

‘Something than which nothing greater can be thought’ and Kant’s *Ens Realissimum*

Morgan Keith Jackson 

Abstract

In this paper, I explore Kant’s much-studied critique of the ontological argument, seeking to place Immanuel Kant and Anselm of Canterbury more directly in contact with one another; I do this in two ways. First, I discuss the historical reception of the ontological argument in Kant’s eighteenth century context. Second, I move the discussion away from the first *Critique*, and look towards Kant’s Pre-critical discussion of the ontological argument in *The Only Possible Argument*, where he initially sets out his primary objection. By shifting the focus towards these areas of Kant’s thought, I aim to achieve three interrelated goals. First, I show that Kant had a limited knowledge of the history and origins of the ontological argument, which was transmitted to him through Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten, who put a Cartesian spin on it. Second, I provide textual evidence which shows that Kant’s objection does not succeed against Anselm’s argument. Third, I elucidate that Kant’s identification of God as the *ens realissimum* is compatible with Anselm’s identification of God as ‘something than which nothing greater can be thought’.

Keywords

Anselm, Kant, Ontological argument, Ens Realissimum, Proslogion

Introduction

But is it [Kant’s dictum] relevant to the ontological argument? Couldn’t Anselm thank Kant for his interesting point and proceed merrily on his way?¹

Despite the recently renewed interest in Immanuel Kant’s relationship with the theological tradition, insufficient scholarly work has

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1974), p. 97.

focused on Kant's treatment of the ontological argument in light of these shifting perspectives. In this paper I set out to account for this lacuna by offering a re-examination of the tenuous relationship scholars have attributed to Anselm of Canterbury and Kant, and their respective treatments of the ontological argument. My line of argument continues the trajectory of thought first expressed by Alvin Plantinga—that Anselm averts much, if not all, of Kant's criticism²—and continued by Gareth Matthews,³ and Peter Millican.⁴ To that end, I also set out to substantiate more fully the claim made by Ian Proops that Kant, in the first *Critique*, offers no successful objection to the ontological argument he initially sets out in *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (Henceforth, *Beweisgrund*).⁵ Despite my sympathy with this line of argument, in this paper I do not maintain the position that Anselm's ontological argument is compatible with Kant's, or rather that Anselm and Kant's ontological arguments are the same. It is evident that Anselm does not make his claims in the mode of an analytic philosopher, but in the mode of a pastor attempting to provide resources for spiritual translation.⁶ Rather, I seek to place Kant and Anselm more directly in contact with one another.

To answer this question successfully, I move in two main phases. In the first phase, I approach the ontological argument from an historical position, providing a brief overview on the theological tradition Kant received and his knowledge of the ontological argument. Here, I argue in the same vein as Ian Logan, that Kant appears to have no direct, and virtually no indirect knowledge of Anselm's argument.⁷ In the second phase, I shift my methodology to an ahistorical one. Here, I demonstrate some argumentative affinities between Anselm's ontological argument set out in *Proslogion* and Kant's ontological argument set out in section one of *Beweisgrund*. In this phase, I pursue such a task from the position of an analytic philosopher, rather than a historian. I begin this section, by focusing on Kant's reasoning as to why existence cannot be considered a real predicate of a thing. From there, I then move

² Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of the Belief in God* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 27.

³ Gareth Matthews, 'The Ontological Argument', in William E. Mann, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Religion* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 81–102.

⁴ While Peter Millican suggests that Anselm's argument fails, he states that it does not fail because it violates some deep Kantian principle. See Peter Millican, 'One Fatal Flaw in Anselm's Ontological Argument', *Mind* 113 (2004), pp. 437–476.

⁵ Ian Proops, 'Kant on the Ontological Argument', *Noûs* 41 (2015), pp. 1–27.

⁶ Anselm is no stranger to featuring in texts with a focus on Analytic Theology. A reference to the *Monologion* and *De Grammatico* show Anselm's engaging in what we may aptly label analytic theology. See William Wood, *Analytic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁷ Ian Logan, *Reading Anselm's Proslogion: The History of Anselm's Argument and its Significance Today* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2009), p. 156.

on to consider Kant's understanding of the concept's 'possibility' and 'necessity' through the lens of modal logic. Once I have done this, I continue in the same analytic manner to tease out textual evidence that witnesses Kant genuinely gravitating towards ideas expressed by Anselm in the *Proslogion*. Specifically, the following four:

- (i) Anselm and Kant use similar classifications and predicates to identify what God is
- (ii) Neither require existence to be a real property of a thing.
- (iii) Neither endorse the perfect being theology so commonly ascribed to them.
- (iv) Anselm and Kant both utilise the *reductio* and the laws of non-contradiction

With these similarities in mind, I conclude by considering the implications my reading has for Kant's Critical treatment of God. I posit, contrary to past scholarship, that Kant's Pre-Critical conception of God as 'an absolutely necessary being' (*ein schlechterdings nothwendiges Wesen*) and as the 'most real being' (*ens realissimum*) informed his concept of God in the first *Critique*.⁸ In this section, I show that Kant does not abandon this set of identifications and predicates when talking about the concept of God in his critical writing. In fact, in the first *Critique* Kant reinforces his textual commitment to the intrinsic relationship between the *ens realissimum* and our faculty of reason, when he writes that 'reason looks around for a concept that squares with so supreme a mode of existence as that of the unconditioned necessity' and finds that the *ens realissimum* 'best squares with [it]'.⁹ Essentially, I offer probative value in demonstrating continuities in the way Kant

⁸ Reference to Kant, with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, refer to the Akademie edition, *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Science (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990-) Unless otherwise stated, translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1998-). Citations to the first *Critique* are to the A (first edition) and B (second edition). The following abbreviations are used: *CPpR*= *Critique of Practical Reason*, *OPA*= *The Only Possible Argument*, *GS*= *Gesammelte*, *LPR*= *Lectures on Religion*, *OP*= *Opus Postumum*, *OIT*= *What does it mean to orientate Oneself*, *CJ*= *Critique of Judgement*, *NE*= *New Elucidations*, *RPT*= *On a recently prominent tone*. See A574/B602; A605-6/B633-4; A605-6/B633-4.

⁹ A586/B614; *OPA* 2:85.

identifies and defines the concept of God in both the pre-Critical and Critical period.¹⁰

From my observations, I aim to achieve two integrated goals. First, contrary to the current trend in Kant studies, I demonstrate that Kant carries his Pre-critical understanding of God into his critical work. Second, by applying both a historical methodology and an ahistorical methodology, I also maintain that Kant's criticism of the ontological argument, initially set out in the *Beweisgrund*¹¹ and later developed in the first *Critique*, cannot be considered a rejection of Anselm's ontological argument. More importantly, I suggest that what has gone unnoticed in the current literature is the notion that Kant's understanding of existence in *Beweisgrund* seems to be the same as his understanding of existence in the first *Critique*; however Kant still supports an ontological argument in *Beweisgrund*, albeit his own version of it. With this understanding in mind, we begin to notice a continuity of thought in the way Kant treats existence. Therefore, we observe the 'so called' rejection of the argument on epistemological grounds, rather than ontological grounds. Remarkably, what we find in the period between the Pre-critical and Critical writing is not Kant's rejection of Anselm's ontological argument, or the argument *in toto*, but rather Kant replacing such arguments with his own 'quasi-ontological proof'. Consequently, Kant did not set out to reject the argument because he did not believe in God, as many contemporary commentators have argued; we know Kant believes in God up until his last days.¹² Rather, Kant was actively engaging in discovering alternatives.

I. Kant and the Theological 'Tradition'

Kant as a Christian thinker remains controversial to this day. Discussions regarding Kant and the theological 'tradition' raise several complications, namely what do we mean when we talk about the theological 'tradition' in relation to Kant. More challenging, is the fact that elementary misunderstandings of Kant's philosophical thought are still common, and serious Kant scholars often disagree about interpretations. Therefore, to avert the thorny question regarding tradition, when I speak of Kant and the theological tradition, I am specifically

¹⁰ In the *New Elucidation*, Kant first puts forward an argument for the existence of God, from the concept of possibility. Despite this, in *Beweisgrund* Kant offers the most developed proof for the existence of God via the concept of possibility. See *NE*, pp.1–45.

¹¹ It is noteworthy to mention that Kant in *RefI* 3706, sets out an early, but detailed criticism of the ontological argument for the existence of God. However, the dating is opaque; it may date as early as 1753 and as late as 1777. See, *RefI* 17:240-17:243.

¹² A742-744/B770-773; *CP&R*, 5:4, 108-114, 121, 125, 134-135; *LPR*, 28:1084; *OIT*, 8:139; *CJ*, 5:546; *OIT*, 8:142; *OP*, 22:115.

speaking of the Pietist tradition which Kant received, from thinkers such as August Hermann Francke, Christian Thomasius, and later Martin Knutzen. On the other hand, there is fortunately not the same level of controversy surrounding the philosophical tradition which Kant was associated with. Nonetheless, for clarity, when I speak of the philosophical tradition in regard to Kant, I am specifically speaking of the philosophical tradition he received from thinkers such as Christian Wolff, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and Christian August Crusius.

Kant’s intellectual formation was saturated in the categories of rationalist theology, which was heavily indebted to the scholastic tradition.¹³ Despite this, Kant does not himself read scholastic sources, although, he surprisingly makes several fleeting references to Anselm throughout his life. While there is always a certain amount of ‘thin ice’ under our feet when we approach Kant’s lectures, in 1783 Kant is said to have directly referred to Anselm as being ‘the first to try to establish the necessity of a highest being from mere concepts, proceeding from the concept of an *ens realissimum*’.¹⁴ To that end, in a *Reflexionen* (dating from as early 1780s) Kant refers to Anselm’s ‘ontotheology’.¹⁵ And in 1791 Kant writes of Leibniz adding to or supplementing Anselm’s argument.¹⁶ However, Kant’s most detailed comment on Anselm is from 1794, where he identifies Anselm as a ‘Parisian Scholastic’, who ‘first put forward the argument developed by Descartes and Leibniz’.¹⁷ Although Kant’s references to Anselm are ephemeral, they still substantiate that Kant was to some extent aware that Anselm was the first to attempt to formulate such an argument and that Leibniz developed it. Another important piece of evidence is John Henry Stuckenburgh’s report that Kant delivered a course of lectures on ‘criticism on [*sic*] the proofs of the divine existence’ prior to 1763.¹⁸ Again, neither did Anselm or Anselm’s argument feature in these lectures.

Kant’s direct references to Anselm raise two historical hurdles. First, the nature and the extent of Descartes’ acquaintance with Anselm’s work is controversial,¹⁹ and the same can also be said about Kant. On the one hand, Ian Logan argues that ‘it is clear from the lack of

¹³ Christopher Insole, ‘Free Belief: The Medieval heritage in Kant’s Moral Faith,’ *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 57, no.3 (2019): pp. 501-528.

¹⁴ *LPR*, 28:1003.

¹⁵ *GS*, XVIII, p. 500.

¹⁶ *GS*, XX, p. 349.

¹⁷ *GS*, XVIII, p. 782.

¹⁸ Proops, ‘Kant and the Ontological Argument’, note 37; also, J.H.W. Stuckenburgh, *The Life of Immanuel Kant* (London: Macmillan, 1882), p. 71.

¹⁹ Graham Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 5. Also, it is only in a letter sent to a Mersenne, after the publication of the *Meditations*, that Descartes mentions Anselm for the first time: ‘I shall look at Saint Anselm at the first opportunity.’ See John Cottingham et al, *The Philosophical Writing of Descartes, vol II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 46.

serious discussion of Anselm, that Kant was not directly acquainted with Anselm's work'.²⁰ Logan further posits, that it is obvious that 'Anselm's argument as an ontological argument (in the sense of that of Descartes and Leibniz) was based on the reports of others who were little or no better acquainted with Anselm than Kant himself'.²¹ However, on the contrary, Gregory Robson and Chris Heathwood maintain that Kant was not only well aware of Anselm's proof albeit, Descartes' revival of it in modified terms, but that 'Kant had in mind at the time of his writing the broader line of ontological proofs that ran from Anselm to Leibniz'.²² This is a decisive point, but one that seems misleading. How could Kant have Anselm's argument in mind, when Anselm's argument is not only distinctly different to that of Descartes and Leibniz's, but Kant's knowledge of Anselm's argument is nebulous?

Despite Robson and Heathwood's suggestion that both Descartes and Kant were well aware of Anselm's proof, there is resounding historical evidence against them. The first being, the initial dilution of Anselm's proof via Bonaventure, who was teaching at the University of Paris at the same time as Aquinas, and who was the first thirteenth-century thinker to pay serious attention to Anselm's ontological argument.²³ Here, Aquinas' criticism of Anselm's proof is most likely directed towards Bonaventure's ontological argument,²⁴ rather than Anselm's. Second, most seventeenth-century philosophers were only familiar with Anselm's proof via Thomas Aquinas' paraphrase in the opening sections of the *Summa Theologiae*.²⁵ Third, and astoundingly, it is this brief paraphrase from Aquinas that Descartes receives five centuries later through the Dutch Thomist theologian, Johannes Caterus, who accuses Descartes of borrowing it.²⁶ Fourth, due to the prominence of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* in the seventeenth-century, and the obscurity of Anselm-Gaunilo's exchange, Aquinas' passage from the *Summa*, not the *Proslogion*, serves as the backdrop for Descartes'

²⁰ Ian Logan, 'What Ever Happened to Kant's Ontological Argument?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007), p. 348.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.348.

²² Gregory Robson, 'The Ontological Proof: Kant's Objections, Plantinga's Reply', *Kant Studies Online* (2012): pp. 126–7; and Chris Heathwood, 'The Relevance of Kant's Objection to Anselm's Ontological Argument', *Religious Studies* 47 (2010).

²³ See Brian Leftow, 'Aquinas', in Graham Oppy, ed., *Ontological Arguments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 44–53. I thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

²⁴ See, Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, 4 vols* (Quaracchi, 1934–39); also, Bernardino Bonansea, 'The Ontological Argument: Proponents and Opponents', in John K. Ryan *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy* (Catholic University of America Press, 1973).

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Iq, que. 2.

²⁶ Kevin J. Harrelson, *The Ontological Argument From Anselm to Hegel* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), pp. 18-21.

argumentum cartesianum.²⁷ Even more problematic for Robson and Heathwood's thesis is the arduous work historians have carried out on the unstated targets of Kant's various criticism; nowhere in these works does Anselm or Anselm's argument feature.²⁸

II. The *Beweisgrund*

Kant, in *Beweisgrund* searches for, and claims to postulate, a proof in support of a theistic God. He affirms that his 'procedure will be like that of someone who is searching for a definition'.²⁹ The search for such a proof is an inherently theological project, beginning with Anselm, who 'began to wonder if perhaps it might be possible to find one single argument that for its proof required no other save itself, and that by itself would suffice to prove that God really exists'.³⁰ Despite undertaking similar theological projects, Anselm does not make his claim in the mode of an analytic philosopher searching for a definition, but in the mode of a pastor trying to provide resources for spiritual translation. Furthermore, Kant affirms that his argument is 'a proof which can be conducted entirely *a priori*'. That is, it 'presupposes neither my own existence, nor that of other minds, nor that of the physical world'.³¹ Kant's argument, or rather his proof, is of the ontological kind, even though he had not yet introduced this term (*ontologischer Beweis*) until the Critical period. More importantly, Kant's proof is based on the putatively *a priori* truth that 'something is possible (*etwas möglich ist*)'.³²

The comment that has fostered the most critical attention in *Beweisgrund*, comes in Kant's maxim that 'existence is not a predicate' (*Das Dasein ist gar kein Prädicat*). This statement has been taken to be the most successful rejection of the ontological argument. I will make it clear that such an observation is surprising in relation to both Kant and Anselm. In the process of apparently rejecting the ontological argument in *Beweisgrund*, Kant's proof at the same time subscribes to his own criticism that existence is not a predicate. What we will see, is

²⁷ In his classical work, *Der Ontologische Gottesbeweis Sein Problem und seine Geschichte in der Neuzeit* (Tübingen: J.C. B. Mohr, 1960), Dieter Henrich argued that Descartes brought the ontological argument back into discussion by reviving Anselm's argument after criticism by Thomas Aquinas had diminished its popularity in the late middle ages.

²⁸ Wolfgang Röd, *Der Gott der reinen Vernunft: Ontologischer Gottesbeweis und rationalistische Philosophie* (München; Verlag C.H. Beck, 2009); Dieter Henrich, *Der Ontologische Gottesbeweis*; and the most recent Uygur Abaci, *Kant's Revolutionary Theory of Modality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 79–89.

²⁹ *OPA*, 2:71.

³⁰ *Prosl Preface*, p. 87.

³¹ *OPA*, 2:91.

³² *OPA*, 2:91.

that Kant is essentially able to clear this conceptual, or rather semantic, hurdle because his proof does not merely move from a conceptual ground (*in intellectu*) to its analytical result (*in re*). Rather, in his proof, 'the divine existence as a ground is concluded from the possible as a result'.³³ Here, Andrew Chignell becomes a helpful point of orientation to understand how Kant's argument is both synthetic and *a priori*:

Kant is not arguing from the mere idea of a supremely perfect being to its real existence (Cartesian proof). Rather, he is starting with what is given *a priori*— truths about real possibilities— and regressively inferring conclusions about what must actually exist in order for these truths to be *made true*.³⁴

Chignell's description is somewhat similar to Anselm's analogy of the painter. For the painter, the starting point is *a priori* (*in intellectu*) and then it regressively culminates with the conceptual breaching the real (the painting actually existing). In this instance, much like Kant, Anselm substantiates that something can *actually exist a priori* as well as in reality. In this regard, Kant's proof goes beyond the Cartesian argument, in that Kant does not assume that the metaphysical lacuna, from the conceptual to the real, is easily overcome by adding the predicate 'perfect' to God. For Kant, the additional modal 'possible' stands in for this metaphysical movement to draw a logical *a priori* conclusion. Interestingly, this results in the proof not 'violating Kant's later strictures against analytic existence-claims; it is thus structurally similar to the arguments he will call transcendental deductions'.³⁵ This observation becomes profoundly important for my subsequent discussion of the argument in Kant's Critical period.

When Kant says that 'existence is not a predicate' he understands this in two ways. First, Kant elucidates that there is no ontological or semantic advantage of tacking-on 'existence' as a predicate to something. Kant gives the following example:

If I say God is omnipotent, all that is being thought is this logical relation between God and omnipotence, for the latter is a characteristic mark of the former. Nothing else is being posited here. Whether God is, that is to say, whether God is posited absolutely or exists, is not contained in the original assertion at all.³⁶

What Kant means by this, is that when I hear the word 'omnipotent' I understand its meaning and I simply apply its meaning to the concept of God. Consequently, all I am determining is that I know what 'omnipotence' means, rather than offering a probative conclusion that

³³ OPA, 2:156.

³⁴ Andrew Chignell, 'Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 91, no.2 (2009): p. 164.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ OPA, 2:74.

God is *actually* this or that ('I am merely speaking of the predicates of that thing').³⁷ Second, 'nothing more is determined by a possibly existent thing than an existent thing'.³⁸ This is Kant's initial movement in favour of the modal principle 'possibility'. I will not discuss here Kant's understanding of 'possibility' as it is the focal point of discussion in the following section.

As a result of Kant's criticism, existence cannot be applied to God. As Kant explains:

If I say: 'God is an existent thing' it looks as if I am expressing the relation of a predicate to a subject. But there is an impropriety in this expression. Strictly speaking, the matter ought to be formulated like this: 'something existent is God. In other words, there belongs to an existent thing those predicates which, taken together, we designate by means of the expression 'God'. These predicates are posited relative to the subject, whereas the thing itself, together with all its predicates, is posited absolutely.'³⁹

While this is a semantic thesis, Kant's main idea here is that 'a sentence ascribing extension to something is meaningless, rather than truth-valued'.⁴⁰ What this means is that the predicate 'existence' should only be one predicate in a long list of predicates, or rather attributes which pertain to God (these can be understood in terms of non-intentional predicates). If one is to claim that God 'exists' (extension), this does not posit anything about God's *actual* existence, but is instead a reductive sentence that misaligns subject and predicate. The predicate 'exists' does not tell us anything about the nature of the subject it is being syntactically correlated to. As a result, by applying the predicate 'existence' to a subject, namely God, it does not tell us anything about the subject God or God's existence, but only about the predicate itself. In short, existence cannot stand in as a logical predicate for other predicates. Rather, these predicates must be posited relative to the subject (God), not existence. Consequently, it is this understanding which provides the framework for the identification of God as the *ens realissimum*. The being that essentially 'exemplifies a maximal version of every fundamental positive predicate of reality (*realitas*) which can be possessed by anything else'.⁴¹ As God states, '*sum qui sum*' (Exodus 3:14). God exists in such a way that his insatiable nature is implied in his existence. God's essence either contains existence as a component or contains predicates that logically entail his existence.⁴²

³⁷ OPA, 2:75; A596-601/ B624-629.

³⁸ Kant gives the example of Julius Caesar (OPA, 2: 72).

³⁹ OPA, 2:74.

⁴⁰ Chignell, 'Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being', p. 175.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.158.

⁴² Nicholas Stang, *Kant's Modal Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University press), p. 27.

What is most striking about Kant's criticism of the ontological argument, both in *Beweisgrund* and the first *Critique* under the titled 'On the impossibility of an ontological proof of God's Existence'⁴³, is that the standard criticism of the ontological argument (existence is not a predicate) originates from Kant's own attempt at proving such an argument to be valid. Even more interesting is that Kant's argument was rejected and rarely discussed as a serious contender to the popular Baumgartian argument of the time. Moses Mendelssohn severely criticised Kant's argument, suggesting that it neither supplanted Baumgarten's argument, nor contributed to the argument in any way.⁴⁴ Mendelssohn's criticism may be the reason owing to the obscure status that Kant's argument has held in the history of the ontological argument.

III. Possibility and Necessity

Before Kant reaches his conclusion that 'this necessary being' (*Das nothwendige Wesen*) 'is a God' (*ist ein Gott*)⁴⁵ he first outlines two central concepts in his argument. The first is the concept of possibility (*Möglichkeit*), and the second is the concept of absolute necessity (*absolute Notwendigkeit*). In this section, I will only provide a cursory account of these concepts as several commentators have already meticulously reconstructed them; it is, thus, not my intention to offer new avenues of interpreting Kant's argument. Instead, I will follow in the popular trend of modal logic.

Kant has a bifurcated understanding of possibility. For Kant, there is logical possibility⁴⁶ and material possibility.⁴⁷ Here, I will bracket material possibility because, for Kant, God's existence is a material possibility. Material possibility according to Kant always 'presupposes something real'.⁴⁸ However, Kant draws a further distinction, claiming that:

- (1a) The possible can only be thought insofar as it is itself real, and the possibility is given as a determination existing within the real (a fiery body)

Or

⁴³ A492-603/B620-631.

⁴⁴ Paul Guyer, *Reason and Experience in Mendelssohn and Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.99; 75-102.

⁴⁵ *OPA*, 2:83; 2:89.

⁴⁶ *OPA*, 2:77.

⁴⁷ *OPA*, 2:80-81.

⁴⁸ *OPA*, 2:79.

(1b) It is possible as a consequence through another existence.⁴⁹

Here, possibility is understood as either a consequence (2b) or a determination (2a). What Kant means by this is that a possibility, which has not yet arrived at a certainty (something real), still has the material possibility to arrive at a certainty (something real). In line with this logic, Kant then asserts that we must accept the statement, 'it is a possibility that a necessary being exists', as a reality. With this understanding in mind, a possibility can necessarily be a real thing, or a true statement (truth-maker). Kant then deduces that 'if something is possible, there exists a ground of this possibility'.⁵⁰ On this point, Nicholas Stang correctly articulates that when Kant talks about 'a ground of possibility' (*Grund der Möglichkeit*) 'he is referring to God's unlimited powers: the infinite powers of God are possible because they are actually instantiated by God'.⁵¹

One of the central concepts in Kant's *Beweisgrund* is the concept of 'absolute necessity' (*Absolute Notwendigkeit*). According to Kant, absolute necessity is the notion that all possibility must be grounded in a single necessarily existing substance: 'it is, indeed, an argument derived from the internal characteristic mark of absolute necessity'.⁵² Before continuing, it is important to be in a position where we have a comprehensive understanding of Kant's definition of absolute necessity:

(2a) It is absolutely necessary that p just in case not-p cancels all possibility (law of non-contradiction).

Which should be understood as

(2b) It is absolutely necessary that p just in case, were it the case that not-p, nothing would be really possible.

This directly entails that:

(2c) For any x if x exists, x exists absolutely necessarily just in case were x not to exist, nothing would be possible.⁵³

In short, if a necessarily existing being did not exist necessarily, nothing would be possible.

⁴⁹ OPA, 2:79.

⁵⁰ OPA, 2:83.

⁵¹ Nicholas Stang, 'Kant's Possibility Proof', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27, no.3 (2010): p, 281.

⁵² OPA, 2:91.

⁵³ For this reconstruction I am indebted to Nicholas Stang, 'Kant's Possibility Proof', p. 284.

While Kant later identifies absolute necessity with God, he does not do this until the concluding remarks of the second section of *Beweisgrund*. Up until the final remarks, Kant's 'Being' is simply a necessary being, not the Christian monotheistic God. However, Kant's proof of the existence of a necessary being segues into proof that there is a unique being that exists absolutely necessarily:

From the mere fact that something exists absolutely necessarily it is possible to infer that something is a first cause of something else. But from the fact that something is a first cause, that is to say, an independent cause, it only follows that, if the effects exist then the cause must also exist, not that the cause exists absolutely necessarily.⁵⁴

In modal terms:

For any proposition *p*, it is necessary that *p*, if and only if there is a (finite) demonstration, that *p* forms identities and real definitions of the constituent of *p*. Since God exists necessarily, there is a demonstration of his existence from his real definition (and perhaps from the real definition of <existence>. God's essence either contains existence as a component or contains predicates that logically entail his existence.⁵⁵

What this means, is that the necessary being is logically grounded in the essence of existence and thus entails all predicates as the *ens realissimum*. From this understanding, we arrive at two conclusions. First, according to Kant, absolute possibility exists: 'all possibility presupposes something actual in and through which all that can be thought is given'.⁵⁶ Second, absolute necessity actually exists, and this means that something real is possible. Because something real is possible—this means it can be logically inferred that it is possible a necessary being exists necessarily. It is key here, to understand that Kant's concept of absolute necessity and possibility are not mutually exclusive, but they are synonymous because for Kant the 'necessary being contains supreme reality'⁵⁷ (*Das nothwendige Wesen enthält die höchste Realität*). Furthermore, once Kant establishes that this necessary being is 'unique', 'simple', 'immutable' and 'eternal', 'supreme reality' (*enthält die höchste Realität*), and 'a mind',⁵⁸ he then identifies this existent necessary being as God:

There exists something absolutely necessarily. It is one in its essence; it is simple in its substance; it is a mind according to its nature; it is eternal in its duration; it is immutable in its constitution; and it is all-sufficient in respect of all that is possible and real. It is a god.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ OPA, 2:91.

⁵⁵ Stang, *Kant's Modal Metaphysics*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ OPA, 2:83.

⁵⁷ OPA, 2:85.

⁵⁸ OPA, 2:83-89.

⁵⁹ OPA, 2:89.

As I will make clear in a later section, such an understanding of God and God's existence is consistent with Anselm's identification of God as 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'.

IV. The *Proslogion* and the *Beweisgrund*

Commonly attributed to Anselm and Kant, is the perfect being argument, which Graham Oppy articulates in the following terms:

- (1) God is a being which has every perfection. (Definition)
- (2) Existence is a perfection. (Premise)
- (3) (Hence) God exists. (From 1, 2).⁶⁰

The perfect being argument, sets out to offer a proof that God has all perfections, as well as showing that existence is a perfection (*ens perfectissimum*). However, this is not an argument sustained in Anselm's or Kant's texts. In the *Beiwsegrund*, Kant describes the necessary being as: 'unique' (*einig*), 'simple' (*einfach*), 'immutable and eternal' (*unveränderlich und ewig*), 'supreme reality' (*enthält die höchste Realität*), and 'a mind' (*ein Gesit*).⁶¹ In the *Proslogion*, Anselm writes that God is: 'life' (*Vita*), 'wisdom' (*sapientia*), 'truth' (*veritas*), 'goodness' (*bonitas*), 'happiness' (*beatitudo*), 'eternity' (*aeternitas*), and 'true good' (*omne verum bonum*).⁶² While these lists of attributes are relatively traditional in both Anselm and Kant's respective contexts, Anselm's omission of the predicate 'perfection' or 'most perfect' (*perfectum; solistimus*) is interesting. Nowhere in the *Proslogion* does Anselm identify God with 'perfection'. Kant, like Anselm, omits the predicate 'perfection' when talking about God. Kant articulates that: 'Nowhere in any of the arguments belonging to my proof and presented thus far has mention been made of the expression perfection' (*vollkommenheit*).⁶³ This is because Kant 'came to notice that the expression 'perfection' in some cases deviated fairly widely from the proper sense of the term because of the uncertainty which is inherent to all language'.⁶⁴ Such an understanding marks Kant's earliest rupture

⁶⁰ Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, p. 47.

⁶¹ *OPA*, 2:89.

⁶² *Prosl* 18, p. 98.

⁶³ *OPA*, 2:90.

⁶⁴ *OPA*, 2:90.

with the rationalist ontological argument, which places a significant emphasis on the relation between God and perfection.⁶⁵

Besides the predicates already noted, Anselm does not merely posit that God exists most truly, but that God 'has existence': 'You among all things have existence most truly, and therefore most greatly; for whatever else exists has existence less truly, and therefore less greatly'.⁶⁶ According to Anselm, to 'exist' and to 'have existence' can be considered two very different metaphysical statements, for human beings have existence less truly in comparison to God. For Anselm, God does not simply exist, both temporally and spatially, but rather God embodies existence as a divine power.⁶⁷ Anselm further reinforces this divine capability in God, stating that:

Indeed you exist neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow but are absolutely outside all time. For yesterday and today and tomorrow are completely in time; however, You, though nothing can be without You, are nevertheless not in place or time but all things are in You.⁶⁸

According to Anselm, God has neither 'past nor future existence but only present existence' and nor can God 'be thought not to exist at any time'.⁶⁹ Here, Kant is in agreement with such an understanding of God when he claims that 'it's non-being is absolutely impossible, and so too, therefore, are its coming-to-be and its passing-away'.⁷⁰ From these passages it is evident that Anselm's description of God and God's relation to existence and reality resembles Kant's identification of God as supreme reality (*enthält die höchste Realität*) and the *ens realissimum*. For Kant, 'all realities are attributed indiscriminately as predicates to God or to the necessary being'.⁷¹ In more detail Kant writes, 'not only is all other reality given through the necessary being as its ground, but also that the greatest possible reality capable of being contained in a being as a determination inheres in the necessary being'.⁷² Again, Kant reinforces the notion that God does not simply exist, but contains supreme reality: 'such a being is, therefore, the most real of all possible beings, for all other beings are only possible through it alone'.⁷³

⁶⁵ See George Wilhelm, Leibniz, 'Monadology', in Robert Latta, ed., *The Monadology and Other Writing*, §41, p.240.

⁶⁶ *Prosl* 3, p. 88.

⁶⁷ Isaac Newton introduces the notion of space as the 'divine sensorium' in Queries 28 and 31 of his *Optiks*. See Isaac Newton, 'Extracts from the Opticks: End of Query 28 (1706)', in H.G. Alexander, ed., *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), pp. 171–83, 174.

⁶⁸ *Prosl* 22, p.100.

⁶⁹ *Prosl* 22, p.100.

⁷⁰ *OPA*, 2:85.

⁷¹ *OPA*, 2:86.

⁷² *OPA*, 2:87.

⁷³ *OPA*, 2:85.

Kant's statement shares a striking similarity to Anselm's claim: 'But clearly, whatever You are, You are not that through another but through Your very self. You are therefore the very life by which You live';⁷⁴ in Kantian terms God is the '*complexus aggregatum* of all realities',⁷⁵ expressed as the *ens realissimum*.

From these passages we can observe that for Anselm and Kant the *ens realissimum* is irreducibly important, whereby both authors strongly maintain that 'all other substances only exist in dependence upon God', this includes reality itself.⁷⁶ Furthermore, both authors adopt analytical examinations of the relationship between predicates, God, and existence to postulate that God must have the Ground of Himself within Himself. While Kant claims that 'existence is not a predicate', in the same vein he substitutes the syntactic position of the predicate 'existence' for the modal 'possibly', resulting in his ontological argument relating synonymously to the notion of God's existence by way of possibility. Furthermore, both Anselm and Kant hypothesise that the notion of being and reality is intrinsically posited in God; that is to say, God does not simply exist, but rather God is existence and reality. Such a reading of Anselm's *Proslogion* alongside Kant's *Beiwsgrund* reveals that Kant and Anselm identify what God is in a very similar way. More importantly, by focusing on the entirety of the *Proslogion* what emerges is Anselm's understanding and identification that God does not depend on existence being a predicate. When Anselm states, 'we believe You to be something than which nothing greater can be thought' nowhere in this statement does Anselm require existence to be a predicate. What Anselm does require, as does Kant, is that 'all reality must either be given as a determination in the necessary being, or it must be given through the necessary being as through a ground'.⁷⁷ As a result, God must necessarily exist, and therefore, God in these terms Anselm would understand as the *ens realissimum*.

V. The reductio and the Laws of non-contradiction

Kant and Anselm both adhere to the rhetorical argumentative device, the *reductio ad absurdum*, to reveal the logical absurdity in the statement 'that nothing at all exists'. For Anselm this is articulated in the following:

⁷⁴ *Prosl* 5, p. 89.

⁷⁵ *RPT*, 8:400.

⁷⁶ *OPA*, 2:91; *Prosl* 3, p. 88.

⁷⁷ *OPA*, 2:89.

'If something than which nothing greater can be thought' (*T*)

And for Kant:

'Its non-being is absolutely impossible' (*I*),

If these propositions can be thought not to exist, then this understanding or concept is not referring to *T* or *I*. Here, Anselm draws an epistemic distinction between the thought of an object and the understanding an object; for Anselm these are two very different concepts. Anselm articulates, 'for in one sense a thing is thought when the word signifies it is thought; in another sense when the very object which the thing is understood'.⁷⁸ Essentially what this means is that God can be 'thought' not to exist, but God cannot be 'understood' not to exist. This is because, 'no one, indeed, understanding what God is can think God does not exist'.⁷⁹ It is important to bear this in mind when navigating Anselm's *reductio*; one must first truly understand, not just think that God is 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'".

Anselm and Kant further maintain, that it is logically impossible to claim that God does not exist because 'all other reality is given through the necessary being as its ground'.⁸⁰ As a result of this, actuality is reality, and actuality and reality are the greatest which can be thought, as made clear by Anselm, when he states that it is greater to exist in reality than simply the mind. Therefore, it is conclusive that premise *I* and *T* are actual, and it would be absurd to deduce that *I* and *T* do not exist on the basis that if *I* or *T* can be thought not to exist than *I* and *T* are not the same as *I* and *T* but are something else entirely, *X* and *Y*. As a result, both Anselm and Kant's premises, *I* and *T*, are determinable by logic, and from this logic it can be inferred that premise *I* and *T* can be identified with God. Here Anselm informs us that, 'whoever really understands this [*T*] understands clearly that this same being so exists that not even in thought can it not exist. Thus, whoever understands that God exists in such a way cannot think of Him not existing'.⁸¹ What Anselm means by this is that 'God is indeed proven to exist most truly and maximally',⁸² but this verification depends on premise *T*. It is not a 'necessity', as Kant maintains, nor is it a definition. To that end, Anselm also rejects Gaunilo's misrepresentation of his formula as 'the most excellent of all things', since, as he says in *Reply 5*: 'For "greater than everything" does not have the same force for the purposes of proving that what is spoken of exists as "something than which nothing greater can be thought"'.⁸³

⁷⁸ *Prosl* 4, pp.88–9.

⁷⁹ *Prosl* 4, p. 89.

⁸⁰ *OPA*, 2:87.

⁸¹ *Prosl* 4, p. 89.

⁸² *Prosl* 3, p. 88.

⁸³ *Reply* 5, p. 116.

Anselm and Kant also emphasise the linguistic importance of the copulative 'is'. For Anselm and Kant, the copulative 'is' connects the subject with a predicate, thus establishing the subject's or object's relation to our thinking or understanding. However, in Anselm's case the 'is' in premise *G* is not a predicate, such as 'omnipotent', 'omnibenevolent,' or 'omnipresent', but rather a complex strand of predicates, much like in Kant's argument. More importantly, this results in Kant's central criticism of the ontological argument, (existence is not a real predicate of a thing), having no consequence on Anselm's ontological argument. Anselm does not apply the predicate 'existence' to God. Interestingly, and largely undeveloped by Plantinga, is the notion that Anselm and Kant's shared understanding and identification of God lies in the existential 'is'. The existential 'is' for Anselm and Kant does not add a new predicate to the subject, God. Lewis White Beck articulates this notion when he suggests that 'this is mainly because in theological terms the subject of God can only be understood outside of all simple predicates'.⁸⁴

The way in which Anselm and Kant examine objects functions as a crucial point of interest. Anselm claims that, 'it is one thing for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that an object actually exists'.⁸⁵ Similarly, Kant poses the question, 'Can it properly be said that there is more in existence than there is in merely a possible existent thing?'⁸⁶ While Kant substitutes the word 'mind' for 'a merely possible thing' both propositions attempt to establish the grounds upon which something can exist, thus deducing that existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind. Here, Kant suggests that 'more is posited through an existent thing than is posited through a merely possible thing',⁸⁷ which is profoundly similar to Anselm's proposition that it 'is greater for something to exist in reality than solely in the mind'. In this instance, both authors are in agreement that it is greater for something to exist in reality than solely in the mind. Central to Kant's understanding of God is the idea that there is a presupposition that the totality of reality and existence are synonymous with God.

When Kant talks of the unanalysable concept of existence it has an intrinsically divine nature, a nature beyond our physical understanding of it. Nonetheless, while the unanalysable concept of existence lies beyond human beings' cognitive capabilities, this does not matter,

⁸⁴ Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy: Kant and his Predecessors* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 439.

⁸⁵ *Prosl* 2, p. 87.

⁸⁶ *OPA*, 2:72.

⁸⁷ *OPA*, 2:72.

because it is sustained by a single infinite being, which is characterised as God, whose existence also lies beyond our faculty of cognition. Despite this absence of evidence sufficient for knowledge of God's existence, or non-existence, this should not be taken as an argument for atheism or agnosticism. For Kant finds it 'providential' that God has not permitted such knowledge. Kant even tells us that we should 'thank heaven' that 'our faith [*Glaube*] is not knowledge: For divine wisdom is apparent in the very fact that we do not know but rather ought to believe that a God exists'.⁸⁸ Evidently, this leads Kant towards a metaphysics that unequivocally affirms there is a naturally divine telos in the world brought into existence by God. In contrast to Anselm, who believes that this divine telos is embedded deep within an individual's intuition, Kant understands it to be ingrained in existence as a thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have not intended to read Kant through 'theological spectacles'.⁸⁹ Rather, I set out to dispel a common misconception that when we separate the 'perceived' Kant, *alleszermalmenden*,⁹⁰ from the 'textual' Kant, (one much more engaged in philosophical theology) the possibility of providing new avenues of interpretation arise. To that end, in this paper I have maintained, that I do not support the argument that Kant and Anselm's ontological arguments are the same sort of argument. Nor have I supported the argument that Kant can be read as a sort of 'modern theologian'.⁹¹ Kant believes in God, but he is not a Christian.⁹²

I have set out to achieve three interrelated goals in this paper. First, to show that both iterations of Kant's rejection of the ontological argument in the Critical and pre-Critical period do not apply to Anselm, on the basis that Anselm's argument does not require existence to be a predicate. Second, when this conceptual confusion is jettisoned,

⁸⁸ LPR, 28:1084

⁸⁹ Philip J. Rossi, 'Reading Kant Through Theological Spectacles', in Chris L. Fire Stone and Stephen Palmquist, ed., *Kant and the new Philosophy of Religion*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), pp.107–23.

⁹⁰ Moses Mendelsohn, *Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe*, eds., Alexander Altmann et al (Akademie-Verlag: Berlin, 1990), p. 3.2:3.

⁹¹ As expressed by Kevin W. Hector in, *The Theological Project of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2

⁹² In his work, *Kant and the Divine: From Contemplation to the Moral Law*, Christopher Insole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), expresses this sentiment comprehensively.

three primary similarities between Anselm and Kant's ontological arguments become more noticeable. Third, and of most importance, is the suggestion that when we read Anselm's phrase, 'Something than which nothing greater can be thought', alongside Kant, we witness a resounding familiarity to Kant's identification of God as the *ens realissimum* and Kant's statement, 'something existent is God'. Moreover, I have suggested that a logical conclusion can be drawn that Kant had no textual evidence of what Anselm's ontological argument looked like. The same, however, cannot be said about the Cartesian ontological argument put forward by Descartes, and subsequently developed by Leibniz, and Woolf, whom Kant openly rejects in the concluding remarks of the *Beweisgrund*.⁹³

Lastly, in this study I have sought to contribute to the shifting pre-conceptions of the relationship between Anselm, Kant, and the ontological argument. While I am aware that Kant denies the possibility of any knowledge of God's existence or non-existence in the first *Critique*,⁹⁴ this only strengthens the epistemological similarities between Kant and Anselm, in that Anselm maintains the notion that God himself remains altogether unknowable, in so far as the divine nature exceeds the spatio-temporal constructs of human knowledge.⁹⁵ Although, it is true that the epistemic status of God shifts in Kant's Critical period, what does not shift is his understanding of what God *is*. Most importantly, I have argued that Kant offers no successful objection to either his own ontological argument set out in *Beweisgrund* or in the first *Critique*. Surprisingly, Kant does not even mention the possibility proof he sets out in *Beweisgrund* in his refutation of the three possible proofs of God's existence in the *Critique*.⁹⁶ In light of this, I have aimed to challenge current trends in Kant studies, which suggest that Kant's Pre-critical philosophy is a sort of divine metaphysical speculation he abandons when he sets the boundaries of knowledge with the publication of the first *Critique*; this is simply not true. There is far more

⁹³ *OPA*, 2:162.

⁹⁴ A590/B618-A742-44; A742-44-B770-72.

⁹⁵ *Prosl* 1, 19, 20, pp. 85-7; 98, 99.

⁹⁶ For the most recent discussion on this point see Michael Oberst, 'The Possibility Proof is Not What Remains from Kant's *Beweisgrund*', *Kantian Review* 25, no.2 (2020): 219. (See A/591/B619, A630/B658).

continuity between Kant's understanding of God and the ontological argument in his Pre-critical and Critical period than has been previously observed.⁹⁷

Morgan Keith Jackson
Department of Studies in Religion,
Durham University, Department of Theology and Religion and The University of
Sydney
12 Landridge Road, Fulham
London
SW6 4LD

mjac3670@alumni.sydney.edu.au m.k.jackson@dunlem.ac.uk

⁹⁷ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers at New Blackfriars for their insightful comments and making clear to me important historical evidence that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. I would also like to thank Gary Wade and Elizabeth Jackson, who were instrumental in getting this piece into scholarly shape.