

# DOES THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT DEPEND ON THE ONTOLOGICAL?

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Does the cosmological argument (CA) depend on the ontological (OA)? That depends. If the OA is an argument "from mere concepts," then no; if the OA is an argument from possibility, then yes. That is my main thesis. Along the way, I explore a number of subsidiary themes, among them, the nature of proof in metaphysics, and what Kant calls the "mystery of absolute necessity."

Both in his pre-Critical *Sole Possible Basis for a Proof of the Existence of God* (1763) and in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant maintains that the (Leibniz-Wolff) cosmological argument depends on the ontological. As he puts it in the first Critique,

...the so-called cosmological proof really owes any cogency which it may have to the ontological proof from mere concepts. The appeal to experience is quite superfluous...<sup>1</sup>

Of course, Kant does not urge this thesis in praise of the cosmological argument, but to bury it: the ontological argument fails, and the cosmological argument, as depending on the former, fails with it.

Various attempts have been made to show that there is no such dependency as Kant alleges, the most impressive being that of J. William Forgie.<sup>2</sup> When I first read Forgie's two recent articles on this topic, I thought he had definitively refuted Kant's dependency thesis. But I now see, or think I see, that the shade of Kant has a plausible rejoinder.

## 1. What is Cogency?

Since the claimed dependence of the cosmological argument (CA) on the ontological argument (OA) is in respect of cogency, we need to know what this is. "Cogency" is Norman Kemp Smith's rendering of *Beweiskraft* which is literally, and I think more perspicuously, translated as "probative force" especially since Kant speaks of theistic *proofs* rather than arguments. In keeping with his project of ascertaining the cognitive value of *metaphysica specialis*, Kant is not concerned with a narrowly logical critique of the arguments of natural theology, but with an epistemological determination of their fitness for producing genuine knowledge. His concern is whether



these arguments amount to *proofs*. How do proofs stand to arguments?

Although every proof is an argument, not every argument, even if valid, is a proof. A valid argument with a false premise is surely no proof of anything, but a sound one isn't either: it is not enough that a putative proof be valid with true premises; it must also have premises which are known to be true, at least by the producers and consumers of the argument. But even this does not suffice: a circular argument could satisfy the foregoing conditions without amounting to a proof. If one cannot know the premises of an argument to be true without knowing the conclusion to be true, then the argument in question is surely no proof. Now consider the following argument: "I am now breathing; therefore, either Kant lived in Königsberg or he did not." This argument exhibits the foregoing four marks. It is valid, has true premises known to be true, and it is noncircular. But it does not prove its conclusion. Thus we need to impose a fifth condition, relevance of conclusion to premises. I suggest that the foregoing five marks are individually necessary conditions of probativeness; whether they are jointly sufficient I leave undecided. Thus a deductive argument is probative only if it is (i) valid in point of logical form, has (ii) true premises that are (iii) known to be true, (iv) avoids *petitio principii*, and (v) is such that the premises are relevant to the conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

Proofs in metaphysics, for Kant at least, must meet further conditions. It is important to appreciate just how Teutonically stringent Kant's notion of metaphysical proof is. A proof in metaphysics is either apodeictic (*apodiktisch*) or it is no proof at all (A789 B817). Such proofs proceed from unimpeachable premises with rigorous logic to conclusions that are demonstratively certain. Kant heaps scorn upon the supposition that there could be probabilistic arguments in metaphysics. At A775 B803 he remarks that to try to prove that God "is probable is as absurd (*ungereimt*) as to think of proving a proposition of geometry merely as a probability."<sup>4</sup> Metaphysics is knowledge by pure theoretical reason, and what pure reason knows it either knows *a priori* and as necessary, or it doesn't know it at all. This is especially so with God, who exists of absolute metaphysical necessity if he exists at all. "For the knowledge of what we profess to know as absolutely necessary must itself carry with it absolute necessity." (A612 B640)

To say that the knowledge of what we claim to know as absolutely necessary must itself carry with it absolute necessity says *more* than that the proposition to be known (the conclusion of the proof) must be necessarily true; it says that the *knowing* of the necessarily true proposition must bring with it insight into *how* and *that* the proposition is *necessarily* true. A "proof" of a necessary truth that does not amount to a proof of the necessity of its conclusion, by providing insight into how it is possible for its conclusion to be necessary, is no proof at all. Thus, to invoke a distinction Kant makes at A789 B817, a God-proof cannot be "apagogical" (*apagogisch*) but must be "ostensive" (*ostensiv*) or "direct" (*direkt*). If the reader finds this obscure, section 7 *infra* should clarify matters.

## 2. Different Dependencies Distinguished

Having in effect distinguished the rich epistemological concept of probativeness from the lean logical concept of soundness, where this is under-

stood in the standard way as a property of those arguments whose form is valid and whose premises are true, we should distinguish two dependency questions. But before distinguishing them, we need to clarify the notion of argument-dependency in general. To say that argument A is dependent upon argument B is to say at least this much: A cannot be probative or sound unless B is probative or sound. To show that argument A is not dependent on argument B, then, it suffices to show that A's being sound or probative does not entail B's being sound or probative. Thus to show that the CA does not depend on the OA, it suffices to show that the CA's being sound or probative does not entail the OA's being sound or probative.

Now for the two dependency questions. (Q1) Is the CA dependent for its *probativeness* on the OA? (Q2) Is the CA dependent for its *soundness* on the OA? We should be open to the possibility that these questions have different answers. Take (Q2) first. The CA is soundness-dependent on the OA just in case the CA cannot be sound (in any version) unless the OA is sound (in some version). Richard Gale seems to be making a case for soundness-dependence when he writes that a "successful" cosmological argument "...must ultimately terminate with a self-explaining explainer, in which a self-explaining being is one whose existence is entailed by its nature or essence, that is, one for whom there is a successful ontological argument."<sup>5</sup> Gale's case for soundness-dependence seems correct. A successful CA must terminate with a being whose essence entails its existence, and if so, how could there fail to be a sound OA for this conclusion? Here is an example:

A being whose essence entails its existence is possible.

A being whose essence entails its existence is either impossible or exists.  
Therefore, a being whose essence entails its existence exists.

Clearly, this version of the OA is sound if any version of the CA is sound. We may answer (Q2) in the affirmative. So there is a clear, if rather uninteresting, sense in which the CA is dependent on the OA: the first is soundness-dependent on the second.

But Gale muddies the waters with his use of "successful." I should think that a successful argument would be a probative argument, and not merely a sound one. If "successful" means "probative," then perhaps one can plausibly argue that the answer to (Q1) should be in the negative. Although the CA cannot be sound unless the OA is, it may well turn out that a version of the CA is probative even though every version of the OA is not. But before we can see how this could be so, we must delve into Kant's argument.

### 3. Kant's Dependency Argument

The cosmological argument as Kant understands it involves three steps, as he makes clear in the 1763 essay.<sup>6</sup> The first step purports to take us from a contingent being or a world of contingent beings to a being upon which they depend for their existence. The second step aims to show that this being exists of absolute metaphysical necessity. The third step tries to establish that this *ens necessarium* (EN) is God, the *ens realissimum* (ER), the maxi-

mally real or maximally perfect being.<sup>7</sup> In the first Critique, Kant lumps the first two steps together, the better to focus on his primary worry, the move from the necessary world-ground to God. Having argued *a contingentia mundi* to a necessary being, how can we show that this being has the attributes definitive of God? It is here that Kant thinks the cosmological arguer must have recourse to the ontological argument. Kant's argument for the dependence of the CA on the OA is most succinctly put in his *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*<sup>8</sup> from his Critical period and I will take these, supplemented by passages from *CPR*, as the basis for the following discussion.

Kant in effect invites us to consider the following stretch of argumentation which appears to bring the CA to a successful completion.

1. There is a being that exists of absolute necessity. (Upshot of first half of CA)
2. "the requisites of absolute necessity are met with solely in the concept of a most real being." (LPT 61)

Therefore

3. "the absolutely necessary being is the most real being." (LPT 61)

Therefore

4. The absolutely necessary being is God.

But, Kant claims, to accept (2) is to endorse the OA. The argument for this claim may be set forth as follows:

5. If "every absolutely necessary being is also a most real being," then "every most real being is an absolutely necessary being."<sup>9</sup>
6. The consequent of (5) is "determined *a priori* from mere concepts." (LPT 62)

Therefore

7. "the mere concept of an *entis realissimi* must carry its own absolute necessity along with it." (LPT 62)

Therefore

8. The existence of a most real being follows from its concept, which is precisely what the OA implies.

Therefore

9. The CA is probative only if the OA is, and is therefore dependent on it.

#### 4. The Bennett-Forgie Response to Kant's Dependency Argument

Forgie claims in effect that a cosmological arguer, with perfect consistency, can accept (7) while rejecting (8), and thus can insist that the appeal to experience in the first half of the CA, far from being superfluous, is indispensable. Jonathan Bennett maintains something similar.<sup>10</sup>

This is a plausible line to take. No doubt the concept of a most real or maximally perfect being is the concept of something which, if it exists, necessarily exists, and indeed from its own nature or essence. It is the concept of something which has a certain modal status, the status of existing either in all possible worlds or in none. Taken in this way, (7) is clearly true, but consistent with the denial of (8). For whether the *ens realissimum* exists in fact cannot be "read off" from the concept, as Kant himself would surely agree: "...if I take the concept of anything, no matter what, I find that the existence of this thing can never be represented by me as absolutely necessary, and that, whatever it may be that exists, nothing prevents me from thinking its non-existence." (A615 B643) This is why the ontological argument, which Kant (mis?)represents as an argument "from mere concepts" (*aus lauter Begriffen*), lacks probative force.<sup>11</sup> One cannot settle questions of existence by conceptual analysis. For with respect to *every* concept, or at least every concept the notes of whose conceptual content are compossible, it is always a further question whether anything instantiates it. (Questions of nonexistence are a different story: one can ontologically disprove round squares and the like.)

It thus appears that Forgie has put his finger on the flaw in Kant's dependency argument, namely, the inference from (7) to (8). But one ought to find it puzzling that Kant, who himself makes what Bennett calls the "conditionalizing move" in refutation of the OA (the retreat from "The *ens realissimum* necessarily exists" to "If it exists, then the *ens realissimum* necessarily exists") will not allow this move to the cosmological arguer. Why does Kant think that the inference from (7) to (8) is valid given his own conviction that nothing is such that its existence follows from its concept?

There is an argument Kant could employ to forge a logical link between (7) and (8):

- a. "absolute necessity is an existence from mere concepts." (LPT 62)
- b. The concept of the ER is the concept of something that exists of absolute necessity.

Therefore

- c. The concept of the ER is the concept of something whose existence follows from its concept.<sup>12</sup>

So given premise (a), one can derive (c) which is equivalent to (8). It follows that Forgie's rejection of the inference from (7) to (8) is premised on a rejection of (a). The obvious way to reject (a) is by claiming that absolute necessity is an existence from essence or possibility, and not from concepts.

One could then consistently maintain that the ER's essence entails its existence without its existence being ontologically provable "from mere concepts." One could consistently hold that the CA is free of entanglement with the OA "from mere concepts."

Although Forgie's position is entirely consistent, it appears that Bennett's is not. Bennett, invoking the conditionalizing move, rejects (in effect) the inference from (7) to (8) and concludes that "...Kant has altogether failed in his attempt to show that the cosmological arguer who takes the second step [from the EN to the ER] is committed to the validity of the ontological argument."<sup>13</sup> As rejecting the move from (7) to (8), Bennett must reject (a). But Bennett goes on to make a "radical criticism" of the CA which he sees Kant as poised to make without actually making, a criticism that rests on the truth of (a).<sup>14</sup> The radical criticism is that there simply cannot be a logically (broadly logically, metaphysically) necessary being for either the CA or the OA to terminate in. For if nothing is such that its existence follows from its concept, as Kant maintains in his critique of the OA, then nothing can exist of absolute logical necessity. But this last inference requires for its validity premise (a): "absolute necessity is an existence from mere concepts." If absolute necessity is an existence from possibility or essence, the inference does not succeed. For we have just seen how one can countenance an *ens necessarium* that is not ontologically provable "from mere concepts."

The upshot is that Bennett cannot have it both ways: he cannot reject Kant's dependency argument while accepting the principle that "absolute necessity is an existence from mere concepts." Given that he accepts the latter and the radical criticism based on it, he should accept the dependency argument.

This leaves the question whether Kant himself accepts the radical criticism and (a). I shall take this up below in section 8.

Thus it would seem that the cosmological arguer can take the following seemingly consistent position. (i) The OA "from mere concepts" fails, and indeed for the reason Kant adduces. Nevertheless, (ii) a thing is maximally perfect if and only if it exists of absolute necessity. Now, (iii) we have (let us assume) an *a posteriori* proof of the existence of an absolutely necessary being upon which all contingent beings depend. Therefore, (iv) we have an *a posteriori* proof of the existence of a maximally perfect being which proof does not depend for its probativeness on the OA.

This is not to say that our *a posteriori* proof is not dependent for its soundness on the OA. Of course it is. For if the proposition expressed by "The maximally perfect being exists" is true, then there must be sound ontological arguments which feature it as a conclusion. Example: "If the maximally perfect being is Itself, then it is." (Inspired by Bonaventura's, *Si Deus Deus est, Deus est.*) But soundness is not the issue; probativeness is. Forgie appears to have shown that the CA is not probativeness-dependent on the OA.

As Forgie of course realizes, the position just sketched, according to which the CA's appeal to experience is indispensable, implies that the proposition expressed by "A maximally perfect being exists" is both necessary and knowable only *a posteriori*. Propositions that enjoy this status are

not exactly unknown to recent philosophy. Thus one could say that it is Kant's failure to make room in his system for propositions of this type that underlies his dependency argument.

We should also note that if there are necessary truths knowable only *a posteriori*, then, since these cannot be conceptual truths, they must be truths grounded in essences distinct from concepts. Armed with a distinction between concept and essence, a distinction Kant does not make, we can easily see how a position like that of Thomas Aquinas is consistent. Thomas both rejected Anselm's proof and held that God's existence is entailed by, indeed is identical with, his essence. This is consistent if absolute necessity is an existence from essence rather than an existence from concepts.

Aquinas commentators often claim that the sort of necessity that figures in the proofs of the *quinquae viae* is distinct from the Leibnizian sort of necessity (existence in all logically/metaphysically possible worlds) at work in the versions of the CA on which Kant set his critical sights, and that therefore Kant's dependency thesis, whether true or false, simply does not apply to the cosmological or contingency arguments of the *doctor angelicus*. The operative sort of necessity in Aquinas is said to be lack of generability/corruptibility and cognates. But as Forgie rightly points out, "although Aquinas may well use a notion of 'necessary being' which is different from the Leibnizian one, his notion of an *uncaused* necessary being entails or involves the Leibnizian notion of a being whose essence involves its existence."<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to see how such an uncaused necessary being would not fall within the scope of Kant's dependency thesis. Besides, how could an ontologically simple God, one in which essence is existence, fail to have the sort of Leibnizian necessity that would make all arguments in support of it subject to Kant's dependency thesis?

#### 5. A Dependency Argument Immune to the Bennett-Forgie Objection

Forgie's main point seems clearly correct, namely, that (8) does not follow from (7) above. Although the concept of the *ens realissimum* (ER) is the concept of something which, if it exists, necessarily exists, it does not follow from the mere concept that it exists. So Forgie thinks that (i) the cosmological arguer need not endorse the OA, and (ii) that the appeal to experience is indispensable to show that something satisfies the concept of the ER. But we should note that although the existence of the ER does not follow from its concept – since nothing is such that its existence follows from its concept – the existence of the ER *does follow from its possibility*.

So if it can be shown that the CA presupposes the possibility of the ER, then the CA will be dependent for its probativeness on a modal OA along the lines of: The ER is possible; if the ER is possible, then it exists; therefore, the ER exists. Ontological arguments like these are not "from mere concepts" (*aus lauter Begriffen*), and so do not make the mistake of inferring existence from a concept. My new and improved dependency argument may be outlined as follows.

10. Either the CA proves that the ER is possible, or it presupposes<sup>16</sup> that the ER is possible.

11. The CA cannot be taken to prove that the ER is possible.

Therefore

12. The CA presupposes that the ER is possible.

13. If the CA presupposes that the ER is possible, then the CA depends on the OA.

Therefore

14. The CA depends on the OA.

Premise (10) is self-evident. But premises (11) and (13) require argument.

Argument for (11). If a thing is actual, then it is possible. (*Ab esse ad posse valet illatio*.) So if I know that a thing is actual, then I know that it is possible. This is consistent with not understanding *how* the thing is possible. For example, I can reasonably claim to know that such things as motion, temporal passage, and relatedness occur, and are thus possible, without understanding how they are possible. (The powerful arguments of Zeno, McTaggart, and Bradley respectively, purport to show that these things are not possible, and in my opinion these arguments, though they have been ably opposed, have never been decisively refuted. Thus these arguments show that we do not understand *how* motion, temporal passage, and relatedness are possible.) But to the extent that I do not understand how a thing is possible, I am justified in wondering whether the thing in question really is actual, and thus really is possible. Thus my inability to understand how libertarian freedom of the will is possible, may lead me to justified doubts about its existence.<sup>17</sup> And if I have justified doubts about its existence, then I am justified in doubting whether my putative knowledge of its existence is genuine knowledge.

Thus although it is obviously true that everything actual is possible, the application of this principle in an attempt to prove that a given thing is possible is stymied by (i) doubts whether the thing in question really is actual, which are especially troublesome when the thing is not sense-perceivable, and (ii) lack of insight into how it could be possible, with (ii) fanning the flames of (i). So I think one must conclude that no CA could be taken to prove the possibility of the ER by proving its actuality. For as Kant remarks, we have no insight into how the ER is possible. In an uncharacteristically "Heideggerian" passage at CPR A613 B641, Kant speaks of unconditional necessity as an "abyss" (*Abgrund*) for human reason where "all support fails us." In trying to secure a *Grund* for all things, we plunge into an *Abgrund*. Since everything we can represent as existent we can just as easily represent as nonexistent (CPR A615 B643), we have no insight into how there could be something that exists of absolute necessity. Of course it doesn't follow that there cannot be an absolutely necessary being; it could easily exist without our understanding how it could exist. (And Kant never denies or even seriously doubts the existence of God.)



The point is that we cannot know how or that an absolutely necessary being is possible through theoretical reason, though we can think and believe this possibility. (cf. Bxxvi) One does well to recall that Kant's attack on metaphysical knowledge is not motivated by a desire to undermine religious belief, but by a desire to insulate it from sceptical corrosion: "I have found it necessary to deny knowledge (*Wissen*) in order to make room for faith (*Glauben*)."<sup>18</sup> We cannot prove God's existence, but we cannot disprove it either.

Having seen that (11) is true, we may infer (12): the CA presupposes that the ER is possible. But if so, then the CA depends on the OA for its probativeness.

To appreciate this, recall that the problem for the second half of the CA is whether or not one can show that the *ens necessarium* (EN) is the *ens realissimum* (ER). This is a question of identification, a question of specifying which being this necessary being is. But the attempt to identify the EN with the ER presupposes that the ER is possible.<sup>19</sup> For something that has been proven to exist (the EN) cannot be identified with something that is impossible. Now the ER either necessarily exists or is impossible, which implies that its possibility entails its actual existence. So if the attempt to identify the EN with the ER presupposes that the ER is possible, then the success of this attempt presupposes that an OA such as the following is probative, and not just sound:

The *ens realissimum* is possible

Either the *ens realissimum* is impossible or it is necessarily existent

Therefore

The *ens realissimum* is necessarily existent.

So it would seem that the CA is after all dependent on the OA, and that the appeal to experience is superfluous. For if the CA cannot attain its ultimate goal without presupposing in its second half the real possibility of the ER, then one can simply begin with this possibility and "run" some such OA as the one just given. The recourse to experience would then be an unnecessary detour.

My point, then, is that something like Kant's dependency thesis can be defended if we distinguish, as Kant did not, the OA "from mere concepts" from the OA from possibility. Forgie is right that the CA does not depend for its probativeness on the OA "from mere concepts." The concept of the ER is the concept of something that necessarily exists given that it does exist; but that it does exist cannot be inferred from its mere concept. But given the real (not merely excogitated) possibility of the ER, it follows straightaway that the ER exists. Note that this un-Kantian distinction between the concept and the possibility (essence) of the ER is one that Forgie himself invokes and must invoke in order to defeat Kant's dependency thesis. (We saw last section that Bennett falls into contradiction when he tries to reject Kant's dependency thesis while holding onto the principle that absolute necessity is an existence from mere concepts.) So although the CA does not depend on the OA "from mere concepts," it does depend for its probativeness on the OA from possibility.

This dependence is damaging to the CA since there is reason to think that the OA from possibility is not probative.<sup>20</sup> For how can one show that

the ER is really possible? It is part of Kant's point that one cannot show this by any analysis of concepts. Leibniz, who thought he could prove the possibility of the ER by showing that the realities (perfections) that make up the divine nature are compossible (since they are all positive) "confused the possibility of this concept [that of the ER] with the possibility of the thing itself." (LPT 55)

### 6. Dependency in the First Half of the CA

If there is a being whose existence is necessary for the existence of all else, it of course does not follow that this being is necessary *in itself*. It is a point of modal logic that one cannot validly pass from "Necessarily, if U then G," to "If U, then necessarily G." To think otherwise is to confuse the *necessitas consequentiae* with the *necessitas consequentiis*. If there must be a being on which contingent beings depend, then this being is conditionally necessary; but it does not follow straightaway that it is unconditionally necessary.

So one might legitimately wonder whether even the first half of the CA can attain its goal. It is supposed to take us from contingent beings to an absolutely or unconditionally necessary being upon which they depend for their existence. In its first step, as Kant explains in the 1763 essay, it takes us to an independent being, one on which all else depends.<sup>21</sup> But how, in its second step, can it negotiate the passage from "An independent being exists" to "An absolutely necessary being exists"? Kant does not press this point in the first Critique, but he could have, and passages elsewhere show that he is well aware of it. "In the Wolffian proof one can indeed discern the independence, but not the inner necessity [of the first cause or ultimate ground]; for its existence is only necessary for the sake of the world."<sup>22</sup>

It is clear that if there is an absolutely necessary ground G, then its possibility entails its actual existence. So all the first half of the CA needs to prove is the possibility of G. But for the reasons given in the preceding section, no CA can *prove* the possibility of an unconditionally necessary being. Not being able to prove it, it must *presuppose* it. But if the first half of the CA presupposes the possibility of G, then surely there is no need for an *posteriori* proof of its actuality: if we are given G's possibility, then we can simply "run" an ontological argument to establish its actuality. So it seems that the first half of the CA, and not just the second half, depends on an OA from possibility, so that, once more, the appeal to experience is superfluous. But of course this is consistent with denying, as I do deny, that the first half of the CA depends on the OA "from mere concepts."

### 7. Can One Prove the Necessary from the Contingent?

Since any CA must have as its conclusion a necessary proposition, this raises the question: Can there be a *probative* argument for an unconditionally necessary proposition when one of the premises of the argument is contingent? If no, then we have another reason to think that the CA is dependent upon the OA. Recall that for Kant, proofs in metaphysics, "transcendental proofs,"<sup>23</sup> must be ostensive and not apagogical (A789 B817) where an ostensive proof is "one which combines with the conviction of its truth

[better: conviction of the truth of its conclusion] insight into the sources of its truth [better: insight into the sources of its conclusion's truth]." What Kant has to say about the distinction I find obscure;<sup>24</sup> part of what I will be attempting in this section is to attach a tolerably clear sense to "ostensive proof."

No doubt there are *sound* arguments with contingent premises and necessary conclusions. Trivial example: "Simone Weil died in 1943; therefore, either Hillary is furious or she is not." This is a sound argument for a necessary proposition: the premise is true and the argument's form is valid, i.e., not possibly such that any argument of this form has true premises and a false conclusion. Nontrivial example:

15. I am now thinking

Therefore

16. It is true that I am now thinking

Therefore

17. There are truths.

This is a sound argument in which the premise is contingently true and the final conclusion is necessary. That (17) is necessary can be proved by a quick *reductio*: If there are no truths, then it is true that there are no truths; but if it is true that there are no truths, then there is at least one truth, namely, the truth that there are no truths. But this contradicts the assumption that there are no truths. Therefore, the assumption is false, and there are truths. On the other hand, if there *are* truths, then of course there are truths. Therefore, *necessarily*, there are truths.

Argument (15)-(17), then, is an interesting case, since it seems to show that I can come to know a necessary truth by inferring it from a contingent premise which I clearly know. It seems to amount to an *a posteriori* proof of the necessary existence of truths. So it appears to be not just sound, but probative.

But here we need a distinction. Although the argument to (17) is probative, I claim that the argument to

17\*. Necessarily, there are truths

is not. It is one thing to come to know a necessary truth; it is another to come to know it *as* necessary. I can know a truth that is necessary without knowing that it *is* necessary. Almost everyone knows that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , and thus almost everyone knows at least one necessary truth; but relatively few know that, necessarily,  $2 + 2 = 4$ , even though these two propositions are logically equivalent. So even if there are *a posteriori* proofs of necessary truths, it is a further question whether they can deliver insight into the necessity of necessary truths. If they cannot, then one may doubt whether they are fully probative.

Suppose we want to prove that there are necessary truths to the Modal Fool who says in his heart: All is contingent! We get him to admit that he is thinking, that it is true that he is thinking, and that therefore there are truths. Although we have gotten him to accept a necessary truth, he won't see it as such. He will reply that it is contingent that there are truths, and perhaps contingent upon the existence of human beings. How do we show him that it is necessarily true that there are truths? My point is that we cannot use an *a posteriori* argument. For even if we can come to know *a posteriori* propositions that are necessarily true, we cannot come to know *a posteriori* that they have this high modal status. To prove to the Modal Fool that it is necessarily true that there are truths, we must have recourse to some such *a priori* proof as the *reductio ad absurdum* given above. The *a posteriori* proof "really owes any cogency which it may have" to the *a priori* proof; "the appeal to experience is quite superfluous."

Similarly, a probative CA must not only bring us to the knowledge that a ground of contingent beings exists which is absolutely necessary, but also to the knowledge that this ground is indeed absolutely necessary. Thus a probative CA cannot merely demonstrate the truth of "God exists" (where this is a necessary truth), but must demonstrate, i.e., generate knowledge of the truth of, "Necessarily, God exists." And this latter is what an *a posteriori* proof cannot deliver.

### 8. The Mystery of Absolute Necessity

Kant represents a watershed in the history of the theistic proofs the central concept of which is that of the *ens necessarium*. As befits a watershed, Kant's thinking teeters ambiguously between the view that (i) the *ens necessarium* is possible but not provable theoretically either in its actual existence or in its possibility, and the view that (ii) the *ens necessarium* is impossible. Here is a passage in support of (i):

Thus, while for the merely speculative employment of reason the supreme being remains a mere *ideal*, it is yet *an ideal without a flaw*...Its objective reality cannot indeed be proved, but also cannot be disproved, by merely speculative reason. If, then, there should be a moral theology that can make good this deficiency, transcendental theology, which before was problematic only, will prove itself indispensable in determining the concept of this supreme being... (A 641 B 669)

If God is an ideal without a flaw, and if the deficiencies of speculative reason can be made good by practical reason, then God must be a really possible being, even if not one whose real possibility is provable *a priori* by conceptual analysis. And of course, if God is possible, then he is actually existent. Although we cannot *know* by speculative reason the possibility (and hence the necessity) of God's existence, we can *think* it and believe it without contradiction. This implies that there is no contradiction in the concept of a necessary being. It is a concept we can coherently think even if we can neither prove nor disprove that it applies to anything.

As further support for (i), consider Kant's remark that "the absolute

necessity of God" is a "mystery in rational religion." (LPT 163) Mysteries are defined as "truths whose possibility reason cannot see into...." (LPT 163) Kant is thus committed to saying that God's absolutely necessary existence is a truth, but not one into whose possibility reason can have any insight. This again implies that the *ens necessarium* is possible.

One more passage, pages further along in the *CPR* than most ever get:

...we must recognize that while the unconditioned necessity of the existence of a being is altogether inconceivable to us, and that every speculative proof of a necessary supreme being is therefore rightly to be opposed on *subjective* grounds, we have yet no right to deny the possibility of such a primordial being *in itself*... (A792 B821, emphasis Kant's)

But other things that Kant says imply that there is a contradiction in the concept of a necessary being, and thus that such a being is logically impossible. For if

- a. Every existential judgment is synthetic *a posteriori* (A598 B626)

and

- b. No synthetic *a posteriori* judgment can be necessary

it follows that

- c. No existential judgment can be necessary

which implies that

- d. No being can exist necessarily

whence we may infer that

- e. The *ens necessarium* is impossible.

One may arrive at this conclusion in another way. Kant tells us that "...absolute necessity is an existence determined from mere concepts." (A607 B635) So if anything exists of absolute necessity, then it should be ontologically provable from its mere concept. But nothing is ontologically provable from its mere concept. Therefore, nothing can exist of absolute necessity.

To put it in still another way, the concept of a necessary being is a self-contradictory one (hence one to which nothing can correspond) since, as a *concept* it cannot entail existence, but as a concept of a *necessary being*, i.e., a being whose existence is determined from its concept, it must entail existence. In other words, the concept of a necessary being is the concept of a thing whose existence is "determined from" its concept; but no concept is the concept of a thing whose existence is "determined from" its concept.

Kant thus seems committed to both (i) and (ii). He is committed to say-

ing both that the existence of God is really possible, though not theoretically provable, and that the existence of God is really impossible. Anyone who does not see this tension, or thinks it can be easily resolved, has not read Kant very closely and will not be able to understand his "watershed" significance in the history of natural theology.

The tension is reflected in the way Kant criticizes the CA. The CA, like the OA, must terminate in a logically (broadly logically, metaphysically) necessary being. Now if a logically necessary being is one whose existence follows from its concept, and if Kant is right that this move from concept to existence is illegitimate, then there simply cannot be a logically necessary being, and the CA collapses. Why then doesn't Kant simply deliver this "radical criticism" of the CA (as Bennett calls it while endorsing it) thus avoiding the rigmarole and fancy footwork of his actual argument?

The answer, I think, is that to deny the *ens necessarium* is as dogmatic as to affirm it. Equivalently, it would be dogmatic to insist that all beings are contingent, or that one has proved any such thing. The Critical path is a *via media* between scepticism and dogmatism. Accordingly, Kant cannot be interpreted as denying the possibility of an *ens necessarium*, or a being to whose essence existence belongs. The EN and its possibility can neither be proven nor disproven. We can *think* the EN (and must think it for moral purposes), but we cannot *know* whether it is possible or impossible.

This explains why Kant, to put it anachronistically, did not give Findlay's ontological disproof.<sup>25</sup> I would put Findlay's argument as follows:

A maximally perfect being cannot exist contingently.  
Necessarily, everything that exists exists contingently.

Therefore

Necessarily, a maximally perfect being does not exist.

As Findlay came to realize in the fullness of time, this argument lacks probative force.<sup>26</sup> For how could anyone claim to know the minor? How could one prove that, necessarily, everything (or every concrete individual) exists contingently? That appears to be as far beyond us as a proof of the real possibility of the *ens realissimum*.

If this is right, then Kant cannot flatly and dogmatically claim, as he does in many places, that "absolute necessity is an existence determined from mere concepts." For we have seen this dictum entail in a few short steps the impossibility of the *ens necessarium*. What he must say is something like: "absolute necessity *for us* can only be an existence determined from mere concepts"; or, "the only absolute necessity into which we can have any insight is an existence determined from mere concepts"; or, "the only way we could *know* that there is a necessary being would be if absolute necessity were an existence determined from mere concepts."

But if we make these backpedaling emendations, Kant's dependency argument collapses. For the reason Kant thinks the cosmological argument depends on the ontological argument "from mere concepts" is

because he thinks that an absolutely necessary being is one whose existence is "determined from mere concepts" (A 607 B 635), and is therefore ontologically provable.

If there is a being whose absolutely necessity of existence is grounded, not in concepts, but in its own essence or nature, then there is no longer any reason to think that the CA depends on the OA "from mere concepts." But as I showed in section 5 *supra*, the CA does depend on the OA from possibility.

In sum, Kant's position is internally inconsistent. His dependency argument requires the assumption that absolute necessity is an existence determined from mere concepts. But his repeated assurances that the ER is possible, albeit unknowable, entail that absolute necessity is not an existence determined from mere concepts. So Kant is committed to both affirming and denying the assumption in question.

### 9. Where Do We Go from Here?

The main systematic (as opposed to exegetical) points to emerge from the discussion in sections 5, 6, and 7 are that (i) the CA in its second half depends for its probative force on the OA from possibility inasmuch as it presupposes but cannot prove the real possibility of the *ens realissimum*; (ii) the CA in its first half does so as well inasmuch as it presupposes but cannot prove the real possibility of the *ens necessarium*; and (iii) both halves of the CA depend for their probativeness on the OA from possibility inasmuch as there cannot be an *a posteriori* proof of a necessary proposition, given Kant's stringent standards of proof.

We seem to face a dilemma with respect to the very possibility of the *ens necessarium*. Either we prove its possibility from experience or we prove it *a priori*. But we have seen that cosmo-theology fails to prove this possibility *a posteriori* just as onto-theology fails to prove it *a priori*. Onto-cosmology may provide a way between the horns. Kant's 1763 argument for the existence of God is an example: it argues from the noncontingent existence of possibilities (without which there could not be a world) to the existence of God.<sup>27</sup> Curiously, Kant does not discuss this argument in the *CPR*. Was he justified in rejecting it?<sup>28</sup>

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### NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), A607 B635. Cited hereafter as *CPR*. It will be understood that the A/B notation just used refers to the 1781 and 1787 editions of *CPR* respectively. Translations have been checked against I. Kant, *Kritik Der Reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1971).

2. J. William Forgie, "Kant on the Relation between the Cosmological and Ontological Arguments," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 34 (1993), pp. 1-12; J. William Forgie, "The Cosmological and Ontological Arguments: How Saint Thomas Solved the Kantian Problem," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995),

pp. 89-100. See also Bruce Reichenbach, *The Cosmological Argument: A Reassessment* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1972), pp. 123-136. For a defense of Kant's dependency thesis, see Peter Remnant, "Kant and the Cosmological Argument," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* vol. 32, no. 2 (August 1959), pp. 152-155.

3. Cf. William Rowe's discussion of conditions on proof in *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 249-257. He doesn't mention the relevance condition.

4. Kant repeats and elaborates the point in *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* at 369-370.

5. Richard M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 238.

6. I. Kant, *Der einzig-moegliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseyns Gottes in Immanuel Kant Werkausgabe*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), p. 732; Third Division, Section 3.

7. Kant's use of 'real' is bound to seem puzzling to scholars unschooled in the rational school-metaphysics in which Kant was brought up. To say that God is the most real being is just to say that God is the most perfect being. A reality is a perfection. Reality is not existence, but essence in a broad sense, quiddity. This is why Reality appears under the rubric Quality, while Existence is under Modality in the Table of Categories at A80 B106. Hence when Kant famously says, at A598 B626, that "'Being' is obviously not a real predicate..." he is denying what Descartes said when he said in the Fifth Meditation that existence is a perfection. Being or existence is not a quidditative determination, hence not a perfection. It is seldom appreciated, however, that this denial is *consistent* with holding that existence is a 'property' of individuals in the sense of something that belongs to individuals. It is therefore a widely committed mistake to infer from A598 B626 that Kant anticipates the Frege-Russellian thesis that existence is never and in no sense a property of individuals, but instead a property of concepts (Frege) or of propositional functions (Russell).

8. I. Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood and Gertrude M. Clark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978). Cited hereafter as *LPT*.

9. At *LPT* 62, Kant claims that the consequent of this conditional follows by conversion from the antecedent. This is of course false as it stands: one cannot validly convert an A-proposition. But at A608 B636, Kant gives a sound argument for the conditional where he invokes, not conversion *simpliciter*, but conversion *per accidens*. Cf. Forgie 1993, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6 for an admirably clear exposition of Kant's reasoning.

10. Jonathan Bennett, *Kant's Dialectic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 252.

11. It goes without saying that concepts for Kant are subjective, and thus dependent for their existence on ectypal intellects like ours. Wolfgang Cramer in his sadly neglected *Gottesbeweise und ihre Kritik* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967), p. 57 *et passim* points out that an OA in which forms and essences (*Formen und Wesen*) are reduced to concepts (*Begriffen*) is doomed from the start and scarcely in need of refutation. Josef Seifert makes a similar point in *Gott als Gottesbeweis* (Heidelberg: Universitaetsverlag C. Winter, 1996), p. 129 *et passim*.

12. It is interesting to note that the conditionalizing move cannot be applied to (c) in the way it *can* be applied to (b)! Compare:

b-cond. The concept of the ER is the concept of something that exists of



absolute necessity, if it exists

with

c-cond. The concept of the ER is the concept of something whose existence follows from its concept, if it exists.

The conditionalization of (b) makes perfectly good sense; but the conditionalization of (c) is nonsense. It would be like saying that the concept of a bachelor is the concept of something whose being unmarried follows from its concept, if it is unmarried. If being unmarried follows from the concept of a bachelor, then it follows from it, and it is absurd to slap on a condition. *Pari ratione*, if existence follows from the concept of the ER, then it follows from the concept, and it is senseless to impose a condition.

13. Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 252-253.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Forgie 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

16. To say that an argument *presupposes* a proposition is not to say that it features that proposition as an explicit premise, but that it has it as an implicit premise in the absence of which the argument would not be sound. Recall Descartes' *Meditation V* ontological argument: God has all perfections; existence is a perfection; ergo, God exists. As I am using "presuppose," this argument does not presuppose that existence is a perfection, although of course it assumes it. But the Cartesian argument does presuppose that "God" in the major premise has a referent, which, by the way, means that this version of the OA is question-begging. But the defect is easily removed – a task I leave as an exercise for the reader.

17. In particular, if the only way to reconcile the "causality of freedom" with the "causality of nature" is the way proposed by Kant in his solution to the Third Antinomy (A533 B561 ff.), then one would have reasonable grounds for doubting whether there is such a thing as the "causality of freedom."

18. CPR, Preface to 2nd edition, Bxxx. Cf. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 138. Rorty, trying to quote this passage, makes a mockery of it when he refers to Kant's "project of 'destroying reason [sic!] to make room for faith'...."

19. J. William Forgie (private correspondence) tentatively suggests that the identificatory project in the second half of the CA presupposes only that it is *epistemically possible* that the ER is (metaphysically) possible. If this is correct, then my new dependency argument collapses. It is clear that the actual existence of the ER does not follow from the epistemic possibility of its being (metaphysically) possible. But if the identificatory project presupposes merely that it is epistemically possible that the ER is (metaphysically) possible, then how could it be shown that the EN has the divine attributes? For if it is merely epistemically possible that the ER is (metaphysically) possible, that is consistent with the ER's being (metaphysically) impossible. If the CA identifies the EN with something that, for all we know, could be metaphysically impossible, then the CA certainly has not *proven* that the ER exists. As long as the argument leaves us in doubt as to whether or not the ER is possible, we will be left doubting whether the EN = the ER.

My point is that the CA cannot remove this doubt by proving that the ER is possible, and so it must presuppose that it is possible.

20. But not for the reason that the OA begs the question, *contra* P. J. McGrath, "The Refutation of the Ontological Argument," *The Philosophical Quarterly* XL (1990), pp. 195-212. *Vide* William F. Vallicella, "Has the

Ontological Argument Been Refuted?" *Religious Studies* 29 (1993), pp. 97-110.

21. I. Kant, *Beweisgrund*, *op. cit.*, p. 732.

22. Reflexion 3812, quoted in Dieter Henrich, *Der Ontologische Gottesbeweis* (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1967), p. 155. My translation.

23. Kant often uses *transzendental* when he should use *transzendent*, perhaps to accommodate the exigencies of good German style. This is one of those occasions.

24. Goethe says somewhere that reading a page of Kant is like walking into a well-lit room. I can't imagine that page coming from the *CPR*.

25. J. N. Findlay, *Kant and the Transcendental Object* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 235- 236.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Cf. Mark Fisher and Eric Watkins, "Kant on the the Material Ground of Possibility: From *The Only Possible Argument* to *The Critique of Pure Reason*," *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. LII, no. 2 (December 1998), pp. 369-395. See also William F. Vallicella, "From Facts to God: An Onto-Cosmological Argument," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (December 2000), forthcoming.

28. I thank Bill Forgie for his comments. Send correspondence to billvallicella@compuserve.com.