locale, i.e. be contextually determined. For some (not all) sciences, the point is not just generalized prediction valid for any circumstances but the understanding of *singularities* within a specific situation - understanding by way of the present context, or the history, or possibly the future of the phenomena. An exhaustive explanation may not be possible, but one must be able to make at least *some* sense of a given phenomenon by way of its surroundings (in the broadest sense). Thus there must always be a commerce between singularities and context; no event, no new development, can ever be without relations that are interpretively meaningful.

Allow me to call these the *scientific unities*, those of *thinkability*, of *lawfulness*, and of *contextual meaningfulness*.

The above unities may not be exhaustive, but it is surely a list of practical assumptions that actually happen - not, to be sure, within the scientific claims themselves (which must always remain open to revision), but within the *conduct* of science. To be sure, these assumptions may

not even appear to *be* assumptions, but rather obvious certainties. Yet it is precisely that “certainty,” or more precisely our grounds for it, which is of interest. That the lawfulness of a field cannot change is not trivially true any more than that the sun will rise tomorrow, nor do we seem to know it by experience. Such unities might be *confirmed* by experience, but not *learned* from it; to the contrary, they first make our sciences possible. If we take them for granted, that does not mean that they are known, and for them to be held in *faith* does not mean that they are uncertain. These unities, as faith in certain maxims (for the purposes of the empirical use of the understanding), suppose nothing more grandiose than that the field of science *makes sense* in various ways, and thereby open up the possibility for research.

But where, then, should a *God* fit into the presupposition of such unities? Why should a God be needed if we are already presupposing the scientific unity of a system? Speaking specifically about “lawfulness,” Kant writes:

...[W]e can always confidently deduce the appearances of the world and their existence from other [appearances] *as if* there were no necessary entity, and yet can strive unceasingly for the completion of the deduction *as if* such an [entity] were presupposed as a supreme ground.

The ideal of the highest entity is, according to these considerations, nothing else than a regulative principle of reason to so view all conjunction in the world *as if* it sprang from an all-sufficient necessary cause - this in order to ground the rule of a systematic and necessary unity according to general laws in the explanation of [such conjunction] - and is not a statement of an existence necessary in itself.¹⁸¹ [*my emphasis*]

Within the “as if” which strives towards completion, a God is presupposed *relative* to the totality of the field in question. (In everyday language it may even go too far to say that one presupposes

¹⁸¹ A618-9/B646-7, in 3:412-3. “[D]a wir denn die Erscheinungen der Welt und ihr Dasein immer getrost von anderen ableiten können, als ob es kein nothwendiges Wesen gäbe, und dennoch zu der Vollständigkeit der Ableitung unaufhörlich streben können, als ob ein solches als ein oberster Grund vorausgesetzt wäre. “Das Ideal des höchsten Wesens ist nach diesen Betrachtungen nichts anders, als ein regulatives Princip der Vernunft, alle Verbindung in der Welt so anzusehen, als ob sie aus einer allgenugsamen nothwendigen Ursache entspränge, um darauf die Regel einer systematischen und nach allgemeinen Gesetzen nothwendigen Einheit in der Erklärung derselben zu gründen, und ist nicht eine Behauptung einer an sich nothwendigen Existenz.” Also cf, e.g., A616/B644 in 3:411.

God, or even a God; one simply presupposes a kind of *metaphysical function* necessary for the idea of systematic unity.) Science, so as to regard the field as meaningful, *acts as if* there were a “something” constantly securing the systematic order. It is not even *constitutive* for the unity we assume, as there is, e.g., nothing logically necessary about it; it is more to say that the unity itself stands *as if* it had such a unifying “something.” The “supreme ground” of systematic unity is then, if one likes, a *second-order* “as if,” with science acting as if there were a unity in its field and that unity manifesting as if it had a ground. The unities *are* precisely *as if* they had such a ground. Here I again quote Kant at length:

But reason cannot think this systematic unity except that it equally gives an object to its idea, which, however, can be given by no experience, for experience never gives any instance of complete systematic unity. This rational entity (*ens rationis ratiocinatae*) is indeed a mere idea, and will thus not simply be accepted in itself as something actual, rather is only laid at the ground problematically (for we can reach it through no concepts of the understanding) in order to so regard all intertwining of the things of the sensible world *as if* they had their ground in this rational entity - but only in the intent to ground systematic unity thereupon, which is indispensable to reason but can be advantageous in all ways to the empirical cognition of the understanding, and equally well never obstructive of it.

One immediately misunderstands the meaning of this idea when one holds it for the assertion or even only the presupposition of an actual thing, which one thinks of ascribing [as] the ground of the systematic constitution of the world; rather, one leaves it wholly not made out what the ground of the same in itself, which has withdrawn itself from our concepts, has for a character, and one only sets oneself for a point of view an idea from which one can only and exclusively spread that unity, so essential to reason and so wholesome for the understanding; in a word: this transcendental thing is merely the schema of that regulative principle whereby reason, so far as it [can], spreads systematic unity over all experience.¹⁸² [*my emphasis*]

¹⁸² A681-2/B709-10, in 3:449. “Die Vernunft kann aber diese systematische Einheit nicht anders denken, als daß sie ihrer Idee zugleich einen Gegenstand giebt, der aber durch keine Erfahrung gegeben werden kann; denn Erfahrung giebt niemals ein Beispiel vollkommener systematischer Einheit. Dieses Vernunftwesen (*ens rationis ratiocinatae*) ist nun zwar eine bloße Idee und wird also nicht schlechthin und an sich selbst als etwas Wirkliches angenommen, sondern nur problematisch zum Grunde gelegt (weil wir es durch keine Verstandesbegriffe erreichen können), um alle Verknüpfung der Dinge der Sinnenwelt so anzusehen, als ob sie in diesem Vernunftwesen ihren Grund hätten, lediglich aber in der Absicht, um darauf die systematische Einheit zu gründen, die der Vernunft unentbehrlich, der empirischen Verstandeserkenntniß aber auf alle Weise beförderlich und ihr gleichwohl niemals hinderlich sein kann. “Man verkennt sogleich die Bedeutung dieser Idee, wenn man sie für die Behauptung oder auch nur die Voraussetzung einer wirklichen Sache hält, welcher man den Grund der systematischen Weltverfassung zuzuschreiben gedächte; vielmehr läßt man es gänzlich unausgemacht, was der unseren Begriffen sich entziehende Grund derselben an sich für Beschaffenheit habe, und setzt sich nur eine Idee zum Gesichtspunkte, aus welchem einzig und allein man jene der Vernunft so wesentliche und dem Verstande so heilsame Einheit verbreiten kann; mit einem Worte: dieses transcendentale Ding ist bloß das Schema jenes regulativen Principis, wodurch die Vernunft, so

We are “asserting” no actual entity, but in practically presupposing (for the sake of our research) the systematic unity of our field as an *idea*, that idea also “gives” the object which grounds it. But it is an object entirely “*unausgemacht*,” without any decision about what makes it up - it is there to fill in a role for the needs of reason, nothing more. The thought, then, is that science acts *as if* an undetermined metaphysical force were keeping the systematic unity of its field (itself an “as if”) intact and meaningful - to speak like Heidegger, that in presupposing a stable ontology to work upon, they also presuppose the $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ which quietly supports it.

To repeat, the discussion above is not intended to do real justice to the question of the metaphysical-theological roots of modern scientific practice; my main ambition is only to set up my following two Chapters. But I also hope to begin a conversation on the notion that Kant, and even rational theology, are not so irrelevant to contemporary science as one might think. The reader has surely noticed that my proposed list of list of scientific unities, even if not exhaustive, directly lines up with the three (non-Cartesian) pre-critical proofs. This is no accident, as I intend to show in the next chapter that Kant rehabilitates those three precritical proofs precisely by way of a certain meaning and indispensability to the work of science, and precisely through the concept of doctrinal faith. In the case of the (original) ontological proof,¹⁸³ science would assume the *thinkability* of the entire field for the purposes of its research, and presuppose a ground which maintains that thinkability. For the contingency proof, science would assume the *lawfulness* of

viel an ihr ist, systematische Einheit über alle Erfahrung verbreitet.” Technically Kant refers here to *all* of the regulative ideas of speculative reason (soul, world, and God), but it applies particularly well to God.

¹⁸³ Although I don’t believe Kant expressly says so, there are reasons to think even God as the most real entity - the God of the ontological proof - is effectively “*unausgemacht*” as well. On A576/B604 he insists that the ideal of reason is the concept of a *thing in itself* as thoroughly determined, when of course things in themselves can’t have properties. More importantly, on A579/B607 he says that the ideal must merely be the *ground* of all possibility, not an aggregate of them all, which better squares with his more usual incomprehensibility talk concerning the necessary entity.

its field in its work, and presuppose the “something” beyond the totality that maintains the condition of lawfulness. In the physicotheological proof, science would assume the *meaningful connectedness* of the singularities under its study, and thereby presuppose a kind of tacit “organizer” who rules out disconnected events. The exact *form* of these unities could presumably change in each case (Kant, after all, wants novel research directions), but the more basic thought is that the assumption of systematicity in practical scientific work already implies theology.

The beginning of this section posed a series of interconnected questions concerning the concept of “Vernunftglaube,” rational faith. If clarifying this concept was a rather contingent goal in itself, the process of working through it has revealed a whole host of insights. “Theory” has its own kind of “practice,” and thus a distinctive kind of faith rooted in scientific conduct; yet science itself has value precisely in its teleology (i.e., from its potential use in the realization of the final end of humanity). The old proofs, as above, might be taken as functioning for the sake of these sciences - but only as reread from a critical point of view.

At the beginning of modern philosophy Descartes suggested that even the mere *possibility* of a divine entity which would allow for systematic error requires that we turn to our theological situation before doing anything else in science (“...I must examine whether God is, and, if he is, whether he can be a deceiver; for by being ignorant in this matter, it looks as if I cannot ever be certain about anything else at all”).¹⁸⁴ This is not an unreasonable suggestion given the stakes - i.e., the very possibility of knowledge - yet few ever actually followed through on the thought. In the broader context of science, it may be less that the possibility of theological

¹⁸⁴ AT VII 36.

disaster as Descartes outlined it has been resolved and removed than that it is simply not talked about. The problematic of rational theology, especially the proofs, has simply been dropped. It is Kant's account of doctrinal faith that suggests a possible reason: one does not really need to *prove* the right God (a God which guarantees some basic certainty to our thinking) if one can just *assume* it. But if we are all quietly taking Descartes' ideal theological case for granted, *as if* it were true, and yet science continues apace, that may suggest less that we are all shirking our speculative duties than that the genuine problematic of Descartes' rational theology lies precisely in the exact way that we take that case for granted.

CHAPTER VI. The Rehabilitation of the Proofs and the Diminution of Speculative Theology

As I argued in the previous chapter, the introduction of the moral proof and its accompanying moral metaphysics effectively shattered the “closed circle” of proofs which Kant labored to develop circa 1763. Yet for rational theology overall, the most radical and far-reaching result of that shift was not the moral proof itself nor the new ontology of the highest good but the development of the notion of *faith*. Faith, especially rational faith, creates a totally new avenue for rational theological efforts: rather than (theoretically) endeavoring to *prove* the existence of a highest entity, Kant can now transfer the problem into a practical register. Indeed, if human conduct of a certain sort *needs* such an entity, indeed always already presupposes it as a form of rational faith, that leaves no particular work left for the theorist other than to appropriate their own behavior. It is doctrinal faith in particular that also offers Kant a way to return to, and *rehabilitate*, most of the old proofs of Descartes, by way of what I previously called the “systematic unities.” When one reads Kant’s main critical text dealing with the fate of his pre-critical speculative theology, the “Ideal of Pure Reason,” it is thus crucial to keep this fundamental shift in mind - especially since that text, by itself, betrays very little of the shift.

The traditional story told about the fate of the pre-critical proofs often goes much like this. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, specifically in the “Ideal of Pure Reason,” Kant refutes all of these traditional proofs and abandons speculative theology for moral theology. Moral theology is then developed in the “Doctrine of Method” and the Second *Critique*, where Kant deploys a moral proof foreign to the speculative proofs. The physicotheological proof is redeemed in a limited sense in the same “Doctrine of Method” and also the Third *Critique*, particularly by way

of its attachment to the moral proof. This story allows for considerable variation in the details, but the core of it is that - with the exception of the physicotheological approach, which is something of a free agent - the speculative proofs must all be abandoned, and there can be no common ground between mere speculative theology (which comes to nothing) and moral theology. (Moral theology has its own problems on this account due to the ambiguous status of practical postulation and the highest good - but Kant at least clearly endorses such theology.)

As I already hinted at in the last Chapter, this story is not right but also not quite wrong, which makes it all the more difficult to correct. There is indeed a shift of emphasis towards moral theology in the critical period with a corresponding devaluation of speculation, and there is a rejection of the older proofs in their speculative form. Yet many other details are lost in this story, and with them a proper understanding of the ones that aren't. In particular, with all focus placed on the opposition between "speculation" and "morality" no notice is taken of the considerable middle area provided by *practice more generally* (i.e., not the directly and exclusively moral). It is only with an eye towards the grey area of scientific skill that the old proofs become relevant again - all of the precritical proofs, that is, turn out to be free agents much like the "physicotheological" (which can become speculative or practical depending on intent), and typically for empirical-scientific purposes.

All of the old proofs, save one. The proof left out of this, as always, is the Cartesian one. Although a full exploration of what this proof actually amounts to will have to wait until the final chapter, in a very fundamental sense the Cartesian proof *just is* speculative theology. This can particularly be found in the way that the system of speculative proofs *diminishes* itself throughout Kant's career: the "Ideal of Pure Reason," read within the whole scope and teleology

of Kant's work, in fact amounts to a kind of middle stopping point in-between the first such system in the 1763 *Beweisgrund* and his last attempt at the same, namely in the drafts for *What is the Actual Progress that Metaphysics Has Made in Germany Since Leibniz's and Wolff's Time?* from the early 1790s. Particularly in that final text the speculative system can be read to quite visibly shrink itself down bit by bit into a single point, that of the Cartesian proof alone.

Given all of the above, the chapter will proceed as follows. At the very end, as preparation for my final conclusions, I will try to trace the path of the transformations of the system of the speculative proofs, concluding with *What is the Actual Progress...?* and with particular interest in the increasing isolation of the Cartesian proof. Before then, though, I make a review of the fate of the other precritical theistic proofs in the critical period - not just on the updates in Kant's discussions of (and/or attacks upon) them, but also a consideration of how these proofs are rehabilitated and redeployed, often in the margins but sometimes (as with the "physicotheological" proof) so openly that it cannot be missed.

If the next sections, which will trace the new transformations of the old precritical proofs, center on the "Ideal" (as that has been the historically decisive text), they will by no means be limited to it. I have insisted from the beginning, albeit without much more than the promise of a better interpretation, that one cannot really understand Kant's critical approach to the proofs - and the proofs as such - without first understanding his earlier writings on the subject and the wider history. Here that check begins to be cashed.

The epochal "Ideal of Pure Reason" of the *Critique* is a tricky and difficult text, often redeploying much older arguments without updating them to the new context and, indeed, with the novel innovations of the critical approach barely manifesting. Out of context this text can

appear just as a simple refutation of all the traditional, speculatively-inclined proofs of the past, or - worse - as a “strange chapter, so unworthy” of Kant, expressing an architecturally driven “rigid scholasticism.”¹ But read against thinking extended back a quarter of a century, and indeed read against the rest of the critical corpus, myriad different levels of discussion and countless nuances - which have often been staring at us from the page for more than two centuries - suddenly manifest themselves. What should become increasingly clear is that the work of the “Ideal” consists less in a refutation of the proofs in isolation and more in a refutation of *speculation as such*, of any claim to reach knowledge and theoretical certainty concerning the existence of a rigorously defined highest entity. Save for the Cartesian proof, all of the old proofs turn out to be perfectly acceptable once relieved of their speculative ambitions to knowledge and, so to speak, “put in retrograde” by the concept of doctrinal faith. Most misleadingly of all, however, this core text concerning the speculative proofs hardly deploys Kant’s most powerful analytical tool against speculation, that of the doctrine of transcendental illusion (to be discussed in the final Chapter).²

I. A Critical Return to the Ontological Proof

¹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I., 507-8.

² As a reminder about terminology, I already warned readers in my second Chapter that Kant’s names for these proofs shift throughout his career, sometimes without clear reason. The proof from contingency is renamed “cosmological,” while the original cosmological proof becomes “physicotheological” or “physicoteleological” (in the Third *Critique*). The ontological proof, read as speculative, *dovetails* with the Cartesian, but in a way that the distinctive approach of the latter comes to take over the name. Once again, I will not alter any quotations from Kant in order to force terminological consistency, but in my own comments I stick to the following: I keep the Cartesian and ontological proofs apart, as in 1763, and I refer to the two empirical approaches as the “contingency proof” and then the “physicotheological proof.”

To be clear at the outset, there is no question of whether the basic concepts of Kant's old ontological proof are still present and playing some role in the critical era, even in the "Ideal of Pure Reason" itself. As Wood points out, the ontological proof has only "a rather shadowy life" in the *Critique*, but one that is "undeniable" all the same.³ there is indeed a long discussion to be found concerning the concept of "most real entity" (the God native to this proof) and even an argument for this concept's necessity. But if the makings are still there, the subsequent puzzle that presents itself to readers is rather why these makings were apparently no longer rendered into a full-blooded speculative *proof* of God's existence.⁴ For even if Kant viewed his old proof as somehow flawed, the same was true of the other speculative proofs which the "Ideal" still calls out and discusses with full recognition. Put another way: why did Kant, ever the lover of symmetry, give us *four* paralogisms and *four* antinomies but then only a *trio* of speculative theistic proofs, when in 1763 he had known of a more fitting quartet?

My suggestion is that asking why the old proof "isn't discussed" as a proof is to look at this puzzle in the wrong way. It is to assume that the refutation of the "ontological proof" in the "Ideal" is simply a carryover of the discussion of the Cartesian proof in the *Beweisgrund*, so that the Cartesian proof outright steals over the "ontological" title from its original bearer. I propose

³ *Kant's Rational Theology* 78,

⁴ I mention several of the most extensive accounts for why Kant seems to drop his old proof *as* a proof. Logan's "Whatever Happened to Kant's Ontological Argument?" (357-9) suggests first that Kant sees no need to discuss his old proof, since the Cartesian has taken over its role – which is in some sense correct – and second that Kant abandons the proof for empiricist reasons. The latter seems untenable, for here one is within a topic where Kant is willing to grant objects beyond experience on certain grounds (most strikingly in the Second *Critique* at 5:134ff, discussed in the next chapter). Chignell's "Most Real Being" (186-8) reads Kant as rejecting the proof in relation to problems arising from jointly instantiating all realities in one entity, which is based in his particular reading of the proof as requiring such instantiation. Fisher/Watkins (393-4), first of all an excellent tour of many ways of explaining the lack of the original ontological proof in the "Ideal" that *do not* work, finally concludes that Kant removes God from the realm of knowledge (and thus drops this proof) due to his developing a sharp divide between reason and the understanding. This is close to my own view, and receives a fuller development along similar lines in Abaci's "Fate of the Only Possible Proof." Abaci's account, discussed below, has only the disadvantage of still not explaining why Kant does not give his old proof a separate place and discussion in the "Ideal," but that is a disadvantage shared by these other accounts as well.

we instead take Kant at his word, and thereby read the refutation of the ontological proof as exactly what it claims to be. More exactly, I suggest that Kant came to recognize that the ontological proof, when it is speculative, *leads into* the Cartesian, and that the Cartesian requires the ontological as a starting point. The two proofs “dovetail” in the carpentry sense.

That is not to say that the dovetailing is tidy. Kant’s discussion of the ontological/Cartesian proof in the “Ideal” barely uses either term: “ontological” is in the section title (“On the Impossibility of an Ontological Proof...”) and in the preceding third section which serves as an introduction (“**There are only three possible methods of proving the existence of God from speculative reason...** The first proof is the physicotheological, the second the cosmological, the third the ontological proof”),⁵ but those are not in the text proper; just prior to the fourth section he even speaks of a “transcendental,” not “ontological,” proof.⁶ In the discussion itself, where one would expect a name to show up constantly, the phrase “ontological proof” is nearly absent; only at the very conclusion of the section does he finally declare, “So for the much-renowned *ontological (Cartesian) proof* of the existence of a highest entity from concepts, all effort and labor is lost... [*my emphasis*],”⁷ thereby once and for all identifying the two proofs for the purposes of speculative reason. Albeit with marks of uncertainty and terminological haziness, none more evident than that parenthetical “ontological (Cartesian),” at this very last moment the proofs do end up married.

⁵ A590-/B618-9, in 3:396. “**Es sind nur drei Beweisarten vom Dasein Gottes aus speculativer Vernunft möglich...** Der erste Beweis ist der physikotheologische, der zweite der kosmologische, der dritte der ontologische Beweis.”

⁶ A591/B619, in 3:397. “Ich werde also von der Prüfung des transscendentalen Beweises anfangen...”

⁷ A602/B630, in 3:403. “Es ist also an dem so berühmten ontologischen (cartesianischen) Beweise vom Dasein eines höchsten Wesens aus Begriffen alle Mühe und Arbeit verloren...”

If I understand the shifts in Kant's position, it is precisely the attempt to keep the ontological proof "speculative" that finally leads it into the Cartesian one. Roughly put, Kant comes to recognize that the "ground" which all possibility presupposes need not be an *actuality*; in order to take that final step, one would need to at least tacitly assume that the concept of the *ens realissimum* (which his proof, he thinks, validly arrives at) implies existence, and necessarily so. Likewise, however, argumentation in the tradition of "Meditation V" can get nowhere without first beginning with just such an *ens realissimum*, which the ontological proof provides. In order to keep the two proofs separate within the "Ideal" (as *speculative* proofs), one would need to distinguish between a Cartesian proof which begins with the ontological and an ontological proof that ends with the Cartesian – Kant rightly seems to have found this impossible. And not only these proofs themselves, but even the relationship between them, all have a predecessor in Descartes.

A. The "Supreme and Complete Condition" of Possible Content

As I said above, the makings of Kant's old ontological proof are still evident in the *Critique*, albeit mostly in the initial "Transcendental Ideal" and not in the treatment of the speculative proofs. Kant is quite clear in his discussion that, *on their own*, those makings are no longer sufficient to establish any speculative conclusion. But they do play the important role of establishing a speculative *concept* of God (one which still grounds all thinkable content).

The section begins with an account of the principles of "Bestimmbarkeit" (determinability, for concepts) and "durchgängigen Bestimmung" (thoroughgoing determination,

for things), the deep details of which are not important for present purposes.⁸ Each thing must be determined, Kant says, by either having or lacking with regard to every possible reality (i.e., primitive quality); a thing is thoroughly determined by having each of those realities either affirmed or denied of it. And if this is to be possible, for Kant, then a sum total of all realities - all possibility gathered together – must always be on hand. This material *in itself* can and must never go transcendently missing, even if in finite things something of that material is always taken away:

The expression ‘non-mortal’ [i.e. a mere privation] cannot at all give to be cognized that a mere non-being is represented in the object thereby, rather it leaves all content untouched. A transcendental negation, by contrast, means non-being in itself, which the transcendental affirmation is opposed to - [affirmation] is an aught, whose concept in itself already expresses being and is therefore named reality (item-hood [Sachheit]), for objects are Aughts (things) through it alone and just so wide as it reaches, whereas the negation in opposition means a mere absence and, where this alone is thought, the rescindment of all things is represented.⁹

Realities can go realized or unrealized in particulars, but they cannot be (to use Kant’s terms) *transcendentally* negated. They must always be available, even if not realized, in their sum total (the “correlate” of all possible entities).

But a totality of reality and the very procedure of thoroughgoing determination then points to the concept of an entity that would somehow *possess* all reality (“...the concept of the *ens realissimum* is the concept of an individual entity, as from all possible opposing predicates one [set] is found in its determination, namely that which belongs to being *per se*”).¹⁰ This is the

⁸ Cf A571-3/B599-601, in 3:385-6. For far more detailed discussion of this topic I point the reader to Grier’s “Ideal of Pure Reason” (266-72), Wood’s *Kant’s Rational Theology* (28-63), and all of Verburgt’s “Ultimate Prototype.”

⁹ A574-5/B602-3, in 5:287. “Der Ausdruck Nichtsterblich kann gar nicht zu erkennen geben, daß dadurch ein bloßes Nichtsein am Gegenstande vorgestellt werde, sondern läßt allen Inhalt unberührt. Eine transscendentale Verneinung bedeutet dagegen das Nichtsein an sich selbst, dem die transscendentale Bejahung entgegengesetzt wird, welche ein Etwas ist, dessen Begriff an sich selbst schon ein Sein ausdrückt und daher Realität (Sachheit) genannt wird, weil durch sie allein, und so weit sie reicht, Gegenstände Etwas (Dinge) sind, die entgegenstehende Negation hingegen einen bloßen Mangel bedeutet und, wo diese allein gedacht wird, die Aufhebung alles Dinges vorgestellt wird.”

¹⁰ A576/B604, in 3:388. “Es ist aber auch durch diesen allbesitz der Realität der Begriff eines Dinges an sich selbst als durchgängig bestimmt vorgestellt, und der Begriff eines *entis realissimi* ist der Begriff eines einzelnen Wesens,

transcendental ideal, the most real entity or “ur-entity.” Properly thought through, says Kant, this ideal is not an aggregate cobbled together from lesser entities (as Gassendi might have it), even if it would correct their shortcomings. Rather, it is at such a remove from all other entities that they cannot even properly be considered limitations of its being. It should instead be considered “most real” in the sense that it is the *ground* of all possibility, i.e. that it first *makes possible* the sum total of reality:

Since one cannot say that an ur-entity is composed of many derivative entities, as each of the same presupposes it and therefore cannot make it up, so the ideal of the ur-entity must also be thought as simple.

The derivation of all other possibility from this ur-entity hence, to speak strictly, cannot even be regarded as a limitation of its highest reality and, as it were, a division of the same; for thereupon the ur-entity would be regarded as a mere aggregate of derivative entities, which according to the above is impossible, although initially we just represented it so in the first rough sketches. Rather the highest reality would lie at the ground of the possibility of all things as a ground and not as an inclusive concept, and the manifoldness of the latter should not be based on the limitation of the ur-entity itself, but on its complete consequences - to which all our sensibility, including all reality in appearance, would belong, which cannot belong to the idea of the highest entity as an ingredient.¹¹

The consequence of this is that the ideal “lies at the ground of the thoroughgoing determination which is necessarily found with all that exists,” to the point that it “makes up the supreme and complete condition of its possibility, to which all thinking of objects overall must be led back as

weil von allen möglichen entgegengesetzten Prädicaten eines, nämlich das, was zum Sein schlechthin gehört, in seiner Bestimmung angetroffen wird.”

¹¹ A579/B607, in 3:389-90. “Weil man auch nicht sagen kann, daß ein Urwesen aus viel abgeleiteten Wesen bestehe, indem ein jedes derselben jenes voraussetzt, mithin es nicht ausmachen kann, so wird das Ideal des Urwesens auch als einfach gedacht werden müssen.

“Die Ableitung aller anderen Möglichkeit von diesem Urwesen wird daher, genau zu reden, auch nicht als eine Einschränkung seiner höchsten Realität und gleichsam als eine Theilung derselben angesehen werden können; denn alsdann würde das Urwesen als ein bloßes Aggregat von abgeleiteten Wesen angesehen werden, welches nach dem vorigen unmöglich ist, ob wir es gleich anfänglich, im ersten rohen Schattenrisse, so vorstellten. Vielmehr würde der Möglichkeit aller Dinge die höchste Realität als ein Grund und nicht als Inbegriff zum Grunde liegen und die Mannigfaltigkeit der ersteren nicht auf der Einschränkung des Urwesens selbst, sondern seiner vollständigen Folge beruhen, zu welcher denn auch unsere ganze Sinnlichkeit sammt aller Realität in der Erscheinung gehören würde, die zu der Idee des höchsten Wesens als ein Ingrediens nicht gehören kann.”

regards their content.”¹² If no ideal, then no thoroughgoing determination, and so no objects. And this is an extraordinary admission on the critical Kant’s part: the transcendental ideal, which is a *concept of reason*, is thereby not only unavoidable but the concept which grounds all reality even in the field of appearances.¹³

Albeit perhaps strange in a critical context, a good deal of this should already seem familiar from discussions of the ontological proof from my third Chapter – moreover the “Transcendental Ideal,” in leading all real possibility back to the concept or idea of an ens realissimum before asking whether that entity exists, is even closer to the structure of Descartes’ “Third Meditation” than the *Beweisgrund* (which omits this middle step). But here the inference from the givenness of reality (possibility) concludes *only* to a necessary ideal – an idea “*in individuo*, i.e. as an individual thing determinable or even determined by the idea alone”¹⁴ - and no longer to an existing *entity*. Even if the ideal is a concept of reason taken as an individual, for all that it is still a concept. Thus the first major difference from 1763 is that, at least speculatively speaking, the final step to existence cannot be taken so easily. A “hypostatization” of the idea of God would be illegitimate:

Now if we go after this idea of ours so far that we hypostatize it, thus we will be able to determine the ur-entity by the mere concept of the highest reality as a single, simple, all-sufficient, eternal, etc. [entity], in a word, [determine] it in its unconditioned completeness by

¹² A576/B604, in 3:388. “Also ist es ein transscendentales Ideal, welches der durchgängigen Bestimmung, die nothwendig bei allem, was existirt, angetroffen wird, zum Grunde liegt und die oberste und vollständige materiale Bedingung seiner Möglichkeit ausmacht, auf welcher alles Denken der Gegenstände überhaupt ihrem Inhalte nach zurückgeführt werden muß.”

¹³ Also of the extraordinary discussion at A581-2/B609-10, in 3:391, which I quote below. In the “Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic” Kant is quite provocative in his account of how mere concepts of reason can play a transcendental role in structuring experience, but even there their effects are typically indirect. Here, at least if we take Kant at his word, a concept of reason seems to be *directly* providing content (reality) to appearances. Fisher and Watkins (1998, 389-90) suggest that even here the ideal is only playing a regulative (not constitutive) role, but they have only a distant text from the discussion of the “cosmological” proof to rely upon (A619/B647, in 3:412-3). But if I am not fully convinced, I also presently have no alternative account for these passages.

¹⁴ A568/B596, in 3:383. “...was ich das Ideal nenne, und worunter ich die Idee nicht bloß *in concreto*, sondern *in individuo*, d. i. als ein einzelnes, durch die Idee allein bestimmbares oder gar bestimmtes Ding, verstehe.”

all predicaments. The concept of such an entity is that of God, thought in transcendental understanding; and so the ideal of pure reason is the object of transcendental theology, as I have alleged above.

However, this use of the transcendental idea would yet already overstep the boundaries of its determination and admissibility. For reason only laid it at the ground as the concept of all reality for the thoroughgoing determination of things overall, without requiring that all this reality be objectively given and itself make up a thing. This latter is a mere bit of poetry [Erdichtung] by which we fasten together and realize the manifold of our idea in an ideal, as a particular entity, wherefore we have no warrant, not even once, to really assume the possibility of such a hypothesis...¹⁵

Kant effectively already expressed this concern circa 1770, in the crucial Fragment 4253 which introduces the moral proof - our taking over this ideal is only “the necessary subordination of concepts according to the law of human understanding”¹⁶ The remains of the old proof still provide us with a legitimate concept of God, and we reach that concept by something like the same procedure. But those same remains, on their own, are insufficient for us to speculatively establish a particular existing *thing*.

B. “Subjective Necessity”

On the other hand Kant is perfectly clear that the original ontological proof is quite valid within certain limits, and this is evidenced even in the “Transcendental Ideal.” Later fragments from the ‘70s initially appear a bit divided on the question, but read comprehensively and with

¹⁵ A580/B608, in 3:390. “Wenn wir nun dieser unserer Idee, indem wir sie hypostasiren, so ferner nachgehen, so werden wir das Urwesen durch den bloßen Begriff der höchsten Realität als ein einiges, einfaches, allgenugsames, ewiges etc., mit einem Worte, es in seiner unbedingten Vollständigkeit durch alle Prädicamente bestimmen können. Der Begriff eines solchen Wesens ist der von Gott, in transscendentalem Verstande gedacht; und so ist das Ideal der reinen Vernunft der Gegenstand einer transscendentalen Theologie, so wie ich es auch oben angeführt habe. “Indessen würde dieser Gebrauch der transscendentalen Idee doch schon die Grenzen ihrer Bestimmung und Zulässigkeit überschreiten. Denn die Vernunft legte sie nur als den Begriff von aller Realität der durchgängigen Bestimmung der Dinge überhaupt zum Grunde, ohne zu verlangen, daß alle diese Realität objectiv gegeben sei und selbst ein Ding ausmache. Dieses letztere ist eine bloße Erdichtung, durch welche wir das Mannigfaltige unserer Idee in einem Ideale als einem besonderen Wesen zusammenfassen und realisiren, wozu wir keine Befugniß haben, sogar nicht einmal, die Möglichkeit einer solchen Hypothese geradezu anzunehmen...”

¹⁶ 17:482.

care present a common account (also echoed by the *Lectures*) - namely, that the ontological proof can reach the existence of this God as something subjectively necessary but not apodictic (precisely by what he will later call “faith”). Fragment 5518 from Kant’s copy of Baumgarten, as a starting point, reads very much like the *Beweisgrund*:

All possibilities presuppose the concept of an *entis realissimi*. And this concept presupposes existence, as realities, without being given, are not thought even in feeling [Empfindung], but what has been given in feeling exists.

Absolute necessity is based on the presupposed condition of all possibility, not on the identity of a concept with itself, from which no existence follows.¹⁷

This can be usefully compared to Fragment 6027 (previously discussed), which similarly reads:

The ontological proof must read like so: in relation to possibility in general, a supreme perfection must exist; but not: an entity which we think as supremely perfect must thereby exist. For this latter does not follow.¹⁸

But these are not full-throated endorsements of the old proof in its full-fat speculative form

(“presupposition” of existence does not imply *proof* of existence), and they are matched by texts emphasizing a more moderated view. E.g., elsewhere Kant speaks of the “transcendental” proof as pointing to a merely “subjective” ground of possibility:

The ground of the transcendental proof lies in this. We can think of possibilities only *derivate*, not *originarie*; consequently the All that is given to us is the *substratum* of possibility, where all our thinking rests upon it *a priori* by limitation and by modified relationships. The subjective ground of all possibility is thus this inclusive concept (subjective) of reality, which makes up the unity in us...¹⁹

¹⁷ 18:205. “Alle Möglichkeiten setzen den Begriff eines *entis realissimi* voraus. und dieser Begriff setzt das Daseyn voraus, weil realitaeten, ohne daß sie gegeben worden, in der Empfindung auch nicht können gedacht werden, was aber in der Empfindung gegeben worden, existirt.

“Die absolute Nothwendigkeit beruht auf der Vorausgesetzten Bedingung aller Möglichkeit, nicht auf der identitaet eines Begriffs mit sich selbst, woraus kein Daseyn folgt.”

¹⁸18:427.

¹⁹ Fragment 5522, in 18:206-7. “Der Grund des transscendentalen Beweises liegt darin. Wir können uns Möglichkeiten nur *derivate*, nicht *originarie* denken; folglich ist das uns gegebene All das *substratum* der Möglichkeit, wo durch limitation und durch veränderte Verhältnisse alles unser Denken *a priori* drauf beruht. De subiective Grund aller Möglichkeit ist also dieser inbegrif (subjektiver) der realitaet, welcher in uns Einheit ausmacht; denn dadurch kann allein das durchgängige Verhältnis was und Einstimmung, was die Form der Möglichkeit ist, verstanden werden.”

There must indeed be an *ens realissimum*, but only as the subjective condition of possibility in experience (and not the condition of possibility among things in themselves). That is to say, there is still a genuine rational validity to the ideal and to the ontological (“transcendental”) proof insofar as it is rooted in the nature of finite reason as such:

Proof from thinking overall, and not from the determinate concept of a thing.

The proof of an entity that contains [begreift] everything does not allow itself to be cognized *a posteriori*, not even *a priori*, other than from the conditions of our reason for determining the object of cognition in the All.²⁰

As Kant says in an echo of Descartes, “We would have no concept at all of the imperfect if we did not think the perfect.”²¹ But he also insists that this foundational concept *remains a mere concept*, and any theoretical validity here reaches only so far as our cognition:

...Now the *substratum* of all possibility *a priori* is the highest reality. Thus the opposite of the same is not among the possibilities. For all negations are limitations; it follows that with all possibility the unlimited is presupposed. This is laid at the ground for all intentions, hence is absolutely necessary: positive concept of necessity. (*Cartesii* proof. Wolff.)
(The necessity of space and time cannot be proved, rather only as a necessary condition of the possibility of things according to form, thus also of the *entis realissimi* as a condition of the possibility of the same according to matter; nevertheless both grounds are only subjective.)²²

The *ens necessarium* is a subjectively necessary *hypothesis* for thinking all possibility. All possibility of a limited thing is derived through the idea and presupposes a larger [thing] which is limited. All possibility thus has the *ens realissimum* for a condition.²³

²⁰ Fragment 5501, in 18:200. “Beweis aus dem Denken überhaupt, und nicht aus dem bestimmten Begriffe eines Dinges.

“Der Beweis von einem Wesen, was alles begreift, läßt sich nicht *a posteriori*, auch nicht anders *a priori* erkennen, als aus den Bedingungen unserer Vernunft, den Gegenstand der Erkenntnis in dem All zu bestimmen.”

²¹ Fragment 5505, in 18:202. “(Wir würden gar nicht einen Begriff vom Unvollkommenen haben, wenn wir nicht das Vollkommene dächten.)”

²² Fragment 5500, in 18:200. “...Nun ist das *substratum* aller Möglichkeit *a priori* die höchste Realität. Also ist das Gegenteil derselben nicht unter den Möglichkeiten. Denn alle Negationen sind Schranken; folglich wird bey aller Möglichkeit das uneingeschränkte vorausgesetzt. Dieses ist in aller Absicht zum Grunde gelegt, mithin absolut nothwendig: positiver Begriff der Nothwendigkeit. (*Cartesii* Beweis. Wolff.)

“(Des Raumes und der Zeit Nothwendigkeit kann nicht bewiesen werden, sondern nur als eine nothwendige Bedingung der Möglichkeit der Dinge der Form nach, also auch des *entis realissimi* als einer Bedingung der Möglichkeiten derselben der Materie nach; indessen sind beyde Gründe nur subjectiv.)”

²³ Fragment 5527, in 18:208. “*Ens necessarium* ist eine subjectiv nothwendige *hypothesis* des Denkens aller Möglichkeit. Alle Möglichkeit eines eingeschränkten Dinges ist in der Idee abgeleitet und setzt ein Größeres voraus, das eingeschränkt wird. Alle Möglichkeit also hat zur Bedingung das *ens realissimum*.”

This merely subjective necessity means that, unlike in 1763, one cannot simply jump from the need for a ground of possibility to the existence of a God without hesitation.

Nevertheless, it might be asked: could even a merely subjective hypothesis still allow us to legitimately make that jump, i.e. still get us to an existence? In a certain sense, yes:

The first subjective condition of thinking, i.e. according to the representation of the object of possibility, is that all material of representation is given in feeling [Empfindung] and objectively in taking-for-true [Wahrnehmung], second the form of the conjunction of the manifold. Therefore that which contains the material and data of all possibles is presupposed as an object [of] taking-for-true, i.e. the material of all possibles exists as a necessary presupposition. The manifold of objects in view of this All of reality is based on the form of the limitation of this All. Hence the absolute unity of the All, in which everything is possible through limitation, lies at the ground. Thus something must exist as a *substratum* of possibility.²⁴

The substratum “must exist,” but *only* as a necessary presupposition. The needle Kant seems to be trying to thread here is that the ontological proof can never be valid as a full-blown speculative *proof* of an existence, but the very fact that we have this concept (the ideal, the substratum of possibility) makes it quite convincing *for us, for our subjective purposes*, that an entity matching that concept should exist. Fragment 5508, e.g., neatly confirms this:

Although the existence of God does not flow from the conditions whereupon we ground the concept of possibility, it yet follows enough from that to be thereby admitted by the one who can judge *a priori* about this. The subjective conditions of thinking thus serve very well to convince *cat anthropon*, not apodictically.²⁵

The proof can produce conviction *according to the person* - ad hominem, κατ’ ἄνθρωπον - but not via any objective certainty. Kant seems perfectly content with such conviction, so long as

²⁴ Fragment 5526, in 18:208. “Die erste subjective Bedingung des Denkens, d.i. der Vorstellung der obiecte der Möglichkeit nach, ist, daß alle Materie der Vorstellung in der Empfindung und obiective in der wahrnehmung gegeben sey, zweytens die Form der Verbindung des Manigfaltigen. Daher wird das, was die Materie und data alles Möglichen enthält, als ein obiect wahrnehmung vorausgesetzt, d.i. die Materie alles möglichen existirt als nothwendige Voraussetzung. Die Manigfaltigkeit der obiecte in ansehung dieses All der realitaet beruht auf der Form der Einschränkung dieses All. Daher liegt zum Grunde die absolute Einheit des All, in welchem alles durch Einschränkung Möglich ist. Es muß also etwas als ein *substratum* der Möglichkeit existiren.”

²⁵ 18:203. “Wenngleich aus den Bedingungen, worauf wir den Begriff der Möglichkeit gründen, das Daseyn Gottes nicht fließt, so folgt doch gnug daraus, damit es von demjenigen eingeräumt wäre, der hierüber *a priori* urtheilen kan. Die subjective Bedingungen des Denkens dinen also sehr dazu, cat anthropon zu überzeugen, nicht apodictisch.”

one does not claim to have decisively *proved* anything thereby. The *Lectures* sum up the same point admirably, and I quote it at length:

We now go to the proof that the ens realissimum is also equally the ens entium, or as we expressed it earlier: that the most perfect entity contains in itself the ground of the possibility of all other things... Precisely on this rests the only possible probative ground for my demonstration of the existence of God, which has been scrutinized [auseinander gesetzt] in more detail in a book I published several years ago. Here it is shown that, among all possible proofs, this one - in which, if we cancel such an ur-entity, the substratum of the possibility of all things is equally cancelled - still affords us the most satisfaction. - Yet even this proof is not apodictically certain; for it cannot set forth the objective necessity of such an ur-entity, rather only the subjective necessity to assume it. Only it cannot be refuted in any way, as it has its ground in the nature of human reason; for [reason] thoroughly necessitates me to assume an entity which is the ground of all possibility, because otherwise I could not at all cognize that wherein something is possible.²⁶

This is as good an expression of Kant's final position on the ontological proof as one is ever likely to find. Merely *presupposing* the existence of God on the basis of the ontological proof is very much necessitated, and certainly raises no difficulties. (Indeed, here Kant must surely be thinking of what he will later call doctrinal faith).²⁷ Problems only arise when one claims to *know* this with objective certainty, i.e. when one tries to deploy this proof *speculatively*.

²⁶ 28:1033-4. "Wir gehen nun zu dem Beweise, daß das ens realissimum auch zugleich das ens entium sey, oder wie wir oben es ausgedrückt haben: daß das aller-vollkommenste Wesen den Grund der Möglichkeit aller andern Dinge in sich enthalte... Eben hierauf beruhet der einzige mögliche Beweisgrund meiner Demonstration vom Daseyn Gottes, der in einer vor mehreren Jahren von mir herausgegebenen Schrift ausführlicher auseinander gesetzt worden ist. Hier wird gezeigt, daß, unter allen möglichen Beweisen, dieser einzige uns noch die meiste Befriedigung gewähret, indem, wenn wir ein solches Urwesen aufheben, zugleich das Substratum der Möglichkeit aller Dinge aufgehoben wird. – Doch ist auch dieser Beweis nicht apodiktisch gewiß; denn er kann nicht die objektive Nothwendigkeit eines solchen Urwesens darthun, sondern nur die subjektive Nothwendigkeit, es anzunehmen. Allein widerleget kann er auf keine Weise werden, weil er in der Natur der menschlichen Vernunft seinen Grund hat; denn diese nöthiget mich durchaus, ein Wesen anzunehmen, das der Grund von allem Möglichen ist, weil ich sonst überall nicht erkennen könnte, worin etwas möglich sey." This passage has acted as a dead giveaway for scholars of Kant's old proof that it still maintains some value; Wood (*Rational Theology* 77-8) already noticed it, and it is constantly pointed out by Abaci ("Chignell's Real Harmony" 18-21, and "Fate of the Only Possible Proof" 270-1) and Chignell ("Belief in Kant" 348-9 and "Most Real Being" 159-60). I discuss this text (along with related fragments) below.

²⁷ Chignell ("Belief in Kant" 348-9) deserves considerable credit for being the first to notice (so far as I am aware) that the continued validity of the ontological proof is linked to faith as a mode of holding-for-true.

To be clear, even in the *Critique* there is no question of whether something like the old ontological proof can hint at the existence of the most real entity, and even justify taking that existence as a necessary one in some sense:

A certain groundedness cannot be disputed in this concept [of concluding that the most real entity is necessary] if what's under discussion [die Rede ist] is resolutions, namely when first the existence of some necessary entity is granted and one comes to agree therein that one must choose one's side [concerning] where one will set [this necessity]; for then one cannot choose more decently, or rather one has no choice, but is obliged to give one's vote to the absolute unity of complete reality as the original source of possibility.²⁸

Much like gambling on extraterrestrials in the doctrinal faith discussion,²⁹ if the question is only which way one has to *vote* (as Kant puts it) there is nothing illegitimate about endorsing the existence of a most real entity. The vote is a *choice*, a *resolution*, in a sense one we are actively driven to make (as a hypothesis), and is perfectly “gründlich” at that level. But, as Kant makes clear later in the paragraph, it is only *the need to make a choice* in the first place, the very context of being driven to choose, that makes this choice justifiable. If that need were removed, i.e. if one were placed in a entirely neutral theoretical situation, the decision has no such basis. And (to return to the fragments) this sums up the problem with the speculative proofs - this choice, this presupposition necessary *for us*, *seems* like it has broader theoretical validity when it doesn't:

[T]he concept of all reality as a substratum of reason is necessary for us; but we cannot therefore view a highest reality as necessary in itself... The concept which lies at the ground is a necessary presupposition, and so it seems to be a concept of a necessary entity.³⁰

²⁸ A587/B615, in 3:394. “Diesem Begriffe kann eine gewisse Gründlichkeit nicht gestritten werden, wenn von Entschließungen die Rede ist, nämlich wenn einmal das Dasein irgend eines nothwendigen Wesens zugegeben wird, und man darin übereinkommt, daß man seine Partei ergreifen müsse, worin man dasselbe setzen wolle; denn alsdann kann man nicht schicklicher wählen, oder man hat vielmehr keine Wahl, sondern ist genöthigt, der absoluten Einheit der vollständigen Realität als dem Urquelle der Möglichkeit seine Stimme zu geben.”

²⁹ Cf A825/B853, in 3:535, discussed in the previous chapter.

³⁰ Fragment 4729, in 17:689-90. “Also ist uns der Begriff von aller Realitaet als ein substratum der Vernunft nothwendig; aber darum können wir nicht eine hochste Realitaet als an sich selbst nothwendig ansehen... Der Begriff, welcher zum Grunde liegt, ist eine nothwendige Voraussetzung und scheint darum ein Begriff vom nothwendigen Wesen zu seyn.”

Kant's objection is not to affirming a most real entity's existence, but in claiming to *know* that it exists in the full-blooded sense: "It is self-evident that reason, for this its purpose, namely just to represent to itself the necessary thoroughgoing determination of things, does not presuppose the existence of such an entity, which is in accordance with the ideal, but only the idea of the same."

³¹ The strongest subjective necessity still "leaves us in complete ignorance [Unwissenheit] regarding the existence of an entity of such exceptional precedence."³²

C. "...this urgent need of reason..."

The above will become a common theme: it is the additional step towards "wissen," towards claiming to *know* the existence (necessity) of most real entity, that makes the proof speculative, and will in the end make it dovetail with the Cartesian proof. To be sure, the reader may nevertheless wonder why the old ontological proof even needs such an additional step when the *Beweisgrund* could apparently conclude to "absolute necessity" and existence while outright rejecting the Cartesian proof at the same moment. A full answer to this question will be complicated, but should show in fairly short order why what is happening in the "Ideal" is a dovetailing of two proofs and not the ontological proof's simply being dropped, and why Kant would have read this dovetailing as unavoidable.

³¹ A577-8/B605-6, in 3:389. "Es versteht sich von selbst, daß die Vernunft zu dieser ihrer Absicht, nämlich sich lediglich die nothwendige durchgängige Bestimmung der Dinge vorzustellen, nicht die Existenz eines solchen Wesens, das dem ideale gemäß ist, sondern nur die Idee desselben voraussetze..."

³² A579/B607, in 3:389. "Alles dieses... läßt uns wegen der Existenz eines Wesens von so ausnehmendem Vorzuge in völliger Unwissenheit."

For the first part of the answer, namely why the critical Kant would not have accepted the validity of the ontological proof on its own, I can rely on the help of an excellent recent piece by Ugyar Abaci. The general point is this:

[T]he key to Kant's downgrading of the pre-critical proof lies in the shift in his interpretation of the [principle that the content of possibility must have a ground] in the foundational premise of the proof. While the pre-critical Kant understands this principle as expressing an ontological condition of the (absolute) real possibility of things in general, the critical Kant takes it to express an epistemological condition of our cognition of (relative) real possibilities of empirical objects.³³

Abaci chooses terms ("ontological" versus "epistemological") which are a bit anachronistic if not misleading, but what he means is that the *Critique* grants (as we saw above) that all possibility must have a ground, but only as a *transcendental condition* of all possible objects as regards their content. This ground need not apply to things in general³⁴ and it need not exist. The "absolute necessity" of the ideal *as a concept* is by no means enough for us to reach it *as actual*. That is to say, the older Kant has to be reading his younger counterpart as either falling short in his demonstration or assuming a hidden premise. In the right circumstances, as above, we might "vote" for the existence of such a ground, but in a neutral theoretical regard the ideal is impotent and unconvincing by itself:

Regardless of this urgent need of reason to presuppose something which could completely ground the understanding in the thoroughgoing determination of its concepts, so it nevertheless notices far too easily the idealic and merely poetical [nature] of such a presupposition as to be talked into immediately accepting a mere creature of its own thinking for an actual entity...³⁵

³³ "Fate of the Only Possible Proof" 289.

³⁴ Cf A582/B610, in 3:391

³⁵ A584/B612, in 3:392. "Ungeachtet dieses dringenden Bedürfnisses der Vernunft, etwas vorauszusetzen, was dem Verstande zu der durchgängigen Bestimmung seiner Begriffe vollständig zum Grunde liegen könne, so bemerkt sie doch das Idealische und bloß Gedichtete einer solchen Voraussetzung viel zu leicht, als daß sie dadurch allein überredet werden sollte, ein bloßes Selbstgeschöpf ihres Denkens sofort für ein wirkliches Wesen anzunehmen..."

There is no other kind of entity which would better “behoove the concept of an absolutely necessary entity” than the ideal,³⁶ but from a theoretical point of view this is still not enough to claim *knowledge* of its existence. If the younger Kant wishes to go any further, then (knowingly or not) he must take on additional demonstrative steps.

I suggest here that for the older Kant his younger counterpart took over the Cartesian proof at the moment he assumed that an “absolutely necessary” ground of possibility must exist just by reason of being such, and that he could not have done otherwise (insofar as he intended the proof to be speculative). As we saw, the younger Kant was profoundly hostile to the Cartesian proof, and was at pains to distinguish his own sense of “absolute necessity” from the disastrous alternative.³⁷ Thus he is not making the gross error of saying that a most real entity must include the reality “existence”: the premise he explicitly relies upon is only that without such an absolutely necessary entity, all thinkable content would be cancelled. Yet neither Kant, young or old, says in refuting the Cartesian/ontological proof that such a proof must take on the specific form of “Meditation V” - in the *Critique* that version only appears after some four pages of discussion, as a challenge to Kant’s prior comments. The problem for the young Kant is that, for his later self, being a ground of possibility does not yet imply “absolute necessity” because *nothing* does. *Describing* absolute necessity is, for the older Kant, “quite easy, that it is namely

³⁶ A586/B514, in 3:394. “The concept of an entity of the highest reality, among all concepts of possible things, would thus best behoove the concept of an absolutely necessary entity, and even if it does not fully satisfy this, so we have no choice nevertheless, but see ourselves compelled to hold to it; for we are not entitled to throw the existence of a necessary being into the wind, rather we concede it, yet in the whole field of possibility we can find nothing which could make a better-grounded claim to such a precedence in existence.” [“Der Begriff eines Wesens von der höchsten Realität würde sich also unter allen Begriffen möglicher Dinge zu dem Begriffe eines unbedingt nothwendigen Wesens am besten schicken, und wenn er diesem auch nicht völlig genughut, so haben wir doch keine Wahl, sondern sehen uns genöthigt, uns an ihn zu halten; weil wir die Existenz eines nothwendigen Wesens nicht in den Wind schlagen dürfen, geben wir sie aber zu, doch in dem ganzen Felde der Möglichkeit nichts finden können, was auf einen solchen Vorzug im Dasein einen gegründeter Anspruch machen könnte.”]

³⁷ See my third Chapter.

something whose nonbeing is impossible” – but that says nothing about the “conditions which make it impossible to regard the nonbeing of a thing as simply unthinkable,” i.e. what would actually render any entity thus, even one “needful” for us.³⁸ For the purposes of a speculative proof all that remains is to, explicitly or otherwise, “[make] oneself a concept a priori of a thing which is so posited that, according its meaning, one conceives existence within its scope, [so that] one can securely conclude thence that, because the object of this concept necessarily belongs to existence... so too its existence is necessarily posited.”³⁹ The older Kant presumably reads the younger Kant as tacitly doing exactly this, even after warding off the same Cartesian proof pages earlier in his text. The younger Kant, that is, concludes that the ground of possibility must exist because merely being such a ground implies its existence. Once that leap is made – and for the older Kant it *must* be made if the proof is intended to be speculative, i.e. to terminate in knowledge of God’s existence – then the speculative ontological proof becomes easy prey for all of Kant’s attacks on the Cartesian one:

...I ask you, is the proposition: this or that thing (which I concede to you as possible, it may be whatever it wants) exists; is this proposition, I say, an analytic or synthetic proposition? If it is the former, so you make no addition to the thought of the thing by the existence [*or the necessity, for that matter*] of the thing; but then either the thought, which is in you, must be the thing itself, or you have presupposed an existence as belonging to the possibility, and then the existence, according to [your] predetermination, is concluded from inner possibility, which is nothing but a mere tautology... By contrast you [may] admit, as it must be rightly admitted by everyone reasonable, that every existential proposition is synthetic: how will you then claim that the

³⁸ A592-3/B620-1, in 3:397. “Nun ist zwar eine Namenerklärung von diesem Begriffe ganz leicht, daß es nämlich so etwas sei, dessen Nichtsein unmöglich ist; aber man wird hiedurch um nichts klüger in Ansehung der Bedingungen, die es unmöglich machen, das Nichtsein eines Dinges als schlechterdings undenklich anzusehen, und die eigentlich dasjenige sind, was man wissen will, nämlich ob wir uns durch diesen Begriff überall etwas denken, oder nicht.”

³⁹ A594/B622, in 3:398. “Gleichwohl hat diese logische Nothwendigkeit eine so große Macht ihrer Illusion bewiesen, daß, indem man sich einen Begriff a priori von einem Dinge gemacht hatte, der so gestellt war, daß man seiner Meinung nach das Dasein mit in seinen Umfang begriff, man daraus glaubte sicher schließen zu können, daß, weil dem Object dieses Begriffs das Dasein nothwendig zukommt, d. i. unter der Bedingung, daß ich dieses Ding als gegeben (existirend) setze, auch sein Dasein nothwendig (nach der Regel der Identität) gesetzt werde, und dieses Wesen daher selbst schlechterdings nothwendig sei, weil sein Dasein in einem nach Belieben angenommenen Begriffe und unter der Bedingung, daß ich den Gegenstand desselben setze, mit gedacht wird.”

predicate of existence does not allow itself repealed without contradiction? Since this privilege is only specific to the analytic, as its character is precisely based thereon.⁴⁰

Add on top of this passage the old thesis that “being is clearly no real predicate”⁴¹ (i.e. no determination of the concept), in its essence unchanged from the *Beweisgrund*, and the Cartesian proof collapses while taking the (speculative) ontological one with it. And as with the early Kant, so for all other such proofs: for the critical Kant any speculative ontological proof must end with a leap into the Cartesian, else it does not properly aim for an existence (is not speculative).

The ontological proof, speculatively understood, becomes (Kant’s version of) the Cartesian proof; better put, there is nothing to distinguish an ontological proof where necessary existence is tacked on at the end from a Cartesian proof where the concept of a most real entity is granted at the beginning. The same identification occurs, in its own way, in Descartes himself. I already pointed out in my third Chapter that the Cartesian proof, at least in “Meditation V,” seems to borrow the title of God (most perfect/most real) and most of its conceptual apparatus from “Meditation III.” The procedure of “Meditation V” is, after all, to take the idea of a most perfect entity and then analytically discover necessary existence among its perfections - and this would not be possible had the first half of “Meditation III” not delivered the concept of God as a most perfect entity in the first place. Kant’s “Ideal” basically replicates this procedure: once the old ontological proof is seen as unable to proceed on its own in the “Transcendental Ideal”, the

⁴⁰ A597-8/B625-6, in 3:400. “...Ich frage euch, ist der Satz: dieses oder jenes Ding (welches ich euch als möglich einräume, es mag sein, welches es wolle) existirt; ist, sage ich, dieser Satz ein analytischer oder synthetischer Satz? Wenn er das erstere ist, so thut ihr durch das Dasein des Dinges zu eurem Gedanken von dem Dinge nichts hinzu; aber alsdann müßte entweder der Gedanke, der in euch ist, das Ding selber sein, oder ihr habt ein Dasein als zur Möglichkeit gehörig vorausgesetzt und alsdann das Dasein dem Vorgeben nach aus der inneren Möglichkeit geschlossen, welches nichts als eine elende Tautologie ist... Gesteht ihr dagegen, wie es billigermaßen jeder Vernünftige gestehen muß, daß ein jeder Existenzialsatz synthetisch sei: wie wollet ihr denn behaupten, daß das Prädicat der Existenz sich ohne Widerspruch nicht aufheben lasse? Da dieser Vorzug nur den analytischen, als deren Charakter eben darauf beruht, eigenthümlich zukommt.”

⁴¹ A598/B626, in 3:401. “Sein ist offenbar kein reales Prädicat...”

concept of God which it won is nevertheless kept aboard until the “impossibility” of an “ontological (Cartesian)” proof from it is thereby shown.

But this is also to say that the dissolution of the ontological proof into the Cartesian (and its subsequent illegitimacy) is only due to its having become speculative. It still has validity outside of a theoretical context, as I said, and all it requires is a different sort of need to call upon it. In that sense, what Kant says at the very center of the “Ideal” should perhaps go for the ontological proof as much as all the others:

Nonetheless this argument [from something else to God] retains a certain importance and a prestige that still cannot be immediately taken away due to [its] objective insufficiency. For suppose that there are commitments [Verbindlichkeiten] which would be wholly right in the idea of reason but without any reality of application to ourselves, i.e. without driving forces, except where a highest entity would be presupposed which could give effect and vigor to the practical laws: thus even we would have a commitment to follow the concepts which, though they might not be objectively sufficient at first, yet are preponderant according to the measure of our reason, and by comparison with which we still cognize nothing better or more transformative. The duty to choose would here bring the inconclusiveness of speculation out of equilibrium through a practical addition - indeed, reason would find no justification for itself, as [its own] most discerning judge, if, under urgent causes to stir, although only deficient [regarding its] perception, it would not have followed these grounds in its judgment, concerning which we can yet at least cognize no better.⁴²

This is clearly a reference to what Kant will later call “rational faith.” The “commitments” implied by the ontological proof, to be sure, are not moral ones, but they remain considerable and very wide ones. Before even treating specifically of any of the proofs, Kant writes:

⁴² A588-9/B616-7, in 3:395. “Gleichwohl bleibt diesem Argumente eine gewisse Wichtigkeit und ein Ansehen, das ihm wegen dieser objectiven Unzulänglichkeit noch nicht sofort genommen werden kann. Denn setzet, es gebe Verbindlichkeiten, die in der Idee der Vernunft ganz richtig, aber ohne alle Realität der Anwendung auf uns selbst, d. i. ohne Triebfedern, sein würden, wo nicht ein höchstes Wesen vorausgesetzt würde, das den praktischen Gesetzen Wirkung und Nachdruck geben könnte: so würden wir auch eine Verbindlichkeit haben, den Begriffen zu folgen, die, wenn sie gleich nicht objectiv zulänglich sein möchten, doch nach dem Maße unserer Vernunft überwiegend sind, und in Vergleichung mit denen wir doch nichts Besseres und Überführenderes erkennen. Die Pflicht zu wählen würde hier die Unschlüssigkeit der Speculation durch einen praktischen Zusatz aus dem Gleichgewichte bringen, ja die Vernunft würde bei ihr selbst, als dem nachsehendsten Richter, keine Rechtfertigung finden, wenn sie unter dringenden Bewegursachen, obzwar nur mangelhafter Einsicht, diesen Gründen ihres Urtheils, über die wir doch wenigstens keine bessere kennen, nicht gefolgt wäre.”

[T]he material for the possibility of all objects of the senses must be presupposed as given in an inclusive concept, [and] all possibility of empirical objects, their difference from one another and their universal thoroughgoing determination, can be based on the restriction of this [concept]. Now in fact, no objects other than those of the senses can be given to us, and nowhere but in the context of a possible experience, [and] consequently nothing is an object for us unless it presupposes the inclusive concept of all empirical reality as a condition of its possibility.⁴³

The ontological picture here, centered upon the ideal, is roughly what I described in the previous chapter as the *unity of thinkability*. It is not possible for us to *know* that there is a ground of all reality which, as it were, secures the very experiencability of the objects of experience, but Kant seems to say that we act *as if* there were such an entity in any of our conduct within any sensible experience, even in *possible* experience. The old ontological proof of 1763 is here turned back on itself: rather than our proving the existence of a God via the givenness of any thinkable content, here it is precisely the presupposition of that God which secures the possibility of empirical objects in regard to their content. If the doctrinal faith at issue here, for Kant, does not rise to the same level of interest as that of the moral proof, still one here has an ontotheology that rules over all objects of experience and thereby (presumably) all science.

II. A Critical Return to the Contingency (“Cosmological”)⁴⁴ Proof

⁴³ A582/B610 3:391. “...so muß die Materie zur Möglichkeit aller Gegenstände der Sinne als in einem Inbegriffe gegeben vorausgesetzt werden, auf dessen Einschränkung allein alle Möglichkeit empirischer Gegenstände, ihr Unterschied von einander und ihre durchgängige Bestimmung beruhen kann. Nun können uns in der That keine andere Gegenstände als die der Sinne und nirgend als in dem Context einer möglichen Erfahrung gegeben werden, folglich ist nichts für uns ein Gegenstand, wenn es nicht den Inbegriff aller empirischen Realität als Bedingung seiner Möglichkeit voraussetzt.”

⁴⁴ Regarding the new title, Kant does tacitly acknowledge the shift in terminology: “This [cosmological] proof, which Leibniz also named the [proof] *a contingentia mundi*, we now want to set before our eyes and subject to examination.” (A560/B588, in 3:404. “Diesen Beweis, den Leibniz auch den *a contingentia mundi* nannte, wollen wir jetzt vor Augen stellen und der Prüfung unterwerfen.”) It should be recalled that in the *Beweisgrund* this proof never even received a proper name in the first place. And any griping about terminological inconsistency aside, “cosmological” is surely no bad description, given that the “world” (κόσμος) and the sensible world in particular is for Kant always marked precisely by contingency (as one sees especially in the Fourth “Antinomy”). Deploying that title here will of course require Kant to rename the *other* empirical proof (which bore the name “cosmological” in 1763) as well, however, none of this making the reader’s or commentator’s job any easier.

Of all the old proofs from the *Beweisgrund*, the contingency proof would seem to change the least though its transition into the critical period. There is obviously a new name, but the core of Kant's review of this proof in the "Ideal" remains evidently much the same as it was nearly two decades earlier. Reading more carefully, however, one finds very new elements at play: not only are there quite new lines of attack against the proof at a merely *causal* level, but when the contingency proof later finds some legitimacy within the critical system (in a newly limited, i.e. non-speculative, respect) in the solution of the "Fourth Antimony," it is only by abandoning the language of causality. The "causal" God is no longer a first cause, not even cause of the world strictly speaking, but the entity which "grounds" the causal series of the sensible world.

A. An Allegedly Transcendental Causality

The more extended and prosaic discussion in the "Ideal" is in some respects actually less clear in pointing out the structure of the proof than the quick and brutal account in the *Beweisgrund*, yet the nature of the central objection is basically the same. To recall the results from my fourth Chapter, in 1763 Kant sees this proof as needing to establish both *that there is* a first cause as well as *what* this first cause is, i.e. that it is properly divine. Apparently being unaware of Descartes' attempt to answer both questions by way of a "causa sui," Kant reads the proof as proceeding in two steps - first by way of empirically establishing a causally necessary entity, and second by locating this necessary existence within the pre-given concept of a most real entity (as that is the only concept which might be determined in advance to have necessarily

existence). This second step, Kant notices, is simply the Cartesian proof upside down, relying on the same fallacy of taking necessary existence as a reality. And Kant repeats this link between the proofs in the *Critique*:

The whole exercise of the transcendental ideal comes to this: either to find a concept for the absolutely necessity, or to find the absolute necessity of something for the concept of the same. If one can do the one, so must one be able to do the other too; for reason cognizes as necessary per se only that which is necessary from its concept.⁴⁵

This older point, to be sure, is the one he wants to emphasize. What is a bit misleading in his explanation is that he *seems* willing to accept premises that he now has very sophisticated *critical* objections to.

Kant initially seems to grant that “the proof properly begins from existence, hence is not entirely led *a priori* or ontologically,” in that it begins from the experience of an existing object (at least myself); it is not physicotheological either, in that it “abstracts from all particular properties of the objects of experience.”⁴⁶ All seems to be well in the progression from any given existence to an absolutely necessary entity, so that it seems that it is precisely in the same old

⁴⁵ A612/B640, in 3:409. “Die ganze Aufgabe des transscendentalen Ideals kommt darauf an: entweder zu der absoluten Nothwendigkeit einen Begriff, oder zu dem Begriffe von irgend einem Dinge die absolute Nothwendigkeit desselben zu finden. Kann man das eine, so muß man auch das andere können; denn als schlechthin nothwendig erkennt die Vernunft nur dasjenige, was aus seinem Begriffe nothwendig ist.”

⁴⁶ A604-5/B632-3, in 3:404-5. “Thus [the proof] reads: If something exists, then an absolutely necessary entity must exist also. Now I myself at the least exist: thus an absolutely necessary entity exists. The minor premise contains an experience, the major premise the inferential from any experience overall to the existence of the necessary. Thus the proof properly begins from existence, hence is not entirely led *a priori* or ontologically; and because the object of all possible experience is called ‘world,’ so this is named the cosmological proof. Since it also abstracts from all particular properties of the objects of experience, through which this world may differ from every possible one, so it is already distinguished in its naming from the physicotheological proof, which requires observations of the particular character of this our sensible world in order to ground the proof.” [“Er lautet also: Wenn etwas existirt, so muß auch ein schlechterdings nothwendiges Wesen existiren. Nun existire zum mindesten ich selbst: also existirt ein absolut nothwendiges Wesen. Der Untersatz enthält eine Erfahrung, der Obersatz die Schlußfolge aus einer Erfahrung überhaupt auf das Dasein des Nothwendigen. Also hebt der Beweis eigentlich von der Erfahrung an, mithin ist er nicht gänzlich a priori geführt oder ontologisch; und weil der Gegenstand aller möglichen Erfahrung Welt heißt, so wird er darum der kosmologische Beweis genannt. Da er auch von aller besondern Eigenschaft der Gegenstände der Erfahrung, dadurch sich diese Welt von jeder möglichen unterscheiden mag, abstrahirt: so wird er schon in seiner Benennung auch vom physikotheologischen Beweise unterschieden, welcher Beobachtungen der besonderen Beschaffenheit dieser unserer Sinnenwelt zu Beweisgründen braucht.”]

place - the move to define that entity - where mere experience is quite helpless. Here I quote at length what is probably Kant's clearest attempt at making that point:

The cosmological proof, however, only helps itself to this experience in order to take a single step, namely to the existence of a necessary entity overall. What this [entity] has for its properties the empirical probative ground cannot teach, rather reason here takes its leave of it entirely and delves behind sheer concepts [for] what, namely, an absolutely necessary entity overall must have for its properties, i.e. which among all possible things contains the requisite condition (*requisita*) for an absolute necessity in itself. Now it believes [glaubt] it will encounter this requisite only and exclusively in the concept of an all-real entity, and concludes thereupon that this is the absolutely necessary entity. But it is clear that one hereby presupposes that the concept of an entity of the highest reality is entirely sufficient to the concept of absolute necessity in existence, i.e. it is acceptable to infer from that to this; a proposition that the ontological argument claimed, which one well accepts in the cosmological argument and lays as a ground, whereas one had yet wanted to avoid it. For absolute necessity is an existence from mere concepts. If I now say that the concept of the *entis realissimi* is such a concept and indeed the only one which is fitting and adequate to necessary existence, so I must also concede that the latter can be inferred from it. Thus it is properly only the ontological proof from sheer concepts which contains all the probative power in the so-called cosmological [proof]; and the putative experience is entirely idle, perhaps only leading us to the concept of absolute necessity but not showing this at any particular thing whatsoever.⁴⁷

Most of the further discussion of the contingency proof here ends up hammering upon this same claim in different ways: if the proof wants to conclude upon a *God*, and not just an undetermined free-floating causal necessity, then it has no choice but to try to locate necessity among the determinations of mere concepts and thereby trade away everything initially compelling about an

⁴⁷ A606-7/B634-5, in 3:405-6. "Dieser Erfahrung aber bedient sich der kosmologische Beweis nur, um einen einzigen Schritt zu thun, nämlich zum Dasein eines nothwendigen Wesens überhaupt. Was dieses für Eigenschaften habe, kann der empirische Beweisgrund nicht lehren, sondern da nimmt die Vernunft gänzlich von ihm Abschied und forscht hinter lauter Begriffen: was nämlich ein absolut nothwendiges Wesen überhaupt für Eigenschaften haben müsse, d. i. welches unter allen möglichen Dingen die erforderlichen Bedingungen (*requisita*) zu einer absoluten Nothwendigkeit in sich enthalte. Nun glaubt sie im Begriffe eines allerrealsten Wesens einzig und allein diese Requisite anzutreffen und schließt sodann: das ist das schlechterdings nothwendige Wesen. Es ist aber klar, daß man hiebei voraussetzt, der Begriff eines Wesens von der höchsten Realität thue dem Begriffe der absoluten Nothwendigkeit im Dasein völlig genug, d. i. es lasse sich aus jener auf diese schließen; ein Satz, den das ontologische Argument behauptete, welches man also im kosmologischen Beweise annimmt und zum Grunde legt, da man es doch hatte vermeiden wollen. Denn die absolute Nothwendigkeit ist ein Dasein aus bloßen Begriffen. Sage ich nun: der Begriff des *entis realissimi* ist ein solcher Begriff und zwar der einzige, der zu dem nothwendigen Dasein passend und ihm adäquat ist, so muß ich auch einräumen, daß aus ihm das letztere geschlossen werden könne. Es ist also eigentlich nur der ontologische Beweis aus lauter Begriffen, der in dem sogenannten kosmologischen alle Beweiskraft enthält; und die angebliche Erfahrung ist ganz müßig, vielleicht um uns nur auf den Begriff der absoluten Nothwendigkeit zu führen, nicht aber um diese an irgend einem bestimmten Dinge darzuthun."

empirically grounded proof. I need not dwell on the point, as I presumably the reader is well familiar with it by now - at the time of the *Critique* this second (conceptual) part of the proof had been well-beaten for the better part of two decades⁴⁸ even while the empirical inference had been apparently left to stand.

But in fact the critical Kant does *not* accept the empirical half of the proof at all. What is quite new, and indeed more interesting, is a list of *other* errors he provides later in the text, “a whole nest of dialectical pretensions” beyond the one he focuses on, which he invites the critically experienced reader to tackle on their own.⁴⁹ Kant refers to the basis of the first part of the argument in an understated footnote:

This inferential [that the proof assumes] is too well-known to need it recited at length here. It is based on the allegedly [vermeintlich] transcendental natural law of causality: that everything contingent has its cause, which, if it in turn is contingent, must have a cause just as well, until the series of causes ordered under one another must terminate in a cause necessary per se, without which it would have no completion.⁵⁰

That “vermeintlich” (we only *reckon* that this is a transcendental law) already hints that something is very wrong, and the numbered list of the “pretensions” assaults this law directly (if only in suggestion). Careful attention to these errors can show how and why the contingency proof will be transformed and rehabilitated elsewhere in the critical system.

⁴⁸ The reader may also see the *Lectures* at 28:1006-7 and 28:1028-31 for more good examples of the same.

⁴⁹ A609/B637, in 3:407. “Ich habe kurz vorher gesagt, daß in diesem kosmologischen Argumente sich ein ganzes Nest von dialektischen Anmaßungen verborgen halte, welches die transscendentale Kritik leicht entdecken und zerstören kann. Ich will sie jetzt nur anführen und es dem schon geübten Leser überlassen, den trüglichen Grundsätzen weiter nachzuforschen und sie aufzuheben.” Caputo points out the importance of this little paragraph, that it “brings to bear the full weight of [Kant’s] analysis of the possibility of experience in the Transcendental Analytic” in a way the rest of the discussion doesn’t. See his “Kant’s Refutation of the Cosmological Argument” at 690-91.

⁵⁰ A605/B633, in 3:404. “Diese Schlußfolge ist zu bekannt, als daß es nöthig wäre, sie hier weitläufig vorzutragen. Sie beruht auf dem vermeintlich transscendentalem Naturgesetz [Seitenumbruch] der Causalität: daß alles Zufällige seine Ursache habe, die, wenn sie wiederum zufällig ist, eben sowohl eine Ursache haben muß, bis die Reihe der einander untergeordneten Ursachen sich bei einer schlechthin nothwendigen Ursache endigen muß, ohne welche sie keine Vollständigkeit haben würde.”

The “nest of dialectical pretensions,” at least in its first three items,⁵¹ goes back to the “Second Analogy” by way of the “Fourth Antinomy”:

To be found [in the proof], then, is, e.g. 1) the transcendental principle of inferring from a contingent to a cause, which is only of meaning in the sensible world, but does not at all have a sense outside of it. For the merely intellectual concept of the contingent can bring forth no synthetic proposition at all, such as that of causality, and the principle of the latter has no meaning at all and no characteristic of its use except in the sensible world; yet here it should directly serve to get out beyond the sensible world. 2) The principle of inferring from the impossibility of an infinite series of causes in the sensible world given on top of one another to a first cause - which the principles of the use of reason do not entitle us to even in experience, much less can they stretch this principle out beyond the same (where this chain cannot be extended at all). 3) The false self-gratification of reason in view of the completion of this series, that one thereby finally throws away all the conditions without which no concept of any necessity can yet find its place and, since one then cannot conceive [anything] further, accepts this for a completion of its concept...⁵²

In order to arrive at a necessary entity as a first cause, i.e. a causally necessary *thing in itself*, the contingency proof must extend causality - and indeed a quite theoretically laden concept of causality, one where an infinite series is simply assumed as impossible - out beyond the sensible world. And it believes it actually arrives at this thing because it hits upon the thought of an entity to which “contingency” and other such finite conditions do not apply - but this is only because

⁵¹ Kant’s fourth item, concerning the distinction between the *logical* possibility (noncontradiction) of a concept, here of God, versus its *transcendental* possibility (its ability to be synthesized within experience), is considerably more general and was already brought up in my discussion of the ontological argument. Cf the important footnote on A596/B624, in 3:399.

⁵² A609-10/B637-8, in 3:407. “Da befindet sich denn z. B. 1) der transscendentale Grundsatz, vom Zufälligen auf eine Ursache zu schließen, welcher nur in der Sinnenwelt von Bedeutung ist, außerhalb derselben aber auch nicht einmal einen Sinn hat. Denn der bloß intellectuelle Begriff des Zufälligen kann gar keinen synthetischen Satz, wie den der Causalität hervorbringen, und der Grundsatz der letzteren hat gar keine Bedeutung und kein Merkmal seines Gebrauchs, als nur in der Sinnenwelt; hier aber sollte er gerade dazu dienen, um über die Sinnenwelt hinaus zu kommen. 2) Der Grundsatz, von der Unmöglichkeit einer unendlichen Reihe über einander gegebener Ursachen in der Sinnenwelt auf eine erste Ursache zu schließen, wozu uns die Principien des Vernunftgebrauchs selbst in der Erfahrung nicht berechtigen, viel weniger diesen Grundsatz über dieselbe (wohin diese Kette gar nicht verlängert werden kann) ausdehnen können. 3) Die falsche Selbstbefriedigung der Vernunft in Ansehung der Vollendung dieser Reihe, dadurch daß man endlich alle Bedingung, ohne welche doch kein Begriff einer Nothwendigkeit statt finden kann, wegschafft und, da man alsdann nichts weiter begreifen kann, dieses für eine Vollendung seines Begriffs annimmt...”

no *other* conceptual determinations can apply to such an entity either. To be sure, the “Second Analogy” delivered us the general validity of causality to a point, i.e. within experience:

Thus the relation of appearances (as possible perceptions), according to which whatever follows after (what happens) is determined in its existence, necessarily and according to a rule in time, by something antecedent, hence the relation of cause to effect, is the condition of the objective validity of our empirical judgments in view of this series of perceptions, hence of their empirical truth and thus of experience. The principle of the causal relation in the sequence of appearances is hence also valid for all objects of experience (under the conditions of succession), as it is itself the ground of the possibility of such experience.⁵³

But it should be noted (although this is not the place for any detailed discussion of that text) that such a principle of causal relations actually gives the metaphysician far less than it initially appears. Anything which manifests within the sensible world is necessarily determined as the effect of a cause, i.e. all objects of experience are subject to causality - but within the constraints of transcendental idealism the law applies only so far as the *alterations of appearances*, not to anything beyond (certainly not things considered in themselves). It does not even guarantee us the *whole* of the series of causes, which is always only a mere idea or problematic concept.⁵⁴ Yet the contingency proof, in the errors laid out above, has to help itself to all of this in some way: the causal chain must be taken to terminate in a cause which is a thing in itself.

B. Ens Extramundanum

⁵³ A202/B247, in 3:175. “Also ist das Verhältniß der Erscheinungen (als möglicher Wahrnehmungen), nach welchem das Nachfolgende (was geschieht) durch etwas Vorhergehendes seinem Dasein nach nothwendig und nach einer Regel in der Zeit bestimmt ist, mithin das Verhältniß der Ursache zur Wirkung, die Bedingung der objectiven Gültigkeit unserer empirischen Urtheile in Ansehung der Reihe der Wahrnehmungen, mithin der empirischen Wahrheit derselben und also der Erfahrung. Der Grundsatz des Causalverhältnisses in der Folge der Erscheinungen gilt daher auch vor allen Gegenständen der Erfahrung (unter den Bedingungen der Succession), weil er selbst der Grund der Möglichkeit einer solchen Erfahrung ist.”

⁵⁴ Cf, e.g., the footnote at A417/B445, in 3:288: “Das absolute Ganze der Reihe von Bedingungen zu einem gegebenen Bedingten ist jederzeit unbedingt, weil außer ihr keine Bedingungen mehr sind, in Ansehung deren es bedingt sein könnte. Allein dieses absolute Ganze einer solchen Reihe ist nur eine Idee, oder vielmehr ein problematischer Begriff...”

It is all the more remarkable, then, that Kant's "Solution of the Cosmological Idea of the Totality of the Dependence of Appearances According to their Existence Overall," i.e. the solution to the "Fourth Antinomy," in fact manages to *rehabilitate* the contingency proof. It does so, however, only by making a striking transformation of it. Between the Thesis and Antithesis of the "Fourth Antinomy," in many respects the Antithesis ("There nowhere exists an entity necessary per se, neither in the world nor outside the world as its cause"⁵⁵) is actually more cogent than its opposite number: any necessary entity's ability to *participate* in ordinary causality (even as a first cause) depends on its being in the world, yet its being an innerworldly object would then render it contingent (subject to causality) and not necessary. Strictly speaking, the concepts of sensible causality and a necessary being are not meaningfully compatible. At the same time, however, that gives Kant room for a solution: to simply *divorce* the two.

Although I will not rehearse the antinomies in detail, Kant's resolution of the conflict between the fourth Thesis (that the causal chain must be terminated in a necessary entity) and Antithesis (that any causal entity must be contingent) reads as follows:

Thus with the apparent antinomy lying before us a way out still remains open, namely inasmuch as both conflicting propositions can be equally true in varying respects - so that all things of the sensible world are thoroughly contingent, hence also always have only an empirically conditioned existence, [and] all the same a non-empirical condition of the whole series, i.e. an unconditionally necessary entity, also finds its place. For this, as an intelligible condition, would not belong to the series as a member of it at all (not even as the supreme member) and would also make no member of the series empirically unconditioned, rather it would leave the whole sensible world in its empirically conditioned existence that goes for all members... [H]ere the necessary entity must be thought as wholly outside of the series of the sensible world (as *ens extramundanum*) and as merely intelligible, which alone can prevent it from being subjected to the laws of the contingency and dependence of all appearances.

...[N]othing gives us the right to deduce any existence from a condition outside the empirical series, or even to hold it as simply independent and self-standing within the series itself, but all

⁵⁵ A453/B481, in 3:315. "Es existirt überall kein schlechthin nothwendiges Wesen weder in der Welt, noch außer der Welt als ihre Ursache."

the same nothing at all thereby yanks [one] into agreeing that the whole series cannot be grounded in some sort of intelligible entity (which therefore is free from all empirical condition, and rather contains the ground of the possibility of all these appearances).⁵⁶

Kant's suggestion is that there can still be a God defined in something like the terms of causal potency, i.e. as the ground to the causal chain - only it can no longer be understood by way of the cause-effect relationship we actually experience, i.e. it must give up all claims to causality in the strict sense. The God of the contingency proof instead becomes the condition, the "ground," of the whole causal series of the sensible world.⁵⁷ This ground is, as Kant says, *extramundane* to the most extreme degree possible:

So it follows that material, and anything at all which belongs to the world, is not fitting for the idea of a necessary ur-entity as a mere principle of the greatest empirical unity, rather [this entity] must be set outside the world...⁵⁸

...[Y]ou must accept the absolutely necessary [as] outside the world; for it should only serve as a principle of the greatest possible unity of appearances, as its supreme ground, and you can never reach this in the world, as the second rule commands to regard all empirical causes of unity as always derived.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ A560-2/B588-90, in 3:379. "Also bleibt uns bei der vor uns liegenden scheinbaren Antinomie noch ein Ausweg offen, da nämlich alle beide einander widerstreitende Sätze in verschiedener Beziehung zugleich wahr sein können, so daß alle Dinge der Sinnenwelt durchaus zufällig sind, mithin auch immer nur empirisch bedingte Existenz haben, gleichwohl von der ganzen Reihe auch eine nichtempirische Bedingung, d. i. ein unbedingt nothwendiges Wesen, stattfinde. Denn dieses würde, als intelligibele Bedingung, gar nicht zur Reihe als ein Glied derselben (nicht einmal als das oberste Glied) gehören und auch kein Glied der Reihe empirisch unbedingt machen, sondern die ganze Sinnenwelt in ihrem durch alle Glieder gehenden empirisch bedingten Dasein lassen... [H]ier aber das nothwendige Wesen ganz außer der Reihe der Sinnenwelt (als *ens extramundanum*) und bloß intelligibel gedacht werden müßte, wodurch allein es verhütet werden kann, daß es nicht selbst dem Gesetze der Zufälligkeit und Abhängigkeit aller Erscheinungen unterworfen werde.

"...[N]ichts uns berechtige, irgend ein Dasein von einer Bedingung außerhalb der empirischen Reihe abzuleiten, oder auch es als in der Reihe selbst für schlechterdings unabhängig und selbstständig zu halten, gleichwohl aber dadurch gar nicht in Abrede zu ziehen, daß nicht die ganze Reihe in irgend einem intelligibelen Wesen (welches darum von aller empirischen Bedingung frei ist und vielmehr den Grund der Möglichkeit aller dieser Erscheinungen enthält) gegründet sein könne."

⁵⁷ One may wonder if this break from worldly causality is distantly prefigured in the distinction between "causa efficiens" and "causa formalis" made by Descartes under pressure from Caterus and Arnauld, but even there the language of "cause" is still retained - Kant, by contrast, totally abandons it.

⁵⁸ A618/B646, in 3:412. "So folgt, daß die Materie und überhaupt, was zur Welt gehörig ist, zu der Idee eines nothwendigen Urwesens als eines bloßen Principis der größten empirischen Einheit nicht schicklich sei, sondern daß es außerhalb der Welt gesetzt werden müsse..."

⁵⁹ A617/B645, in 3:411-2. "Es folgt aber hieraus, daß ihr das Absolutnothwendige außerhalb der Welt annehmen müßt: weil es nur zu einem Princip der größtmöglichen Einheit der Erscheinungen als deren oberster Grund dienen soll und ihr in der Welt niemals dahin gelangen könnt, weil die zweite Regel euch gebietet, alle empirische Ursachen der Einheit jederzeit als abgeleitet anzusehen."

Although the *Sensible and Intelligible World* had already insisted on the language of a God outside the world, here not even the most basic concepts or constituents of that world can still apply in speaking of such a God - especially not causality.

To be sure, this resolution leaves Kant with an obvious problem: if the relation between this God and the sensible world is not a causal one, an alternative concept to describe that relation is lacking. To say that God *conditions* or *grounds* the empirical causal series is still to speak in a quasi-causal language, albeit while openly disqualifying that obvious interpretation. This remained a serious problem for Kant until the very end, as the *Opus Postumum* drafts indicate, but as I indicated in my third and fourth Chapter the problem of “grounding” is to some extent indissoluble. If we ask Kant for an explanation for this concept, we are not only asking him to basically extend empirically-fitted concepts to a non-empirical question, but - as I will discuss momentarily - missing the real problem. I already suggested with Descartes that it is not a metaphysical picture that includes “active faculties” (more or less worked out) which first allows us to ask why things exist, but the other way around - that our demand for a why *just means* that there needs to be such faculties. Kant, as we will soon see, takes this a step further (in that it is the *need* for such a ground that first “gives” it).

As with the ontological one above, a divorce from the errors of the Cartesian proof (along with a correction of the overextension of the concept of causality) renders the conclusions of the contingency proof perfectly acceptable, now in the form of a doctrinal faith. With the resolution of the “Fourth Antinomy” it becomes legitimate to *presuppose* the existence of God as a necessary ground of causality, so long as one does not claim that one has *proved* this:

It may well be permissible to accept the existence of an entity of the highest sufficiency as the cause of all possible effects, in order to make the unity of explanatory grounds, which reason

seeks, easier for it [to reach]. But to presume [sich herausnehmen] so much that one even says, 'Such an entity necessarily exists,' is no more the modest statement of a permitted hypothesis but the bold pretension of an apodictic certainty...⁶⁰

We no longer make a claim to knowledge, rather the proper way to understand the proof is in reverse: in our dealings with a causally governed world we act *as if* there were a ground of causality. And as Kant insists repeatedly in the "Ideal," the assumption of such a ground is by no means idle. At minimum it plays a role assisting reason in the proper *systematization* of all cognitions, particularly in relation to causality and natural lawfulness in general. If we critically separate this God off from the world (and causality proper) and accept its existence only as an *assumption*, then we gain both a causally consistent natural world and a concept of pure reason that constantly drives us towards better explanatory accounts:

...[W]e can always confidently deduce the appearances of the world and their existence from other [appearances] as if there were no necessary entity, and yet can strive unceasingly for the completion of the deduction as if such an [entity] were presupposed as a supreme ground.

The ideal of the highest entity is, according to these considerations, nothing else than a regulative principle of reason to so view all conjunction in the world as if it sprang from an all-sufficient necessary cause - this in order to ground the rule of a systematic and necessary unity according to general laws in the explanation of [such conjunction] - and is not a statement of an existence necessary in itself.⁶¹

In the previous chapter I referred to the above as the *unity of lawfulness*. What lies behind the contingency proof, as a theoretical argument, is an ontotheology of entities obedient to natural law, rendered systematic by our reason - for "It is a business of reason to make systematic the unity of all possible empirical acts of understanding..."⁶²

⁶⁰ A612/B640, in 3:409. "Es mag wohl erlaubt sein, das Dasein eines Wesens von der höchsten Zulänglichkeit als Ursache zu allen möglichen Wirkungen anzunehmen, um der Vernunft die Einheit der Erklärungsgründe, welche sie sucht, zu erleichtern. Allein sich so viel herauszunehmen, daß man sogar sage: ein solches Wesen existirt nothwendig, ist nicht mehr die bescheidene Äußerung einer erlaubten Hypothese, sondern die dreiste Anmaßung einer apodiktischen Gewißheit..."

⁶¹ A618-9/B646-7, in 3:412-3.

⁶² A664/B692, in 3:439. "Der Verstand macht für die Vernunft eben so einen Gegenstand aus, als die Sinnlichkeit für den Verstand. Die Einheit aller möglichen empirischen Verstandeshandlungen systematisch zu machen, ist ein Geschäft der Vernunft..."

III. A Critical Return to the Physicotheological Proof

If one were to ask a diligent undergraduate what Kant has to say about the physicotheological proof, they would probably more or less quote back the closing paragraph of the selfsame section in the “Ideal”: “[T]he cosmological [proof] lies at the ground of the physicotheological proof, but the ontological lies at the ground of the [cosmological]...”⁶³ If the student has read a little more, they may also point out that this proof is later put in tandem with the moral proof in the *Critique of Judgment*, perhaps without quite being able to say how or why. This would not be wrong: as I mentioned above, the fate of the old physicotheological proof is in many respects better understood than that of the others.

Like the others, in many ways Kant’s approach to this proof carries on from that of the *Beweisgrund*. Considered in speculative intent it still cannot reach the right concept of God on its own, so that it must (as before) marry itself off to other approaches (in the speculative case, ultimately the Cartesian). Yet if he always regarded it as convincing for everyday human reason, the concept of doctrinal faith gives him a way to further advance that regard: even more evidently than the proofs above, at the end of the First *Critique* Kant will rehabilitate this one as a necessary presupposition for science. But the discussion which occurs at the end of the *Third* is still more novel, in that this proof’s relationship to the moral proof reveals quite new and important hints about the whole nature of rational theology.

⁶³ A630/B658, in 3:419. “So liegt demnach dem physikotheologischen Beweise der kosmologische, diesem aber der ontologische Beweis vom Dasein eines einigen Urwesens als höchsten Wesens zum Grunde...”

A. "...a mighty spring..."

First to the proof insofar as it is given in speculative intent.

Kant's critical account of the physicotheological proof as left to its own devices, to be sure, basically recapitulates his judgments in *Beweisgrund* III. We observe a certain degree of the interconnectedness of the world, fill in the rest of the details analogically, and thereby make a best guess as to an intelligent author:

The unity of the [intelligent cause of the world, as well as its existence] lets itself be concluded with certainty from the unity of the mutual correlation of the parts of the world, as members of an artful structure upon it, as far as our observation reaches, but on top of that with probability [Wahrscheinlichkeit] according to all the principles of analogy.⁶⁴

The problem is that this "wahrscheinlich" proof, which may be perfectly fine within its limits (as it was in 1763), here intends to be *speculative*. And as a *speculative* proof, it must land upon a quite determinate concept of God:

The inference, then, is from the order and endfulness so thoroughgoingly observable in the world, [taken] as a thoroughly contingent furnishing, to the existence of a cause proportionate to it. But the concept of this cause must let us conceive something wholly determinate about it, thus it can be no other than that of an entity that possesses all power, wisdom, etc., in one word all perfection, as an all-sufficient entity...⁶⁵

But how, Kant asks, do we *get* there? "This supreme cause (in regard to all things of the world) - how grand [groß] should one think it? We cannot cognize the world according to its whole contents, still less do we know how to estimate its grandeur [Größe] by comparison with

⁶⁴ A625-6/B653-4, in 3:416-7. "Die Einheit derselben läßt sich aus der Einheit der wechselseitigen Beziehung der Theile der Welt als Glieder von einem künstlichen Bauwerk an demjenigen, wohin unsere Beobachtung reicht, mit Gewißheit, weiterhin aber nach allen Grundsätzen der Analogie mit Wahrscheinlichkeit schließen."

⁶⁵ A627/B655, in 3:417-8. "Der Schluß geht also von der in der Welt so durchgängig zu beobachtenden Ordnung und Zweckmäßigkeit, als einer durchaus zufälligen Einrichtung, auf das Dasein einer ihr proportionirten Ursache. Der Begriff dieser Ursache aber muß uns etwas ganz Bestimmtes von ihr zu erkennen geben, und er kann also kein anderer sein, als der von einem Wesen, das alle Macht, Weisheit etc., mit einem Worte alle Vollkommenheit als ein allgenugsames Wesen besitzt..."

everything which is possible.”⁶⁶ We do not know exactly how nature stands, not in its totality.

Thus (just as in the *Beweisgrund*), if we must stick strictly to what can be drawn from experience

- i.e., to what can be known with certainty - then we can only reach an exceedingly skilled

designer of the world, and not the God Kant wants:

At the most, then, the proof could put forth a world architect who would always be very limited by the suitability of the stuff he worked with, but not a world creator to whose idea everything is subjected, which is far from adequate for the great intention which one has in sight, namely to prove an all-sufficient ur-entity...

...Thus physicotheology can give no definite concept of the supreme world cause, and therefore cannot be adequate for a principle of theology which in turn shall make up the groundwork of religion.⁶⁷

If God is no mere architect, is the “intellectual concept” par excellence, finite experience can never reach so far: “For how can an experience ever be given which should be suitable to an idea? Therein stands exactly the idiosyncrasy [Eigenthümliche] of the latter, that it can never coincide with any experience.”⁶⁸

Importantly, however, it is not just that physicotheology (on its own, as speculation) is doomed from the beginning, which was already true in 1763. Here Kant goes on to add that strictly speaking it is not even a *theology* at all, given that it cannot produce for itself any adequate *concept* of God. At best it is a mere “preparation” for other approaches:

⁶⁶ A622-3/B650-1, in 3:415. “Diese höchste Ursache (in Ansehung aller Dinge der Welt), wie groß soll man sie sich denken? Die Welt kennen wir nicht ihrem ganzen Inhalte nach, noch weniger wissen wir ihre Größe durch die Vergleichung mit allem, was möglich ist, zu schätzen.”

⁶⁷ A627-8/B655-6, in 3:417-8. “3:417-8. Der Beweis könnte also höchstens einen Weltbaumeister, der durch die Tauglichkeit des Stoffs, den er bearbeitet, immer sehr eingeschränkt wäre, aber nicht einen Weltschöpfer, dessen Idee alles unterworfen ist, darthun, welches zu der großen Absicht, die man vor Augen hat, nämlich ein allgenugsames Urwesen zu beweisen, bei weitem nicht hinreichend ist...

“...Also kann die Physikotheologie keinen bestimmten Begriff von der obersten Weltursache geben und daher zu einem Princip der Theologie, welches wiederum die Grundlage der Religion ausmachen soll, nicht hinreichend sein.” This same point is repeated still more vividly in the *Lectures* at 28:1008-9.

⁶⁸ A621/B649, in 3:414. “Man wird nach allen obigen Bemerkungen bald einsehen, daß der Bescheid auf diese Nachfrage ganz leicht und bündig erwartet werden könne. Denn wie kann jemals Erfahrung gegeben werden, die einer Idee angemessen sein sollte? Darin besteht eben das Eigenthümliche der letzteren, daß ihr niemals irgend eine Erfahrung congruiren könne.”

Thus physicotheology is a misunderstood physical teleology, only useful as a preparation (propaedeutic) for theology and only sufficient for this intention through the addition of another principle on which it can support itself, but not in itself as its name tends to indicate.⁶⁹

Thus the physicotheological proof could perhaps give emphasis to other proofs (if there are such to be had) by interlacing speculation with intuition; but for itself, it more prepares the understanding for theological cognition and gives it a direct and natural direction than it alone could complete the business.⁷⁰

This, indeed, is why Kant slightly shifts the name to “*physicoteleological* proof” in the Third *Critique*. It is also why the need to *marry* this proof to others is still more pressing than in the pre-critical writings. In those texts this proof was only wedded to the ontological and contingency proofs, while here - in speculative intent - it leads into the Cartesian proof by way of the contingency proof. (Importantly, however, it can also be wedded to the *moral* proof.)

In *Beweisgrund* III Kant finished discussing this proof at the moment its limitations became clear, while in the *Critique* he insists on more fully exploring its speculative options. How *could* the physicotheological proof arrive at the right theoretical concept of God? As the undergraduate from above knows quite well, Kant thinks that “the cosmological [proof] lies at the ground of the physicotheological proof, but the ontological lies at the ground of the [cosmological]” - that is to say, Kant tries to marry this proof to the contingency one, which in turn implies the Cartesian one. On its face this is highly questionable, and presumably many readers over the ages have felt something of the kneejerk expressed nicely by Allen Wood -

[This] is arbitrary and unpersuasive. Kant was induced to give such an account, one supposes, principally by his desire to find in physicotheology a covert reliance on the cosmological argument, paralleling the alleged dependence of the latter on the ontological proof. But he makes no real case at all that physicotheology, by its very nature, involves any hidden dependence on, or

⁶⁹ From the Third *Critique*, 5:442. “Also ist Physikotheologie eine mißverstandene physische Teleologie, nur als Vorbereitung (Propädeutik) zur Theologie brauchbar und nur durch Hinzukunft eines anderweitigen Princips, auf das sie sich stützen kann, nicht aber an sich selbst, wie ihr Name es anzeigen will, zu dieser Absicht zureichend.”

⁷⁰ A637/B665, in 3:423. “Der physischtheologische Beweis könnte also vielleicht wohl anderen Beweisen (wenn solche zu haben sind) Nachdruck geben, indem er Speculation mit Anschauung verknüpft: für sich selbst aber bereitet er mehr den Verstand zur theologischen Erkenntniß vor und giebt ihm dazu eine gerade und natürliche Richtung, als daß er allein das Geschäfte vollenden könnte.”

even a commitment to, any a priori arguments. The very most Kant might hope to show is that the existence of an *ens realissimum* cannot be established without relying on arguments a priori.⁷¹

This is totally correct, but also no different from what Kant himself says. If all we're looking for is "reassurance" and a way to make sense of our study of nature (as I discuss below), the physicotheological proof functions perfectly well on its own - but it is not thereby speculative *theology*, or theology of any kind. Physicotheology "can never give a determinate concept of God without [transcendental theology], and an indeterminate one helps not at all," i.e. it cannot found *religion*.⁷² Wood is thus even approximately right about Kant's reasons for his hierarchy of these proofs. In reading Kant's argument one must keep in mind just how specifically directed it is: there is nothing stopping the physicotheologian from taking their winnings from the empirical work and cashing them in for a few reasonable (but not certain) assumptions. Kant's worry only concerns when they try to go further than this, and it is from a *speculative* point of view (and only from that point of view) that one must have a priori argumentation.

Importantly, then, I take the key to Kant's argument to lie not so much in a specific progression through the proofs, but in the point that all speculative roads lead to the Cartesian - i.e., that even the staunchest empirical theist cannot avoid this sort of priori argumentation if they want *knowledge* of a determinate God's existence. As Kant *strictly* presents it, of course, the proof (from *this specific* world) *must* leap into the contingency proof (from a world *in general*) *first*, that then concealing a Cartesian proof:

Once one has reached the point of veneration for the greatness of the wisdom, power, etc. of the world author and can get no further, so one at once leaves behind this argument guided by

⁷¹ *Kant's Rational Theology* 131-2.

⁷² 28:1008 in the *Lectures*; also cf 5:439 in the *Third Critique*. To clarify, I don't think Kant's point here amounts to the position that we must necessarily *know* God's essence in an exhaustive way, any more than (e.g.) Descartes is; the point is more that even if we don't (fully) know God's concept, still that concept itself must be determined according to a certain consistent rationale. A concept of God which is itself actually *underdetermined*, he seems to suggest (e.g.) at, will result in people filling in those gaps in different ways, and thus in radically different Gods.

empirical probative grounds and goes to the contingency of the world, which one likewise initially inferred from the order and endfulness of the same. From this contingency alone one now goes entirely by transcendental concepts to the existence of a necessity per se, and from the concept of the absolute necessity of the first cause to the thoroughgoing determination or determining concept of the same, namely an all-embracing reality. Thus the physicotheological proof, kept stuck in its undertaking, in this quandary abruptly sprang over to the cosmological proof, and since this is only a more concealed ontological proof, so it actually carried out its intention merely through pure reason...⁷³

But what's important here is the nature of that "leap" from one proof into the other. Wood is surely right that this exact sequence is not essential, and the argument for the speculative physicotheological proof's inevitable marriage is better if one is willing to take Kant *loosely*. The argument would then effectively be asking how the speculative theologian can show, with demonstrative force, that a quasi-divine world author (already found empirically) belongs together with the right divine concept. If they are to do this, effectively they must *locate* the right predicate (e.g., "world author") within a concept not given in experience. Crucially, it is not enough to say that the entity matching this concept *could* have authored this world - if the thing and the concept are really going to stick together demonstratively, one has to show (in some way or other) that this entity *must* have authored this world, *necessarily*. Thus whatever the details involved in one's arriving at it, they tacitly set the particular existence of this entity inside its conceptual determination.⁷⁴ And this is the core of the Cartesian proof, even if one does not then

⁷³ A629/B657, in 3:418-9. "Nachdem man bis zur Bewunderung der Größe der Weisheit, der Macht etc. des Welturhebers gelangt ist und nicht weiter kommen kann, so verläßt man auf einmal dieses durch empirische Beweisgründe geführte Argument und geht zu der gleich anfangs aus der Ordnung und Zweckmäßigkeit der Welt geschlossenen Zufälligkeit derselben. Von dieser Zufälligkeit allein geht man nun lediglich durch transscendentale Begriffe zum Dasein eines Schlechthinnothwendigen und von dem Begriffe der absoluten Nothwendigkeit der ersten Ursache auf den durchgängig bestimmten oder bestimmenden Begriff desselben, nämlich einer allbefassenden Realität. Also blieb der physischtheologische Beweis in seiner Unternehmung stecken, sprang in dieser Verlegenheit plötzlich zu dem kosmologischen Beweise über, und da dieser nur ein versteckter ontologischer Beweis ist, so vollführte er seine Absicht wirklich bloß durch reine Vernunft..."

⁷⁴ Even if one were to temper the conclusion, e.g. by positing that this God only necessarily exists on condition of the presence of this specific order of the world, one would still be shaping one's concept around a modal predicate.

explicitly assume a “realissimum.” In a few passages Kant gives support to a loose reading by outright dropping the midpoint of his strict progression, the contingency proof, from discussion:

For if only [the physicotheologians] wished to examine themselves they would find that, after having gone forth a good stretch on the terrain of nature and experience and all the same seeing themselves always still just as far from the object which appears opposite their reason, they abruptly leave this terrain and go up into the realm of mere possibilities, where on the wings of ideas they hope to come near to that which has withdrawn itself from all empirical searching. After they finally reckon that they have seized firm footing by such a mighty spring, they spread the henceforth determined concept (the possession of which they have come into without knowing how) over the whole field of creation, and elucidate the ideal, which was entirely a product of pure reason, through experience, although meagerly enough and far below the worth of its object...⁷⁵

I assert, accordingly, that the physicotheological proof can never put forth the existence of a highest entity alone, but must always leave it up to the ontological (for which it only serves as an introduction) to supplement this deficiency, hence this [ontological proof] yet always contains the only possible probative ground (provided overall that nothing but a speculative proof [can] take place) which no human reason can bypass.⁷⁶

It seems one can “spring” into transcendental theology and the Cartesian proof in smaller hops, in one big jump, or however one likes, but in any case one is doomed to do so. If one accepts Kant’s conceptual conditions on the proofs, then this final destination is difficult to avoid.

Thus if one thinks Kant’s arguments across in the “Ideal” through to the end, one increasingly sees not “*three* possible methods of proving the existence of God from speculative reason” but only *one* (“...thus the ontological proof from nothing but pure concepts of reason is

⁷⁵ A629-30/B657-8, in 3:419. “Denn wenn sie sich nur selbst prüfen wollten, so würden sie finden, daß, nachdem sie eine gute Strecke auf dem Boden der Natur und Erfahrung fortgegangen sind und sich gleichwohl immer noch eben so weit von dem Gegenstande sehen, der ihrer Vernunft entgegen scheint, sie plötzlich diesen Boden verlassen und ins Reich bloßer Möglichkeiten übergehen, wo sie auf den Flügeln der Ideen demjenigen nahe zu kommen hoffen, was sich aller ihrer empirischen Nachsuchung entzogen hatte. Nachdem sie endlich durch einen so mächtigen Sprung festen Fuß gefaßt zu haben vermeinen, so verbreiten sie den nunmehr bestimmten Begriff (in dessen Besitz sie, ohne zu wissen wie, gekommen sind) über das ganze Feld der Schöpfung und erläutern das Ideal, welches lediglich ein Product der reinen Vernunft war, obzwar kümmerlich genug und weit unter der Würde seines Gegenstandes, durch Erfahrung...”

⁷⁶ A625/B653, in 3:416. “Ich behaupte demnach, daß der physikotheologische Beweis das Dasein eines höchsten Wesens niemals allein darthun könne, sondern es jederzeit dem ontologischen (welchem er nur zur Introduction dient) überlassen müsse, diesen Mangel zu ergänzen, mithin dieser immer noch den einzig möglichen Beweisgrund (wofern überall nur ein speculativer Beweis stattfindet) enthalte, den keine menschliche Vernunft vorbeigehen kann.”

the only one possible, if any proof of a proposition raised so far above all empirical use of the understanding is possible at all”)⁷⁷ The Cartesian approach increasingly becomes the mark of speculative theology *as such*, the other proofs only becoming speculative by way of its addition.

B. Intentional Causality and an Unnoticed Mixture

But as with the previous two proofs, this speculative failure does not at all mean that physicotheology comes to nothing. The critical Kant’s target continues to be the claim that the proof is *certain*, that it gives us *knowledge*:

But although we have no objection against the rationality and usefulness of this procedure, rather we instead have to recommend and encourage it, nevertheless for that reason we cannot condone the claims which this kind of proof would like to make for apodictic certainty and for an approval requiring no goodwill nor foreign assistance at all; and it can in no way harm the good cause to tune down the dogmatic speech of some trash-talking reasoner to the tone of moderation and humility of a faith adequate to reassurance, although precisely not mandating unconditional submission.⁷⁸

Once the trash-talking reasoner has been tuned down Kant has little but praise for the proof, insofar as it provides a certain rational guidance for the development of science and our understanding of nature:

This proof always deserves to be mentioned with respect. It is the oldest, clearest, and the most suitable for common human reason. It enlivens the study of nature, just as it itself has its existence from this and always comes into new power through it. It yields ends and intentions

⁷⁷ A630/B658, in 3:419. My emphasis.

⁷⁸ A624-5/B652-3, in 3:416. “Ob wir aber gleich wider die Vernunftmäßigkeit und Nützlichkeit dieses Verfahrens nichts einzuwenden, sondern es vielmehr zu empfehlen und aufzumuntern haben, so können wir darum doch die Ansprüche nicht billigen, welche diese Beweisart auf apodiktische Gewißheit und auf einen gar keiner Gunst oder fremden Unterstützung bedürftigen Beifall machen möchte; und es kann der guten Sache keinesweges schaden, die dogmatische Sprache eines hohnsprechenden Vernünftlers auf den Ton der Mäßigung und Bescheidenheit eines zur Beruhigung hinreichenden, obgleich eben nicht unbedingte Unterwerfung gebietenden Glaubens herabzustimmen.” It is in just this paragraph, and with just this concern about certainty in mind, that Kant grounds the proof - speculatively considered - in the Cartesian argument.

where our observation would not have discovered them by itself, and expands our cognition of nature through the guidance of a special unity whose principle is beyond nature.⁷⁹

What Kant will do with this proof, as he does with the others, is to turn it backwards - so that, instead of proving the existence of the right God via the given purposiveness of nature, we instead presuppose the right God in order to see purposiveness in nature for the sake of our rational projects. It becomes, that is, a third case of doctrinal faith (and thus *rational* faith).

Not just one more case, though, but indeed Kant's central example of doctrinal faith in the "Canon." Seeing nature as in some sense *teleological*, for Kant (as briefly discussed in the last Chapter), is not a condition for our *knowledge* of nature but is utterly essential for our investigations into it. This is a tacit and merely presupposed teleology, but one (for Kant) not optional for natural science all the same. He applies the retrograde proof already in the First *Critique*, and then again at length in the Third:

[Y]et endful unity is such a great condition of the application of reason to nature that I cannot at all pass it by, inasmuch as experience moreover presents me abundant examples thereof. But I cognize no other condition for this unity which made it my guide for natural science, except if I presuppose that a highest intelligence ordered everything according to the wisest ends. It follows that it is a condition of one indeed contingent but still not inconsiderable intention, namely having a direction in the investigation of nature, to presuppose a wise world author.⁸⁰

We have an indispensable need to underlay nature with the concept of an intention, even if we wish to investigate it by continued observation only in its organized products; and so this concept is already an utterly necessary maxim for the empirical use of our reason... [I]n regard to the products which must be judged only as intentionally formed thus, and not otherwise, this maxim of reflective judgment is essentially necessary in order to get even only an empirical

⁷⁹ A623/B651, in 3:415. "Dieser Beweis verdient jederzeit mit Achtung genannt zu werden. Er ist der älteste, klärste und der gemeinen Menschenvernunft am meisten angemessene. Er belebt das Studium der Natur, so wie er selbst von diesem sein Dasein hat und dadurch immer neue Kraft bekommt. Er bringt Zwecke und Absichten dahin, wo sie unsere Beobachtung nicht von selbst entdeckt hätte, und erweitert unsere Naturkenntnisse durch den Leitfaden einer besonderen Einheit, deren Princip außer der Natur ist."

⁸⁰ A826/B854, in 3:535. "...so ist doch die zweckmäßige Einheit eine so große Bedingung der Anwendung der Vernunft auf Natur, daß ich, da mir überdem Erfahrung reichlich davon Beispiele darbietet, sie gar nicht vorbegehen kann. Zu dieser Einheit aber kenne ich keine andere Bedingung, die sie mir zum Leitfaden der Naturforschung machte, als wenn ich voraussetze, daß eine höchste Intelligenz alles nach den weisesten Zwecken so geordnet habe. Folglich ist es eine Bedingung einer zwar zufälligen, aber doch nicht unerheblichen Absicht, nämlich um eine Leitung in der Nachforschung der Natur zu haben, einen weisen Welturheber vorauszusetzen."

cognition of their inner character: for even the thought of them as organized things is impossible without thereby conjoining the thought of a generation with intention...

But now, what does even the most totally complete teleology prove in the end? Does it prove that such an understanding entity is there? No; nothing further than that we, according to the character of our cognitive capacity, thus in the conjunction of experience with the supreme principles of reason, can make utterly no concept of the possibility of such a world except that we think to ourselves an intentionally acting supreme cause of the same. Thus we cannot objectively put forth the proposition, 'There is an understanding ur-entity;' we can only [do so] subjectively for the use of our judgmental power in its reflection on ends in nature, which cannot be thought according to any other principle than that of an intentional causality of a highest cause.⁸¹

This is, of course, not classical (precritical) physicotheology - not Nieuwentyt, not even Boyle - but still it can read as bolder than it really is. As above, Kant is not arguing that there *is* any "intentional causality," or even that we *should think* that there is, only that our considerations in certain kinds of science do not make sense except that we project a certain sense of *contextuality* upon the field we investigate. Earlier I called this the "unity of contextual meaningfulness": We act *as if* nature were purposive and meaningfully organized, or (more broadly) as if everything had its place in the whole, and thereby we act *as if* some entity were doing the organizing.

But this is not Kant's last word on the proof's legitimate use within the critical system. I suggested in the previous Chapter that doctrinal faith could remain a case of Vernunftglaube so long as the theoretical conduct that faith served could at least remain *indirectly* related to moral

⁸¹ 5:398-9. "Wir haben nämlich unentbehrlich nöthig, der Natur den Begriff einer Absicht unterzulegen, wenn wir ihr auch nur in ihren organisirten Producten durch fortgesetzte Beobachtung nachforschen wollen; und dieser Begriff ist also schon für den Erfahrungsgebrauch unserer Vernunft eine schlechterdings nothwendige Maxime... Hingegen in Ansehung der Producte derselben, welche nur als absichtlich so und nicht anders geformt müssen beurtheilt werden, um auch nur eine Erfahrungserkenntniß ihrer innern Beschaffenheit zu bekommen, ist jene Maxime der reflectirenden Urtheilskraft wesentlich nothwendig: weil selbst der Gedanke von ihnen als organisirten Dingen, ohne den Gedanken einer Erzeugung mit Absicht damit zu verbinden, unmöglich ist...

"Was beweiset nun aber am Ende auch die allervollständigste Teleologie? Beweiset sie etwa, daß ein solches verständiges Wesen da sei? Nein; nichts weiter, als daß wir nach Beschaffenheit unserer Erkenntnißvermögen, also in Verbindung der Erfahrung mit den obersten Principien der Vernunft, uns schlechterdings keinen Begriff von der Möglichkeit einer solchen Welt machen können, als so, daß wir uns eine absichtlich=wirkende oberste Ursache derselben denken. Objectiv können wir also nicht den Satz darthun: es ist ein verständiges Urwesen; sondern nur subjectiv für den Gebrauch unserer Urtheilskraft in ihrer Reflexion über die Zwecke in der Natur, die nach keinem anderen Princip als dem einer absichtlichen Causalität einer höchsten Ursache gedacht werden können." Kant dismisses physicotheology's grandest claims in short order (and in terms akin to the First) at especially 5:437 and 5:440-2.

willing and moral ends. But that implies a further possibility, namely that doctrinal faith could somehow relate itself to the moral faith which Kant views as most central. In fact Kant himself brings up exactly this phenomenon towards the very end of the Third *Critique*, when he admits that the physicotheological proof not only could be, but historically was and is, mixed into and wedded with the moral proof. Everything crucial is said in a single quick passage, from which I suggest two conclusions:

This argument taken from physical teleology is worth venerating. It has the same effect of conviction upon the common understanding as upon the subtlest thinker... But how does this proof win such vast influence upon the mind, above all in the judgment of cold reason (for one could count the stirring and elevation of the same by the wonder of nature as presumption), towards a calm, wholly acquiescing [sich gänzlich dahin gebende] approval? It is not the physical ends, which all point to an unfathomable understanding in the world cause; for these are inadequate to that, as they do not satisfy the need of the inquiring reason...

Thus, that the physicotheological proof convinces, just as if it were equally a theological one, stirs not from the use of the ideas of the ends of nature as so many empirical probative grounds for a highest understanding; rather, without notice it mixes the moral probative ground, indwelling in each man and so intimately moving for him, into the inference with it, after which one attributes to the entity which reveals itself so inconceivably artfully in the ends of nature a final end as well, hence wisdom (although without being justified in that by the perception of the [ends of nature]), and thus voluntarily supplement that argument in view of the deficiency which yet hangs upon it. Thus in fact only the moral proof brings forth conviction, and even this only in a moral regard, to which everyone intimately feels their acquiescence; the physicotheological [proof], however, has just the merit of leading the mind on the way towards ends in the consideration of the world, but thereby towards an understanding world author; there, then, the moral relation to ends and the idea of precisely such a lawgiver and world author, as a theological concept, still appears to develop from that probative ground by itself, although it is a pure extra.⁸²

⁸² 5:476-8. "Dieses aus der physischen Teleologie genommene Argument ist verehrungswerth. Es thut gleiche Wirkung zur Überzeugung auf den gemeinen Verstand, als auf den subtilsten Denker... Allein wodurch gewinnt dieser Beweis so gewaltigen Einfluß auf das Gemüth, vornehmlich in der Beurtheilung durch kalte Vernunft (denn die Rührung und Erhebung desselben durch die Wunder der Natur könnte man zur Überredung rechnen), auf eine ruhige, sich gänzlich dahin gebende Beistimmung? Es sind nicht die physischen Zwecke, die alle auf einen unergründlichen Verstand in der Weltursache hindeuten; denn diese sind dazu unzureichend, weil sie das Bedürfniß der fragenden Vernunft nicht befriedigen...

"Daß also der physisch-teleologische Beweis, gleich als ob er zugleich ein theologischer wäre, überzeugt, rührt nicht von der Benützung der Ideen von Zwecken der Natur als so viel empirischen Beweisgründen eines höchsten Verstandes her; sondern es mischt sich unvermerkt der jedem Menschen beiwohnende und ihn so innigst bewegende moralische Beweisgrund in den Schluß mit ein, nach welchem man dem Wesen, welches sich so unbegreiflich künstlich in den Zwecken der Natur offenbart, auch einen Endzweck, mithin Weisheit (obzwar ohne dazu durch die Wahrnehmung der ersteren berechtigt zu sein) beilegt und also jenes Argument in Ansehung des Mangelhaften, welches ihm noch anhängt, willkürlich ergänzt. In der That bringt also nur der moralische Beweisgrund die Überzeugung und auch diese nur in moralischer Rücksicht, wozu jedermann seine Beistimmung innigst fühlt, hervor; der physisch-teleologische aber hat nur das Verdienst, das Gemüth in der Weltbetrachtung auf den Weg der

Kant's readers will notice the striking similarity to the language of A629-30 above, where the physicotheologian "on the wings of ideas" made a "mighty spring" into the Cartesian proof - except here the discussion concerns the *moral* proof. The physicotheologian, once again without even noticing it (albeit not in a "spring" this time), here mixes in a new premise and thereby finds themselves in an entirely different argument. To the extent that Kant talks of "respect" or "veneration" for this proof, then, such a respect seems to stem from the fact that it actually assumes the moral proof without realizing it - in other words, that respect is actually far more due to the silent moral presuppositions behind physicotheology's curtain. Kant pushes this thought still further later in the passage, where he claims that the moral proof actually *replaces* [ersetzt] the motivational sparkle that physicotheology lacks:

But the moral probative ground of the existence of God properly does not even merely supplement the physicotheological towards a complete proof; rather it is a special proof which replaces the lack of conviction in the latter: as this [latter] in fact can achieve nothing but to direct reason in judging the grounds of nature and the contingent but admiration-worthy order of the same, which is familiar [bekannt] to us only by experience, towards the causality of a cause which contains the ground of the same according to ends (which we must think as an understanding cause, according to the character of our cognitive capacities), and to make [reason] attentive, but thus more receptive of the moral proof.⁸³

Kant's conclusion amounts to saying that the physicotheological proof, supposedly the oldest, clearest, most suitable etc., in fact is only *borrowing* all of its conviction from morality and the moral proof in particular. Physicotheology thus cannot satisfy the needs of reason in a conclusive

Zwecke, dadurch aber auf einen verständigen Welturheber zu leiten: da denn die moralische Beziehung auf Zwecke und die Idee eines eben solchen Gesetzgebers und Welturhebers, als theologischer Begriff, ob er zwar reine Zugabe ist, sich dennoch aus jenem Beweisgrunde von selbst zu entwickeln scheint."

⁸³ 5:478. "Der moralische Beweisgrund vom Dasein Gottes ergänzt aber eigentlich auch nicht etwa bloß den physisch-teleologischen zu einem vollständigen Beweise; sondern er ist ein besonderer Beweis, der den Mangel der Überzeugung aus dem letzteren ersetzt: indem dieser in der That nichts leisten kann, als die Vernunft in der Beurtheilung des Grundes der Natur und der zufälligen, aber bewunderungswürdigen Ordnung derselben, welche uns nur durch Erfahrung bekannt wird, auf die Causalität einer Ursache, die nach Zwecken den Grund derselben enthält, (die wir nach der Beschaffenheit unserer Erkenntnißvermögen als verständige Ursache denken müssen) zu lenken und aufmerksam, so aber des moralischen Beweises empfänglicher zu machen."

way unless it is helped out by moral assumptions, evident or implicit. And one would presume this same point applies to the other examples of doctrinal faith.

And as I also pointed out above, this passage also draws a *parallel* between the moral proof and the Cartesian one. Like the Cartesian proof's manifestation within physicotheology in the "Ideal" a decade earlier, the moral proof here is strictly speaking a "Zugabe" (an extra added on without a real basis) rather than anything natively present in the proof itself.⁸⁴ But it, too, provides physicotheology with the concept it was missing - here not a *speculative* God, but a God with "wisdom" directed towards a "final end." This parallel, on its face, should be shocking, as the two proofs (Cartesian and moral) could not be more different in Kant's estimation: one is a strictly theoretical joke of the schools (Schulwitz) while the other is the cornerstone of a moral final end for our strivings. Yet in relation to the inadequate physicotheological proof, both play obviously equivalent functions. Indeed, it seems to be *only* those two proofs which can, properly or improperly, supply the theological concept (speculative or moral) which that proof lacks.

This last point on the dual concepts of God serves as an occasion for a general (if provisional) conclusion for this return to the old pre-critical proofs. The most obvious thing to be noticed from this discussion is that, excepting (as usual) the Cartesian, *all* of the proofs are now taken to "work" perfectly well so long as one takes them to conclude only to a subjectively necessary *presupposition*, not to *knowledge* (the claim to certainty being the most evident sign of a speculative approach). All of these proofs, when read in retrograde, can therefore become cases of doctrinal faith. And indeed, Kant's claim that it is actually the moral proof which supplies any

⁸⁴ Kant further emphasizes the dissimilar grounds for the proofs on 5:479.

of the conviction that the physicotheological proof might have confirms much of what was discussed in the previous Chapter. Taken on its own this claim is quite specific, but if the worth of the physicotheological proof - which certainly *seems* entirely speculative and theoretical, and properly manifests as a necessary presuppositions for certain kinds of natural science - actually has its ground in *moral* necessity, this is very likely true of all of the other proofs based in doctrinal faith as well.

What should be far more surprising, however, is the appearance of a possible parallel between the Cartesian and moral proofs. When adequately worked out, this strange relation will serve as the foundation for my closing discussions in the next Chapter. But before then, the highly exceptional case of the Cartesian proof and the nature of speculative theology overall bears further discussion.

IV. The Diminution of the Speculative System

It was remarked at the beginning of this chapter, and should have become increasingly obvious to the experienced reader, that the “Ideal of Pure Reason” (and specifically its collection of proofs) is in many ways a strange text. Although seeming to have a systematic form embracing the entirety of the project of the theistic proofs (“There are only three possible methods of proving the existence of God from speculative reason,” etc.), it is screamingly obvious that the text simply drops discussion of issues that Kant himself had already developed by that point: it effaces the distinction between the Cartesian and ontological approaches even when the ontological remains (within the realm of doctrinal faith) perfectly distinct, and it

ignores the moral proof entirely. As a collection of the proofs known to Kant, the “Ideal” is so evidently incomplete that the reader may wonder if Kant completely forgot himself in writing it.

But Kant’s stated topic in the “Ideal” is never the proofs *as such, as a whole*, something he never again tackles in extended systematic form after 1763. The question of the proofs’ systematicity was indeed an evident concern for the early Kant (as discussed in my second Chapter), but it becomes less and less his question throughout the critical years. The moral proof seems to have changed his direction, and done that by way of introducing a question concerning *intent* in the probative grounds (the thought that some proofs aim at supersensible knowledge, but others not). If one goes to the critical Kant with concerns like those of 1763 in mind - if one is searching for a *total system* of the proofs - one will not find it. To be sure, the remains of the old system still manifest in the *Critique* and beyond, but the emphasis goes towards tracing back and exhausting the various *interests* which lie *behind* the various probative grounds, not towards the grounds themselves. Put another way, Kant progressed from a question of *how* (i.e. on what grounds) one might prove God’s existence to one of *why* (i.e. for what need).

What one finds in the “Ideal” is the insistence that the proofs at issue are “*from speculative reason*”; the title which begins the discussion is, “Of the Probative Grounds of *Speculative Reason* to Infer the Existence of a Highest Entity” (my emphasis).⁸⁵ This distinction already excludes any examples of faith at all, in that speculation is a derivation of the theoretical: “theoretical cognition is speculative when it goes towards an object, or such concepts of an object, at which one can arrive through no experience.”⁸⁶ Speculation may indeed be a special

⁸⁵ A583/B611, in 3:392. “Von den Beweisgründen der speculativen Vernunft, auf das Dasein eines höchsten Wesens zu schließen.”

⁸⁶ A634-5/B662-3, in 3:422. “Eine theoretische Erkenntniß ist speculativ, wenn sie auf einen Gegenstand oder solche Begriffe von einem Gegenstande geht, wozu man in keiner Erfahrung gelangen kann. Sie wird der Naturerkenntniß

case of theory, but it still always concerns “knowing what there is.” Thus if the “Ideal” purports to display all of the proofs for the existence of God “from speculative reason” and leaves out many details, including several of the proofs he would have known, this is not any mistake on Kant’s part: it only means that some of the proofs, or (better) some cognitions concerning God’s existence, do not concern knowledge.

Which leaves the status of the ones that *do* as an unresolved question. In the last Chapter I discussed moral and even practical-scientific interests, with an emphasis on the question of faith; in this Chapter I showed how Kant saves the old ontological, contingency, and physicotheological proofs from their speculative fate, apparently redeploing them as doctrinal faith. But that fate itself - what it *means* to be a speculative proof for the existence of God - has so far gone unexplored. This section begins to answer that unresolved question by exploring the development of the system of the theistic proofs (from the specifically speculative interest of reason) up through the critical period, or - more accurately - the *retreat* of that system. The attentive reader should have noticed that the speculative system in fact *shrinks* throughout Kant’s career even as the total number of proofs increases: the system of *Beweisgrund* III features four proofs, while in the “Ideal” - when Kant well knew of five proofs overall- we get only three. But the diminution of the system does not stop there: Kant returned to the topic of rational theology a decade after the “Ideal” in the drafts for *What is the Actual Progress that Metaphysics Has Made in Germany Since Leibniz’s and Wolff’s Time?*, and in that text only *two* speculative proofs remain. Kant says that they are ultimately *both* “ontological,” that *both* can be “counted towards ontology.” And the Third *Critique*, read against this draft, says much the same.

entgegengesetzt, welche auf keine andere Gegenstände oder Prädicate derselben geht, als die in einer möglichen Erfahrung gegeben werden können.”

My purpose in this section is to, as it were, draw out the trajectory of that diminution and explain its rationale. The system of the “Ideal of Pure Reason,” far from being Kant’s final word on the speculative proofs, then turns out to be quite a transitional text. Its conclusion, that every speculative proof is *based upon* the Cartesian, eventually does not go far enough: by the end only a single speculative proof is really left standing, namely the Cartesian/ontological itself. Speculative theology, at the end, *is* the Cartesian proof. Speculative theology, properly understood, is characterized less by any intention than by a single defining gesture, to “see” necessity within the concept of God.

A. “The arguments here are only two...”

The *Actual Progress* essay constitutes, to borrow a term from de Vleeschauwer, a “Cinderella” in the Kantian corpus,⁸⁷ even for Kant himself (who never finished it). Albeit not well edited and somewhat fragmented, it constitutes Kant’s last attempt in extended and (relatively) continuous prose and argumentation to express the whole critical system, with a new and particular emphasis on the teleology of the history of philosophy. The section on “Transcendent Theology,” starting at 20:301 shortly prior to the various appendices, can initially appear less novel to the reader, as merely a condensed version of the discussion in the “Ideal.”⁸⁸ In a sense this is even correct, but everything crucial lies in *where and how* the condensing happens, i.e., in the makeup of the system itself.

⁸⁷ His titular article (“La Cinderella dans l’oeuvre Kantienne”) includes an excellent if occasionally somewhat conjectural background and discussion of the work as a whole; see especially 299-304.

⁸⁸ E.g., the Cambridge edition suggests just this at Footnote 34 in *Theoretical Philosophy After 1781*, 496: “Kant’s critique of rational theology is more fully expounded in CPR, A567-642/B595-670. Compare also his posthumously published *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, 28:1004-12...”

To review a bit and set up the contrast in advance, what Kant told us of the system of speculative proofs in 1763 was this:

All the probative grounds for the existence of God can only be taken either from the intellectual concepts of the merely possible, or from the empirical concepts of the existent. In the first case it concludes either from the possible as a ground to the existence of God as a result, or from the possible as a result to the divine existence as a ground. In the second case, in turn, it concludes either from that whose existence we experience to merely the existence of a first and independent cause, but to the divine properties of the same by means of the parsing of this concept, or both existence as well as the properties will be immediately deduced from what experience teaches.⁸⁹

Here we have four proofs, as discussed in Chapters III-IV. In turn, the Kant of 1781 wrote:

There are only three possible methods of proving the existence of God from speculative reason. All the ways which one may hit upon in this intention begin either from the determinate experience and the particular character of our sensible world thereby known, and ascend from it according to the rules of causality to a highest cause outside the world; or they empirically lay down only indeterminate experience, i.e. some existence, for a ground; or finally they abstract from all experience and conclude wholly a priori, from mere concepts, to the existence of a highest cause. The first proof is the physicotheological, the second the cosmological, the third the ontological proof. There are no more of them, and more can there not even be.⁹⁰

As discussed above, the ontological and Cartesian are now fused and any proofs from practical intent are left out. Here is the parallel passage from *What is the Actual Progress...?*:

The arguments here are only two, and cannot ever be more. - Either one concludes from the concept of the most real entity to the existence of the same, or from the necessary existence of something to a determine concept which we have to make from it.

The first argument concludes thus: a metaphysically all-perfectest entity must necessarily exist, for if it did not exist then it would lack a perfection, namely existence.

The second concludes inversely: an entity which exists as a necessity must have all perfection, for if it did not have all perfection (reality) in itself, then it would not be

⁸⁹ 2:155-6.

⁹⁰ A590-/B618-9, in 3:396. “**Es sind nur drei Beweisarten vom Dasein Gottes aus speculativer Vernunft möglich.** Alle Wege, die man in dieser Absicht einschlagen mag, fangen entweder von der bestimmten Erfahrung und der dadurch erkannten besonderen Beschaffenheit unserer Sinnenwelt an und steigen von ihr nach Gesetzen der Causalität bis zur höchsten Ursache außer der Welt hinauf; oder sie legen nur unbestimmte Erfahrung, d. i. irgend ein Dasein, empirisch zum Grunde; oder sie abstrahiren endlich von aller Erfahrung und schließen gänzlich a priori aus bloßen Begriffen auf das Dasein einer höchsten Ursache. Der erste Beweis ist der physikotheologische, der zweite der kosmologische, der dritte der ontologische Beweis. Mehr giebt es ihrer nicht, und mehr kann es auch nicht geben.”

thoroughgoingly determined a priori through its concept, hence cannot be thought as a necessary entity.⁹¹

The system is not just condensed but *emptied*. The physicotheological proof has abandoned the others, so that all we are left with is the Cartesian and contingency proofs (now posed as obvious mirror images). To be sure, there is no new argumentation: the Cartesian proof gets barely a curt dismissal (“...this unground [in the first proof], I say, is so manifest that one need not delay oneself with this proof, which moreover seem to have already been given up as untenable by the metaphysicians”⁹²), while the contingency approach is attacked on basically the same grounds as in the “Ideal”:

Thus we can make ourselves no concept whatsoever of an absolutely necessary entity as such (the ground whereof is that it is a mere concept of modality...). Thus we cannot infer in the least from its presupposed existence to determinations which widen our knowledge of the same beyond the representation of its necessary existence, and which could thus ground some kind of theology.⁹³

What is new, therefore, is not the argumentation but the lack of content itself, the fact that speculative (“transcendent”) theology has become a veritable ghost town.

Yet as I suggested above, it is not only that the speculative ranks have been cut down to two proofs but that they are ultimately (albeit Kant shows a bit of hesitation in this) *the same*

⁹¹ 20:302-3. “Der Argumente sind hier nur zwey, und können auch nicht mehr seyn. — Entweder man schließt aus dem Begriff des allerrealsten Wesens auf das Daseyn desselben, oder aus dem nothwendigen Daseyn irgend eines Dinges auf einen bestimmten Begriff, den wir uns von ihm zu machen haben.

“Das erste Argument schließt so: Ein metaphysisch allervollkommenstes Wesen muß nothwendig existiren, denn wenn es nicht existirte, so würde ihm eine Vollkommenheit, nämlich die Existenz, fehlen.

“Das zweyte schließt umgekehrt: Ein Wesen, das als ein nothwendiges existirt, muß alle Vollkommenheit haben, denn wenn es nicht alle Vollkommenheit (Realität) in sich hätte, so würde es durch seinen Begriff nicht als a priori durchgängig bestimmt, mithin nicht als nothwendiges Wesen gedacht werden können.”

⁹² 20:303. “...dieser Ungrund, sage ich, ist so einleuchtend, daß man sich bei diesem Beweise, der überdem als unhaltbar von den Metaphysikern schon aufgegeben zu seyn scheint, nicht aufhalten darf.”

⁹³ 20:304. “Also können wir uns von einem absolut-nothwendigen Dinge, als einem solchen, schlechterdings keinen Begriff machen (wovon der Grund der ist, daß es ein bloßer Modalitätsbegriff ist...). Also können wir aus seiner vorausgesetzten Existenz nicht im mindesten auf Bestimmungen schließen, die unsre Erkenntniß desselben über die Vorstellung seiner nothwendigen Existenz erweitern, und also eine Art von Theologie begründen könnten.”

proof, both “ontological.” The lighter blow against the contingency proof (which Kant himself dubbed “cosmological” in the “Ideal”) falls in the last paragraph of the section:

Thus the proof, so-called the cosmological by some (because it still assumes an existing world) but nevertheless transcendental - which equally well can be counted towards ontology, as nothing claims [wollen] to have been concluded from the character of the world but only from the presupposition of the concept of a necessary entity, thus a pure rational concept *a priori* - sinks back into its nothingness just like the previous [proof].⁹⁴

The “cosmological” proof really belongs to ontology, and the “some” who call it so (presumably including the Kant of 1781) are wrong - it really makes no use of whatever worldly assumptions one grants it. The heavier blow is delivered earlier on, in passing:

It is true that if we want to make ourselves a concept *a priori* of a thing in general, thus ontologically, we always lay for a ground the concept of an all-real entity in thought for an ur-concept... let us now subject the purported proofs of the existence of such a [God], which can therefore be named ontological.⁹⁵

Both speculative proofs are now “ontological,” and named as such.⁹⁶ This terminological cropping-out of the contingency proof as its own approach is not even limited to just the *Actual Progress* drafts - it can also be confirmed in the very last pages of the Third *Critique* from a few years prior. Read too quickly, the two paragraphs from the bottom of 5:475 to the top of 5:476 can appear to simply discuss *first* the “ontological” proof” *and then* the “cosmological” proof, but the details of the text deserve closer consideration:

Now, the ontological proof of the existence of God from the concept of an ur-entity is either that which concludes from the ontological predicates, whereby it can alone be thought as thoroughly determined, to the absolutely necessary existence [of the ur-entity], or from the

⁹⁴ 20:304. “Also sinkt der von einigen sogenannte kosmologische, aber doch transscendentale Beweis, (weil er doch eine existierende Welt annimmt) der gleichwohl, weil aus der Beschaffenheit einer Welt nichts geschlossen werden will, sondern nur aus der Voraussetzung des Begriffes von einem nothwendigen Wesen, also einem reinen Vernunftbegriffe *a priori*, zur Ontologie gezählt werden kann, so wie der vorige, in sein Nichts zurück.” I slightly adjust the placement of the parenthetical in my translation to clarify what I take to be Kant’s point.

⁹⁵ 20:302. “Wahr ist es, daß, wenn wir uns *a priori* von einem Dinge überhaupt, also ontologisch, einen Begriff machen wollen, wir immer zum Urbegriff den Begriff von einem allerrealsten Wesen in Gedanken zum Grunde legen... Aber auch über alle diese Einwürfe weggesehen, lasset uns nun die vorgeblichen Beweise vom Daseyn eines solchen Wesens, die daher ontologische genannt werden können, der Prüfung unterwerfen.”

⁹⁶ This also marks a slight shift in how Kant uses the term “ontological,” albeit one still fairly consistent with earlier thoughts - the term here seems to refer to *any* sort of *a priori* manipulation of concepts of entities.

absolute necessity of the existence of something, whatever it be, to the predicates of the ur-entity: for to the concept of an ur-entity, so that [the ur-entity] is not derivative, belongs the unconditioned necessity of its existence and (in order to represent this) the thoroughgoing determination per its concept. Now, one had faith in finding both requirements in the concept of the ontological idea of an all-realest entity: and so two metaphysical proofs sprang forth.

The proof which laid for a ground a mere metaphysical concept of nature (named the properly-ontological [eigentlich=ontologisch]) concluded from the concept of the all-realest entity to its utterly necessary existence; for (it reads) if it did not exist, so it would lack a reality, namely existence. - The other (which one also names the metaphysical-cosmological proof) concluded from the necessity of the existence of something (the like of which, since I am given an existence in self consciousness, must by all means be admitted) to its thoroughgoing determination as the all-realest entity; for everything existing is thoroughgoingly determined, but the necessary per se (namely what we ought cognize as such, hence a priori) must be thoroughgoingly determined by its concept; which, however, only lets itself be met in the concept of an all-realest thing...⁹⁷

This is not the presentation of two different proofs in order, but the disambiguation of a *single* proof (“*the ontological proof... is either that which concludes from the ontological predicates... to the absolutely necessary existence [of the ur-entity], or from the absolute necessity of the existence of something... to the predicates of the ur-entity*”) into two different possible directions, which Kant names the “properly-ontological” and the “metaphysical-cosmological.” The contingency approach is not quite so strongly folded into “ontology” as it will be in *What is the Actual Progress...?*, but its empirical side is minimized to the same degree. In Kant’s

⁹⁷ 5:475-6. “Der ontologische Beweis vom Dasein Gottes aus dem Begriffe eines Urwesens ist nun entweder der, welcher aus ontologischen Prädicaten, wodurch es allein durchgängig bestimmt gedacht werden kann, auf das absolut=nothwendige Dasein, oder aus der absoluten Nothwendigkeit des Daseins irgend eines Dinges, welches es auch sei, auf die Prädicate des Urwesens schließt: denn zum Begriffe eines Urwesens gehört, damit es nicht abgeleitet sei, die unbedingte Nothwendigkeit seines Daseins und (um diese sich vorzustellen) die durchgängige Bestimmung durch den Begriff desselben. Beide Erfordernisse glaubte man nun im Begriffe der ontologischen Idee eines allerrealsten Wesens zu finden: und so entsprangen zwei metaphysische Beweise. “Der einen bloß metaphysischen Naturbegriff zum Grunde legende (eigentlich=ontologisch genannte) Beweis schloß aus dem Begriffe des allerrealsten Wesens auf seine schlechthin nothwendige Existenz; denn (heißt es) wenn es nicht existirte, so würde ihm eine Realität, nämlich die Existenz, mangeln. - Der andere (den man auch den metaphysisch=kosmologischen Beweis nennt) schloß aus der Nothwendigkeit der Existenz irgend eines Dinges (dergleichen, da mir im Selbstbewußtsein ein Dasein gegeben ist, durchaus eingeräumt werden muß) auf die durchgängige Bestimmung desselben als allerrealsten Wesens: weil alles Existirende durchgängig bestimmt, das schlechterdings Nothwendige aber (nämlich was wir als ein solches, mithin a priori erkennen sollen) durch seinen Begriff durchgängig bestimmt sein müsse; welches sich aber nur im Begriffe eines allerrealsten Dinges antreffen lasse...”

chronologically final estimation, whichever text one chooses, the proof “a contingencia mundi” remains in the speculative system only as a slight variation of the Cartesian one.

B. A Proof Without Theology

From all of the above it should be clear that Kant’s considerations on the speculative system have a definite *trajectory* towards consolidation, and specifically towards the Cartesian proof. In the discussion in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* just considered, for example, the physicotheological proof - which is considered right after the two (effectively one) speculative proofs - is totally divorced from any remaining speculative directions, despite being counted among their number in the “Ideal” of less than a decade earlier.⁹⁸ Its connection to the moral proof is played up (as above), and the possibility of our rendering it speculative again is not even mentioned. It would go too far for me to conjecture about whether the contingency proof or even the original ontological proof could have similarly left the system given enough time (and given Kant’s interest), but that would not have been unthinkable. Kant’s speculative system, as we have it already, always tends towards excluding everything but the Cartesian approach, so that the Cartesian proof is effectively the mark of speculative theology as such. The system shrinks itself to that single phenomenon, that single needle-point.

And yet on its own that proof could no longer be *theological*. If one were to split the Cartesian proof off from the contingency and ontological ones, one could indeed retreat to the position suggested in Chapter III by way of Leibniz and Descartes - that the proof can proceed

⁹⁸ Cf 5:476ff.

simply from the notion of necessary existence, with no need to deal with a most real entity at all. Everything we have seen so far indeed suggests that it is an “ens necessarium,” a *pure necessity*, which is at issue in this proof. But for Kant, as with the physicotheological proof there is no *theology* without an appropriately divine *concept*. And the notion of a pure “ens necessarium” has no proper concept whatsoever: “...to the inquiry of he who wanted to accept and to know the existence of a necessary entity, ‘Which among all things must be respected on that account?’, one could not answer: ‘This here is the necessary entity.’”⁹⁹ In some sense there *can be* no naked Cartesian proof only because “the whole task of the transcendental ideal” is to match up necessary entity and divine concept, and such a proof completely skips the concept. Without another proof appended to it - even a proof more properly at home in rational faith - the Cartesian proof itself can no longer be a piece of speculative *theology*. It vanishes like smoke.

The Cartesian proof, notably, is never saved and rehabilitated like the others. It secures no ontological field, deploys no ontotheology, even has no proper concept of its own, gives us (in its most extreme variation) nothing but the necessary existence of a necessary entity. The characteristic marks of all the other proofs are totally lacking in this one: stated nakedly on its own it thus has the appearance of, as Kant says, a joke. And yet at the same time, all other proofs take on the Cartesian one the moment they become speculative. Throughout this entire study the Cartesian proof has shown itself to be both increasingly impotent and useless as well as increasingly central and even unavoidable. If we (with Kant) can reread the other proofs in terms of rational faith, in retrograde, that may answer many of our initial questions, but it also renders

⁹⁹ A612/B640, in 3:408-9. “Er thut aber der Frage wegen seines eigenen Daseins gar kein Genüge, als warum es doch eigentlich nur zu thun war, und man konnte auf die Erkundigung dessen, der das Dasein eines nothwendigen Wesens annahm und wissen wollte, welches denn unter allen Dingen dafür angesehen werden müsse, nicht antworten: Dies hier ist das nothwendige Wesen.”

this one more perplexing. This is a proof *purely about necessity*, the necessity of the existence of God (God as ens necessarium) - and that is, in some sense, at the heart of all the other proofs as well. The remaining puzzles of the proofs basically converge into a pair of remaining questions: *seen in their proper sense*, what is the Cartesian proof, and what is ontotheology?

CHAPTER VII. From Necessity to Need

The previous two Chapters left us very nearly with Kant's last word on the question of the proofs. On the one hand, speculative theology, the project of Descartes (and beyond) for winning *knowledge* about God's existence, was increasingly whittled down to the singular point of the illegitimate Cartesian proof (taking existence itself from the concept of God). On the other, the moral proof led the way in retranslating the concerns of the rational theological project into *rational faith* - with the moral proof itself being directly relevant to the practical project of promoting the highest good and the other proofs (ontological, contingency, and physicotheological) promoting the same end indirectly, through the scientific presupposition of a unifying ground (doctrinal faith). Kant's last word is quite enough to save the proofs for the purposes of a certain practical use (i.e., according to rational faith) and give them a proper place in the "rightful claims" of reason, and at the same time dismiss them whenever they make "groundless presumptions" to speculative knowledge.¹

But the present project, to understand the role of the theistic proofs within the modern (Cartesian) metaphysics we inherit - and that, in order to understand we ourselves who inherit that tradition - must take interpretive steps beyond Kant's own express position. In effect we've already been doing this all along, especially via various broadly Heideggerian concepts (especially "ontotheology"). Indeed, already in Chapter I discussion of "ontotheology" managed to suggest the strangeness of the proofs' connection to metaphysics and give some rudimentary

¹ Cf Axii, in 4:9. "Sie ist... eine Aufforderung an die Vernunft, das beschwerlichste aller ihrer Geschäfte, nämlich das der Selbsterkenntniß, aufs neue zu übernehmen und einen Gerichtshof einzusetzen, der sie bei ihren gerechten Ansprüchen sichere, dagegen aber alle grundlose Anmaßungen nicht durch Machtsprüche, sondern nach ihren ewigen und unwandelbaren Gesetzen abfertigen könne; und dieser ist kein anderer als die Kritik der reinen Vernunft selbst."

direction to our question, even if actual resolution of the perplexities hinted at was nowhere in sight. I promised at the time that this would become possible via a long detour; in returning to those initial themes, we will now see how much our exploration of Kant has won us.

This chapter will centrally devote itself to finally answering the two central questions which have been left hanging: first, what proper sense can be made of the Cartesian proof?; second, what is the final relationship between the proofs and ontotheology? My conclusions are simple, which is not to say obvious. To the first: the real sense of the Cartesian proof, that whence its questionable demonstrative form emerges, *is rational faith itself* formally considered. That will eventually amount to saying, following but also extending Kant, that speculative theology after Descartes is merely the theoretical misuse of a supersensible deposit initially stemming from practice. Taking God for granted in one's conduct produces the illusion of a *path to knowing* God's existence. This is to say that the proofs, in their speculative mode, have gotten themselves backwards - they take a *felt need of reason*, needs based in reason's purposes, as some kind of supersensible perception. Thus, to the second: a more basic *practical ontotheology* lies in retrograde beneath any such rational theology, so that the former grounds and feeds the latter. The priority does not lie in using the givenness of an ontological realm to argue for the existence of the relevant θεῖον, but in assuming the existence of that θεῖον in order to secure one's practical dealings with the ontological realm - so that the former is only, so to speak, the explicit theoretical manifestation of the latter. And that interpretation ("practical ontotheology") will be the product of a "fusion" of Heideggerian ontotheology with Kantian faith. Properly understood, ontotheology implies rational faith (i.e. it is *practical*), while rational faith is always

ontologically oriented in turn. The heart and soul of the proofs, then, is nothing itself divine but at the same time nothing arbitrary. It is the needs of reason; it is *us*.

I. The Cartesian Proof: "...need is held for perception..."

The Cartesian proof has shown itself to be *the* crucial element of speculative theology, yet at the same time it establishes no ontology, makes possible no new conduct, is never rehabilitated like the other old proofs, and perhaps even has no particular content beyond the necessary existence of the necessarily existent entity. In the previous Chapter, of course, the Cartesian proof of the critical period ended up fatefully married to Kant's old ontological approach, in that the Cartesian proof must "borrow" its concept of God from the ontological one (just as the ontological became speculative via the Cartesian). But as I suggested in Chapter III, despite Kant's apparently consistent answer to the proof from 1763 forward and even despite Descartes' initial formulation of it in "Meditation V," the proof does not need to consist in inferring from the definition of God as "most real" or "most perfect" to God's possession of existence as a determinative predicate. On consideration, I suggested, the proof does not even require the language of realities or perfections, which is more native to the ontological approach. What Descartes himself finally says (in language further sharpened by Leibniz) is that the God of this proof is *the necessary entity* by definition. The "Replies" more specifically read:

[O]ne must distinguish between possible and necessary existence, and one must note that possible existence is indeed contained in the concept or idea of all things which are clearly and distinctly understood, but necessary existence is nowhere except in the idea of God alone.

Existence is contained in the idea or concept of each thing, as we can conceive of nothing except within the rationality [sub ratione] of its existing; possible or contingent existence is indeed

contained in the concept of a limited thing, and necessary and perfect [existence] in the concept of a most perfect entity.²

In Chapter III I marked out the unique sense of “existence” at issue here with the term *existentiality*. Any entity whatsoever must be conceived under the rationality of existing, i.e. in terms of its ability to exist (existentiality). This existentiality is a condition for thinking any entity whatsoever; yet in the case of *God*, the existentiality is not just “possible or contingent” but somehow “necessary.” That God has a necessary existentiality, that the “ability to exist” through which we think such an entity is somehow marked by necessity, from there becomes the whole basis for the Cartesian proof’s move to full-blown existence.

But *where* is this existentiality, and where is the divine necessity? If Descartes says that existentiality is “contained in the concept” of any entity, that we conceive of entities only “within the rationality of” their existentiality, an account of how it is so contained remains lacking. Descartes seems to take it for granted that existentiality, this fact unavoidable for our conceiving anything, lies in the entity itself as grasped (conceptum), so that contingent or necessary existentiality would be a determining quality of that concept much like any other. Yet Descartes himself, as I discussed, also argued that the distinction between essence and existence was a *formal* distinction, a distinction of “reason ratiocinatae” relying first of all on how the entity “should” be thought. The fact that existentiality is determinative and unavoidable precisely for our *conceiving* suggests, in parallel to that discussion, that existentiality could lie within the *concipere*, the act of “grasping” itself and not the entity proper. Existentiality would be not a real quality of an entity, but a certain aspect of the *constitutive acts* which make entities manifest to thinking (in whatever way they so manifest). It would be, to speak like Descartes, a quality

² AT VII 116 and 166.

“cogitandi,” ontologically fundamental yet still having to do more with the nature of the thinking than the entity thought. And the critical Kant, albeit using the Leibnizian term “modality,” expresses exactly this alternative in discussing the same phenomenon:

The principles of modality, however, are not objectively synthetic, for the predicates of possibility, actuality, and necessity do not in the least increase the concept of which they are spoken by means of setting down something else in the representation of the object. But as they are all the same still always synthetic, so they are only subjective, i.e. they subjoin to the concept of a thing (something real), of which they say nothing else, the cognitive power wherein it springs forth and has its seat...³

The modality of judgments is a quite peculiar function of the same which has this distinguishing [feature] in it, that it does not contribute to the content of the judgment... but goes only to the value of the copula in relation to thinking overall.⁴

The categories of modality have the peculiarity in them that as a determination of the object they do not in the least increase the concept to which they are appended as predicates, but only express the relationship to the cognitive capacity... Hereby no more determinations are thought in the object itself, rather it is only asked how it relates (together with all its determinations) to the understanding and its empirical use, to empirical judgmental power, and to reason (in its turn towards experience).⁵

To say that existentiality (modality) is “subjective,” in Kant’s sense above, is not to make it arbitrary or illusory, but only to say that it concerns the *mode of manifestation* of the thing and not its facts or qualities (in Heidegger’s terms, to see it as an *ontological* determination of entities rather than an ontic one). Even if existentiality would lie in the grasping and not in the grasped, it would still be determinative in *how* that grasping must happen.

³ A233-4/B286, in 3:197. Die Grundsätze der Modalität sind aber nicht objectiv=synthetisch, weil die Prädicate der Möglichkeit, Wirklichkeit und Nothwendigkeit den Begriff, von dem sie gesagt werden, nicht im mindesten vermehren, dadurch daß sie der Vorstellung des Gegenstandes noch etwas hinzusetzen. Da sie aber gleichwohl doch immer synthetisch sind, so sind sie es nur subjectiv, d. i. sie fügen zu dem Begriffe eines Dinges (Realen), von dem sie sonst nichts sagen, die Erkenntnißkraft hinzu, worin er entspringt und seinen Sitz hat...

⁴ A74/B99-100, in 3:89. “Die Modalität der Urtheile ist eine ganz besondere Function derselben, die das Unterscheidende an sich hat, daß sie nichts zum Inhalte des Urtheils beiträgt... sondern nur den Werth der Copula in Beziehung auf das Denken überhaupt angeht.”

⁵ A219/B266, in 3:186. Die Kategorien der Modalität haben das Besondere an sich: daß sie den Begriff, dem sie als Prädicate beigefügt werden, als Bestimmung des Objects nicht im mindesten vermehren, sondern nur das Verhältniß zum Erkenntnißvermögen ausdrücken... Hiedurch werden keine Bestimmungen mehr im Objecte selbst gedacht, sondern es fragt sich nur, wie es sich (sammt allen seinen Bestimmungen) zum Verstande und dessen empirischen Gebrauche, zur empirischen Urtheilskraft und zur Vernunft (in ihrer Anwendung auf Erfahrung) verhalte.

Divine necessity too could be read in both ways. If that necessity were no real quality, that would not require denying that necessary existence is “contained in the concept” of God in a certain sense, nor the Leibnizian assertion that God is the “necessary entity.” But it would certainly change how that necessity is understood. Necessary existence would no longer lie inside the *concept* of God (with or without other perfections around it), waiting to be the premise for an argument, but would instead manifest within how we *think* God. “Necessary entity” would then mean, an entity whose existence we cannot fail to assume. One would thus transition from *the entity’s* necessity to exist to *our* necessity - our “need” - to presuppose that entity. (Nor would this have to be a piece of personal inclination, if that need is somehow *rational*.)

The above thus suggests a working hypothesis for how to reread the Cartesian proof, indeed one given by Kant himself in (among other places) a brief side comment in a quite extraordinary footnote. The argument would begin that this proof, like the others, has been presented backwards. If we change the sense of God’s unique existentiality, it becomes possible to reread what looks like a bad joke - the inference of necessary existence as a fact out of necessary existence as a quality - as a *reaction* to a rational need. This in itself is not novel: the previous Chapter, after all, was devoted to showing how all of the other precritical proofs were rehabilitated within the critical system by “retrograding” their attempts to reach knowledge of an existence into the presupposition of that existence for practical purposes. Except the Cartesian proof by itself - being thoroughly *formal* - cannot have the same result. The novelty is that this proof instead becomes the very form of any necessary practical presupposition, i.e. it becomes the form of rational faith itself.

A. Ein fremden Besitz

Kant's reading of the basic error of speculative theology, and thus of the Cartesian proof (insofar as, for Kant, that proof *is* speculative theology), is expressed in a few places throughout his critical writings, but nowhere more sharply than in his critique of Mendelssohn in "What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" In a long and crucial footnote, Kant writes:

Since reason needs to presuppose reality as given for the possibility of all things and regards the differentiation [between] things only as limitations by means of negations hung upon them: so it sees itself compelled to lay for a ground one single possibility, namely that of an unlimited entity, as original, but to regard all others as derivative. Since also the thoroughgoing possibility of all things must be encountered in the whole of all existence - at least, the principle of thoroughgoing determination makes possible the distinction between the possible and the actual for our reason only in such a way - so we find a subjective ground of necessity, i.e. a need of our reason itself to lay for a ground of all possibility the existence of an all-realest (highest) entity. So now the Cartesian proof of the existence of God springs from the fact that subjective grounds for presupposing something for the use of reason (which at its ground always only remains an empirical use) are held for objective - hence need is held for perception. As it is with this, so it is with all the proofs of the worthy Mendelssohn in his *Morning Hours*. They accomplish nothing for the sake of a demonstration... [H]olding-for-true from the subjective grounds of the use of reason, if objective [grounds] are lacking for us and yet we are compelled to judge, is thus always still of great importance; only we must not display [ausgeben] as a free perception what is only a compelled presupposition...⁶

⁶ 8:137-8. "Da die Vernunft zur Möglichkeit aller Dinge Realität als gegeben vorauszusetzen bedarf und die Verschiedenheit der Dinge durch ihnen anhängende Negationen nur als Schranken betrachtet: so sieht sie sich genöthigt, eine einzige Möglichkeit, nämlich die des uneingeschränkten Wesens, als ursprünglich zum Grunde zu legen, alle anderen aber als abgeleitet zu betrachten. Da auch die durchgängige Möglichkeit eines jeden Dinges durchaus im Ganzen aller Existenz angetroffen werden muß, wenigstens der Grundsatz der durchgängigen Bestimmung die Unterscheidung des Möglichen vom Wirklichen unserer Vernunft nur auf solche Art möglich macht: so finden wir einen subjectiven Grund der Nothwendigkeit, d. i. ein Bedürfniß unserer Vernunft selbst, aller Möglichkeit das Dasein eines allerrealsten (höchsten) Wesens zum Grunde zu legen. So entspringt nun der cartesianische Beweis vom Dasein Gottes, indem subjective Gründe etwas für den Gebrauch der Vernunft (der im Grunde immer nur ein Erfahrungsgebrauch bleibt) voraus zu setzen für objectiv - mithin Bedürfniß für Einsicht - gehalten werden. So ist es mit diesem, so ist es mit allen Beweisen des würdigen Mendelssohn in seinen Morgenstunden bewandt. Sie leisten nichts zum Behuf einer Demonstration. Darum sind sie aber keinesweges unnütz. Denn nicht zu erwähnen, welchen schönen Anlaß diese überaus scharfsinnigen Entwicklungen der subjectiven Bedingungen des Gebrauchs unserer Vernunft zu der vollständigen Erkenntniß dieses unsers Vermögens geben, als zu welchem Behuf sie bleibende Beispiele sind: so ist das Fürwahrhalten aus subjectiven Gründen des Gebrauchs der Vernunft, wenn uns objective mangeln und wir dennoch zu Urtheilen genöthigt sind, immer noch von großer Wichtigkeit; nur müssen wir das, was nur abgenöthigte Voraussetzung ist, nicht für freie Einsicht ausgeben..."

Kant clearly opens the footnote in the first two sentences with a focus on the (old) *ontological* proof, yet in the third sentence he markedly shifts to speak of the *Cartesian* proof instead. True enough, Kant did take the move to combine the two proofs in the “Ideal” five years earlier - but the effect of that everywhere else was to simply remove the phrase “Cartesian proof” from his writing, while here it shows up one last time.⁷ More than that, the way he speaks of it - that it “springs from the fact that subjective grounds for presupposing something for the use of reason... are held for objective” - is broad enough to apply to *any* of the speculative proofs as we previously considered them. In the sweep of a few sentences, that is, Kant moves from his own preferred pre-critical proof to the Cartesian proof at the ground of the “Ideal of Pure Reason,” and then to “all the proofs” swallowed by the same speculative fate.

To the point, though, Kant here diagnoses the Cartesian proof - and thus speculative theology in general - as the consequence of the fact that “subjective grounds for presupposing something for the use of reason... are held for objective - hence need is held for perception [Einsicht],” that the proof takes for granted “as a free perception [Einsicht] what is only a compelled presupposition.” In Chapter III I mentioned in passing that the early Kant had no answer to the Cartesian proof in its naked, “ens necessarium” form, and even in the “Ideal” he still explicitly treats the proof as an *argument*. Here, however, the proof is traced beyond “Meditation V” and treated in its simplest aspect.⁸ Considered at its foundations, Kant is saying,

⁷ This text is also (so far as I have found) the last place where he ever speaks of the “Cartesian proof” by its original name. The reappearance of the phrase “Cartesian proof” could be an artifact of Mendelssohn’s own frequent references to Descartes in relation to a priori argumentation - see *Morgenstunden* at 308ff. But the particular proof Mendelssohn argues for in the relevant section seems to bear little relation to what Kant outlines in the previous sentences, which is - again - his own original ontological proof.

⁸ In his *Ontological Argument* Kevin Harrelson rightly says, “What requires explanation is not that an *ens perfectissimum* contains necessary existence, but rather why we perceive this to be the case. The Cartesian ontological argument is not merely about God, but rather about our perception of God... What Descartes needs to demonstrate [with this proof], then, is not an objective connection, but only the veracity of a certain perception.” (p.67) Which is to admit that it is, at bottom, not an “argument” at all. Where Harrelson seems incorrect is in the

the Cartesian proof is not really a “proof” (an argument) at all, however much one may build an inferential form on top of its basic propensities: it is really the claim to *see* something (einsehen), to see an object and indeed a *necessary* object.⁹

If that is the central problem of the Cartesian proof, and thus of all speculative theology, then all of the far more famous argumentation of the “Ideal” in fact turns out to be somewhat peripheral. The major theme of Kant’s account of the proofs is rather that they are what he calls *transcendental illusion*,¹⁰ a concept already alluded to in the very first pages of the *Critique*’s first edition. Reason, in its various projects, finds itself necessitated to find shelter in “Grundsätzen” which have no proper objective application, yet which *seem* not only knowable but indeed the first of all knowables. This illusion is not in itself an error in judgment (although it can very quickly lead to such errors), merely a consequence of the fact that reason can go beyond experience: “[T]his illusion (which one can yet prevent from being deceitful) is equally indispensable nevertheless... if in our case we want to train the understanding beyond any given experience (any part of the total possible experience), hence also to its greatest possible, and farthest, extension.”¹¹ And this is ultimately to say (as I will further argue below), reason is

insistence throughout his book that Kant never saw this perceptual aspect of the proof, i.e. never seriously considered the shifts made by the later Leibniz, the “Replies”, etc.. The “Orientation” footnote belies this: Kant not only saw it, but his response to it is the core of his later considerations of rational theology. If the “Ideal” deals with a version of the Cartesian proof more akin to “Meditation V” it is perhaps only because that version *is an argument*, i.e. it claims plausible demonstrative validity rather than metaphysical intuition.

⁹ And this, incidentally, points to the distinguished importance of *Malebranche* for understanding this proof, since for him above all others it is indeed entirely a question of *seeing* God. E.g.: “Thus one cannot see God except that he exist; we cannot see the essence of an infinitely perfect being without seeing its existence... Thus if one thinks it, it is necessary that it be.” [From the *Recherche de la Vérité*, IV, XI, III: “L’on ne peut donc voir Dieu qu’il n’existe; on ne peut voir l’essence d’un être infiniment parfait sans en voir l’existence... Si donc on y pense, il faut qu’il y soit.”]

¹⁰ To be sure, Kant does bring up this notion in the “Ideal,” noting that it is indeed a “dialectical but natural illusion” that “realizes and hypostatizes what can only be an idea.” [A615/B643, in 3:410. Was ist nun in diesen transscendentalen Beweisen die Ursache des dialektischen, aber natürlichen Scheins, welcher die Begriffe der Nothwendigkeit und höchsten Realität verknüpft und dasjenige, was doch nur Idee sein kann, realisirt und hypostasirt?] Yet it is far from prominent and barely deployed in the actual argumentation.

¹¹ A644-5/B672-3, in 3:428. “...diese Illusion (welche man doch hindern kann, daß sie nicht betrügt) ist gleichwohl unentbehrlich nothwendig, wenn wir außer den Gegenständen, die uns vor Augen sind, auch diejenigen zugleich

illusion-prone precisely because it is first of all *practical and teleological*.¹² We will never escape illusion's trickery insofar as we remain the entities who we are:

For we are dealing with a natural and inevitable illusion which founds itself upon subjective principles and palms them off as objective... Thus there is a natural and inevitable dialectic of pure reason, not one in which (e.g.) a dunce tangles themselves in through lack of cognizance or which some sophist has artfully contrived so as to befuddle reasonable people, but one which hangs unopposed upon human reason and which, even after we have detected its deception, will still not cease to play tricks on it and relentlessly drive it into momentary aberrations, which need to be resolved each time.¹³

And if this illusion seated in reason itself is what invites us to perceive our rational interests into the facts - "One can put all [transcendental] illusion to this: that the subjective condition of thinking is taken for the cognition of the object"¹⁴ - then the Cartesian proof is the grandest of all examples. It is our attempt to theoretically claim and secure a "compelled presupposition" - here a theological presupposition - which is necessary for our rational conduct.

Yet if the Cartesian proof amounts to a kind of theoretical misuse of our ideas (as spurred on by illusion), that still leaves the question of how such a misuse should even be possible. On Kant's account, theoretical reason is not wrong pure and simple in claiming that it in some way

sehen wollen, die weit davon uns im Rücken liegen, d.i. wenn wir in unserem Falle den Verstand über jede gegebene Erfahrung (den Theil der gesammten möglichen Erfahrung) hinaus, mithin auch zur größtmöglichen und äußersten Erweiterung abrichten wollen."

¹² Here see especially Fugate's discussion at *Teleology of Reason* 200-205. For still deeper discussion of transcendental illusion I refer to Grier's epochal book on the subject (*Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*), especially the fourth and eighth chapters. She emphasizes, as I do (but in far greater detail), that this "illusion" is *not* a judgmental error, *not* the outcome of bad theory or even misapplication of the understanding (even if it can be the ground of all that and more), but something rooted in reason itself as a necessary manifestation of our capacity to extend cognition beyond sensible experience.

¹³ A298/B354-5, in 3:237. "Denn wir haben es mit einer natürlichen und unvermeidlichen Illusion zu thun, die selbst auf subjectiven Grundsätzen beruht und sie als objective unterschiebt... Es giebt also eine natürliche und unvermeidliche Dialektik der reinen Vernunft, nicht eine, in die sich etwa ein Stümper durch Mangel an Kenntnissen selbst verwickelt, oder die irgend ein Sophist, um vernünftige Leute zu verwirren, künstlich ersonnen hat, sondern die der menschlichen Vernunft unhintertreiblich anhängt und selbst, nachdem wir ihr Blendwerk aufgedeckt haben, dennoch nicht aufhören wird ihr vorzugaukeln und sie unablässig in augenblickliche Verirrungen zu stoßen, die jederzeit gehoben zu werden bedürfen." Kant is not, of course, endorsing the thought that reason itself is somehow "corrupt"; one must only find the right "Lage" for the grounds for this tendency. Cf A669/B697, in 3:442.

¹⁴ A396, in 4:247. "Man kann allen Schein darin setzen: daß die subjective Bedingung des Denkens für die Erkenntniß des Objects gehalten wird."

“sees” (speculari) an object like God; indeed, practical reason does give an “increase” (Zuwachs) of sorts to theoretical vision, and in some sense an object is in fact “given.” What, then, does the misuse actually consist in? Or, more fully put: what is the articulation of practice and theory, such that anything like dialectical illusion can ever become a problem?

The tenuous nature of the Cartesian proof, that it “sees” its object somehow and yet misunderstands itself when it begins to theorize about it, should be related to one of the most eventful passages in the Second *Critique* and the entire critical corpus. I quote Kant at length:

Now, through an apodictic practical law, [the ideas of speculative reason] come by objective reality as the necessary conditions of the possibility of what this [law] commands itself to make into an object, i.e., we are instructed by that [law] that [the ideas] have objects, yet without being able to indicate how their concept refers to an object, and this is also not yet cognition of these objects; for thereby one cannot judge synthetically about them at all, nor determine their application theoretically, hence from them [one can] make no theoretical use of reason at all, as that wherein all speculative cognition of the same properly stands. But nevertheless theoretical cognition, not indeed of these objects, but of reason overall, was thereby widened insofar as objects were yet given to those ideas by the practical postulates, while a merely problematic thought thereby first became an objective reality. Thus there was no widening of the cognition of given supersensible objects, but yet a widening of theoretical reason and the cognition of the same in regard to the supersensible overall, insofar as it was compelled to grant that such objects are given [es solche Gegenstände gebe], yet without being able to determine them more closely, hence [without being able to] itself widen this cognition of the objects (which have henceforth been given to them from practical grounds, and also only for practical use) - for this increase pure theoretical reason, for which all these ideas are transcendent and without object, thus has only its practical capacity to thank.¹⁵

¹⁵ 5:135. “Nun bekommen sie durch ein apodiktisches praktisches Gesetz, als nothwendige Bedingungen der Möglichkeit dessen, was dieses sich zum Objecte zu machen gebietet, objective Realität, d. i. wir werden durch jenes angewiesen, daß sie Objecte haben, ohne doch, wie sich ihr Begriff auf ein Object bezieht, anzeigen zu können, und das ist auch noch nicht Erkenntniß dieser Objecte; denn man kann dadurch gar nichts über sie synthetisch urtheilen, noch die Anwendung derselben theoretisch bestimmen, mithin von ihnen gar keinen theoretischen Gebrauch der Vernunft machen, als worin eigentlich alle speculative Erkenntniß derselben besteht. Aber dennoch ward das theoretische Erkenntniß zwar nicht dieser Objecte, aber der Vernunft überhaupt dadurch so fern erweitert, daß durch die praktischen Postulate jenen Ideen doch Objecte gegeben wurden, indem ein blos problematischer Gedanke dadurch allererst objective Realität bekam. Also war es keine Erweiterung der Erkenntniß von gegebenen übersinnlichen Gegenständen, aber doch eine Erweiterung der theoretischen Vernunft und der Erkenntniß derselben in Ansehung des Übersinnlichen überhaupt, so fern als sie genöthigt wurde, daß es solche Gegenstände gebe, einzuräumen, ohne sie doch näher bestimmen, mithin dieses Erkenntniß von den Objecten (die ihr nunmehr aus praktischem Grunde und auch nur zum praktischen Gebrauche gegeben worden) selbst erweitern zu können, welchen Zuwachs also die reine theoretische Vernunft, für die alle jene Ideen transcendent und ohne Object sind, lediglich ihrem reinen praktischen Vermögen zu verdanken hat.”

Kant's basic thought (not that any of the above is easy) is that it is practical reason alone (the will) which *gives* ideal objects such as God to the understanding, and thus to theory. They are given to theory, Kant insists, not to be known nor cognized nor positively dealt with in any way, but only to be *admitted* in their givenness. To be sure, this seems to run against the grain of the First *Critique*, which famously warns us that “[w]ithout sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”¹⁶ There should presumably be nothing for us to see in the case of a supersensible object like God, because nothing for the understanding to bring under synthesis. But in the same passage from the second *Critique* Kant has a surprising reply:

Pure concepts of the understanding (categories), without which no object can be thought, are required for every use of reason in respect to an object. These can only be applied for the theoretical use of reason, i.e. to cognition [of objects], so far as intuition (which is always sensible) is equally laid under them, and so merely in order to represent an object of possible experience through them. But here now ideas of reason, which can be given in no experience at all, are what I must think through categories in order to cognize [an object]. Here alone, too, it is not about the theoretical cognition of the objects of these ideas, rather only about [the fact] that they have objects at all. Pure practical reason provides this reality, and theoretical reason has nothing further to do here than to merely think those objects through the categories - which, as we have clearly shown elsewhere,¹⁷ it goes about quite well without needing intuition (neither sensible nor supersensible), because the categories have their seat and origin in the pure understanding, solely as the capacity to think, independently of and before all intuition, and they always only refer to [bedeuten] an object overall, in whichever way it may ever and always be given to us. Now for the categories, so far as they are to be applied to these ideas, indeed it is possible to give no object in the intuition; but it is [the case] for them that such [an object] is actual - hence the category as a mere form of thought is not here empty, but rather has a reference [Bedeutung] - [since] the reality of the concepts which appertain to the purpose of the possibility of the highest good is sufficiently secured through an object which practical reason presents without doubt in the concept of the highest good, all the same without effecting through this increase the smallest widening of cognition according to theoretical principles.¹⁸

¹⁶ A51/B75, in 3:75. “Ohne Sinnlichkeit würde uns kein Gegenstand gegeben und ohne Verstand keiner gedacht werden. Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind.”

¹⁷ Kant is not specific here, but he may be thinking of passages such as A253-4/B309ff in 3:210ff.

¹⁸ 5:136. “Zu jedem Gebrauche der Vernunft in Ansehung eines Gegenstandes werden reine Verstandesbegriffe (Kategorien) erfordert, ohne die kein Gegenstand gedacht werden kann. Diese können zum theoretischen Gebrauche der Vernunft, d. i. zu dergleichen Erkenntniß, nur angewandt werden, so fern ihnen zugleich Anschauung (die jederzeit sinnlich ist) untergelegt wird, und also blos, um durch sie ein Object möglicher Erfahrung vorzustellen. Nun sind hier aber Ideen der Vernunft, die in gar keiner Erfahrung gegeben werden können, das, was ich durch Kategorien denken müßte, um es zu erkennen. Allein es ist hier auch nicht um das theoretische Erkenntniß der

Intuition is surely necessary for having an object when that object is to be known, experienced, or empirically pictured - but that is not the case here. The understanding is perfectly capable of categorizing a mere negative “something” without any intuition, provided that it is given to us in some way or other (“in whichever way [an object] may ever and always be given to us”).¹⁹ And in the case here, it is practical reason’s necessary presupposition of God that provides the actuality, i.e. the will itself does the work of giving an object.²⁰ The understanding can do no more with this object than merely acknowledge it; theoretical reason thus “has nothing further to do,” positively at least, beyond merely granting that such an object is given.

But one should notice that theoretical reason *is involved* in this givenness in its own way, and is even enriched by it. Kant’s thought is perhaps best expressed in his talk of a *Zuwachs* (“increase”) rather than an *Erweiterung* (“widening”) of theory. Kant insists in the title of this section that there is no “equal widening of cognition as speculative” even when reason is

Objecte dieser Ideen, sondern nur darum, daß sie überhaupt Objecte haben, zu thun. Diese Realität verschafft reine praktische Vernunft, und hiebei hat die theoretische Vernunft nichts weiter zu thun, als jene Objecte durch Kategorien bloß zu denken, welches, wie wir sonst deutlich gewiesen haben, ganz wohl, ohne Anschauung (weder sinnliche, noch übersinnliche) zu bedürfen, angeht, weil die Kategorien im reinen Verstande unabhängig und vor aller Anschauung, lediglich als dem Vermögen zu denken, ihren Sitz und Ursprung haben, und sie immer nur ein Object überhaupt bedeuten, auf welche Art es uns auch immer gegeben werden mag. Nun ist den Kategorien, so fern sie auf jene Ideen angewandt werden sollen, zwar kein Object in der Anschauung zu geben möglich; es ist ihnen aber doch, daß ein solches wirklich sei, mithin die Kategorie als eine bloße Gedankenform hier nicht leer sei, sondern Bedeutung habe, durch ein Object, welches die praktische Vernunft im Begriffe des höchsten Guts ungezweifelt darbietet, die Realität der Begriffe, die zum Behuf der Möglichkeit des höchsten Guts gehören, hinreichend gesichert, ohne gleichwohl durch diesen Zuwachs die mindeste Erweiterung des Erkenntnisses nach theoretischen Grundsätzen zu bewirken.”

¹⁹ Kuehn has a useful discussion of this in his “Kant’s Transcendental Deduction...” 164-7.

²⁰ It is remarkable that *phenomenological* readings of Kant, from Husserl and especially Heidegger but really ever since, seem to have completely missed the importance of these passages. E.g. Heidegger, with some right and obviously writing against the Neo-Kantians, reads the “Aesthetic” and “Analytic” as radically placing the priority of human cognition onto “intuition,” i.e. *givenness*. And Heidegger reads this as directly implying a collapse of rational metaphysics. Yet for Kant the basis of metaphysics would not at all be destroyed, only moved elsewhere. Heidegger’s emphasis on givenness, it seems to me, is rightly placed - yet as these passages show, for Kant there is still another source of givenness beyond sensible intuition, namely the needs of the will (with their own particular mode of giving). Cf, e.g., *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*., esp. §5-6; *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, esp. §4-6, and *The Question Concerning the Thing*, esp. §24-5.

“widened” in a practical regard,²¹ albeit in the details of the discussion this principle gets messy. (He later says there is “a widening of theoretical reason and the cognition of the same in regard to the supersensible overall” - because it suddenly has to admit new objects - yet at the same time there is no widening of theoretical cognition *towards* those objects.) The point is that theoretical reason gains no additional range of objects to *theoretically appropriate*, but it does find itself with more objects: “...for by this [postulation] the theoretical cognition of pure reason admittedly comes into an increase, but it consists merely in this, that these concepts, otherwise problematic (merely thinkable) for it, are now assertorically declared as [concepts] to which actual objects belong.”²² The new objects - objects that nevertheless do not belong to theory - are only, so to speak, “dropped off” with theoretical reason by the will, much as a tourist might leave their luggage at a hotel:²³ the total amount of stuff *at* the hotel is thereby increased, so that the staff and management might even have to deal with the increase in some way, but the range of the hotel’s *property* (what is its own) stays exactly the same as it was.

We may understand the mistakes of speculative theology, then, by contrast to what theoretical reason *should* be doing, for it is not left to merely sit idle. Much like the tourist’s hotel, even if theory is not given any further positive work it is still is tasked with a kind of *caretaking* of the objects placed under its supervision:

But once reason is in possession of this increase, so it will, as speculative reason ([but] properly only for securing its practical use), go to work with those ideas negatively, i.e. not widening but cleansing [them], so as to hold off, on the one hand, anthropomorphism as the source of superstition, or the feigned widening of those concepts through alleged experience, and on the other the fanaticism which promises [that widening] through supersensible intuition or suchlike feelings; which are all hindrances of the practical use of pure reason, so that warding them off

²¹ 5:134.

²² 5:143. “...wodurch denn die theoretische Erkenntniß der reinen Vernunft allerdings einen Zuwachs bekommt, der aber blos darin besteht, daß jene für sie sonst problematische (blos denkbare) Begriffe jetzt assertorisch für solche erklärt werden, denen wirklich Objecte zukommen...”

²³ Kant outright calls these objects a “foreign estate” (“fremder Besitz”) for speculative reason at 5:120.

admittedly belongs to the widening of our cognition in practical intent, without it being a contradiction to this to equally admit that reason in speculative intent has thereby won nothing in the least.²⁴

That is, theoretical reason has at least the *negative* role of cleaning up its own mistakes, which is of course a longstanding Kantian theme.²⁵ (Reason is both the source of, and solution to, all of its own difficulties, albeit it can only solve them with an eye towards practice²⁶ - even the merely negative role that speculation is left with can only be performed for the sake of “practical use.”) Kant’s worries about the “hindrances” reason itself produces are even repeated in the footnote on Mendelssohn discussed earlier:

Mendelssohn perhaps did not think on [the fact] that dogmatizing with pure reason in the field of the supersensible is the route directly to philosophical reverie [Schwärmerei], and that only critique of this very same capacity of reason can fundamentally treat this malady... For by what right will one deny reason, which has once succeeded in that field so well according to its own admission, from going still wider into the very same [field]? And then where is the boundary where it must stop?²⁷

And if what speculative reason must continually “cleanse” itself of, and protect the objects postulated by practical reason from, is anthropomorphism, superstition, fanaticism, and reverie in

²⁴ “5:135-6. Ist aber die Vernunft einmal im Besitze dieses Zuwachses, so wird sie als speculative Vernunft (eigentlich nur zur Sicherung ihres praktischen Gebrauchs) negativ, d. i. nicht erweiternd, sondern läuternd, mit jenen Ideen zu Werke gehen, um einerseits den Anthropomorphism als den Quell der Superstition, oder scheinbare Erweiterung jener Begriffe durch vermeinte Erfahrung, andererseits den Fanaticism, der sie durch übersinnliche Anschauung oder dergleichen Gefühle verspricht, abzuhalten; welches alles Hindernisse des praktischen Gebrauchs der reinen Vernunft sind, deren Abwehrgung also zu der Erweiterung unserer Erkenntniß in praktischer Absicht allerdings gehört, ohne daß es dieser widerspricht, zugleich zu gestehen, daß die Vernunft in speculativer Absicht dadurch im mindesten nichts gewonnen habe.”

²⁵ Cf, for example, the first *Critique* at A639/B667ff (3:425ff) and the *Groundwork* at 4:456ff.

²⁶ This is a confirmation, albeit perhaps in an unexpected context, of O’Neill’s comments on the fundamentally recursive, anti-foundational, and even communal aspects of the critical method and of rational discipline: “[T]hinking that wholly dispenses with discipline falls into disorientation. If there is a discipline of thought or action that deserves to be thought of as authoritative and so to be called the discipline of reason, it must be self-imposed. Hence for us practical reasoning is fundamental. It is in choosing how to act, including how to think, to understand and to interpret, that we embody or flout the only principles that we could have reason to think of as principles of reason.” *Constructions of Reason*, 27.

²⁷ 8:137. “Mendelssohn dachte wohl nicht daran, daß das Dogmatisiren mit der reinen Vernunft im Felde des Übersinnlichen der gerade Weg zur philosophischen Schwärmerei sei, und daß nur Kritik eben desselben Vernunftvermögens diesem Übel gründlich abhelfen könne... Denn mit welchem Rechte will man der Vernunft, der es einmal in jenem Felde seinem eigenen Geständnisse nach so wohl gelungen ist, verwehren, in eben demselben noch weiter zu gehen? Und wo ist dann die Gränze, wo sie stehen bleiben muß?”

general - perhaps including theoretical skepticisms on the other side - then these more extreme versions of theoretical distortion are themselves only made possible (as the route directly to them) by the initial move to dogmatize about such objects at all. And that initial move, in turn, happens only on the basis of viewing objects given by the will as if they could be theoretically cognized - as if they were objects known to us.

Speculative theology's misuse of these strange objects left to it by the will is thus based in theory's mistaking such objects as within its own scope of interest. Reason, in practical intention, does give itself objects beyond the bounds of experience. Theory *has an object* in front of it - whence the illusion that we are *acquainted* with this object - but without critical reflection it (so to speak) forgets *how* the object got there, so that it quickly gives it a theoretical determination. In a fit of concern about epistemological certainty, perhaps especially in the face of God's crucial role in all of its interests, theory may take it upon itself to secure the being of this entity through demonstration (since theory is the realm of demonstration). But in proving the existence of any God, theory can only begin with the one thing it evidently knows about this entity - namely that it is *needed* for something. It will hold need for perception and take a compelled presupposition as a free perception. In the first *Critique* Kant makes the point by saying that "...the condition belonging to [everything conditioned] cannot be cognized as simply necessary from that, rather it serves only as respectively necessary or just needful [nöthige], but in itself and *a priori* a voluntary presupposition for the rational cognition of the conditioned."²⁸

This is perhaps bettered in an earlier fragment: "The concept which lies at the ground is a

²⁸ A634/B662, in 3:422. "Da, wenn bloß von dem, was da ist (nicht, was sein soll), die Rede ist, das Bedingte, welches uns in der Erfahrung gegeben wird, jederzeit auch als zufällig gedacht wird, so kann die zu ihm gehörige Bedingung daraus nicht als schlechthin nothwendig erkannt werden, sondern dient nur als eine respectiv nothwendige oder vielmehr nöthige, an sich selbst aber und *a priori* willkürliche Voraussetzung zum Vernunftkenntniß des Bedingten."

necessary presupposition, and so it seems to be a concept of a necessary entity.”²⁹ The root problem of speculative theology, as Kant diagnoses it, is not that nothing is given but that what is given gets *taken* in the wrong way. The Cartesian proof is thus the distinctive movement whereby the hotel seizes the luggage dropped off with it as its own property.

B. “...moral theology is equally ontotheology...”

The Cartesian proof thereby begins in *need*: “It is thus not cognition, but the felt need of reason, whereby Mendelssohn (without his knowledge) oriented himself in speculative thinking.”

³⁰ Were it to think through its origins, the Cartesian proof would discover either that it has nothing left to prove - the entity whose existence it sought to secure is *already given to it* by way of reason’s practical commitment - or that it thereby has no legitimate theoretical route to prove it. On the other hand, if the Cartesian proof consists in proceeding from the “necessity” of God - in fact a need - to God’s existence, then the *sense* of that proof lies in precisely the rational faith which “gives” me God as a presupposition.

This can be explicated by way of Kant himself. In a note to Baumgarten (from the section on “The Will of God”) which Adickes dates to 1783-4, Kant makes a subtle but quite direct connection between the Cartesian (“ontological”) and moral proofs:

(If it were possible to know that a God is, then morality would remain in men nevertheless.)

In Moral Theology

God is represented as the head in a necessary system of ends... God as *summum bonum originarium*. The moral properties are not [God's] supreme dominion over entities according to

²⁹ Fragment 4729, in 17:689-90.

³⁰ 8:139. “Es ist also nicht Erkenntniß, sondern gefühltes Bedürfniß der Vernunft, wodurch sich Mendelssohn (ohne sein Wissen) im speculativen Denken orientirte.”

the laws of morality, rather the self-sufficiency of these laws themselves. Here we lay for a ground what we certainly know, namely the necessary system of all ends, to which all others must be subordinated as their *conditio sine qua non*...

Thereby moral theology is equally ontotheology. [my emphasis] All the same it is a merely practical and subjective certainty which is grounded on an interest, but on an interest objectively necessary and inseparable from the essence of reason, subordinated in no intention. Were morality only a pragmatic system of prudence, so faith in God would be a mere hypothesis; now it is a postulate.

The highest wisdom in physicotheology is merely relative. and concerns adequacy in view of the system of all ends; but in moral theology [the highest wisdom] is self-sufficiently the source of the possibility of the things themselves...

All moral properties of God are here to be determined only objectively according to our concepts, not subjectively...³¹

Although the aim of the discussion is to emphasize that one must reach God through moral laws and not the other way around (a point he makes in rejecting “theological ethics”),³² that discussion stands upon the rationale of the wider claim that “moral theology is ontotheology.” Kant does not mean this term in the Heideggerian sense, of course - he is thinking instead of his own definition in the *Critique*, where ontotheology is the kind of rational theology which attempts (he says) “to cognize [the ur-entity's] existence through mere concepts, without help from the least experience.”³³ What Kant means is that, *strictly thought through*, this definition

³¹ Fragment 6099, in 18:451. “(Wenn es möglich wäre zu wissen, daß ein Gott sey, bliebe denn noch moralitaet im Menschen.)

“In der Moraltheologie

“Wird Gott vorgestellt als das überhaupt in einem nothwendigen System der Zwecke... Gott als summum bonum originarium. Die Moralische Eigenschaften sind nicht seine obere Herrschaft über die Wesen nach Gesetzen der Moralitaet, sondern die selbstandigkeit dieser Gesetze selbst. Hier legen wir zum Grunde, was wir gewiß wissen, namlich das nothwendige System aller Zwecke, denen alle andere als ihrer *conditio sine qua non* untergeordnet werden müssen...

“Dadurch wird Moraltheologie zugleich ontotheologie. Sie ist gleichwohl eine bloß practische und subiective Gewisheit, die sich auf einem interesse gründet, aber auf einem obiectiv nothwendigen und von dem Wesen der Vernunft unzertrennlichen, in keiner absicht untergeordneten interesse. Wäre moral nur ein pragmatisches System der Klugheit, so ware der Glaube an Gott bloß Hypothese; nun ist er ein Postulat.

“Die hochste Weisheit in der physicotheologie ist bloß relativ. und betrifft die Zulänglichkeit in Ansehung des Systems aller Zwecke; aber in der moraltheologie ist sie selbstandig der Qvell der Möglichkeit der Dinge selbst...

“Alle moralischen Eigenschaften Gottes sind hier nur obiectiv nach unsern Begriffen zu bestimmen, nicht subiectiv...”

³² Cf A632/B660, in 3:421.

³³ A632/B660, in 3:420. “...oder [die transscendentale Theologie] glaubt durch bloße Begriffe ohne Beihülfe der mindesten Erfahrung sein Dasein zu erkennen und wird Ontotheologie genannt.”

should apply not only to the Cartesian proof and the ontological proof (if one still distinguishes them), but *even to the moral proof as well*.

“Ontotheology,” for Kant, means theology through mere concepts, with no empirical admixture. Yet if the concept of God is, for Kantan “intellectual” (or rational) one - and it had been since at least the *Beweisgrund* - then properly speaking *only* an ontotheology (in his sense) could ever be theologically valid. With the moral proof, to be sure, that theology is practical: from the final end of the moral law we only find that we *presuppose* an existence, and we do not *prove* it. Yet it still does what it does by way of pure concepts, i.e. rational ideas. Even more, if an ontotheology can be legitimately grounded in practical reason, then one can even take the point beyond Kant’s word. (If the Cartesian proof and thus all speculative theology amounts only to a misreading of the grounds whereby we judge God’s existence, that implies that *there are still such grounds*.) A reformed ontological proof, for example, would also be a prime candidate for valid ontotheology, in that it too deals in mere ideas. That proof proceeds by beginning in its dealings from entities and then finding that, in its work, it has projected an advance understandability upon its field (and finding that that unity itself presupposes a God). Since it never really ventures beyond that unity (as an idea), this proof is an ontotheology. And indeed, if so - if all we need is for a proof to draw upon a priori conditions for the systematicity of science, bracketing the empirical content of that science - then even the contingency and physicotheological proofs would qualify. That is, if the critical rehabilitation of all the other old proofs in the previous Chapter had the consequence of giving them a certain *practical a priority*, then they, too, must now be “ontotheological” in Kant’s sense.

But the Cartesian proof does not relate itself to practical dealings in the same way. To be sure, something like the Cartesian proof has always been at the core of these other proofs, as the critical Kant reads them - it has shown itself to be, so to speak, the *form* of speculative theology as such. If we were to “retrograde” this proof, then, we could not get any rehabilitated Cartesian proof, for there would be no ends for which we would be presupposing anything (a practical postulation must specify a *content* for the “need,” and the Cartesian proof is characterized precisely by its lack of content; an empty and formal need “in general” hardly makes sense). To retrograde this proof and reread it with a newly critical eye would only give us the “form” of all these other proofs.

But such a “form” would not be nothing. If what it outlines is nothing less than the event of the practical presupposition of God as such, what we are left with is in fact rational faith itself, that which all of the other critical proofs embody. The Cartesian proof “retrograded” *just is* rational faith as a formal structure. This is, in a sense, a promotion: once a mere joke, this proof is now tantamount to “the waymarker or compass” for reason overall.³⁴

Yet the same simultaneous humbling and promotion also applies to metaphysics overall. The *Critique* famously begins with the scandalous failure of the reign of metaphysics as “queen of all sciences,”³⁵ necessitating a critique of pure reason as the tribunal concerning the rights of any such queen. By the end of the “Canon” and certainly after the second *Critique* she has been, in a certain sense, completely secured in her power and genealogy, in that *practical* reason turns out to “grant the very thing it completely and utterly refuses us in view of the speculative.”³⁶ The

³⁴ Cf 8:142. Iris Murdoch, perhaps from sheer genius, already noted a deep connection between the Cartesian proof (which she attributes to Anselm) and Kant’s ethics, albeit without apparently being aware of the particulars I try to point out. See *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 391-442.

³⁵ Cf Avii ff in 4:7ff.

³⁶ A804/B832, in 3:522.

only price is that theoretical reason has been shorn of any supersensible “sight” not first given to it by practical reason, and left only to do the work of caretaking for whatever the will drops off for it.³⁷ Metaphysics, in terms of the supersensible, thus turns out to be practical through and through, to the point that factors like the existence of God even become *constitutive* (not just regulative) for moral willing as such:

Here [supersensible objects] become immanent and constitutive, in that they are grounds for the possibility of making actual the necessary object of pure practical reason (the highest good) - there, without this [status], they are transcendent and merely regulative principles of speculative reason, which do not enjoin [reason] to assume a new object over and above experience, rather only [enjoin] their use in experience to approach perfection.³⁸

³⁷ This, it seems to me, is the proper basis for the “primacy” of practical reason, what Kant expressly argues for in a few dense passages at 5:119-121. On this topic more generally see again Gardner’s “The Primacy of Practical Reason,” an excellent exploration of the problem that concludes in frank bafflement. I suspect Gardner may have found more satisfying answers to his questions if he had further explored the topic of *faith*, as it seems to me that disaster is certain if one does not follow Kant in treating the suppositions of faith as radically *use-oriented*. Native to talking about practical cognition as we do, at a theoretical level, is an almost ineradicable tendency to read it as if it were still itself something quasi-theoretical. And if one reads faith in this way, then what Kant seems to write in these sections is either that practical reason simply invents fictions for itself or, against everything else Kant says, that it must have some kind of distinctive, magical intuition of supersensible objects - i.e., it is again either presumption (reckoning at best) or knowledge, and in either case must be rooted back in theory. The complaints of Wizenmann, Schelling, and others on this topic all seem to me rooted in this same tendency. But the whole point is that rational faith *cannot be taken* as an intuiting or inventing at all, it skips over “realisms” and “fictionalisms”: instead it *uses* the supersensible for its ends without asking epistemic questions (which it cannot do), so that any subsequent theoretical postulation is only a kind of shadow cast by this use. There is no wishful invention or magical kind of vision here (even if often one cannot help but speak that way), just a grander version of what many of us already do in assuming electricity (without having the vaguest notion of it) whenever we use our toaster.

³⁸ 5:135. “Hier werden sie immanent und constitutiv, indem sie Gründe der Möglichkeit sind, das nothwendige Object der reinen praktischen Vernunft (das höchste Gut) wirklich zu machen, da sie ohne dies transcendent und bloß regulative Principien der speculativen Vernunft sind, die ihr nicht ein neues Object über die Erfahrung hinaus anzunehmen, sondern nur ihren Gebrauch in der Erfahrung der Vollständigkeit zu nähern auferlegen.” One may compare this to Kant’s remarks towards the end of the third *Critique*, speaking of how to treat analogical language about God’s wisdom: “But when it comes to the practical, so such a regulative principle (for the prudence or wisdom [of the highest entity]) is: that, to act according to what, as a purpose, can only be thought as possible by us in a certain way following the character of our cognitive capacity, is equally constitutive, i.e. practically determining; meanwhile the very same [principle], as a principle to judge the objective possibility of things, is in no way theoretical-determining (namely that only kind of possibility which belongs to our capacity to think also belongs to the object), but is a merely regulative principle for reflective judgmental power.” [5:457-8: “Wenn es aber auf das Praktische ankommt, so ist ein solches regulatives Princip (für die Klugheit oder Weisheit): dem, was nach Beschaffenheit unserer Erkenntnißvermögen von uns auf gewisse Weise allein als möglich gedacht werden kann, als Zwecke gemäß zu handeln, zugleich constitutiv, d. i. praktisch bestimmend; indeß eben dasselbe als Princip die objective Möglichkeit der Dinge zu beurtheilen keinesweges theoretisch=bestimmend (daß nämlich auch dem Objecte die einzige Art der Möglichkeit zukomme, die unserm Vermögen zu denken zukommt), sondern ein bloß regulatives Princip für die reflectirende Urtheilskraft ist.”] The point being, if I understand, that practically constitutive principles are also regulative, while regulative principles for reflective judgment are not theoretically constitutive (objectively determinative).

But if the Cartesian proof and speculative theology rest on the error of mistaking the need for God for the perception of God - and more broadly, if the rulership of metaphysics is now to base its legitimacy upon the *practical needs* of reason rather than any innate theoretical concepts or supersensible intuitions - this is not yet to say that the notion of a “need of reason” is clear. Much to the contrary. If we have driven the problem of transcendental illusion at the bottom of the proofs back to that error - taking need for perception, and the object of faith for an object of knowledge - that still does not clarify how Mendelssohn (and others going at least back to Descartes) could have made such an error, what resemblance a “need” could ever have to seeing anything, and indeed what such “needs” really amount to.

C. The Felt Needs of Reason

The initial question of this project comes down to why it is that there is any rational theology (in the form of the theistic proofs) in the first place - put another way, it asks why there is any metaphysical *interest* in establishing God’s existence. That this question should hit upon the status of the *needs of reason* is thereby no accident, as “[a]ll interest presupposes a need, or produces one.”³⁹ No finite entity, not even reason, can stand on its own: “Now indeed it is true of each created entity; desire for something here always presupposes a need, whereby I seek it. But why and whence does that come? Just because no creature is all-sufficient, but each one always and ever needs much.”⁴⁰ Since the theme of “being in need”⁴¹ has been in the discussion since

³⁹ From the Third *Critique*, at 5:210. “Alles Interesse setzt Bedürfnis voraus, oder bringt eines hervor...”

⁴⁰ From the *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, 28:1062. “Dies findet nun zwar bei einem jeden erschaffenen Wesen statt; hier setzt Begierde nach Etwas immer ein Bedürfnis voraus, warum ich es begehre. Aber

Descartes, it is perhaps no surprise that human reason itself - as any created thing - might have “needs” at the basis of its various projects, and that we might discover such needs behind the proofs.

But to sharpen the point, it is not only that *we* are using this question of rational need to understand the history of rational theology. Indeed, the discovery that reason’s neediness lies at the ground of all metaphysical interest also allows Kant himself to reread the entire history of philosophy through it. Although the notion of “rational need” is only first discussed in detail in the “Orientation” essay, the very first appearance of a strong statement on “felt needs of reason” in the critical texts (so far as I have found) is in fact a *historical* comment. Kant finds a flawed but genuine predecessor for himself in Plato of all figures:

Plato marked very well that our cognitive power feels a far higher need than to merely spell out appearances according to synthetic unity so as to be able to read them as experience, and that our reason in a natural way soars towards cognitions which go much wider than any object at all which experience can give, [so that no such object] can ever coincide with them - but which nevertheless have their reality and are in no way mere weavings of the brain.⁴²

Kant characteristically “cannot follow” Plato in his use of ideas in speculative cognition but still praises him for applying them “vorzüglich” to the practical,⁴³ to the point that one might read the entire critical metaphysics as an attempt “to further go after this thought, and (where the splendid

warum und woher kommt das? Eben weil kein Geschöpf all- genugsam ist, sondern ein jedes noch immer selbst viel bedarf.”

⁴¹ Cf Chapter IV.

⁴² A314/B370-1, in 3:246. “Plato bemerkte sehr wohl, daß unsere Erkenntnißkraft ein weit höheres Bedürfnis fühle, als bloß Erscheinungen nach synthetischer Einheit buchstabiren, um sie als Erfahrung lesen zu können, und daß unsere Vernunft natürlicher Weise sich zu Erkenntnissen aufschwinde, die viel weiter gehen, als daß irgend ein Gegenstand, den Erfahrung geben kann, jemals mit ihnen congruiren könne, die aber nichtsdestoweniger ihre Realität haben und keinesweges bloße Hirngespinnste sind.”

⁴³ A314/B371 “Plato fand seine Ideen vorzüglich in allem, was praktisch ist, d. i. auf Freiheit beruht...”; “Er dehnte seinen Begriff freilich auch auf speculative Erkenntnisse aus... Hierin kann ich ihm nun nicht folgen...”

man leaves us without help) to set it in light by new efforts.”⁴⁴ Kant thereby finds these “needs of reason” behind everything that metaphysics has ever claimed to see from the beginning.⁴⁵

Kant’s sense of “the needs of reason” is, on that account, absolutely central not only to his own project, but (if he is right) for understanding the entire history of metaphysics in general (including the theistic proofs). It is therefore somewhat frustrating for the reader to discover that Kant says almost nothing specific to the *internal details* of need, to the workings of the mechanism (so to speak), and focuses almost exclusively on how it functions within the broader picture. The best clue to how “need” works, I suggest, can be found in the nature of that metaphor itself, related as it is to Kant’s language concerning reason as an “organism.” Reason - as autonomous, as concerned always with itself - is preeminently *alive*, and to that extent has its own definite “will to power.”

The nature of that metaphor can be approached from the broader question of need’s relation to rational theology and to practical and theoretical interest. To recall, Kant had already made the point in the *Critique* that rational theology could get nowhere, and would not even start, were there no independent practical demand to decide in favor of God’s existence.⁴⁶ Even the appeal to an a priori Cartesian proof, he writes, is itself the result of a rational need wherein reason is “compelled” (gezwungen) to make a judgment:

It was something wholly unnatural and a mere novelty among the jokes of the schools to want to even pick out from a wholly voluntarily projected idea the existence of the object corresponding to it. In fact one would never have tried it in this way, had not the need of our reason - to assume

⁴⁴ Kant specifically says this of the project of the *Republic*, but the formulation applies more generally. A316/B372, in 3:247. “...diesem Gedanken mehr nachzugehen und ihn (wo der vortreffliche Mann uns ohne Hülfe läßt) durch neue Bemühungen in Licht zu stellen...”

⁴⁵ Thus if the present project turns upon using this concept of “need” to read the history of the proofs, it is therefore only repeating and expanding upon something Kant himself was already doing.

⁴⁶ Cf A587-9/B615-7, in 3:394-5.

something necessary for the existence of anything overall (by which one could put a standstill to the regress) - gone beforehand...⁴⁷

And the “Orientation” essay picks up on this same theme, making it clear that the basis of this obligation to choose, this drive to judge even and precisely where knowledge is not possible, is an unavoidable need of reason:

One can remain secured against all error if one does not so undertake to judge where one does not know as much as is required for a determinate judgment... But where it is not so voluntary whether one wills to judge determinately about something or not, where an actual need, and indeed such a one which hangs upon reason in itself, makes the judging necessary, and all the same a lack of knowledge limits us in regard to the items required for the judgment: there a maxim is necessary whereupon we render our judgment; for reason wants at some point to be satisfied.⁴⁸

What is crucial is that this need *is not accidental*, not a matter of our own personal inclinations, as “...in all cases where the need is based on inclination, [it] cannot even necessarily postulate the existence of its object for the one who is troubled by it, much less contain a requirement valid for everyone, and is hence a merely subjective ground of the wish.”⁴⁹ As the famous first line of the 1781 *Critique* insists, the need in question is a *necessary* one based in the character of human reason itself (“Human reason has the peculiar destiny in one genus of its cognitions: that it is

⁴⁷ A603/B631, in 3:403. “Es war etwas ganz Unnatürliches und eine bloße Neuerung des Schulwitzes, aus einer ganz willkürlich entworfenen Idee das Dasein des ihr entsprechenden Gegenstandes selbst ausklauben zu wollen. In der That würde man es nie auf diesem Wege versucht haben, wäre nicht das Bedürfniß unserer Vernunft, zur Existenz überhaupt irgend etwas Nothwendiges (bei dem man im Aufsteigen stehen bleiben könne) anzunehmen, vorhergegangen, und wäre nicht die Vernunft, da diese Nothwendigkeit unbedingt und a priori gewiß sein muß, gezwungen worden, einen Begriff zu suchen, der wo möglich einer solchen Forderung ein Genüge thäte und ein Dasein völlig a priori zu erkennen gäbe.”

⁴⁸ 8:136. “Man kann vor allem Irrthum gesichert bleiben, wenn man sich da nicht unterfängt zu urtheilen, wo man nicht so viel weiß, als zu einem bestimmenden Urtheile erforderlich ist. Aber wo es nicht so willkürlich ist, ob man über etwas bestimmt urtheilen wolle oder nicht, wo ein wirkliches Bedürfniß und wohl gar ein solches, welches der Vernunft an sich selbst anhängt, das Urtheilen nothwendig macht, und gleichwohl Mangel des Wissens in Ansehung der zum Urtheil erforderlichen Stücke uns einschränkt: da ist eine Maxime nöthig, wornach wir unser Urtheil fällen; denn die Vernunft will einmal befriedigt sein.”

⁴⁹ From the Second *Critique*, 5:144. “Ich gebe ihm hierin vollkommen Recht in allen Fällen, wo das Bedürfniß auf Neigung gegründet ist, die nicht einmal nothwendig für den, der damit angefochten ist, die Existenz ihres Objects postuliren kann, viel weniger eine für jedermann gültige Forderung enthält und daher ein bloß subjectiver Grund der Wünsche ist.”

disturbed by questions which it cannot refuse, for they are given out by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, for they rise above all capacity of human reason”).⁵⁰ And precisely because it is necessary, this need beyond the bounds of knowledge is at the same time the source of its own *right* (or *warrant*, as Kant says in the second Critique)⁵¹ to judge of what it cannot know for its own purposes. This is the case above all with the existence of God:

[Beyond having the concept] the right of the need of reason steps in, as a subjective ground for presupposing and accepting something which it may not claim itself to know by objective grounds; and consequently for orienting itself in thinking, in the space of the supersensible which is immeasurable and filled with turbid night for us, only by [reason's] own need...

[One particular case where one is forced to judge is] with the concept of a first ur-entity, as supreme intelligence and equally as the highest good. For it is not only that our reason already feels a need to lay the concept of the unlimited for the ground of the concepts of all that is limited, hence of all other things; this need thus also goes to the presupposition of its existence, without which [reason] can give no satisfactory ground for the contingency of the existence of things in the world, but least of all for the endfulness and order which one meets with everywhere in such admiration-worthy grades (in the small, because it is near to us, still more than the large). Without assuming an understanding author, no understandable ground thereof is giveable without falling into sheer inconsistencies; and although we likewise cannot prove the impossibility of such an endfulness without a first cause with understanding (for then we would have adequate objective grounds for this assertion, and would not need to appoint subjective [ones]): so yet in this lack of perception there remains a subjective ground which is enough for the assumption of the same therein, since reason needs it: to presuppose something which is understandable so as to explain this given phenomenon from it, since everything else with which it can connect any concept does not help this need.⁵²

⁵⁰ Avii, in 4:7. “Die menschliche Vernunft hat das besondere Schicksal in einer Gattung ihrer Erkenntnisse: daß sie durch Fragen belästigt wird, die sie nicht abweisen kann, denn sie sind ihr durch die Natur der Vernunft selbst aufgegeben, die sie aber auch nicht beantworten kann, denn sie übersteigen alles Vermögen der menschlichen Vernunft.”

⁵¹ Cf 5:4. “...Befugniß, ja subjective Nothwendigkeit (Bedürfniß der reinen Vernunft)...”

⁵² From the “Orientation” essay, 8:137-9. “Nun aber tritt das Recht des Bedürfnisses der Vernunft ein, als eines subjectiven Grundes etwas vorauszusetzen und anzunehmen, was sie durch objective Gründe zu wissen sich nicht anmaßen darf; und folglich sich im Denken, im Unermeßlichen und für uns mit dicker Nacht erfüllten Raume des Übersinnlichen, lediglich durch ihr eigenes Bedürfniß zu orientiren...

“Ganz anders ist es mit dem Begriffe von einem ersten Urwesen, als oberster Intelligenz und zugleich als dem höchsten Gute, bewandt. Denn nicht allein, daß unsere Vernunft schon ein Bedürfniß fühlt, den Begriff des Uneingeschränkten dem Begriffe alles Eingeschränkten, mithin aller anderen Dinge zum Grunde zu legen; so geht dieses Bedürfniß auch auf die Voraussetzung des Daseins desselben, ohne welche sie sich von der Zufälligkeit der Existenz der Dinge in der Welt, am wenigsten aber von der Zweckmäßigkeit und Ordnung, die man in so bewunderungswürdigem Grade (im Kleinen, weil es uns nahe ist, noch mehr wie im Großen) allenthalben antrifft, gar keinen befriedigenden Grund angeben kann. Ohne einen verständigen Urheber anzunehmen, läßt sich, ohne in lauter Ungereimtheiten zu verfallen, wenigstens kein verständlicher Grund davon angeben; und ob wir gleich die Unmöglichkeit einer solchen Zweckmäßigkeit ohne eine erste verständige Ursache nicht beweisen können (denn alsdann hätten wir hinreichende objective Gründe dieser Behauptung und bedürften es nicht, uns auf den subjectiven

In this passage (which also includes the footnote about the “Cartesian proof” discussed at the beginning of this section) Kant alludes to every single proof he has ever discussed, and in the process unites them all as responses to a rational need. The proofs render manifest something “understandable” which “explains” any given phenomenon. In Heideggerian terms, they give that which grounds entities in their particular mode of being.

In this essay, to be sure, Kant still makes his usual distinction in rational needs between the theoretical and practical (“But one can view the need of reason as twofold: firstly in its theoretical [use], second in its practical use”),⁵³ but ultimately it is only the practical need which is marked as totally “unconditioned.” In the case of practical reason, “we are compelled to presuppose the existence of God not merely if we wish to judge, but because we must judge”⁵⁴ - and this, because the realization of the highest good (an objective duty) *needs* the existence of God as a condition.⁵⁵ In the Second *Critique* Kant is explicit about this:

[These] postulates concern only the physical or metaphysical conditions, in a word, [those] lying in the nature of things, of the possibility of the highest good... for a practically necessary end of pure rational will - which does not here choose, but rather obeys an irreducible rational command which has its ground objectively in the character of things such as they must be generally judged by pure reason... This is thus a need in an utterly necessary intent, and justifies its presupposition not merely as a permissible hypothesis, but as a postulate in practical intent...⁵⁶

zu berufen): so bleibt bei diesem Mangel der Einsicht doch ein genugsamer subjectiver Grund der Annehmung derselben darin, da die Vernunft es bedarf: etwas, was ihr verständlich ist, voraus zu setzen, um diese gegebene Erscheinung daraus zu erklären, da alles, womit sie sonst nur einen Begriff verbinden kann, diesem Bedürfnisse nicht abhilft.”

⁵³ 8:139. “Man kann aber das Bedürfnis der Vernunft als zwiefach ansehen: erstlich in ihrem theoretischen, zweitens in ihrem praktischen Gebrauch.”

⁵⁴ 8:139. “Weit wichtiger ist das Bedürfnis der Vernunft in ihrem praktischen Gebrauche, weil es unbedingt ist, und wir die Existenz Gottes voraus zu setzen nicht bloß alsdann genöthigt werden, wenn wir urtheilen wollen, sondern weil wir urtheilen müssen.”

⁵⁵ See Chapter V.

⁵⁶ 5:143. “Nun betreffen obige Postulate nur die physische oder metaphysische, mit einem Worte in der Natur der Dinge liegende Bedingungen der Möglichkeit des höchsten Guts, aber nicht zum Behuf einer beliebigen speculativen Absicht, sondern eines praktisch nothwendigen Zwecks des reinen Vernunftwillens, der hier nicht wählt, sondern einem unnachlässlichen Vernunftgebote gehorcht, welches seinen Grund objectiv in der Beschaffenheit der Dinge hat, so wie sie durch reine Vernunft allgemein beurtheilt werden müssen, und gründet sich nicht etwa auf Neigung, die zum Behuf dessen, was wir aus bloß subjectiven Gründen wünschen, sofort die Mittel

[A] need of pure practical reason is grounded in a duty to make something (the highest good) into the object of my will, so as to advance it according to all of my powers; whereby I must, however, presuppose the possibility of the same, hence also the conditions for it, namely God, freedom, and immortality, for I cannot prove these through my speculative reason, albeit I also cannot refute them.⁵⁷

This is to say, faith - which has been so crucial for us in the last two Chapters - does not come first. To be sure, faith only manifests in a practical structure - in my willing something - so that it can never be entirely self-standing. But even granted that, rational faith is ultimately only the *response* which rational need first called for:

[T]hus the principle which determines our judgment [concerning God's existence] is indeed subjective, as a need - it is also equally, however, as the means for advancing that which is objective (practically) necessary, the ground of a maxim of holding-for-true in moral intent, i.e. a pure practical rational faith.⁵⁸

This goes even for *moral* faith, the holding-for-true most proper to practical reason.

Yet as we saw previously, if it is only the need of reason in its practical use which is unconditionally decisive, that does not necessarily exclude the theoretical altogether. Kant indeed says that “one sees well that [theoretical need] is only conditional, i.e. we must accept the existence of God if we wish to judge concerning the first causes of everything contingent, principally in the order of ends actually laid out in the world,”⁵⁹ i.e. that we are not *directly*

dazu als möglich, oder den Gegenstand wohl gar als wirklich anzunehmen keinesweges berechtigt ist. Also ist dieses ein Bedürfnis in schlechterdings nothwendiger Absicht und rechtfertigt seine Voraussetzung nicht bloß als erlaubte Hypothese, sondern als Postulat in praktischer Absicht...”

⁵⁷ 5:142. “Dagegen ist ein Bedürfnis der reinen praktischen Vernunft auf einer Pflicht gegründet, etwas (das höchste Gut) zum Gegenstande meines Willens zu machen, um es nach allen meinen Kräften zu befördern; wobei ich aber die Möglichkeit desselben, mithin auch die Bedingungen dazu, nämlich Gott, Freiheit und Unsterblichkeit, voraussetzen muß, weil ich diese durch meine speculative Vernunft nicht beweisen, obgleich auch nicht widerlegen kann.”

⁵⁸ 5:146. “[S]o ist das Princip, was unser Urtheil hierin bestimmt, zwar subjectiv als Bedürfnis, aber auch zugleich als Beförderungsmittel dessen, was objectiv (praktisch) nothwendig ist, der Grund einer Maxime des Fürwahrhaltens in moralischer Absicht, d. i. ein reiner praktischer Vernunftglaube.”

⁵⁹ 8:139. “Das erste Bedürfnis habe ich eben angeführt; aber man sieht wohl, daß es nur bedingt sei, d. i. wir müssen die Existenz Gottes annehmen, wenn wir über die ersten Ursachen alles Zufälligen vornehmlich in der Ordnung der wirklich in der Welt gelegten Zwecke urtheilen wollen.” Also cf 5:142, where Kant even speaks of theoretical need in terms of mere “hypotheses” as opposed to “postulates.”

compelled to practice the theoretical scientific work whereby we need to presuppose the existence of a first cause or divine author.⁶⁰ It is certainly true that theoretical/speculative reason cannot become quite so decisive in its judgments without an appeal to moral needs, but Chapter V of this study has shown that practical “wisdom” itself has a deep interest in theory. Crucial to willing the highest good, as Kant insists over and over, is that it be *realizable* - it must never be a “mere ideal” (“ein bloßes Ideal”). The practical postulates guarantee this possibility at a (so to speak) practical-metaphysical level, but its *realizability for us* is a question of the development of our rational powers to the point where we can use them as a means to change the world. And, as I showed, the distinctive practice of theory - science - is central to this: “[S]cience (critically sought and methodically initiated) is the narrow gate which leads to the doctrine of wisdom,”⁶¹ and “[T]he way to wisdom, if it shall be secure and not impassable or misleading, must for us humans inevitably go through science...”⁶² It is not only that the theoretical needs of reason, by way of wisdom and a holistic rational teleology, is in *harmony* with morality, although that is in

⁶⁰ The materials of doctrinal faith are thus never completely stable, at least on their own, as Kant expresses in one of the most memorable passages in the *Critique*: “Unconditioned necessity, which we so indispensably need as the last bearer of all things, is the true abyss for human reason... One cannot fend off the thought, but one also cannot bear it, that an entity, which we ourselves represent as the highest among all possible [entities], as it were says to itself: “I am from eternity to eternity, except for me nothing is except that which is something merely by my will: but whence am I, then?” Here everything sinks beneath us, and the greatest perfection, just like the least, wavers without a posture merely before speculative reason, which is cost nothing [der es nichts kostet], which lets one just as the other disappear without the slightest hindrance.” [A613/B641, in 3:409. “Die unbedingte Nothwendigkeit, die wir als den letzten Träger aller Dinge so unentbehrlich bedürfen, ist der wahre Abgrund für die menschliche Vernunft... Man kann sich des Gedanken nicht erwehren, man kann ihn aber auch nicht ertragen, daß ein Wesen, welches wir uns auch als das höchste unter allen möglichen vorstellen, gleichsam zu sich selbst sage: Ich bin von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit, außer mir ist nichts ohne das, was bloß durch meinen Willen etwas ist; aber woher bin ich denn? Hier sinkt alles unter uns, und die größte Vollkommenheit, wie die kleinste schwebt ohne Haltung bloß vor der speculativen Vernunft, der es nichts kostet, die eine so wie die andere ohne die mindeste Hinderniß verschwinden zu lassen.”]

⁶¹ From the Second *Critique*, 5:163. “...Wissenschaft (kritisch gesucht und methodisch eingeleitet) ist die enge Pforte, die zur Weisheitslehre führt...”

⁶² 5:141.

fact the case.⁶³ More than that, the full development of science - the activity through which the theoretical needs of reason manifest - is, along with the realization of the rest of human reason's potential, the pragmatic condition (the means) for the realization of practical reason's final end. Theoretical needs, are thereby *indirectly* practical needs, just as theory can be indirectly (teleologically) moral. The advancement of a final moral end requires a burgeoning, ever-deepening victory of human theoretico-technical power over the natural world; as Kant writes in an aside, "...the inevitable need of human reason [is] to find full satisfaction only in a full systematic unity of its cognitions."⁶⁴

And with that question of "full systematic unity" we arrive at the final and perhaps most decisive clue for the phrase "need of reason," namely the nature of the metaphor itself.

In some regard, the language of "need" might initially seem downright inappropriate. Particularly in the "Orientation" essay Kant continually affirms that reason's needs are something *felt* (gefühl), given as a feeling (Gefühl). But, as he also insists, "Reason does not feel."⁶⁵ If reason is, in the language of the Third *Critique*, the "Begehrungsvermögen," the

⁶³ E.g., 5:146. "[Pure practical rational faith is] a freely-willed determination of our judgment, conducive to moral (commanded) intention, yet moreover concordant with the theoretical need of reason to accept that existence [of God] and lay it as a ground for the further use of reason..." ["Dieser ist also nicht geboten, sondern als freiwillige, zur moralischen (gebotenen) Absicht zuträgliche, überdem noch mit dem theoretischen Bedürfnisse der Vernunft einstimmige Bestimmung unseres Urtheils, jene Existenz anzunehmen und dem Vernunftgebrauch ferner zum Grunde zu legen, selbst aus der moralischen Gesinnung entsprungen..."]

⁶⁴ 5:91. "...welches das unvermeidliche Bedürfnis der menschlichen Vernunft ist, die nur in einer vollständig systematischen Einheit ihrer Erkenntnisse völlige Zufriedenheit findet."

⁶⁵ From 8:139-40. Kant tries to further explain himself in this same footnote, but thereby opens up a batch of new questions: "...it sees its lack and, through the cognitive drive, exerts [wirkt] the feeling of need. It is proficient hereby just as with the moral feeling, which causes no moral law, for this springs wholly out of reason; rather it is caused or exerted by the moral laws, hence by reason, since the active yet free will needs determinate grounds." Which implies that the feelings of rational need and *respect* (the moral feeling) somehow run parallel to one another. I can find no other texts discussing this relationship. ["Die Vernunft fühlt nicht; sie sieht ihren Mangel ein und wirkt durch den Erkenntnißtrieb das Gefühl des Bedürfnisses. Es ist hiemit, wie mit dem moralischen Gefühl bewandt, welches kein moralisches Gesetz verursacht, denn dieses entspringt gänzlich aus der Vernunft; sondern durch moralische Gesetze, mithin durch die Vernunft verursacht oder gewirkt wird, indem der rege und doch freie Wille bestimmter Gründe bedarf."]

capacity for desiring - it is only for a “desiring” which goes beyond all nature and breaks off from sensible inclinations. It cannot have “feelings” in that usual sense, hence it properly speaking cannot have “needs.”

Yet this is the phrase Kant uses, and this phrase along with a whole nest of other such analogies associated with it have been there since the First *Critique*, above all in the metaphor of reason as organism.⁶⁶ It is not only that Kant cannot do without such analogies,⁶⁷ but that taking reason to be a kind of living organism with an insatiable hunger for completion and generality is perhaps the best way of understanding it: “The whole [of reason] is thus articulated (*articulatio*) and not piled up (*coacervatio*); it can indeed grow internally (*per intussusceptionem*), but not externally (*per appositionem*) - like an animal body, whose growth adds no member, but without change of proportion makes each [member] stronger and more competent for its ends.”⁶⁸ Even without external inclinations or additions, reason itself is *alive* in its own unique sense. It has the possibility of, and indeed an incessant drive towards, *growth*, i.e. towards the development of its powers. In the “General History in Cosmopolitan Intent” Kant writes:

All natural assets of a creature are determined to unwind themselves completely and endfully... An organ which is not to be used, an ordering which does not reach its end, is a contradiction in the teleological doctrine of nature. For if we depart from this principle, so we no more have a lawful nature but a nature end-lessly at play, and the comfortless More Or Less steps into the place of the guidance of reason.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Cf Bxxiii, Bxxxvii-viii, and A832-3/B860-1.

⁶⁷ For a technical discussion of Kant’s analogies, I point the reader to Kleingeld’s excellent “The Conative Character of Reason in Kant’s Philosophy.”

⁶⁸ A833/B802, in 3:539. “Das Ganze ist also gegliedert (*articulatio*) und nicht gehäuft (*coacervatio*); es kann zwar innerlich (*per intussusceptionem*), aber nicht äußerlich (*per appositionem*) wachsen, wie ein thierischer Körper, dessen Wachsthum kein Glied hinzusetzt, sondern ohne Veränderung der Proportion ein jedes zu seinen Zwecken stärker und tüchtiger macht.”

⁶⁹ 8:18. “Alle Naturanlagen eines Geschöpfes sind bestimmt, sich einmal vollständig und zweckmäßig auszuwickeln... Ein Organ, das nicht gebraucht werden soll, eine Anordnung, die ihren Zweck nicht erreicht, ist ein Widerspruch in der teleologischen Naturlehre. Denn wenn wir von jenem Grundsatz abgehen, so haben wir nicht mehr eine gesetzmäßige, sondern eine zwecklos spielende Natur; und das trostlose Ungefähr tritt an die Stelle des Leitfadens der Vernunft.”

Reason, as the most preeminent of living creatures, must also “unwind” itself towards greater and greater power or contradict its own guidance. A century later Nietzsche would, in his own way, repeat the same point (“[O]ne must want to have more than one has in order to *become* more.’ For this is the doctrine preached by life itself to all that has life: the morality of development. To have and to want to have more - *growth*, in one word - that is life itself.”)⁷⁰ - although this is not to say that Kantian reason is thereby Nietzschean.⁷¹

But if the needs of reason, as practical either directly or indirectly, are grounded in the fact that reason is a living organism of sorts, this in turn provides the clue for how the tradition of rational theology was ever able to mistake “Bedürfnis” for “Einsicht.” No one could seriously mistake need for perception unless need were itself a kind of seeing, a kind of “intuiting” in the very broadest sense. A fragment dated to the mid-’60s, one appearing in the middle of a discussion of the principle of sufficient reason, provides an early expression of the interrelatedness of these terms: “If we want to posit [setzen] something through reason, then we need a ground. I.e., positing [setzung] *a priori* is through a ground, it must then be intuition.”⁷² Even this early, the kind of “intuiting” which reason must use to posit anything is directly related to our need of a ground, albeit without the young Kant yet going so far as to reduce the ground

⁷⁰ 125 (1885) from *The Will to Power*, 77.

⁷¹ Nietzsche insists that all ends, and especially all moralities, be subordinated to the willing itself (life): “All ‘purposes,’ ‘aims,’ ‘meaning’ are only modes of expression and metamorphoses of one will that is inherent in all events: the will to power. To have purposes, aims, intentions, willing in general, is the same thing as willing to be stronger, willing to grow - and, in addition, willing the means to do this. The most universal and basic instinct in all doing and willing has for precisely this reason remained the least known and most hidden, because *in praxi* we always follow its commandments, because we *are* this commandment - All valuations are only consequences and narrow perspectives in the service of this one will: valuation itself is only this will to power.” (675 (Nov. 1887-March 1888), from *The Will to Power*, 356.) For Kant, by contrast, the “life” that characterizes *reason* is Nietzsche upside down: it is only because reason has a final end, and one which is *moral*, that it thereby wills and guides the growth of its own powers. Despite the disagreement, however, Nietzsche was thus mistaken to see Kant’s thought as opposed to “life”; it is rather that for Kant the organism which “cognizes no limits to its projects” can only be that which submits itself to its own practical autonomy, and thereby its own practical needs.

⁷² 18:256. “(Wenn wir etwas durch die Vernunft setzen wollen, so bedürfen wir einen Grund. D.i. die setzung a priori ist durch einen Grund, es müste denn Anschauung seyn.)”

into the need. (By the critical period it is *only* the need of reason which can give reason its object, and thereby allow it to see.) But to explore the thought a bit, in zoological phenomena there is an evident parallel between need and sight. For living organisms, “need” is always *transitive*: it is never just a blind feeling but a need *for something*, whether something general or quite specific - for any food at all, or for *this piece* of food. More than that, it is precisely the need which *gives* the thing needed for the organism to look upon it (*intueri, anschauen*) *as* the thing it is, either in bodily presence or in conspicuous absence. The food, e.g., does not manifest *as* food until seen with needy eyes. Reason does not need food or anything else of the sort, to be sure: it rather needs unity, systematicity, and the conditions for the realization of its ends. But in much the same way it remains need that guides reason’s sight. It is thus uniquely in his analogy of reason as a needy organism that Kant comes closest to Spinoza’s position that striving, wanting, appetite, and desire are “nothing other than the very essence of the human being.” For Spinoza it is a kind of essential neediness which makes the encounter of anything else possible. One sees things, and judges them, first and only *because* one wants them or because they have some relation to need: “[W]e strive for, want, have appetite for, and desire nothing because we judge it to be good, to the contrary, we therefore judge anything to be good because we strive for, want, have appetite for, and desire it.”⁷³ Except that from a Kantian point of view, the “striving to persevere in its being” which is identical to the “actual essence” of an entity (its total

⁷³ EIII P9S, in *Opera Omnia* II 148: “Hic conatus cum ad mentem solam refertur, voluntas appellatur sed cum ad mentem et corpus simul refertur, vocatur appetitus, qui proinde nihil aliud est quam ipsa hominis essentia ex cujus natura ea quæ ipsius conservationi inserviunt, necessario sequuntur atque adeo homo ad eadem agendum determinatus est... Constat itaque ex his omnibus nihil nos conari, velle, appetere neque cupere quia id bonum esse judicamus sed contra nos propterea aliquid bonum esse judicare quia id conamur, volumus, appetimus atque cupimus.”

desire and need)⁷⁴ applies particularly to the very highest human capacity, the organism of reason.

II. The Theory and Practice of Rational Theology

In saying the above I only draw a few conclusions from a few facts - that existentiality (modality) relates “only to the value of the copula in relation to thinking overall” (not to the determinations of a thing’s concept), that nevertheless God is “necessary” for our purposes, that it is possible to mistake an ultimately practical need of reason for the theoretical perception of an object, that this is precisely what the Cartesian proof (and speculative theology) really consists in. In doing so I have stood right at the edge of Kant’s own views and perhaps even toed past them, albeit hopefully not in a way inconsistent with those views. In particular, if one takes Kant’s doctrine of the needs of reason as the basis for rational faith seriously, then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that such “felt needs” - far from being mere affected distortions of reason’s otherwise clear sight (as perhaps Wizenmann would have read them) - are precisely the way in which reason sees. The will, insofar as it is insatiably needy, has a vision of its own sort totally distinct from theoretical cognition. Needs, in themselves, are not distortions, albeit they can give rise to the illusion whereby one mistakes such needs for properly theoretical intuitions or experiences (“freie Einsicht”). But that is also to say, even the most grotesque misuse of theoretical argumentation (in support of God’s existence, say) is never just an accident. There is

⁷⁴ Cf EIII P6-7, in *Opera Omnia* II 147.

always something *beneath* it which gives it life and purpose, in the best case what Kant calls “rational faith” and then, ultimately, a rational need.

But rational faith - and this will be my closing argument - is, thought through to the end, precisely what Heidegger suggests with “ontotheology,” and vice versa. The two are, if not one and the same, mutually intertwined. And that means to say that the ontotheology discussed in Chapter I, properly understood, is *practical*: it relates to our conduct first, only indirectly to our knowledge of what is. On the other side, rational faith, even and precisely when it provides us the conditions for the achievement of our essential ends, does so by projecting a systematic unity upon entities; that is to say, it also secures a certain understanding of being via the presupposition of God. I will call the fusion of these two concepts by the term *practical ontotheology*. And if it is such a practical ontotheology which underlies classical rational theology and the proofs for the existence of God, then it is no wonder that it survives all attempts at theoretical disqualification - indeed, by Heidegger’s lights it should be all the more powerful the more it remains hidden and unspoken. If the proofs and (even more) the *ways of life* they carried with them still remain with us today, it is perhaps because we ourselves remain still “metaphysical” in both Kant’s and Heidegger’s sense, with all the needs that entails.

A. “...a certain ancient opinion...”

In the discussions above we critically *reversed* the old Cartesian proof, or (to use a different metaphor) removed the surface argumentation to go back to its original soil of rational need. The strange argument that the necessary entity necessarily exists then properly turned out

to be the rational necessity that the entity which secures the ends of our conduct must be presupposed. We thereby found the general “form” of undifferentiated rational faith. But if the Cartesian proof (and indeed all of speculative theology) can be “reversed” this way, then one should likewise be able to “reverse” the entire historical problematic of rational theology.

In one sense this is nothing new. In the first Chapter I already attempted to make the case that Descartes’ use of the proofs can and should be read as a kind of “crab canon,” with the text requiring the reader to read it backwards as much as forwards - read the proofs as *beginning* with God as a “suspicion” as much as ending with God as an existence. At that moment the “retrogression” of the proofs was limited only to Descartes, and pointed out only as a way of resolving an apparent contradiction.

Yet the nature of that contradiction - namely, how it should be possible that ontotheology (the reliance of a secure understanding of being upon a θεῶν) remains compatible with the project of the proofs (to use the secure understanding of being to prove God’s existence) without contradiction or circularity - is now newly relevant. Kant’s doctrine of rational faith and the needs of reason underlying it, indeed his entire treatment of rational theology, now lets us understand that strange second level of the *Meditations*. At the time we had no way to interpret the articulation between the proofs and their retrograde, “ontotheological” reading beyond merely pointing out that the two were not in contradiction; now, however, if the whole of speculative theology really amounts to mistaking need for perception (deploying theoretical claims to *knowledge* as a cover for practical *rational neediness*), then we can reread the two levels at work in the theology of Descartes (the proofs and the ontotheology) under that same distinction between theory and practice. What we should see, if we reexamine the theoretical

exterior of the *Meditations*' theistic proofs with a Kantian eye, is a progression of *practical* presuppositions, so that the explicit proofs will have their basis in rational faith. The "retrograde" reading should turn out to be *more fundamental* than the first.

But that also suggests precisely the fusion of Kant and Heidegger that I mentioned above. The "retrograde" reading of Descartes was originally deployed in order to see if one could read the *Meditations* as ontotheological, as deploying a $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ in order to secure a certain understanding of being and a certain sphere of entities. If that same level of reading, after the intervening Chapters, can now also be read as the one concerning practical presuppositions, then Kant and Heidegger suddenly coincide. This will supply the basis for further explorations in the next section.

For now let us return to Descartes, to the same texts as in the first Chapter. To recall, the *Meditations*' very first statement concerning God reads:

But yet a certain ancient opinion is fixed in my mind that there is a God who can do anything, and by whom I exist just in this way, and am created. But whence do I know that that [God] did not make it so that there is just no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no figure, no magnitude, no place, and yet that all of these would look to me to exist no differently than now? Even more... may I thus be mistaken as often as I likewise add two and three, or count the sides of a square, or something else even easier, if that can be devised?⁷⁵

This theoretical *suspicion* of God, as I put it in Chapter I, is enough for Descartes to reach the heart of his hyperbolic doubt. A paragraph later, of course, Descartes presents the theological case of a nonexistent God, and after that the case of the omnipotent evil genius - but all of these present much the same problems, so that they have largely the same initial function in the argument. (Indeed, all possible theological situations point to the *same* ontotheological relationship between God - or evil genius, or weakened cause - and being, as if the *role* being

⁷⁵ AT VII 21.

played, even if disastrously, somehow precedes any one theoretical determination of the divine.) These possibilities, as a generalized suspicion, already establish the two crucial Cartesian ontotheologies (thinking and causality) by placing all the relevant entities and their being into the sphere of divine control; all that remains is for them to be secured and made certain through God's existence and truthfulness.

Is it possible to thematize this initial ontotheology as *practical* presupposition? Put another way, are there practical assumptions made in the text which remain steady and could somehow be related back to the theoretical concerns? In fact Descartes himself, precisely at the moment when he insists he must go so far as to even "deceive himself," states exactly this kind of practical exemption: "And indeed I know that nothing of danger or error will follow [from this] in the meantime, and I cannot indulge too equitably [my] distrust, since *I am pressing on matters not of acting, but only of inquiring* [my emphasis]." ⁷⁶ This line in fact splits the entire discourse of the *Meditations*. Descartes begins, of course, with the "weight of prejudices" and many "crooked habits" alongside the all-important ancient opinion above, namely his assumption of an ontotheology. But if they all "distort" the judgments he makes in perceiving things and need to be corrected by the self-deception of the evil genius at a *theoretical* level, at this moment Descartes says that at a *practical* level those same prejudices and habits - which are originally based in that level of "acting" - are to be left untouched. He does not question his conduct, only his *theory*.

⁷⁶ AT VII 22. "Quapropter, ut opinor, non male agam, si, voluntate plane in contrarium versâ, me ipsum fallam, illasque aliquandiu omnino falsas imaginariasque esse fingam, donec tandem, velut aequatis utrimque praejudiciorum ponderibus, nulla amplius prava consuetudo iudicium meum a rectâ rerum perceptione detorqueat. Etenim scio nihil inde periculi vel erroris interim sequuturum, & me plus aequo diffidentiae indulgere non posse, quandoquidem nunc non rebus agendis, sed cognoscendis tantùm incumbo."

To be sure, this is precisely the distinction that saves his theoretical project from the commonsensical objections of a Reid or a Hume: even if the meditator has “released [their] mind from all cares and procured for [themselves] some secure free time”⁷⁷ they still have to eat, breathe, stoke their fireplace, pace their room, write their notes in good Latin, etc., and they do not - even *cannot* - doubt any of this. But if this *activity* goes totally unquestioned by Descartes (even if, at a theoretical level, the influence of its habits must be fought to the death), by broadly Kantian lights the same goes for the *conditions presupposed* in this activity. If Descartes has convincingly suggested that an omnipotent “something” holds sway over earth, sky, mathematics, etc., precisely in setting aside “res agendae” as inviolable he at the same time must *presuppose in advance* the right God, a God which would guarantee the certainty of that food, that air, that fire, that floor, and that language, at least in practical intent. What Kant calls the “minimum of theology,”⁷⁸ namely granting at least the *possibility* of the right sort of God, is granted by Descartes throughout “Meditation I,” and perhaps even exceeded by his exemption for acting. Put more strongly, if at the theoretical level Descartes wavers between an omnipotent entity who is “summe bonus” or not (or who systematically deceives, or who doesn’t exist) and only begins to resolve this in “Meditation III,” in practical regard Descartes must always act *as if* the ideal theological situation is already certain. The theoretical demonstrations basically only reconfirm what his “acting” presupposed.

But this same point - that a practical presupposition of the right sort of God, i.e. a *practical ontotheology*, actually underlies the explicit work of theoretical demonstration - also resolves a serious problem later in the *Meditations*. Pascal’s famous dismissal of the proofs on

⁷⁷ AT VII 17-18: “Opportune igitur hodie mentem curis [18] omnibus exsolvi, securum mihi otium procuravi...”

⁷⁸ Cf my discussions of atheism in Chapter V.

the grounds of of *memory* - “The metaphysical proofs of God are so distant from the reasonings of men and so involved that they barely hit - and when they would serve some, they would serve only for the instant that they see this demonstration, but an hour later they fear to have been tricked”⁷⁹ - while obviously curt, in fact has some support in Descartes himself. Towards the end of “Meditation V” the meditator admits:

...because I am yet also of a nature that I cannot fix [my] mind's gaze always to the same thing so that it be perceived clearly, and often the memory of a judgment made previously recurs when I am no longer attending to the reasons why I judged it so, other reasons can be brought to me which, if I were ignorant of God, might easily overthrow [my] opinion, and so I would have true, certain knowledge [scientia] of nothing, ever, but only wandering, changeable opinions.⁸⁰

Just as Pascal says, the demonstrations serve well *while we are gazing at them*, and then immediately waver when we look elsewhere. This is a fundamental problem, going back at least to “Meditation II” and the performative nature of the “I exist”:⁸¹ the truth of any rational conclusions (including from clear and distinct perceptions, and presumably even from the natural light) are unstable beyond the moment of attention to them. So long as I keep the entire chain of argument in mind I can, e.g., be certain of the properties of the triangle and validly draw conclusions about anything else further removed (since I have proved that God exists, etc.). But if I am not *presently attending* to such perceptions, if I merely rely on my *remembering* having made those arguments, those memories do not provide the same mark of certainty and the results I wish to draw fall out of reach. At the extreme, there seems to be no reason why even the

⁷⁹ *Pensées* S222/L190, at 129. “Les preuves de Dieu métaphysiques sont si éloignées du raisonnement des hommes et si impliquées, qu'elles frappent peu et quand cela servirait à quelques-uns, cela ne servirait que pendant l'instant qu'ils voient cette démonstration, mais une heure après ils craignent de s'être trompés.”

⁸⁰ AT VII 69. “...quia tamen ejus etiam sum naturae ut non possim obtutum mentis in eandem rem semper defigere ad illam clare percipiendam, recurratque saepe memoria judicii ante facti, cum non amplius attendo ad rationes propter quas tale quid judicavi, rationes aliae afferri possunt quae me, si Deum ignorarem, facile ab opinione dejicerent, atque ita de nullâ unquam re veram & certam scientiam, sed vagas tantum & mutabiles opiniones, haberem.” Also cf the related discussion in Replies II at VII 140-1.

⁸¹ Cf Marion's *Descartes' Metaphysical Prism*, 169-205.

theistic proofs themselves should not be subject to this same limitation. Even so, in the very next paragraph Descartes writes:

In truth since I have perceived that God is, and likewise because I have understood that all other [things] depend on him, and that he is not deceitful; and thence I have gathered that all those [things] which I clearly and distinctly perceive are true by necessity; [therefore] even if I might no longer attend to the reasons why I have judged that such is true, if I would only so much as remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it, no contrary reason can be brought up that might impel me to doubt, rather I have true, certain knowledge of this.⁸²

The conclusion - because I *have* secured (perfect tense) rational theology in the past, so I now *keep* the knowledge (present tense) of everything thereby gained - is not only challenged by Pascal's observation but is also evidently question-begging in itself. Descartes mentions nothing that would mark the memory of a theistic proof as somehow less exposed to doubt than any other memory; while he further explains in the Second Replies that "they who have known God... understand that it is not possible that the faculty of understanding which was given by him tends not towards truth,"⁸³ this too cannot supply the missing premise. This is, importantly, not an issue with the *theoretical validity* of Descartes' proofs, but with their continued *applicability* beyond that immediate theoretical situation. It is a problem of *extending* the proofs into practical life, whence it is not accidental that these passages arrive at the point of transition into the "Sixth Meditation."

On the other hand, in such practical life the mere memory of theoretical certainty is fully compatible with, and may even further buttress, a practical certainty which is already unavoidable, and vice versa; indeed, the fact that there is nothing else to support this memory's

⁸² AT VII 70. "Postquam verò percepi Deum esse, quia simul etiam intellexi caetera omnia ab eo pendere, illumque non esse fallacem; atque inde collegi illa omnia, quae clare & distincte percipio, necessariò esse vera; etiamsi non attendam amplius ad rationes propter quas istud verum esse judicavi, modo tantùm recorder me clare & distincte perspexisse, nulla ratio contraria afferri potest, quae me ad dubitandum impellat, sed veram & certam de hoc habeo scientiam."

⁸³ AT VII 146. "...iis qui Deum sic norunt ut intelligant fieri non posse quin facultas intelligendi ab eo ipsis data tendat in verum..."

validity, i.e. nothing else to save us from never being able to escape from the theoretical situation, is itself further evidence of a kind of hidden practical priority even in the later *Meditations*. Such a marriage (of a theoretical memory with a practical presupposition) will still never reach total epistemic certainty, to be sure - but in fact Descartes already admits in the very last lines of the *Meditations* that the realm of practical life can never hope to reach this: “But because the necessity of things to be done does not always grant [us] a moment of accurate examination, it should be admitted that human life is often liable to errors concerning particular things, and the weakness of our nature is to be acknowledged.”⁸⁴ Full theoretical certainty, that is to say, has to be left within the first five “Meditations,” as the “res agendae” require a certain roughness of approach not characteristic of theory proper. The final outcome of the *Meditations* cannot, and is not intended to be, theoretical truth, but the *memory* of such truth; yet even such a memory would presumably only be a wavering ghost, were it not harmonized with the practical faith in God (implied by “matters of action”) which was never really challenged.

I admit to some qualifications regarding rereading Descartes in this way. It is true that in its specifics Descartes’ ontotheology seems to stretch into sensibility moreso than Kant’s: transcendental idealism (the divide between sensible and supersensible cognitions) implies that ontic doubts about floors and fireplaces are to be resolved at the empirical level, not by appeal to the divine.⁸⁵ And yet as discussed in Chapter V, Kant seems to think that the application and even the formation of empirical concepts (and thereby experience overall) ultimately depends upon the presupposition of systematic unity (and thereby a highest entity). A synthesis of the

⁸⁴ AT VII 90. Sed quia rerum agendarum necessitas non semper tam accurati examinis moram concedit, fatendum est humanam vitam circa res particulares saepe erroribus esse obnoxiam, & naturae nostrae infirmitas est agnoscenda.

⁸⁵ But see A651-4/B679-2 in 3:432-3, and my comments in Chapter V.

manifold does not necessarily imply earth, sky, etc., insofar as those remain more exacting empirical concepts. More than that, of course, Kant has at least two additional ontotheologies to worry about (the order of nature, morality) which Descartes does not seriously consider. All of this poses interesting issues, yet I beg the reader's leave not to further consider them (my point is only that Kant gives us a way to interpret the articulation between the theistic proofs and their ontotheology, and thereby a way to understand the proofs more generally).

I must also admit that it is only due to Descartes' extraordinary (if perhaps unintended) honesty that we find this structure of practical ontotheology written into the margins of the *Meditations*, and that this is by no means duplicated in Spinoza or Leibniz or Durham. After Descartes the fundamental issue of the *articulation* between theoretical judgments and practical assumptions basically disappears until at least the *Critique*, with the evident exceptions of Pascal and perhaps Hume. But the fact that these difficult questions (of presupposed practical habits or opinions, of how the proofs sustain themselves after their initial theoretical success...) are no longer approached in the lines of the theorizing is not to say that such problems, and even rational faith itself, are not present in these other works, even present in a preeminent way - if only by their being manifestly avoided.

B. Ontotheology in Practice

It is in rereading the retrograde level at work in the *Meditations*, then, that Kant and Heidegger evidently collide, so that I can argue that Kant's efforts in rational theology can help us to better interpret what Heidegger saw in his own notion of "ontotheology" - this, in two

ways. First, I will suggest that Heidegger's "understanding of being" and the odd "forgetfulness" associated with it can better be read as broadly practical, as its own structure within conduct. Second, ontotheology can then be read directly in terms of the faith structure. In brief, Kant and Heidegger can not only be translated into one another, but even made to dovetail - and this argument will constitute my last substantive point. If the proofs are, so to speak, the explicit theoretical manifestations of ontotheologies structured in terms of faith, then in a certain sense the temptation towards making such proofs cannot ever be removed so long as we remain "rational" in the mode of our present tradition. But that does not mean there is no hope, or that our only way to "deal" with the proofs (as such theoretical arguments) is to somehow wholly convert ourselves to another mode of life. More modestly we may still, so to speak, staple these discussions and their conclusions among the various structures of the proofs as a critical example, serving as warning and clarification for future generations.

Ontotheology - the way that the totality of entities (or at least a general region of entities) and the being of those entities is understood and secured by way of a master entity, a θεῖον - has now been with us since the first Chapter. The proofs, with the exception of the Cartesian (which has now analyzed out as the mere form of the others), have already shown themselves to be bound up with this notion in a complex way. But that does not mean that the *sense* of ontotheology has really been brought to light, by us or even by Heidegger. When Heidegger writes that "it still remains unthought by what unity ontologic and theologic belong together,"⁸⁶ this is also to admit that he himself cannot say exactly what this unity is or even why it is unthought. He had noticed ontotheology at work in the history of philosophy (metaphysics) since

⁸⁶ *Identity and Difference* 60.

the 1920s,⁸⁷ but without ever thereby giving a full account of *why* philosophy had taken that form, or even why it had tended to go unquestioned ever since.

More than that: it has always been something of a mystery ever since *Being and Time* why the “question of being,” and even the very understanding of being in which we always necessarily dwell, have been “forgotten” at all (the very first premise of the book). Very roughly put, for Heidegger all explicit discussion of being itself - which includes discussion about the fundamentals of metaphysics (not what its details are, but why it ended up that way) - seems to have a tendency to efface and disqualify itself, and he is never quite able to explain why. True enough, Heidegger later speaks of a “withdrawing” of being itself away from unconcealment, and in the much later *Time and Being* even tries to read this withdrawal according to the logic of *giving* (being itself, in giving entityness and time, conceals itself as giver)⁸⁸ - but even by his own intentions, to say *only* this is a dangerous and dubious procedure which surely tempts the reader to think of “being itself” as some kind of hidden and superlative benefactor entity (the very last thing Heidegger could want). A better route, I suggest, can be found through Kant, for since the proofs have turned out to be bound up *both* with rational faith *and* with ontotheology the two concepts should be mutually clarifying.

What is in some regards strange about rational faith is that it took so long for someone to even *formulate* it, and that even today it is not a major topic of philosophical discussion. It must be recalled, as Kant insists over and over, that explicit theoretical work always stands upon the demand to justify, to find evidence, to demonstrate, to give reasons. Theory will always *try* to do this even when the demonstrations are faulty and the reasons questionable. Thus, as I mentioned

⁸⁷ See Chapter I.

⁸⁸ Cf *On Time and Being*, 16ff.

in Chapter V, there is something “wavering” in the interactions between theory and faith. When a mere practical presupposition is raised up to an explicit theoretical level - as a *postulate* - it has nothing to defend itself beyond (at most) showing that it cannot be refuted, and critically arguing that we cannot avoid it. Yet such a defense, at a theoretical level, will never seem completely convincing: it will always seem to prove nothing and lead to no (theoretical) conviction. When what is important is the proofs’ *theoretical* power, the question of practical presuppositions thereby tends to be buried as a curious historical footnote.

But that does not mean something like rational faith is not present. The demands (to prove, demonstrate, etc.) that the theoretical situation places on a conversation tend, in a perverse way, to *bury* the very reasons why any debate on the proofs happens in the first place. I surely need not argue at length that our presuppositions, sometimes being quite basic moral or scientific or epistemic reasons (or, far more dubiously, more specifically apologetical ones), in fact tend to be *that for the sake of which* any proof gets made. Yet those reasons cannot really appear on a theoretical stage even if they answer to the “needs of human reason”; they must be, so to speak, dressed up in the garb of a demonstrative argument, even a totally specious one. This is presumably why the history of philosophy has never much taken Kant’s *moral* proof in particular very seriously. Even moreso than his (original) ontological proof (which has always seen its share of followers in one form or other, and which has now even gained a prominence in the literature), historically the Kantian moral proof has never really found a secure place in rational theology, nor in present philosophy of religion’s discussions of the proofs as a whole.⁸⁹ In spite

⁸⁹ To qualify myself, this is surely not true of Kant’s rough contemporaries. And past Fichte’s generation, to be sure, one will find moral proofs, but they tend to be *theoretically posed* - as in the famous opening chapters of *Mere Christianity*, for example. These proofs proceed from the givenness of moral laws or moral awareness or some such towards the knowledge (or at least the probability) of God’s existence in more traditional theoretical fashion. And such proofs, which (so to speak) re-dogmatize a mode of argument which in Kant only ever had its form within a

of Kant's viewing it as the crowning achievement and even final basis of all rational theology, in spite of his explaining it to a degree which the other rehabilitated proofs never received, it has perhaps always seemed slightly bizarre to most everyone else. It remains a "proof" for God's existence that does not terminate in *knowledge* (or even *theoretical probability*) of that existence. This oddity makes it relatively useless to the typical proponents of such proofs and relatively innocuous to their enemies.⁹⁰

This suggests that, from a Kantian point of view, even if the entire roster of writers for an age were converted to his position this would not remove the original source of the temptation towards speculative proofs. On the one hand our practice seems to demand certain presuppositions which we cannot prove, while on the other the rules of theoretical discourse seem to demand that we objectively justify and secure whatever we make a claim to; "Human

faith structure, have often had some appeal - but my point seems to hold good for what Kant actually intended. I cannot be exhaustive, but to point out a few examples, Flew's classic *God and Philosophy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), intended as a quick but full examination of all evidence for belief in God, has an entire chapter on moral justification that dispenses with Kant's proof in less than a page crammed in at the end; Swinburne's *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) has a few pages on moral arguments, but in the theoretical mode and with Kant's again being sidelined; Plantinga, so far as I have read, never discusses Kant's moral proof at all, although he surely must have been aware of it through the work of writers such as Robert Adams and John Hare. The moral proof proper, to the extent that it gets seriously considered at all, only seems to receive such consideration from writers highly familiar with Kant such as Beiser, Chignell, and again and most prominently, Adams and Hare (both of whom openly confess a debt to Allen Wood's efforts in the '70s). One wonders whether the proof would have been completely forgotten were it not attached to a particularly famous thinker.

⁹⁰ One could object, of course, that there is another reason, which is that taking Kant's strongest views of rational theology seriously would have been *hard*. Doing so would have turned philosophers back to the question of rational need, and so to the question of why they themselves have any need to prove God's existence (or dispute such proofs) in the first place. They would have been forced to grant that the proofs are tied up from the beginning with the question of why we need such a God, and thus to give up on direct debates concerning their "validity," etc.. And this would have required far more than (as Kant once wrote) "the agility of spirit, more particular to the years of youth, to readily alter old, accustomed ways of thinking according to the transformations of the state of the sciences," which is still perhaps too much to ask of less than two and a half centuries. It would have required that philosophers give up on the idea that arguments and demonstrations (in the usual sense), our bread and butter, can have much of serious value to say in rational theology, especially compared to the analysis of what we ourselves do and what that conduct presupposes. All this may be true enough, but I take the first reason - namely, that theoretical discourse demands proofs - as more fundamental. [Quote from the "Orientation" essay, 8:140. "...die den Jugendjahren mehr eigene Gewandtheit des Geistes, alte, gewohnte Denkungsart nach Veränderung des Zustandes der Wissenschaften leicht umzuändern..."]

reason has the special fate in one genus of its cognition that it is assaulted by questions which it cannot dismiss, for they are assigned to it by the nature of reason itself, but which it cannot answer either, for they surmount all capacities of human reason.” These twin compulsions, to do justice to the needs of reason but also to settle such questions theoretically, will always create an environment which is bound to produce such proofs for God’s existence from time to time (so long as they maintain their force). Need, once translated to the theoretical level, will always give the illusion of being a starting point for knowledge, and theological assumptions will always be ready to armor themselves in demonstrations. Rational faith, when it migrates into theoretical discussion as a postulate, appears basically indefensible, unnecessary, and even inexplicable, so that in a curious way it ends up forgotten.

Yet this same difficulty is also much how Heidegger describes *the understanding of being* in the very first pages of *Being and Time*:

[W]e always already make our way in an understanding of being. We do not *know* what “being” says. But already when we ask, “what is ‘being’?,” we hold ourselves in an understanding of the “is,” without being able to conceptually fix what that “is” means. We do not even know the horizon from which we should catch and fix the sense. *This average and vague understanding of being is a fact.*

This understanding of being may yet wobble and blur, and make its way close to the limit of a mere cognition of the word - [but] this indefiniteness of the understanding of being, ever already available, is itself a positive phenomenon, which needs clarification.⁹¹

[The everyday use of ‘being’] makes it manifest that a riddle lies a priori in each comportment towards, or being towards, entities as entities. That we ever already live in an understanding of

⁹¹ *Sein und Zeit* 5-6. “...wir bewegen uns immer schon in einem Seinsverständnis... Wir wissen nicht, was »Sein« besagt. Aber schon wenn wir fragen: »was ist ›Sein‹?« halten wir uns in einem Verständnis des »ist«, ohne daß wir begrifflich fixieren könnten, was das »ist« bedeutet. Wir kennen nicht einmal den Horizont, aus dem her wir den Sinn fassen und fixieren sollten. Dieses durchschnittliche und vage Seinsverständnis ist ein Faktum. Dieses Seinsverständnis mag noch so sehr schwanken und verschwimmen und sich hart an der Grenze einer bloßen Wortkenntnis bewegen – diese Unbestimmtheit des je schon verfügbaren Seinsverständnisses ist selbst ein positives Phänomen, das der Aufklärung bedarf.”

being, and that the sense of being is all the same shrouded in darkness, proves the fundamental necessity to repeat the question of the sense of “being.”⁹²

Which at least suggests some interest to a comparison. If “being” tends to be forgotten, here and even more strikingly in later texts, could that be because it too concerns practical interest somehow?

There are various ways in which Dasein can “forget itself” and forget the being-question, some better explained than others, “fallenness” being the most prominent.⁹³ Far more difficult to make sense of in the context of *Being and Time* is the tendency towards converting everything into something *instantiate* (“vorhanden”) - existent or quasi-existent in the old-fashioned sense. Consideration of this mode of being, as Heidegger says, *overlooks* other modes in favor of questions of whether, how, and what the entity is. Yet as he suggests in the painfully underwritten §69.b:

In order that the thematization of the instantiate, the scientific projection of nature, become possible, *Dasein must transcend* the thematized entity... But if the thematization of the innerworldly instantiate [entity] is an envelope [Umschlag] of circumspectly discovering concern, then a transcendence of Dasein must already underlie the “practical” being-alongside handy [entities].⁹⁴

Viewing entities as instantiate is a way to “package” those entities: it does not *negate* its other modes of being (a hammer is still a hammer even when we weigh and measure it). One can indeed read a hammer as merely a thing with properties, and perhaps even (as I.3 suggests as a

⁹² *ibid* 4. “Sie macht offenbar, daß in jedem Verhalten und Sein zu Seiendem als Seiendem a priori ein Rätsel liegt. Daß wir je schon in einem Seinsverständnis leben und der Sinn von Sein zugleich in Dunkel gehüllt ist, beweist die grundsätzliche Notwendigkeit, die Frage nach dem Sinn von »Sein« zu wiederholen.”

⁹³ The fact that Dasein is fascinated with the world, that it falls into it in its everyday dealings, is not only nothing inherently bad, but the *reversal* of that fallenness is ultimately what leads to “properness” (“Eigentlichkeit”) - to Dasein’s turning towards itself and its own being. Cf *Sein und Zeit* §38.

⁹⁴ *Sein und Zeit* 363-4. “Damit die Thematisierung des Vorhandenen, der wissenschaftliche Entwurf der Natur, möglich wird, muß das Dasein das thematisierte Seiende transzendieren. Die Transzendenz besteht nicht in der Objektivierung, sondern diese setzt jene voraus. Wenn aber die Thematisierung des innerweltlich Vorhandenen ein Umschlag des umsichtig entdeckenden Besorgens ist, dann muß schon dem »praktischen« Sein beim Zuhandenen eine Transzendenz des Daseins zugrundeliegen.”

way to integrate Heidegger's point back into first-order logic) as one with something like value-properties to express its status as a "Zeug."⁹⁵ But even that "way out" does not get past Heidegger's more basic point: the very possibility of discovering the hammer as a mere instantiate thing presupposes an understanding of the hammer as something *handy* (zuhanden), thus in turn an understanding of the world and its worldhood, of being as such, and of Dasein. Instantiateness is ontologically founded upon more basic modes of being towards entities, being, and the world, but in such a way that it *covers over* those modes. Even the very first discussion of Dasein after the "Introduction" amounts to a sharp distinction between mere instantiateness and the being of that entity whose being is ever mine, and a disqualification of those approaches (philosophical, anthropological, psychological...) which have misunderstood that very distinction⁹⁶ - which is to say, within the tradition *even Dasein* has often had its kind of being overlooked in favor of instantiateness. And this tendency to collapse all being into one level, even if the tendency's real roots are never explored in the published Divisions, is said again and again to be particularly characteristic of *theorizing*⁹⁷ (even if the instantiate indeed occasionally comes to the fore in everyday dealings).

Given the consequences of theorizing's tendencies, then, even just in the context of *Being and Time* we have plenty of resources with which to sideline Heidegger's later explanations (being's autonomous choice to sneak away in the night, as it were, as source of forgetfulness) in favor of a simpler account, albeit one itself not totally explained. The theoretical attitude, that discourse we take up in order to know and say and debate about what there is, not only demands proofs, evidence, etc. (as in Kant), but also tends to reduce all questions of being to those of

⁹⁵ See *Sein und Zeit* §21.

⁹⁶ See *Sein und Zeit* especially at 41-2, but also the rest of the first chapter.

⁹⁷ See *Sein und Zeit* §13.

quantification and properties (instantiateness). “Being,” and with it “ontotheology,” may well then remain unthought because the theoretical attitude is not well-suited for thinking it.

That, in turn, opens up a quite new possibility, albeit one which might have rubbed Heidegger himself the wrong way. If it is true that “in all knowing and claiming, in all conduct towards entities, in all self-conduct towards my own self, ‘being’ is used,”⁹⁸ and being and our relation towards it nevertheless remains in theoretical obscurity, then an obvious reason would be that Heidegger’s “understanding of being,” in all its variations, is fundamentally *practical*. *Seinsverständnis* is first rooted in a *conduct*, indeed the conduct towards entities. As Kant has suggested, the empirical use of the understanding cannot function without reason treating the field of experience *as if* it had systematic unity, by, so to speak, projecting an indeterminate regulative principle behind it.⁹⁹ The “understanding of being” could, in each case, function as something like that mode of projection. If the question of being is first of all about *practice* - or rather, about the structures accompanying practice - and if theory characteristically tends to efface all distinctively practical modes of “seeing,” this would go a good ways towards better solving Heidegger’s puzzle about our forgetfulness thereof.¹⁰⁰

And finally, if the above rereading of the understanding of being were accepted, one could use that practical problematic to reinterpret the question of ontotheology, i.e. of the “unity of ontologic and theologic.” If any understanding of being is rooted in basic and unavoidable

⁹⁸ *Sein und Zeit* 4.

⁹⁹ This is, of course, quite vague, but it is not my place here to work out such details exhaustively.

¹⁰⁰ Heidegger may surely object that the theory/practice distinction is itself a product of metaphysics in the bad sense - I could well agree with him, while still pointing out that such a Kantian reading of his problem suits it quite well. And even the original opposition in Aristotle, based in the duality of σοφία and φρόνησις, does not line up with our own gross “theory versus practice” distinction: θεωρεῖν and πράξις are both ἐνέργεια, both ways of being-at-work with their own distinct ends, both in a sense meaningless without the other. Heidegger, of course, would have been well aware of this; cf *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, esp. chapters 5, 7-8, and 11-13, and X.7-8, as well as discussions of these texts in *Plato’s Sophist*, especially §8-9 and §18-25.

conduct towards entities, then “ontotheology” - that “continuous playing back and forth between the theological question of the ground of entities as a whole and the ontological question of the essence of entities as such”¹⁰¹ - would amount to the presupposition of a certain divinity in tandem with the being of the entities, which then secure and make comprehensible the conduct. This is, indeed, exactly analogous to how Kant describes rational faith. The two notions, rational faith and ontotheology, would then turn out to dovetail. Kant’s practical philosophy and Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics would, as strange as it may sound, each complete the other.

I have previously hinted at this thought, where it surely provoked a justifiable kneejerk on behalf of the attentive reader. If there are structural similarities, they may point out, still ontotheology is an *ontological* concept (having to do with the understanding of the being of entities) while rational faith is a practical and ultimately *moral* concept (aiming at the realizability of certain practical ends). Certainly, but I don’t need to confuse the two in order to show that they imply one another, at least for the purposes of “metaphysics.”

Can rational faith be taken as ontological? Kant’s formulation in the “Orientation” essay is that Vernunftglaube is the hypothetical holding-for-true of a condition (here a divine existence) that makes reaching a necessary end, ultimately the highest moral end, realizable. But as I argued earlier, “end” is as much an ontological concept as a moral one - “the highest good,” in its leading sense means the systematic whole of ends-in-themselves.¹⁰² Something’s being an end thus means it is *understandable* according to that mode of being, just as much as it is the “ought” of an actual or possible act of volition. But this goes as much for limited, merely hypothetical ends (e.g., the ends of science) as much as for moral ends-in-themselves. If one

¹⁰¹ Schelling’s *Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* 66.

¹⁰² See the comments on the highest good in Chapter V.

reads the conclusions of the “Dialectic” seriously,¹⁰³ the entities thematic in scientific investigation (as the main example) just *do not make sense* as the entities they are without the presupposition of a systematic unity organizing our experience. In order to act towards any end and thereby (either directly or indirectly) find relation to the final ends of morality, one has to *understand* such entities as the entities that they are. Yet the unities involved - moral or not - themselves “give” a master entity, a θεῖον. Rational faith implies ontotheology.

The reverse trick would seem to be far more difficult in Heidegger, since - as noticed by many canny readers¹⁰⁴ - the descriptions and structures in *Being and Time* seem to undermine traditional ethical problematics. Yet this is not wholly true. Although this is not the place to discuss his early readings of Aristotle in detail, notions of ἀγαθόν and τέλος are in fact crucial for the early Heidegger - to the point that the understanding of being always already implies a relation to ends. Heidegger insists on the fundamental role of τέλειον (endedness) in *Nicomachean Ethics* I for determining what kind of ἐνέργεια (being-at-work) can be the highest ἀγαθόν (good) for human beings, and insists that it is an *ontological* notion: “Presumably, τέλειον is not an entity, or a piece of being, whose end it constitutes. Rather, τέλειον is a *way of being*, a *mode of being* itself.” And, in mapping out *Metaphysics* V at 1021b:

The character of τέλειον as that beyond which there is nothing else there... A beyond-which nothing that, as a definite being-possibility of an entity, determines it genuinely in its being; the beyond-which-nothing in the sense that, for a being, there is no further being-possibility beyond the τέλος, that an entity has come to its end with regard to its being-possibilities.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Cf my discussion of the unities of science at the end of Chapter V.

¹⁰⁴ I mention Iris Murdoch in particular. See “*Sein und Zeit: The Pursuit of Being*” in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, 97: “Heidegger [in the connection between truth and Stimmung] notices, and at once abandons, an idea of immense importance, that of the moral content of cognition and the ubiquity of evaluation... The implication of his lack of interest is that at an ‘everyday’ level, proximally and for the most part, human life has no built-in moral aspect. In his system, moral insight or inspiration is a later, or farther, or special, or specialized, narrowly defined, achievement.” Or, in a pithy side comment: “[M]ost existentialist thinking seems to me either optimistic romancing or else something positively Luciferian. (Possibly Heidegger is Lucifer in person.)” From *The Sovereignty of Good*, 70.

¹⁰⁵ From *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, p.61 and 59. But see the entire discussion in §10-12.

Following this is one of the earliest discussions of *death* (as the farthest possibility of Dasein) in Heidegger's corpus, as well as - still more intriguingly - the acknowledgement that *this reading of Aristotle connects the latter directly to Kant* (in that human being is determined in terms of being an end in itself, *τέλος δι' αὐτό*, for both).¹⁰⁶ Without much making a point of it, the third chapter of *Being and Time* (if not much of the rest) merely translates and expands upon Heidegger's 1924 commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics* I, and it includes the structure of goods (ends) in themselves in relation to goods (ends) for the sake of other goods - only without using those terms. Even world and worldhood themselves, understood from that earlier context, always involve relations to ends (goods). Being-in-the-world, properly understood by Heidegger's own history, thus amounts to an *ethical* notion as much as an ontological one.¹⁰⁷ To be sure, there are other entities beyond myself which also have the character of Dasein and other entities in the world beyond mere "gear" (*Zeug*) - Heidegger elsewhere mentions animals, mathematical objects, mere things, and works of art for a start. But when the early texts and the tacit connections to Aristotle (and to Kant) are taken seriously, what they show is that for Heidegger a certain sort of *τέλος*, having a definitive *limit*, is constitutive for the being of all manner of entities. Differences in modes of being, that is to say, can be understood as differences in *τέλος* (making it clear that the famous chapter on death is at the same moment a chapter exploring the "de-finition" of Dasein's being). The understanding of being is thus, in just the same way, an understanding of *endedness*. And this is not only a formal point, either: in spite of the lack of explicit ethical language, throughout *Being and Time* Heidegger sees me as encountering entities

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 65: "[Aristotle's] determination... is echoed in the Kantian definition of the human being: the rational essence exists as an *end in itself*."

¹⁰⁷ See especially *Sein und Zeit* 84-6, on worldhood and the for-the-sake-of-which.

(including myself) through my *conduct*, i.e. through decision, caring-about, caring-for others, and so on. Even mere instantiateness - being-quantified and having properties, the being characteristic of entities looked at under the pure theoretical gaze - is merely derivative of more practically-related modes of being, is something we tend to see *by way of* our conduct. The understanding of being, “metaphysical” or otherwise, thus turns out to require certain practical projects and the availability of ends.

For Heidegger himself, of course, just that would be sufficient. But *metaphysics* characteristically requires an additional step, namely that the understanding of being be rendered secure and certain - characteristically by way of a highest entity. Metaphysics, of course, will also still tend to want to put certain modes of being ahead of others, but assuming Heidegger thinks his analysis in *Being and Time* should apply to the whole tradition (rather than its just being his own innovation), the point that directed practical conduct is essential for the understanding of being should still hold. The understanding of being, however it may be worked out concretely, is an understanding of being that underlies entities according to their ends; it is, if one likes, “teleological.” And in metaphysics - as an ontotheology - it implies rational faith.

To be sure, the two concepts of Heideggerian ontotheology and Kantian rational faith come from entirely different sets of concerns, and I do not dispute that. But even beyond my direct comparative work above, the fact that both apply so well as analytical tools to the questions of the proofs suggests a deep kinship. If I am right in my reading of Kant, i.e. that the problematic driving the proofs is precisely the structures of rational faith lying underneath them, then the most useful result of this analysis will be the development of a novel heuristic tool for “taking off” the surface theory of rational theology. My suggestion is that anytime and anywhere

one sees structures analogous to classical rational theology, a practical ontotheology will be found underneath: the supposed explicandum will turn out to be something we practically presuppose in advance for the sake of the comprehensibility of a totality, and for the sake of one's ends within it (the explicans), and this as something we *need*. This is evidently true most of all with the proofs themselves, but perhaps not exclusively so.¹⁰⁸ Such a "need" may not be for an end as grandiose as the highest good, but (to step beyond Kant) that may not collapse it into mere inclination. If there are wider intersubjective needs as well, needs of collective ways of life, they may demand satisfaction in their own way and thereby exemplify their own practical ontotheology - which may be diagnosed in analogous fashion.

C. Us

If my reading of Kant is correct and the proofs properly manifest from an intersection of rational faith combined with theoretical reason's concern for certainty, then we can confidently predict that humanity will persist in proving the existence of God over and over until the end of days so long as we are touched by the needs of reason and the demands of theory. This, presumably to the point that even books like this, books which try to overturn the table upon which the game of the proofs has long been played, cannot stop it, and are perhaps even doomed to seem perverse to their intended reader.

¹⁰⁸ This is not to say the reverse, namely that any practical ontotheology of this kind will always and inevitably produce proofs of a highest entity. (They may still produce at least a *temptation* towards justifying them at a theoretical level, and perhaps still even have a whiff of rational theology about them, even if the arguments that result are more subtle.) But my main concern here is to make a case for how one should read the overt theistic proofs of the tradition (assuming they are not made hypothetically or, as Kant would say, from inclination).

Be that as it may, that reader may have noticed that for this entire study I have not talked that much about *us*. There is a certain sense in which I myself am not central to this story, and neither are you: we do not play the role of any θεῖον, and in the drive towards the highest good we are cannon fodder at best. Yet it is precisely *we* who do the work of proving God's existence. In the simple Heideggerian ontotheological scheme - being securing entities while a θεῖον secures being - there is evidently little place for any little I. But Heidegger himself hints at something more complex, first in the almost totally undeveloped 1931 phrase "onto-theo-ego-logical"¹⁰⁹ and then more helpfully in a later note:

This inquiry 'into' being is made directly by and for an entity (by man) in such a way that this entity too is established in advance as 'what this entity is' and 'in that this entity is', and this again only on the basis of the experience of entities as what is present and constant. The questioner of the question of being is also the one who responds to this question. Responding in this context means: representing the ἀρχή of entities [*i.e. the θεῖον*]... and *producing* the ἀρχή representationally, so that with the help of asserting the response entities may explicitly reside and be constant in the presence of the constancy of ἀρχή itself, that is, entities may *be*.¹¹⁰

The questioner - I myself - responds to the question of being by representationally setting forth a θεῖον, and with the manifestation of that master entity all other entities are able to come into their mode of being. So far as I know Heidegger says nothing more along these lines, but in any case his language of representing and producing is surely far too brutal. I will instead speak of the I's ontotheological role as *licensure*, leaning on the sense of the Latin root (licet: "it is allowed...", "it is right..."). The I is not God, not a θεῖον, cannot found an ontology nor even bring about the final ends of reason. But the I *licenses* the θεῖον; the I *allows* it do its work.

Thus the strange role of the I in modern metaphysics is that I am *in control* of ontotheology even when, and perhaps even because, I am *not* the highest entity. To some extent

¹⁰⁹ *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, 126: "The question of being as a whole is onto-theo-ego-logical."

¹¹⁰ *Mindfulness* 298.

and within certain limits we may *choose* whatever ontology we prefer to emphasize and “ontotheologize” - and beyond that, we may even choose whatever “highest entity” we prefer (assuming it is not any of us). *We*, we mere human beings, cannot play the role of a θεῖον, cannot secure the being of entities by themselves; even in the extreme cases we still have to go through the “subject” or perhaps “total science.” Yet it is *our needs* driving the ontotheological structure, so that we still remain the key to the affair. Those rational needs are the source of this strange power to “licence” the divine. It is we who allow the θεῖον to do its work - our needs and (to a limited extent) even our tastes determine the role it plays.

But if the specifics of the ontology and the θεῖον are up to us, in another sense *it does not matter* who or what the θεῖον is: we merely hire someone to do an ontological job, so that the details of that contractor and why we chose them is less important than the metaphysical work they do. Any practical ontotheology can be made to fit just about any choice of θεῖον - a Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or any sort of God one wishes, science, life, the “spirit,” the transcendental subject, nature, “reality,” the market, the state, power, etc.. The *role* is more important than the actor, certainly moreso than the actor’s history. Thus it is not quite correct, e.g., to read metaphysics as “objectifying” God in the strict sense: an incomprehensible God, e.g., of Abrahamic orthodoxy, is just as fitted for the job of ontotheology as a God who can be known and calculated in advance. Instead of “objectification,” the question should rather be whether merely *playing this role* - as our needs demand that we licence some entity to do - distorts or even degrades the entity chosen for it. Licensure requires that the highest entity meet our needs rather than the other way around.

Classical rational theology thus gets itself upside down even when it conceives itself merely as the science of what we can all “agree on” with regard to the divine, not even yet as the science of the theistic proofs. Rightly understood, any ontotheology would go *atop* of, not underneath, our specific doctrines and practices. As licensors we do not start with a first cause, divine architect, etc. and then add specifics - we *reinterpret* the traditions we already have to fit with our metaphysical needs. In this way, however, rational theology - conceived as a science of whatever can be universally agreed upon regarding the divine - is still perfectly right in another sense. The role of θεῖον can indeed be fitted to any “divinity” one may choose, for the right price. It is up to us to make the decisions about whether and how to pay it.

In any case, then, the historical analysis of the metaphysical proofs for God’s existence - and with them, rational theology after Descartes - is complete within its own bounds. And rightly understood, then, it turns out that it was really an analysis of *us*, we who inherit that tradition. What has been gained thereby?

To be clear, if the term “proofs for the existence of God” merely pointed to the naked, unmotivated query about whether we have any evidence for the existence(s) of a kind of entity superior to us, then assuming there has ever been such a query it would not be questionable in principle. Nor would it be questionable as a kind of rational hermeneutical corrective of a tradition’s own concepts from within that tradition itself (as in Anselm). It might be questionable in its own way as an *apologetical* project - for unless an argument somehow relates to quite specific religious doctrines it cannot aim to actually convince anyone not already convinced - but not in any especially troubling way. Yet *the* proofs - the proofs as they manifest and take on prominence in a very specific historical moment (namely the century and a half after Descartes),

the proofs as they continue to have a hold on our own thinking about “religion” and related topics - these turn out to have a hidden and quite substantial metaphysical, and thereby *practical*, commitment.

It is precisely this hidden intertwining of metaphysics and practical need that makes them questionable. To be clear again, there is nothing wrong or evil about “metaphysics,” ontotheology, rational faith, or any of the rest, so long as one is *transparent* (to oneself and others) about what one is doing and why. Yet if this analysis is broadly correct, then it is precisely the lack of such transparency which has bolstered the proofs’ status for so long. If we today still seem to be *stuck* with the proofs in our conversations about religion (philosophical and otherwise), if we seem unable to go beyond them in spite of everything, it is perhaps not for lack of sufficient counterarguments but rather because we cannot see their real basis in the clear light of day. With transparency, the questionable nature of the proofs dissolves along with their theoretical guise, such that we might have open conversations about the nature of the needs at their root. And not just as the Nietzschean question of whether we may give them up, and what that would cost. We may also ask, e.g. whether and how far other such needs may be found elsewhere in our ways of life, within science, politics, the arts, and other spheres, presumably “religion” itself most of all.

But to be clear, although their form may be (mis-)deployed for apologetical reasons or even purely arbitrary ones, the proofs are not themselves in any way arbitrary and certainly not doctrinally specific: they are rooted in metaphysical needs which cannot totally be avoided so long as we ourselves remain “metaphysical.” But that is also to say that it is precisely these *needs* which are really worth further consideration, not the proofs in themselves. The proofs may be

“boring and obvious” at the surface level of explicit theoretical argumentation - but take that off, refuse to let what’s underneath cover itself over again with new games of “justifying and being able to justify what one says,” and suddenly one finds a play of practical interests and needs where one might finally begin to make real philosophical headway. One finds *us*.

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