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Rationalism and Kant's Rejection of the Ontological Argument

DAI HEIDE*

ABSTRACT Kant rejects the ontological argument on the grounds that the ontological argument inescapably must assume that existence is a “determination” or “real predicate,” which it is not. Most understand Kant’s argument for this claim to be premised upon his distinctive proto-Fregean theory of existence. But this leaves Kant dialectically vulnerable: the defender of the ontological argument can easily reject this as question-begging. I show that Kant relies upon two distinct arguments, both of which contend that the claim that existence is a determination is inconsistent with bedrock ontological set pieces assumed by rationalist defenders of the ontological argument.

KEYWORDS Kant, ontological argument, modality, existence, rationalism, creation

KANT’S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ONTOLOGICAL argument for the existence of God is significant for at least two reasons. First, Kant offers what is probably the most widely accepted objection to the ontological argument in the history of philosophy. This objection says that existence is not a “determination” or “real predicate” of things; Kant holds that the ontological argument inescapably must assume that existence *is* a determination, and thus that it fails. Second, Kant offers an alternative positive account of existence according to which existence is instead “absolute positing” (*OPA*, Ak. 2:73).¹ This view is widely understood as anticipating a Fregean nonqualitative conception of existence according to which ‘exists’ functions as an operator rather than as a predicate (for example, the existential quantifier), and, as such, does not contribute qualitatively or semantically to the contents of other concepts or judgments to which it applies. For this reason, Kant’s positive theory of existence is of serious interest even to those who are not especially interested in the history of philosophy or rational theology.

¹All references to Kant’s works are to the volume and page number of the Akademie edition (*Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*) except for references to the *Critique of Pure Reason (CPR)*, which is cited according to the standard A/B pagination, where ‘A’ refers to the first (1781) edition of the text and ‘B’ refers to the second (1787) edition. When an unpublished reflection is cited, the Akademie pagination will be preceded by an “R” and a number. Translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Complete Works of Immanuel Kant*.

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The question that I shall ask in this essay is this: in objecting to the ontological argument, how does Kant aim to establish that existence is not a “determination” or “real predicate” of things? In other words, what is Kant’s *argument* for the claim that he takes to be devastating to the ontological argument? Of course, this question has been asked frequently in the scholarly literature, and a durable consensus has emerged: many scholars contend that Kant’s claim that existence is not a determination is premised upon his positive theory of existence. Many extant interpretations see Kant as beginning with a (logical, semantic, or metaphysical) claim about existence and concluding, on its basis, that existence is not a determination.

I outline the consensus interpretation in more detail in the next section, but at first blush it is easy to see why it is attractive. First, several passages in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and Kant’s 1763 *Only Possible Argument* are easily understood as setting out precisely this argument. Second, the inference upon which the argument trades is plausibly valid: if Kant begins with the view that ‘exists’ is an operator rather than a predicate, the conclusion that existence is not a determination (or predicate or property) follows straightforwardly. Finally, understanding the argument in this manner offers interested parties an objection to the ontological argument that is widely acceptable from a contemporary perspective, given that the usual candidates for Kant’s positive theory of existence are consistent with contemporary quantificational accounts of existence.

In what follows, I do not deny that Kant gives an argument of the sort the consensus interpretation understands him to give. Instead, I argue for two claims. First, I argue that the consensus interpretation leaves Kant dialectically vulnerable when this argument is understood in its historical context. Second, I argue that the scholarly literature has largely missed two alternative arguments Kant gives for the claim that existence is not a determination, both of which incorporate a distinctive and considerably more dialectically compelling strategy for objecting to the ontological argument as it was advanced by the rationalists with whom Kant is primarily concerned. I spend much of this essay exposing these arguments and defending them from the perspective of Kant’s historical situation. Together, I argue, they constitute a unified attack on a version of the ontological argument found in Descartes and widely taken up by the German rationalists. I close the essay by briefly arguing that the interpretation set out in this paper suggests an alternative interpretation of Kant’s grounds for accepting his positive theory of existence as absolute positing: Kant may have accepted this claim precisely *because* he rejects the view that existence is a determination.

I. THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND THE CONSENSUS INTERPRETATION

Kant often refers to the ontological argument that he is targeting as the “Cartesian proof.”² It is standardly thought that Kant is especially concerned with developments of Descartes’s ontological argument in Meditation V by Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten. Versions of the ontological argument by each of these

²See e.g. A 602/B 630; cf. R 3706 (Ak. 17:240); R 5506 (Ak. 18:202); and Ak. 8:138.

philosophers assume a perfectionist ontological picture. These arguments begin from the concept of God as the *ens perfectissimum* or the *ens realissimum*—the most perfect or most real being.³ On this view, the concept of God is the concept of a being that instantiates *all* or the *most really possible* primitive perfections to the maximum degree in a single substance.⁴ A perfection is regarded as a qualitative ontological element that can be instantiated in greater or lesser degrees.⁵ For example, benevolence may be regarded as a perfection: one can be more or less benevolent, and there is presumably a maximum degree of benevolence, or what one might refer to as “perfect benevolence.” On some ontological pictures, all aspects of metaphysical reality are explained by appeal to degrees of perfections: what we might think of as negative ways of being (darkness, coldness) are explained as mere negations or privations of certain perfections (light, heat) rather than as primitive positive ways of being in their own right. On this “privative” conception of reality, apparently opposed qualities are understood as mere degrees (or absences) of a single quality. On other ontological pictures, including Kant’s own, reality contains genuine metaphysical opposition: some apparently opposed qualities are in fact genuinely opposed in the sense that one cannot be explained as a mere lack, or lesser degree, of the other.⁶ Furthermore, on some pictures, some aspects of reality fail to be perfections precisely because they lack a maximum degree. Extension, for example, is sometimes thought to require a nonperfectionist explanation because of its infinitude.⁷

³Older versions of the argument take the concept of God to be the concept of the *ens perfectissimum*: the being that contains all the perfections, or realities, to the maximum degree. For example, Descartes begins his proof by defining God as a “supremely perfect being,” which he explicates as a being that “has all perfections” (CSM 2:45–46). Kant, like Baumgarten, prefers to regard the concept of God as the concept of an *ens realissimum*: the being that coinstantiates as many realities or perfections as possible and to the maximum degree. Kant’s motivation for preferring the latter characterization is that he, following Leibniz, holds that the concept of an *ens perfectissimum* itself requires proof of possibility: it may not be possible for any being to instantiate all the realities or perfections to the maximum degree. Kant resolves this worry by regarding the concept of God as the concept of an *ens realissimum*: a being that coinstantiates as many realities (to the maximum degree) as is really possible. See e.g. A 576/B 604 and Ak. 28:1014. For extensive discussion of Leibniz’s engagement with this issue, see Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, ch. 5.

⁴I say “primitive” perfections here simply to forestall the objection that there are various properties that one might regard as perfections that God does not plausibly instantiate, for example, heat or redness. It is open to the metaphysical perfectionist to insist that God instantiates only a set of primitive perfections and to hold that some perfections are derivative. For discussion of this point, see Chignell, “Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being.”

⁵‘Perfection’ is not the only term used to pick out positive ways of being in this philosophical tradition. Some philosophers use ‘reality’ in place of, but equivalently to, ‘perfection,’ as Kant does in some of his own formulations of the ontological argument, including the one quoted in the main text below. In 1763, Kant exclusively uses ‘determination’ to discuss the properties understood to be instantiated essentially by God. While he does not explicitly define the term there, in his 1755 “New Elucidation,” Kant says that “to determine is to posit a predicate while excluding its opposite” (Ak. 1:391).

⁶For Kant’s most detailed exposition of this view, see his “Negative Magnitudes,” which he published in 1763, the same year as the *OPA*. For detailed discussion of these competing conceptions of metaphysical reality in the Leibnizian and Kantian philosophical systems, see Hogan, “Metaphysical Motives”; and Newlands, “Theism to Idealism.”

⁷See, for example, Leibniz, *Discourse*, §1, AG 35.

Here is how Kant reconstructs the ontological argument in the Pölitz transcript of his lectures on rational theology dated to 1783–84:⁸

1. The ontological proof for the existence of God is taken from the concept of an *ens realissimum*. One infers, namely: An *ens realissimum* is one which contains all realities in itself. But existence is also a reality; hence, the *ens realissimum* must necessarily exist. If one therefore asserts that God is not, then one thereby denies something in the predicate which lies already in the subject; consequently there is a contradiction here. (LPDR, Ak. 28:1027)⁹

The defenders of the ontological argument that Kant targets unequivocally adopt the perfectionist ontology described above, contending that existence is a perfection.¹⁰ It is clear from Kant's presentation that he regards the ontological argument as requiring the premise that existence is a perfection—or, in his preferred terminology, a “determination” or “real predicate.”¹¹ Existence is, in Kant's rendering, treated alongside the other qualitative properties that are presumably contained in or otherwise derivable from the essence, or concept, of God, including power, knowledge, goodness, and so on. On this view, existential predicates are first-order predicates that contribute qualitatively, or semantically, to the contents of concepts, and they are subject to conceptual containment relations. It is this premise that Kant targets in criticizing the ontological argument: if Kant is right that existence is *not* a determination, then the ontological argument cannot succeed in establishing the existence of God.¹²

⁸In what follows, I number each of the main passages that drives the discussion in this paper so as to facilitate later cross-references to them.

⁹Cf. *OPA*, Ak. 2:156; A 596–97/B 624–25.

¹⁰In Meditation V, Descartes writes, “Whenever I do choose to think of the first and supreme being, and bring forth the idea of God from the treasure house of my mind as it were, it is necessary that I attribute all perfections to him, even if I do not at that time enumerate them or attend to them individually. And this necessity plainly guarantees that, when I later realize that existence is a perfection, I am correct in inferring that the first and supreme being exists” (CSM 2:46–47). Baumgarten says, “The predicates of the most perfect being are called its perfections. In the most perfect being, there are as many of the most highly agreeing perfections as there can be in one being simultaneously, or as are compossible.” He goes on to say, “Existence is a reality compossible with the essence and the rest of the realities. Therefore, the most perfect being has existence” (*Metaphysics*, 281–82). Cf. Leibniz, “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” AG 23.

¹¹There is some question whether by the *CPR* Kant's invocations of ‘real predicates’ and ‘determinations’ (which, at A 598/B 626, he indicates he uses equivalently) can be understood as meaning what defenders of the ontological argument mean by ‘perfections’ or ‘realities.’ The reason is that Kant appears to *define* a real predicate in the *CPR* as a “synthetic” predicate (A 598/B 626), and this appears to be at odds with the traditional understanding of a perfection as simply a positive way of being; there appears to be no barrier in the tradition to thinking that perfections can be included in the very concepts of the beings that instantiate them (and, indeed, passage 1 indicates that Kant himself takes the ontological argument to *require* that existence be conceptually contained in the concept of the *ens realissimum*). I do not deny that in some contexts Kant's conception of a real predicate deviates from the tradition. But I assume henceforth that in the specific contexts in which he criticizes the ontological argument, Kant uses ‘determination’ in the traditional sense, and not in a more specific sense unique to his own philosophy on pain of rendering his objection question-begging. This accords with my broader argument that Kant aims to criticize the ontological argument on its own terms. I discuss this in detail in my manuscript “Kant on Real Predication and the Ontological Argument.”

¹²Readers of Leibniz may object that the inclusion of Leibniz among the defenders of the broadly “Cartesian” ontological argument that Kant targets is problematic because Leibniz ultimately gave up this proof in favor of various others that may escape Kant's criticism. See note 27 for discussion.

Our question is: how does Kant propose to establish that existence is not a determination? On what I am calling the “consensus interpretation,” Kant engages in a line of argument that we can schematically represent as follows:

i. Existence Thesis (ET)

...

n. Therefore, existence is not a “determination” of things (END)

ET is meant to denote any of a range of particular claims about existence that have been posited in the scholarly literature as serving to support Kant’s claim that existence is not a determination (END). For example, a widely endorsed candidate for ET is just the claim that existence is a quantifier. The ellipsis indicates that on some interpretations additional premises may be regarded as necessary. And END is simply the claim that constitutes Kant’s widely accepted objection to the ontological argument.¹³

It is easy to see why this interpretation is attractive.¹⁴ The most obvious reason is textual: several passages from the *CPR* and the *OPA* are easily understood as setting out precisely this argument. Consider this passage from the Transcendental Ideal section of the *CPR*:

2. Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing or of certain determinations in themselves. In the logical use it is merely the copula of the judgment. The proposition **God is omnipotent** contains two concepts that have their objects: God and omnipotence; and the little word “is” is not a predicate in it, but only that which posits the predicate in relation to the subject. Now if I take the subject (God) together with all his predicates (among which omnipotence belongs), and say **God is**, or there is a God, then I add no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit the object in relation to my concept. (A 598–99/B 626–27)

¹³Not all interpreters have explicitly distinguished END from a positive thesis about existence. That is, some have *explained* END as a positive thesis about existence. For example, Stang writes, “Kant’s claim that existence is not a determination is equivalent to defining the object-level existence predicate in the natural way, using the quantifier ‘ \exists ’” (*Kant’s Modal Metaphysics*, 41). I believe this is a mistake, and most commentators who defend the consensus interpretation see Kant’s argument as depending upon a genuine inference from a view about existence *to* END—even if that inference is virtually immediate.

¹⁴This strategy is widely defended. One of its best-known defenses is by Bennett. He sees Kant’s argument as ultimately resting on a positive, “Fregean,” thesis about existence (Bennett, *Kant’s Dialectic*, 230–34). Two prominent recent defenders of the consensus interpretation are Van Cleve and Stang. Van Cleve, *Problems from Kant*, 189–90, explicitly contends that Kant *infers* END from a quantificational conception of existence. Likewise, Stang holds that Kant begins by *defining* existence quantificationally and then concludes that existence is not a determination (*Kant’s Modal Metaphysics*, ch. 2; “Kant’s Argument,” 596). Other proponents of this broadly sketched consensus schema include Cuffaro, “Kant and Frege”; Forgie, “Existence as a Second-Level Property” and “Kant and Existence”; Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, ch. 14; Engel, “Kant’s ‘Refutation’”; Kannisto, “Positio contra complementum”; and Wiggins, “The Kant-Frege-Russell View.” In “Kant’s Objection,” Plantinga considers and rejects a version of the consensus interpretation, though he also entertains alternatives. It is not entirely clear whether Hintikka would endorse the consensus schema, though he does take Kant’s assertion of END to depend upon general considerations of judgment and predication, as do many on this list (“Kant on Existence, Predication, and the Ontological Argument”). Some interpreters defend alternative, but broadly semantic, interpretations, including Rosenkoetter, “Absolute Positing”; and Proops, “Kant on the Ontological Argument.” For a general critique of Kant’s relation to Frege on the matter of existence, see Kannisto, “Kant and Frege on Existence.”

And consider another passage, this one from the *OPA*, that is clearly the predecessor of passage 2:

3. If the existence of the subject is not already presupposed, every predicate is always indeterminate in respect of whether it belongs to an existent or merely possible subject. Existence cannot, therefore, itself be a predicate. 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. (*OPA*, Ak. 2:74)

One can easily see the appeal of the consensus interpretation in these passages: in both, Kant appears straightforwardly to argue for END by pressing the claim that existential statements are mere "positings" and thus are not predicative at all. On this reading, Kant is accusing the defender of the ontological argument of mistakenly assuming that the grammatical isomorphism between existential statements and genuine predicative statements entails that 'exists' and its cognates play the same semantic role as genuine predicates. But careful attention to the function of existential statements reveals that 'exists' functions altogether differently from a semantic point of view, that is, that it makes no semantic or qualitative contribution to the content of a concept at all.

On the consensus interpretation, then, Kant begins from some positive claim about existence and concludes that existence is not a determination (END). The most natural candidate for ET is simply the claim that existence is (absolute) positing. Of course, this is itself opaque, at least from a contemporary perspective. How are we to understand the notion of positing?

Kant's own brief elucidation of the notion of positing drives a version of the consensus interpretation defended by Van Cleve, Stang, and others. Kant says that we should interpret 'God exists' as "something existent is God." And he says that existence is "merely the positing of a thing or certain determinations." This strongly suggests that Kant's positive thesis about existence is that existence is a second-order property of concepts, that is, that 'exists' functions quantificationally. On this view, existential claims are not predicative; rather, they serve to indicate that a concept is instantiated. If this is correct, then with minimal additional assumptions, it clearly follows that existence is *not* a first-order property of objects or concepts, and thus that END is true.

However, from a historical perspective, the argument of Kant's that the consensus interpretation understands to constitute his main (or only) strategy in rebutting the ontological argument faces certain dialectical challenges. Chief among them is that Kant's argument is represented as depending upon an assumption that can easily be regarded as question-begging. Insofar as Kant's argument begins with an assumption or definition that virtually immediately entails END, it will be open to defenders of the ontological argument simply to reject the premise and be on their way. This problem is compounded by the fact that the scholarly literature rarely represents Kant as mounting a sustained argument for

ET: it is often understood as merely a matter of definition, hypothesis, or mere reflection on the nature of judgment and predication.¹⁵ As such, defenders of the ontological argument may remain unmoved.

This is not to deny that the consensus interpretation is a good argument: it is plausibly valid, and *we* may have good reason to endorse any of a variety of versions of ET, especially in light of developments in logic and the philosophy of language since the end of the nineteenth century. Many widely accepted arguments begin from premises that opponents would not accept. My point is rather that, given the worries outlined above, we may justifiably wonder whether the consensus interpretation exhausts Kant's resources in objecting to the ontological argument. Might Kant have offered distinct considerations that exert more dialectical pressure on his opponents to abandon their argument?

The second challenge facing the consensus interpretation is that there are numerous texts in the Kantian corpus in which Kant is clearly aiming to establish END but which cannot plausibly be read as relying on any candidate for ET. These texts thus reveal evidence of alternative arguments that cannot be understood as versions of the consensus interpretation. It would be blithe to deny that there is serious evidence that Kant makes the argument emphasized by the consensus interpretation. Indeed, I shall not deny that Kant endorses some version of it. But I shall deny that this is Kant's only, or main, argument for END.

Instead, I shall reconstruct two distinct alternative arguments for END, both of which have a clear textual basis and both of which incorporate a considerably more dialectically compelling strategy for objecting to the ontological argument. In both arguments, Kant's strategy is this: the claim that existence is a determination, which is required by the ontological argument, is inconsistent with modal commitments held by defenders of that argument. On this interpretation, Kant does not begin with a theory that proponents of the ontological argument would be unlikely to accept; rather, Kant accuses them of inconsistency on their own terms and suggests that the way to resolve the inconsistency is to abandon their qualitative conception of existence—and thus the ontological argument.

These arguments do not depend upon any distinctive Kantian conception of judgment, predication, or existence. These are not arguments that depend upon Kant's own philosophical innovations. Rather, these arguments adopt the broad modal framework endorsed by Kant's rationalist targets (and which Kant himself largely accepted in 1763) in order to level the charge of inconsistency. In this way, these arguments pose a greater threat to the ontological argument than does the consensus interpretation precisely because it is not open to defenders of the ontological argument simply to reject as question-begging any premise of either argument. If I am correct in drawing attention to the largely ignored passages in

¹⁵As we have seen, Stang contends that Kant simply *defines* existence in "the natural way," i.e. as a quantifier (*Kant's Modal Metaphysics*, 41). Likewise, Van Cleve, *Problems from Kant*, 190, cites a passage at A 599/B 627 as evidence that Kant begins with the "Kant-Frege" view of existence as a quantifier, but he offers no argument for this position on Kant's behalf. Bennett, *Kant's Dialectic*, 234, offers more sustained consideration in favor of the view that existence is a quantifier on Kant's behalf, but Bennett regards many of these arguments as fallacious and instead decides to "adopt the Kant-Frege view as a working hypothesis."

which these arguments are given, then Kant's ultimate strategy for objecting to the ontological argument is due for serious reconsideration.

2. COMPLETE DETERMINATION AND NECESSARY EXISTENCE

In the first section of the first reflection of the *OPA*, Kant gives his main argument that "existence is not a predicate or a determination of a thing." Since this argument will occupy us in this section, I quote it at length.¹⁶

4. This proposition seems strange and absurd, but it is indubitably certain. Take any subject you please, for example, Julius Caesar. Draw up a list of all the predicates which may be thought to belong to him, not excepting even those of space and time. You will quickly see that he can either exist with all these determinations, or not exist at all. The Being who gave existence to the world and to our hero within that world could know every single one of these predicates without exception, and yet still be able to regard him as a merely possible thing, which, in the absence of that Being's decision to create him, would not exist. Who can deny that millions of things which do not exist are merely possible from the point of view of all the predicates they would contain if they were to exist. Or who can deny that in the representation which the Supreme Being has of them there is not a single determination missing, although existence is not among them, for the Supreme Being cognizes them only as possible things. It cannot happen, therefore, that if they were to exist they would contain an extra predicate; for, in the case of the possibility of a thing in its complete determination, no predicate at all can be missing. And if it had pleased God to create a different series of things, to create a different world, that world would have existed with all the determinations, and no additional ones, which He cognizes it to have, although that world was merely possible. (*OPA*, Ak. 2:72)

This argument opens the section of the *OPA* in which Kant contends he will establish END. It contains no appeal to the sorts of considerations regarding judgment and absolute positing found in passages 2 and 3 that drive the consensus

¹⁶As I noted in the previous section, many interpreters have emphasized what I have called the "consensus interpretation." Some who do not still see Kant's argument as rooted in semantic considerations. Nevertheless, there are exceptions. In *Kant's Rational Theology*, Allen Wood does not endorse the consensus interpretation and instead offers an original and distinctive interpretation. A similar interpretation of the argument discussed in this section is briefly alluded to in Fisher and Watkins, "Kant on the Material Ground," 377. They contend, as do I, that in passage 4 Kant denies that existence is a determination on the basis of thinking that such a view is inconsistent with the completely determinate nature of concepts of individuals. The main focus of their paper, however, is on Kant's own positive proof of the existence of God in subsequent sections of the *OPA*; they do not discuss in detail the mechanics of the argument or its development in Kant's rationalist context. Likewise, Anderson, *Poverty of Conceptual Truth*, 316–26, 374–76, considers the role of conceptual determinacy in Kant's argument for END. My interpretation agrees with Anderson's insofar as it takes Kant to give an argument for END that relies on noting an inconsistency between the complete conceptual determinacy of concepts of individuals and the view that existence is a determination, but we differ both in detail and in emphasis. For one, Anderson finds this to be the main argument of the *CPR*, whereas I find considerations of conceptual determinacy to be most centrally at work in the *OPA*. Second, I think Anderson does not clearly enough distinguish Kant's considerations about conceptual determinacy from separate issues concerning modal identity—which I take to be the focus of an entirely distinct argument (§3) constructed in response to Baumgarten's theory of existence, a connection Anderson does not discuss. Finally, my interpretation emphasizes the distinctively ontological and theological motivations behind Kant's criticism of the ontological argument, whereas Anderson's view is embedded in a broader project that is focused on the development of Kant's views on logic and judgment.

interpretation. I elucidate what I regard as the precise argument of this passage in due course, but to begin, I want to highlight Kant's emphasis here on the completely determinate nature of the concepts of the individuals God considers prior to the act of creation. Kant says that in God's representation of possible individuals, "there is not a single determination missing" and God considers a thing "in its complete determination," even when it remains "merely possible."

Consider another passage several paragraphs later in which Kant returns to the same point:

5. If I imagine God uttering His almighty "*Let there be*" over a possible world, He does not grant any new determinations to the whole which is represented in His understanding. He adds no new predicate to it. Rather, He posits a series of things absolutely and unconditionally, and posits it with all its predicates; everything else within the series of things is posited only relatively to this whole. The relations of predicates to their subjects never designate anything existent; if they did, the subject would then already have to be posited as existent. (*OPA*, Ak. 2:74)

Here again, Kant insists that God's representation of possible individuals is "complete" and that when God creates, He adds no new "predicate" beyond those which are already included in the complete representation of the possible being in question.¹⁷

It is clear, then, that in these passages Kant is appealing to a principle I will call Complete Determination.

Complete Determination: concepts of individuals are completely determinate in the sense that, for any predicate or determination P, the concept of an individual includes either P or ~P.

As I argue presently, the key point for understanding Kant's argument for END in passages 4 and 5 is that Kant justly ascribes Complete Determination to rationalist proponents of the argument, since Kant's aim is to show that Complete Determination (along with other assumptions) requires them to abandon their qualitative conception of existence. But there is evidence in the *OPA* that Kant himself endorses Complete Determination. He writes,

6. The proposition that a possible thing, regarded as such, is indeterminate with respect to many of its predicates could, if taken literally, lead to serious error. For such indeterminacy is forbidden by the law of excluded middle which maintains that there is no intermediate between two predicates which contradict each other. It is for example impossible that a man should not have a certain stature, position in time, age, location in space, and so forth. (*OPA*, Ak. 2:76)

Kant goes on to say, "The Omniscient certainly knows all the determinations which would inhere in such a person, if he were to exist, even though he does not

¹⁷It is true that in passage 5, Kant does appeal to the notion of "positing." This is because passage 5 does not immediately follow passage 4, but rather appears only after Kant has concluded, on the basis of passage 4, that existence is absolute positing. Thus, Kant's appeal to positing in passage 5 is not good evidence that such a theory serves as a premise in the argument Kant makes here. Rather, as the intervening text makes clear, Kant's appeal to absolute positing depends upon the argument of passage 4, which does not appeal to that notion at all. This is in keeping with an argument I shall make later: that Kant's positive theory of existence is not a premise but rather a conclusion derived from metaphysical considerations.

actually exist" (*OPA*, Ak. 2:76). Passage 6 thus indicates that Kant regards Complete Determination as holding true of every "possible thing," and he contends that God knows every determination that would attach to any possible being were it to exist. It seems to follow, then, that Kant endorses the view that *concepts* of individuals are completely determinate: if God knows every predicate that would be instantiated by any possible being were it to exist, then God's representation of any possible individual must itself be completely determinate on pain of supposing that God's representation of a possible individual fails to include all of the predicates that apply to such an individual.¹⁸

According to Complete Determination, every concept of an individual—including merely possible individuals—is determinate with respect to every possible predicate. Kant's appeal to the principle is no surprise: it was explicitly affirmed by Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten. Wolff and Baumgarten refer to it as the "principle of excluded middle" and derive it immediately from the principle of contradiction.¹⁹

This gives the appearance that Wolff and Baumgarten take the principle to be primarily logical. However, the ultimate justification for Complete Determination is almost certainly to be understood as rooted in the metaphysical and theological considerations that animated rationalist philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Philosophers in the period widely accepted the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), which says that every fact or state of affairs has a complete explanation or metaphysically sufficient determining ground. As Leibniz puts it, "Nothing happens without a reason why it should be so rather than otherwise" (Second Letter to Clarke, AG 321). Leibniz's view that the PSR is incompatible with a Newtonian absolutist conception of space (because the PSR cannot permit qualitatively indiscernible spaces) is well known. But the PSR also bears close connection to Complete Determination.²⁰ The PSR demands that God act for

¹⁸An anonymous referee points out that the text of the *OPA* does not unequivocally indicate Kant's acceptance of Complete Determination as a principle about *concepts* rather than a principle about *individuals*. While I agree that Kant himself vacillates between speaking of the principle as it applies to individuals and as it applies to concepts, I think this worry can largely be set aside for the purposes of this project. First, as I have argued above, insofar as Kant takes the principle to have implications for God's knowledge of merely possible individuals, it appears to *entail* the complete determinacy of concepts of possible individuals. Second, this point is in keeping with the general tendency among rationalists to move freely between claims about concepts and claims about individuals, a tendency that is undoubtedly rooted in the widely assumed rationalist commitment to the full intelligibility of the cosmos. Finally, even if this is mistaken, it is not of much significance for the current project: what matters is not whether Kant himself endorses the principle in a particular version, but rather whether he rightly ascribes the principle to the rationalists he targets in the *OPA*, which I shall presently argue he does. I also do not intend for this discussion to carry any implication regarding the fate of Complete Determination in Kant's critical philosophy, where the story is complicated by developments in Kant's metaphysics and epistemology. For discussion of this point, see Stang, "Kant on Complete Determination."

¹⁹Baumgarten writes, "Every possible thing is either A, or not-A, or neither. Now, what is neither is nothing, because it would be both of these. Therefore, *every possible thing is either A, or not-A*, or, for every subject, one out of each pair of contradictory predicates is suitable. *This proposition* is called *the principle of the excluded third or middle between two contradictories*" (*Metaphysics*, 101, Baumgarten's emphasis). Cf. Wolff, *Philosophia prima*, §52–55.

²⁰For discussion of some of the issues that arise in this paragraph, see Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, chs. 2–3. See also Sleight, "Truth and Sufficient Reason." For discussion of Leibniz's

sufficient reason when He chooses to create, and the sufficient reason God has for creating is that the world He will create is the best of all possible worlds He could create. This conception of divine creation as governed by the PSR appears to require the completely determinate nature of possible individuals and their concepts in the divine mind. This is because this story requires that God be able to strictly order possible worlds according to their worthiness or goodness. The goodness of a world is understood as a function of the variety and degree of perfections it instantiates balanced against the simplicity of its governing laws.²¹ If concepts of worldbound individuals were indeterminate in any respect, then no strict measure of the goodness of such worlds would be possible: there would be no fact of the matter regarding the all-things-considered goodness of such a world, and, at best, only a partial, comparative ranking would be possible. As such, if there is to be a fact of the matter about which possible world God has most reason to create, then possible individuals must be completely determinate.²²

It is against the background of these commitments that we can consider Leibniz's commitment to the view that individuals are "complete beings" with "complete notions":

7. The nature of an individual substance or of a complete being is to have a notion so complete that it is sufficient to contain and allow us to deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed. (*Discourse*, AG 41)

As I understand Leibniz, this conception of an individual as a complete being is required by a conception of divine creation as governed by the PSR.²³

With the ontological conception of complete determinacy set out, we shall return presently to Kant's argument.²⁴ Before we do, however, we shall consider the final piece required to reconstruct the argument of passages 4 and 5.

Contingency of Creation: created beings exist contingently.

With the exception of Spinoza, no philosopher in the period denies this principle and Leibniz devotes considerable attention to securing the contingency of created existence in light of his commitment to the PSR. Because so much has been written

conception of an individual and its modal implications, see Mates, "Individuals and Modality"; Di Bella, *The Science of the Individual*; Cover and Hawthorne, *Substance and Individuation*.

²¹For helpful discussion of Leibniz's thinking about these issues and the tensions that arise, see Newlands, "From Theism to Idealism."

²²I thank Colin McLear and James Messina for helpful discussion of the issues that arise in this paragraph.

²³Leibniz does not, to my knowledge, make this argument in precisely these terms, but this argument closely tracks the order of argument in the opening sections of the *Discourse*, where Leibniz begins by sketching his conception of creation and his view that it is governed by the PSR before turning to his conception of individuals as completely determinate beings (*Discourse*, §§1–8, AG 35–41).

²⁴Contemporary modal metaphysicians also appeal to complete determinacy in their conception of a possible world: a possible world is standardly *defined* in terms of maximal completeness. For example, on a standard view, a possible world is a maximally consistent set of propositions: for every proposition P, the world contains either P or \sim P (i.e. every world is such that the addition of any proposition would render the set inconsistent). While there are of course important differences between the traditions, the notion that a possible world is completely determinate has been taken to be foundational by both; see e.g. Kripke, "Completeness Theorem in Modal Logic."

on this subject, and because the principle is so widely endorsed, I shall not offer further defense of it here.²⁵

We are now in a position to see how Kant's argument for END in the *OPA* works. Passage 4 opens with Kant's assertion of END. In arguing for this view, Kant repeatedly affirms Complete Determination. He then claims that God "could know every single one of those predicates" contained in the completely determinate concept of Julius Caesar "and yet still be able to regard him as a merely possible thing." As I understand this argument, Kant's claim is that if existence *were* a determination, then God *would not* be able to cognize Julius Caesar in his complete determinacy and at the same time "regard him as a merely possible thing." Kant's repeated emphasis, throughout passages 4 and 5, on preserving the "merely possible" status of individuals God considers in determining what to create, is instructive here: evidently, Kant sees the view that existence is a determination as threatening precisely that status. As I understand him, Kant's point is that if completely determinate concepts of possible individuals include existential predicates, then nothing can be regarded as "merely possible": individuals would be necessarily existent or necessarily nonexistent by virtue of their concepts including or excluding the predicate "exists." Kant affirms this reading in passage 5, when he says that if existence were a determination, then the subject would "already have to be posited as existent." That is, if existence were a determination, then we *could not* regard any such individual as "merely possible," but rather would have to regard such an individual as necessarily existent. But this runs afoul of Contingency of Creation. As such, Kant concludes that we must abandon END: the alternative is to abandon either Complete Determination or Contingency of Creation, but both are widely affirmed and for good reason.

We can formalize Kant's argument as follows:

1. Concepts of individuals are completely determinate in the sense that, for any predicate or determination P, the concept of an individual includes either P or \sim P. (Complete Determination)
2. If existence is a determination, then every individual determinately includes or excludes existence in its concept. (1)
3. If the concept of an individual determinately includes existence in its concept, then the individual is necessarily existent.
4. If the concept of an individual determinately excludes existence from its concept, then the individual is necessarily nonexistent.
5. Therefore, if individuals determinately include existential predicates in their concepts, then every individual is either necessarily existent or necessarily nonexistent. (2, 3, 4)
6. If every individual is either necessarily existent or necessarily nonexistent, then no individual exists contingently.
7. Created individuals exist contingently. (Contingency of Creation)
8. Therefore, created individuals are neither necessarily existent nor necessarily nonexistent. (6, 7)
9. Therefore, created individuals neither determinately include nor determinately exclude existence in their concepts. (3, 4, 8)
10. Therefore, existence is not a determination. (2, 9)

²⁵Leibniz's attempt to secure the contingency of created individuals is a career-long project, but it is in especially sharp focus in a set of papers including "On Freedom and Possibility" (AG 19–22), "On Contingency" (AG 28–30), and in his *Discourse* (AG 35–68). See Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, for extended discussion.

I believe this interpretation of the argument is both textually supported and interpretively compelling.²⁶ Furthermore, this interpretation of the argument renders Kant's objection to the ontological argument considerably more dialectically compelling than does the consensus interpretation. On that view, Kant *begins* by asserting a theory of existence that is inconsistent with the theory required to make the ontological argument work, and then concludes that the theory assumed by the ontological argument is false. By contrast, in the argument I have just outlined, Kant points out that the commitment to existence being a determination comes at the significant cost of abandoning the complete determinacy of individual concepts or else facing the specter of necessitarianism. Insofar as Complete Determination and Contingency of Creation are regarded as foundational for rationalist defenders of the ontological argument, the cost of maintaining the ontological argument is drastic. Kant has thus argued that the ontological argument must fail *by its defender's own lights*.²⁷

One might take issue with premises 3 and 4 in this argument. Together with Complete Determination, it ostensibly follows from these premises that none of an individual's properties are instantiated contingently. Leibniz, worried about precisely this implication, simply denies that containment carries necessity along with it: on Leibniz's view, some predicates may be contained in a concept of an individual without necessarily being instantiated by that individual. This move has been widely discussed in the literature, sometimes skeptically and sometimes optimistically.²⁸ The point, here, is simply that at least one of Kant's opponents seems clearly to reject two key premises in this argument.

Nevertheless, I think we can understand Kant's appeal to these premises as strategic rather than ignorant. As Kant understands the ontological argument,

²⁶An anonymous referee objects that the text of passages 4 and 5 does not unambiguously support this reading of the argument and suggests instead that the argument of the *OPA* might better be understood as a version of the argument from the Pölitiz transcript, which I discuss in the next section; that argument is a direct response to Baumgarten's unique account of existence, and Kant's point is that Baumgarten's account of existence cannot account for the claim that the individuals God creates are numerically identical to some set of individuals God considered prior to the act of creation. While I concede that in the *OPA* Kant has available the resources to make this argument, and I note below that Baumgarten's theory of existence makes an appearance in the *OPA*, I do not find passages 4 and 5 to be primarily concerned with issues of identity. Rather, as I have argued, passages 4 and 5 seem primarily aimed at preserving the "mere possibility" of some individuals—something that requires abandoning the view that existence is a determination. I do not deny that one may be able to find in the text of the *OPA* passages that anticipate Kant's later argument, but I find no unambiguous and extended discussion of matters of identity in the relevant portions of the text.

²⁷One might broadly object, as Stang does, to ascribing this line of reasoning to Kant on the grounds that "even the ontotheist can admit that, while existence is a real predicate, it is a real predicate with a very different status than the other real predicates, something of which Leibniz was, in fact, quite aware" (*Kant's Modal Metaphysics*, 69). Stang here appeals to Leibniz's mature view, largely developed in letters and other unpublished manuscripts, that existence is a second-order property of essences, such that existence is a "degree of reality": "the property of having more reality or perfection than any incompatible alternative" (Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, 165). However, I do not see this as a reason to challenge my interpretation of the texts we have examined. For, first, while Kant knew of "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas," where Leibniz develops a version of the Cartesian ontological argument, it is less likely that he was aware of Leibniz's unpublished views. Second, even if he had known of a broadly Leibnizian account of existence that diverged from the traditional view, Kant is clearly aiming to reject the traditional and widely endorsed version of the argument that depends upon the view that existence is a first-order property that contributes qualitatively to the contents of concepts. Cf. Nachtomy, "Modal Adventures."

²⁸See Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, ch. 1; and Lin, "Rationalism and Necessitarianism."

its key inference relies upon a claim about the containment of existence in the very concept of God. It is from this claim that, on pain of contradiction, the existence of God follows. Thus, Kant appears to see the ontological argument as crucially *relying* on premise 3: it is that premise that permits the inference from a claim about the concept of God to the claim that God necessarily exists. As such, Kant's point appears to be that defenders of the ontological argument cannot simply disavow such a premise in a different context. To do so, one might argue, would be intolerably ad hoc. Thus, we can see Kant as here pressing precisely this point, even despite his own sympathy with theories that attempt to escape issues with necessity and existence that he here raises for the rationalist defender of the ontological argument.²⁹

Stang suggests a reason why one might find my interpretation of Kant's argument inadequate. He considers an interpretation of the argument in passages 4 and 5 that is broadly similar to mine and concludes that "this is a very weak argument, which has no dialectical force against Leibniz or any other ontotheist."³⁰ He asks, "Why cannot Leibniz hold that the" complete individual concept "of an individual contains all the real predicates it would have if it were to exist *except* existence itself (and predicates that logically entail existence)?"³¹ If this story were right, then the defender of the ontological argument would indeed be able to sidestep Kant's concern about concepts of individuals threatening the contingency of created individuals.

As a first response, it is unclear how this maneuver could save the ontological argument as it was traditionally understood in the early modern rationalist context. For Stang's response aims to uphold both (a) that existence is a first-order determination, and (b) that existence is excluded from concepts of individuals. But if Complete Determination is maintained, as it was by Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten, then (a) and (b) appear to be inconsistent: insofar as existence is a determination, then, if Complete Determination is true, existence *must* be included in concepts of individuals. So, at first blush, this maneuver appears of no help in securing the ontological argument except at the cost of abandoning a significant ontological set piece.³²

Nevertheless, Stang's objection cannot be dispatched quite so easily: the view that existential predicates are excluded from individual concepts of possible beings is defended by Baumgarten, who also defends a version of the ontological argument. Kant routinely employed Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* and was intimately

²⁹Cf. Forgie, "Kant and Existence." Forgie agrees that passage 4 considers whether the inclusion of existential predicates in concepts of merely possible beings would have implausible modal implications, but he understands Kant to reject this idea in part because he has already developed a conception of existence as a second-order property. This is thus a version of the consensus interpretation.

³⁰Stang, *Kant's Modal Metaphysics*, 68.

³¹Stang, *Kant's Modal Metaphysics*, 68.

³²Indeed, Kant considers and rejects such a theory on precisely these grounds in the *OPA*. He raises Baumgarten's theory, to be discussed shortly, that there is "more in existence than in mere possibility, for it completes that which is left indeterminate by the predicates inhering in or issuing from the essence," and he rejects it in passage 6 because such a theory is excluded by Complete Determination: "the proposition that a possible thing, regarded as such, is indeterminate with respect to many of its predicates"—Baumgarten's view—"is forbidden by the law of excluded middle" (*OPA*, Ak. 2:76).

familiar with Baumgarten's revisionary theory of existence. In §3, I reconstruct an argument for END that appears specifically designed to reject a version of the ontological argument that contends that existential predicates are excluded from concepts of possible finite individuals—in other words, the kind of ontological argument that Baumgarten adopts. This argument of Kant's appears primarily in the Pölitz transcript of his 1783–84 lectures on philosophical theology, which remains the richest source of Kant's critical-period views on the topic.

3. MODAL IDENTITY

Baumgarten defends a version of the ontological argument according to which “existence is a reality compossible with the essence and the rest of the realities. Therefore, the most perfect being has existence” (*Metaphysics*, 282).³³ It is thus clear that Baumgarten regards existence as a first-order conceptual determination, or reality.³⁴ As we have seen, Kant takes the ontological argument, in the iterations with which he is primarily concerned, to require that existence be a first-order determination or predicate subject to conceptual containment relations. Baumgarten affirms this view, and he affirms that existence is a determination included in the essence of God.

However, Baumgarten's claims about existence diverge from those of his predecessors when he turns his attention to finite beings. Baumgarten claims that a possible finite being is “not determined sufficiently through essence” and thus “is determinable with regard to its existence” (*Metaphysics*, 112). It thus appears that Baumgarten's position is that possible individuals are indeterminate with regard to existential predicates. Though existence is contained in the very essence (and so concept) of God, it is not so contained in the essence or concept of finite creatures, including merely possible beings. Baumgarten thus advances a version of the account of existence that Stang takes the Leibnizian to have available to herself.

Baumgarten's theory is intuitively compelling. By contending that merely possible beings are existentially indeterminate but that God is not, Baumgarten's theory seems able to secure the ontological argument while delivering an intuitive cleavage between existence and essence in the case of finite beings. Kant, of course, will agree with Baumgarten that essences of finite individuals carry no existential import. Kant's point has been, however, that in order to secure this result, one must abandon the view that existence is a determination. In the *OPA* (pages 4 and 5), Kant aims to secure this conclusion by arguing that the view that existence is a determination is inconsistent with the conjunction of Complete Determination and Contingency of Creation. I have noted above that my own view is that this argument is likely to be successful even against Baumgarten's modified theory of existence. But in the Pölitz transcript, Kant offers a distinct argument, this one aimed at undermining the specific version of the ontological argument that one gets if one adopts Baumgarten's theory of indeterminate finite essences.

³³For extended discussion of the details of Baumgarten's account of existence, see Fugate, “Baumgarten and Kant on Existence”; and Kannisto, “Positio contra complementum.”

³⁴Cf. Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, 111, where he again asserts that existence is “a reality” that is “compossible with” essence.

Consider the following passages from the Pölitz transcript:

8. In this proof, everything unquestionably depends on whether the existence of a thing is in fact one of its realities. But the fact that a thing exists does not by itself make the thing more perfect; it does not thereby contain any new predicate, but in such a way it is rather posited with all its predicates. The thing was already just as complete in my concept when I thought of it as possible as it is afterward when it actually exists; for otherwise, if existence were a special reality belonging to the thing, it would not be the same thing I had thought before, but more would exist than was included in the concept of the object. *Being* is thus obviously not a real predicate, that is, the concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing in order to make it still more perfect. It is only the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, in themselves. (LPDR, Ak. 28:1027)
9. If I think in a thing every reality except one, the missing reality is not added if I say that this defective thing exists, but rather it exists with precisely the same deficiency I have thought in it, for otherwise what exists would be something different from what I was thinking of. Now if I think of some being as the highest reality (without deficiency), it is still an open question whether it exists or not; for it is just as thoroughly determined as an ideal as it would be if it were an actual object. From this we see how rash it would be to conclude that existence is included already in the concept of a possible thing. (LPDR, Ak. 28:1028)

These passages appeal to an argument distinct from that of the *OPA*. In these passages, Kant contends that if existential predicates are first-order perfections that contribute qualitatively to the contents of concepts and yet apply only to created individuals, then no existing individual could be numerically identical (“the same thing” rather than “something different from what I was thinking of”) to any individual that might have remained merely possible. Kant’s strategy here is similar to his strategy in the *OPA* insofar as he aims to show that a particular version of the ontological argument is inconsistent with a widely accepted ontological background. But the ontological commitments Kant takes to be relevant in this instance are distinct and emerge specifically in light of Baumgarten’s theory of existence. We can understand what Kant takes to be the unwelcome consequence of Baumgarten’s conception of existence if we consider the distinctively theological context in which this argument arises. Kant’s claim is that if existential predicates are instantiated only by *existing* finite creatures, then one must counterintuitively abandon the view that created individuals are numerically identical to some set of individuals considered by God prior to the act of creation.³⁵ That is, Kant’s claim is that if Baumgarten’s view of existence is correct, then no created individual is identical to any individual that God considered as possible prior to the act of creation: if existence is a determination instantiated only upon the actualization of a being, then any being God considered prior to the act of creation would, by virtue of lacking existential determinations altogether, fail to be numerically identical to any being God creates.³⁶

³⁵Passages 8 and 9 contain language that differs markedly from that of passages 4 and 5. In the latter passages, Kant does not appeal to considerations of identity—considerations concerning whether “what exists would be something different” than what had been conceived. But such considerations are the clear focus in passages 8 and 9. I therefore take the argument of the *OPA* to differ significantly from the one Kant makes here; see note 26.

³⁶Kant’s point is thus *not* that Baumgarten’s theory leads to the denial of all relations of counterfactual identity. This would not have been an unwelcome consequence in the Leibnizian context.

In light of this discussion, it appears that Kant is assuming, for the purposes of this argument, a picture of creation according to which God's creative act is *de re*. That is, Kant is assuming that, in creating, God does not merely will to create an individual that satisfies a description in the divine intellect, but rather wills to create *that* individual or *this* world. On such a view, God must take a *de re* attitude toward a possible individual that, upon God's act of will, is rendered actual. We can term the principle that Kant assumes *De Re* Creation.

De Re Creation: every existing finite individual or world is numerically identical to some individual or world that would have remained merely possible had some other world or individual existed.

In the context of divine creation, this principle entails that existing individuals are numerically identical to individuals considered by God prior to the act of creation—that is, individuals that it was God's will to create.

The argument also rests on the wholly uncontroversial Indiscernibility of Identicals:

Indiscernibility of Identicals: if individual A is numerically identical to individual B, then A and B are qualitatively identical, that is, A instantiates all and only those determinations instantiated by B.

This says that numerical identity is sufficient for qualitative identity. It is the converse of the considerably more controversial Identity of Indiscernibles, which says that qualitative identity is sufficient for numerical identity. The Indiscernibility of Identicals is, historically speaking, an uncontroversial principle. Though explicit discussions of numerical and qualitative identity in the rationalist tradition focus heavily on the more controversial Identity of Indiscernibles, the Indiscernibility of Identicals is widely attributed to Descartes and Leibniz, and I see no reason to deny that it was held by the philosophers in the Leibnizian tradition.³⁷

In light of this discussion, I can put more formally the argument Kant is making in passages 8 and 9.

1. If, excluding God, existence is a determination instantiated only by created individuals, then possible individuals considered by God prior to the act of creation do not instantiate a determination instantiated by created individuals.
2. If individual A instantiates a determination and individual B does not instantiate that same determination, then individual A is numerically distinct from individual B. (Indiscernibility of Identicals, contrapositive)
3. Therefore, if, excluding God, existence is a determination instantiated only by created individuals, then created individuals are numerically distinct from any possible individuals considered by God prior to the act of creation. (1, 2, hypothetical syllogism)
4. But created individuals *are* numerically identical to some set of individuals considered by God prior to the act of creation. (*De Re* Creation)
5. Therefore, excluding God, existence is not a determination instantiated only by created individuals. (3, 4, modus tollens)

Kant's point is not about counterfactual contexts in general, but rather the context of creation. Indeed, Leibniz's denial of transworld identity does not entail that actualized individuals are not among the stock of possible individuals God considers prior to the act of creation. See Leibniz, *Discourse*, AG 61; and Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, §§270–79, 149–51.

³⁷An important rationalist who rejects the principle is Spinoza, who denies that numerical identity suffices for qualitative identity. See Spinoza, *Ethics*, Hp4–Hp7.

We can now see precisely how Kant's argument works. Kant's point is this: a theory of existence that suggests that existential predicates are first-order predicates that contribute qualitatively to concepts of individuals and at the same time holds that merely possible beings are existentially indeterminate entails that existing created beings are numerically distinct from any beings considered by God prior to the act of creation. And this entails that a conception of creation according to which God chooses *de re* the best of all possible worlds to create is false.³⁸ Given the importance of this latter doctrine in the period, Kant concludes that Baumgarten's theory of existence is incorrect.³⁹

I said above that this is a distinct argument of Kant's for END. Note that this is not quite correct: Kant's conclusion is not that existence is not a determination. Rather, it is that, leaving God aside, existence is not a determination instantiated only by created individuals. Nevertheless, it is clear that Kant is targeting the view that existence is a determination by arguing against what he understands to be a particular version of that theory: Baumgarten's view that existence is a determination instantiated only by created individuals (aside from God). Furthermore, this argument can be understood as supplemental to the argument of the *OPA*: if one aims to evade that argument by claiming that possible individuals are entirely existentially indeterminate, then Kant is able immediately to contend that such a view requires wholesale revision of a common theological position on creation.

The key, and most controversial, component of this argument is *De Re* Creation. It is thus worth considering the status of such a principle in the rational theological context and whether Kant's appeal to such a principle is justified. There is startlingly little explicit discussion of this issue among the rationalist philosophers themselves, and it has received little scholarly attention. This is no doubt partly owing to the fact that the rationalist tradition simply does not have a serious modal logic—indeed, the possible worlds apparatus invoked to explain modal claims is itself a new innovation and is often appealed to in imprecise ways. As such, our conclusions should be appropriately tentative.⁴⁰

³⁸One might also point out that Baumgarten's theory of existence in conjunction with the Indiscernibility of Identicals appears to entail that God's creative powers are severely limited. If the world God creates is nonidentical to any world God considers prior to His act of creation, and if this holds because, necessarily, existential predicates are instantiated only by created beings (other than God), then it follows that it is necessary that God cannot create any being He considers prior to the act of creation. This appears to conflict with the Leibnizian view that God's metaphysical nature is compatible with God choosing *any* among the possible worlds He considers and that God's choice of the best is owed not to His metaphysical nature but rather His moral nature (Leibniz, *Theodicy*, §§201, 235). However, I do not see any evidence that Kant makes this argument, so I set it aside.

³⁹Fugate offers a considerably more detailed account of Baumgarten's theory of existence than I have given here and defends Baumgarten against Kant. But Fugate does not discuss the modal argument I have given here. On my view, the modal argument succeeds against Baumgarten even if his full theory of existence is more complicated than the portion I have discussed here. See Fugate, "Baumgarten and Kant on Existence."

⁴⁰Kant is usually regarded as developing an actualist theory of modality in the *OPA*, and there is a widely perceived tension between actualism and a commitment to *possibilia*—which *De Re* Creation appears to be committed to. But Kant need not endorse *De Re* Creation in order to ascribe it to his opponents. Furthermore, Kant's own actualism, given its peculiar view that the actual ground of all possibility is God Himself, may be able to accommodate *possibilia*. Indeed, passages 4 and 5 contain

The first point to note is that the defenders of the ontological argument Kant targets certainly *write* as though they accept *De Re* Creation. Consider, for example, Baumgarten's account of creation:

10. In his most proportional will, God decided the creation of this world. Hence, he decided on the existence of this world according to a recognized degree of goodness in it. In his most proportional will, he did not decide on the existence of another world. Therefore, God did not recognize goodness in the existence of any other world as much as he recognized it in the existence of this world. Now, the knowledge of God is the most distinct and maximally infallible. Therefore, the existence of this preferred world, which was chosen above all the rest, is the best existence of a world that there can be. (Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, 311)

It is difficult to take this passage at face value and suppose that Baumgarten would have denied that God has *de re* attitudes toward nonactual beings prior to the act of creation. He speaks of God as assessing degrees of goodness exemplified by a range of possible worlds and choosing a particular world ("this world") by virtue of recognizing "in it" the highest degree of goodness. On the face of it, Baumgarten takes God's act of creation to be explained by appeal to God's attitudes toward individuals, which he understands God to be able to individuate. Though it is conceivable that this story could be given a *de dicto* interpretation, this is strong *prima facie* evidence that Baumgarten is justifiably targeted by Kant's argument.

Still, there is some reason to doubt the intelligibility of *de re* modal assertions in the broadly Leibnizian rationalist tradition that includes Baumgarten. The chief reason is that Leibniz appears to be committed to a wholly qualitative conception of individual substance and thus of reality in general. In numerous passages, Leibniz appears to take the nature of individual substance to be exhausted by the predicates that compose its complete concept. Sentences that pick out individuals using proper names are, on this account, analyzable into definite descriptions that employ no singular terms, but rather purely general descriptions.⁴¹ If this is right, then the intelligibility of *de re* modal assertions may well be doubted: on a wholly general conception of reality, only *de dicto* modal claims appear to be explicable.⁴²

For example, take a claim that is apparently necessary *de re*: "Pegasus is essentially winged." Can a purely qualitative conception of individual substance account for the intelligibility of this claim? Many have thought not. In order to evaluate this claim, one must be able to make justifiable judgments of transworld identity. But "Pegasus" is reducible, on this view, to a description. And there seems to be no justifiable way to insist that a winged horse in some possible world *is* or *is not* the very

strong *prima facie* evidence that Kant himself appeals to *possibilia* in explicating creation. Kant's development of an actualist theory of modality is primarily found in Reflections 2–4 of §1 of the *OPA*, Ak. 2:77–92. For further exposition and discussion, see Chignell, "Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being"; Stang, *Kant's Modal Metaphysics*; Abaci, "Kant's Only Possible Argument" and *Kant's Revolutionary Theory of Modality*; Van Cleve, *Problems from Kant*; and Fisher and Watkins, "Kant on the Material Ground." For a convincing argument in favor of thinking that Kant admits *possibilia* (in some sense), see Rosefeldt, "Kant's Logic of Existence." For discussion of *de re* modality in the context of actualist theories of modality, see Adams, "Actualism and Thisness"; and Bennett, "Two Axes of Actualism."

⁴¹See Mondadori, "Reference, Essentialism, and Modality."

⁴²Among the few commentators who address this issue head on in Leibniz, Cover and Hawthorne engage with it in a particularly perspicuous manner; see their *Substance and Individuation*, ch. 4; cf. Stang, "Kant's Argument," 612–18.

same substance as Pegasus in the actual world. Our search for identical substances amounts to nothing more than comparisons of descriptive similarity. Likewise, as Stang argues, on a wholly qualitative conception of reality, there appears to be no nonbrute way for the Leibnizian to account for identity claims in counterfactual contexts.⁴³ For example, we might ask: had God created a different world, would *I* have existed? On a purely descriptive account of reality, this question becomes: had God created a different world, would the thing that satisfies my description have been *me*? In the absence of the capacity to appeal to nonqualitative aspects of substances (for example, haecceities) or brute identity facts, there appears to be no intelligible way to answer such a question.

Nevertheless, Leibniz liberally employs *de re* modal notions. He speaks of the “individual notion” of a being as its “essence,” and indeed appeals to the essences of individual substances throughout his philosophy (*Discourse*, AG 49). In fact, Leibniz’s denial of transworld substantial identity itself appears to require the intelligibility of *de re* modal claims: the notion of transworld identity must be intelligible if the claim that no substances are transworld identical is intelligible. And Leibniz’s justification for the Identity of Indiscernibles by appeal to the PSR presupposes the intelligibility of *de re* modal claims.⁴⁴

It thus appears that despite Leibniz’s broad commitment to a qualitative conception of reality, he is nevertheless committed to the intelligibility of *de re* modal claims and thus to some aspects of reality that cannot be exhausted purely descriptively. Stang contends that Leibniz reconciles these two strands of his thought by introducing *possibilia* as a way of grounding identity claims in counterfactual contexts.⁴⁵ Cover and Hawthorne, whose emphasis is on the intelligibility of singular propositions in Leibniz’s philosophy, contend that Leibniz endorses a “weak haecceitism,” according to which concepts of individuals are in fact singular concepts in the sense that the general content contained in them is explanatorily grounded in a unique causal principle (“the law of the series”). In this way, *de re* modal claims may be made intelligible: the general content considered by God in determining which world to create does not preclude the intelligibility of facts about modal identity precisely because such content is rooted in a bare, nongeneral law that constitutes the essence of an individual.⁴⁶

It is beyond the scope of this paper to adjudicate these interpretations of Leibniz. My aim here has simply been to argue that, appearances to the contrary, the broadly Leibnizian philosophy that forms the backdrop of the versions of the ontological argument with which Kant is concerned can intelligibly make room for a picture of creation such that created beings are numerically identical to beings considered by God prior to the act of creation. That is, the broadly Leibnizian ontology can intelligibly be understood as upholding *De Re* Creation. This is *prima facie* confirmed by the numerous texts in which these thinkers describe God’s

⁴³Stang, “Kant’s Argument,” 616.

⁴⁴On this last point, I am especially indebted to Cover and Hawthorne for their incisive discussion of the relation between what they call “haecceitism” and its relation to the Identity of Indiscernibles in Leibniz (*Substance and Individuation*, 155–59); cf. Adams, “Primitive Thisness and Primitive Identity.”

⁴⁵Stang, “Kant’s Argument,” 616.

⁴⁶Cover and Hawthorne, *Substance and Individuation*, 168–75.

creation, and this result justifies Kant's appeal to *De Re* Creation in arguing, in the mid-1780s, against Baumgarten's view that existence is a determination instantiated only by created beings (apart from God).

Finally, I have argued that Kant is attributing *De Re* Creation to his opponents in part because in the texts in question Kant puts his argument in terms of the identity of *things*. But it is worth noting that if one remains suspicious that Kant's opponents do not accept this *de re* picture of creation, despite the way they write about it, Kant could readily argue that Baumgarten's theory of existence is inconsistent even with a *de dicto* conception of creation. That is, Kant could argue that if existential predicates are excluded from God's concepts of possible things, but are instantiated by those things God creates, then God would be unable to think about created beings by employing the very concepts he employs in creating them. Put another way, the actual world would fail to fall in the extension of the concept of the world God entertained when He elected to create it. While I think this is not the point Kant aims to be making in the passages from the Pölitz transcript we have considered, we might find some basis for this line of reasoning in his famous "hundred thalers" passage in the *CPR*. He writes,

- II. A hundred actual dollars do not contain the least bit more than a hundred possible ones. For since the latter signifies the concept and the former its object and its positing in itself, then, in case the former contained more than the latter, my concept would not express the entire object and thus would not be the suitable concept of it. (A 599/B 627)

Here, Kant says that the issue is that my concept of a hundred thalers would fail to be "suitable" to an existing hundred thalers, since by hypothesis only an existing hundred thalers is existentially determinate. Thus, I believe that even if Kant's opponents were to reject *De Re* Creation, Kant's basic strategy in arguing for END can be successfully redeployed.⁴⁷

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Kant's argument in the 1783–84 Pölitz transcript is thus of a piece with the argument he gives in the *OPA* (passages 4 and 5): Kant aims to establish that the ontological argument fails by its defenders' own lights. In both cases, Kant is plausibly read as contending that the claim that existence is a determination (or, in Baumgarten's hands, its modified brethren) is inconsistent with certain bedrock commitments widely held in the German rationalist tradition. I have not claimed that Kant does not give the argument elucidated by defenders of the consensus interpretation. My aim instead has been to highlight a wholly different argumentative strategy embodied in two distinct arguments found across twenty years of Kant's writings on the subject. In my view, these arguments deserve considerably more attention than they have received, which is almost none. The reason is that they constitute a powerful line of response to defenders of the ontological argument, and one that is not open to the charge of question-begging, as is the consensus interpretation. From a contemporary metaphysical perspective, considerable reason may remain

⁴⁷I thank Colin McLear for pressing me on this issue and for valuable discussion of it.

to emphasize the consensus interpretation. But in Kant's own historical context, one might well take the arguments outlined herein to constitute Kant's primary line of attack: they, unlike the consensus interpretation, attack the ontological argument on the basis of principles acceptable to its defenders.

This brings me to my final point, which, for reasons of space, will remain largely speculative. As we have seen, the consensus interpretation has largely understood ET to be a matter of assumption, definition, or a priori reflection on the nature of judgment. That is, few commentators have understood Kant as mounting a significant *argument* for his claim that existence is absolute positing, which is itself often interpreted in quantificational terms. I suggest that Kant may well have had available to himself a plausible argument for this claim. It goes like this:

1. Existence is not a determination (END)
2. Therefore, existence is absolute positing (ET)

As it stands, this argument is not obviously valid: it requires a premise asserting an exhaustive disjunction between some notion's being a first-order conceptual determination or else an absolute positing. If one understands Kant's notion of absolute positing as a second-order concept (such that existence functions to assert that a concept is instantiated), then one may well understand the required disjunction to be highly plausible indeed. The thought is this: if it has been shown that existence is not a determination, then given its role in language and judgment, there is no alternative other than to think of it as a second-order concept that serves to indicate that some first-order concept is instantiated.

As I noted above, a full defense of this line of reasoning is beyond the scope of this paper. And such a defense may not be entirely possible given the relative paucity of texts in Kant's philosophy that bear on precisely this issue. That said, one significant point in favor of this line of interpretation is that the argument above closely tracks the order of argument in the *OPA*. There, Kant begins, in §1 of the First Reflection, by arguing that "existence is not a predicate or a determination of a thing" (*OPA*, Ak. 2:72). He does this, in passage 4 and again in passage 5, without any overt appeal to the notion of absolute positing as a premise. In §2 of the First Reflection, Kant *then* contends that "existence is the absolute positing of a thing" (*OPA*, Ak. 2:73). This strongly suggests Kant himself regards ET as dependent upon END—and thus strongly suggests that Kant takes his canonical argument for END to proceed entirely independently of any kind of proto-Fregean quantificational conception of existence. So, while I have not aimed to argue that the consensus interpretation is incorrect, and I have not denied that some passages suggest that Kant entertained such an argument, a careful contextual examination of the relevant texts reveals that the argument identified by the consensus interpretation is unlikely to be Kant's primary or most secure argument that the ontological argument for the existence of God must be abandoned.⁴⁸

⁴⁸I owe special thanks to Rosalind Chaplin, Colin McLear, James Messina, and Eric Watkins for extraordinarily helpful and thorough discussions of earlier versions of this paper. I also owe thanks to Andrew Chignell, Sukjae Lee, and Sam Newlands for general discussions about the philosophical background of this paper.

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