Introduction

In the section of the first Critique entitled “The Ideal of Pure Reason,” Kant constructs an elaborately layered critique of the so-called “cosmological proof” of the existence of God. He portrays the cosmological argument (as I shall more neutrally term it) as having three main phases.

First, one observes that there is at least one existent being, and argues that it exists contingently (28: 1006). Second, appealing to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, one argues for the existence of an absolutely necessary being as the ultimate cause (A 605/B 633n*) or ground (28: 1006) of this contingently existing being. Third, one argues that this absolutely necessary being is a most real being—or ens realissimum (A 605–6/B 633–34). In “The Ideal,” Kant presents this third step as drawing the argument to a close (A 606/B 634). But, judging by his discussion in the Religion Lectures, he sometimes conceives of the argument as intended to be completed by a sort of coda in which one argues that the absolutely necessary being, since it is an ens realissimum, must possess each of the traditional “divine attributes.”

Kant raises three main objections to this version of the cosmological argument. First, it “presupposes” the correctness of the ontological argument in the sense, apparently, of tacitly incorporating the ontological argument as a proper part (A 607/B 635; A 608–9/B 636–7). Second, it commits an ignorantio elenchi, a fallacy of arguing for something other than what was at issue (A 609/B 637). It does so, Kant thinks, because the proponent of the argument, having promised to establish the existence of an absolutely necessary, “highest” being—that is, a necessarily existent most real being—on the basis of empirical assumptions, in practice first contends for a weaker conclusion and then, in order to arrive at the stronger, desired conclusion, reverts to

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1. A 603/B 631–A 614/B 642.
2. Kant is plainly not using “proof” as a success word, but I will avoid following him in this because the practice can today sound jarring.
3. See 28: 1037 and 28: 1047–49 for some of the relevant arguments. There is also an allusion to this step in the first Critique itself (A 580/B 608). Kant, however, ignores it in his official critical discussion of the argument at A 603–06/B 631–34.
the well-trodden \((a\ priori)\) path of the ontological argument (ibid.). Third, the cosmological argument presupposes the ontological argument, but not merely because it tacitly assumes the soundness of the ontological argument as a premise \((A608/B\ 637)\). Since he takes himself to have established the unsoundness of the ontological argument earlier in “The Ideal,” Kant concludes that the cosmological argument must be unsound.

Kant also raises certain other objections to the cosmological argument, including the charge that it attempts to employ the Principle of Sufficient Reason beyond its legitimate domain of application \((A\ 609–10/B\ 638)\). But it is clear that he wishes to rest the weight of his criticism on these three main points.

Although it is broadly agreed that Kant \textit{announces} these three criticisms, not every commentator has been persuaded that Kant really \textit{develops} all three of them. Most notably, Allen Wood, in his perceptive study of Kant’s philosophy of religion, contends that Kant, in spite of presenting himself as developing all three criticisms in “The Ideal,” in practice makes a case only for the third \((\text{Wood 1978, 124–25})\). Wood is certainly right that this is how things seem, but I will argue that a closer look at the relevant texts reveals his assessment to be mistaken.

Kant does, indeed, develop all three criticisms in “The Ideal.” Moreover, I shall argue that it matters greatly that he should have done so; for it is the two criticisms that Wood takes Kant to have failed to develop that turn out to be the most promising.

The key to recognizing all three of Kant’s announced objections as working parts of his critical case is, I shall argue, to reflect on the following question: to what kind of contingent fact does Kant see the cosmological argument as appealing? I will argue that the answer turns out to be somewhat unexpected: Kant sees his opponent as appealing not to the assumption that something observably existent \textit{might not have existed at all}, but rather to the assumption that it \textit{might have existed but not in the way in which it actually exists} — to the assumption, in other words, that it might have existed in some other way. Accordingly, he supposes that the most that one could hope to establish in the first phase of the argument — the part that proceeds by pushing an explanatory or causal regress to its limit — is that there is some being that cannot exist in any other way than the way in which it actually exists, a being that, as Kant puts it himself, is capable of existing “only in one single way \((\text{\textit{nur auf eine einzige Art})}\)” \((A\ 605/B\ 633;\ 28:1029)\). Such a being would be one for which the question “Why does this being exist thus and not otherwise?” would not arise. And it would not do so simply because it would be an impossibility for this being to exist otherwise than it actually does. In what follows, I will refer to a being so conceived as an “essentially unimodal being.”

Because, in Kant’s view, the first phase of the cosmological argument would at best establish the existence of an essentially unimodal being, the argument must, he thinks, be supplemented by an \textit{a priori} train of reasoning in which it is argued (1) that this essentially unimodal being is an \textit{ens realissimum} (or most real being), and (2) that this \textit{ens realissimum} exists necessarily or, to put it another way, that it is a necessary being. I will refer to these parts of Kant’s reconstruction of the cosmological argument as the second and third “phases” of the argument.

Kant, I will argue, sees the cosmological argument as containing the ontological argument as a proper part because he believes that the former must appeal to the latter if it hopes to show not merely that the \textit{ens realissimum} exists, but that it exists \textit{necessarily} — a conclusion that for Kant must mean that it exists from its very concept (or so, at least, I will argue).

4. Kant sometimes speaks of an “absolutely necessary being” and sometimes merely of a “necessary being.” In the present context, it is clear that the latter phrase is intended to abbreviate the former. The qualification “absolutely” is intended to mark a contrast — familiar from the writings of Leibniz and Wolff, and going back (at least) to Aquinas — between absolute and hypothetical necessity. A hypothetically necessary being is one whose existence is necessary \textit{on some condition}, while an absolutely necessary being is one whose existence is unconditionally necessary. Kant, of course, believes that there are numerous hypothetically necessary beings because he regards any (non-initial) state of the empirical world and any (non-initial) event within it as necessarily existent \textit{given the laws of nature and the existence of a previous state of the world}.

Kant on the Cosmological Argument
The version of the ontological argument that Kant concentrates on throughout his discussion, I will argue, is the Leibnizian version — one that begins with an attempt to establish the consistency of the concept of the ens realissimum (New Essays, bk. 4, chap. 10, 437–38). I will argue that Kant sees the particular version of the cosmological argument that he attributes to his opponent as containing (what amounts to) an attempted proof of this same consistency assumption. He views the matter this way because the train of reasoning constituted by the first two phases, since it purports to establish the existence of an ens realissimum, will — if sound — trivially suffice to establish the consistency of the concept of an ens realissimum.

It will take a good deal of work to show how these ideas play out in detail, and how they are grounded in Kant’s texts, but I preview them here in the hope of helping the reader keep track of the twists and turns in Kant’s rather complicated reconstruction of his opponent’s argument.

It should not be immediately obvious that Kant conceives of the first phase of the argument as contending for the existence of an essentially unimodal being, and much of this essay will be concerned with substantiating this point. I will argue that four main considerations point to this conclusion.

First, such a view is the natural one to hold if we make the assumption — itself a charitable one — of interpretive charity on Kant’s part. For, it is only if one conceives of a contingent being in the way that this view would demand — that is, as a being that is capable of having existed in some other way — that the crucial contingency assumption even seems as though it might be established by means of an argument (as Kant supposes that it would have to be). To be clear, Kant does not think that his opponent succeeds in establishing the contingency assumption, but he does think that his opponent possesses an argument for it that is at least prima facie cogent. Second, I think it is only by taking this view of what (in Kant’s view) the first phase of the argument purports to establish that we can make sense of an otherwise obscure passage in the heart of Kant’s discussion (A 605–6/B 633) — see section 3 for details. Third, one of Kant’s actual historical opponents, Christian Wolff, turns out to be committed to thinking of an absolutely necessary being as an essentially unimodal being since he conceives of a contingent being as a being that is capable of having existed in some other way — see section 2. Finally, on the assumption that the first phase of the argument purports to establish only the existence of an essentially unimodal being, we can explain why the notion of a being that is capable of existing “only in one single way” figures in Kant’s discussion at A 605/B 633 (compare: 28: 1029).

The essay is divided into five sections and a conclusion. The first section examines Kant’s reconstruction of the first phase of the cosmological argument. I contend that he sees this phase as capable at best — that is, waiving certain other objections — of establishing only the existence of an “absolutely necessary being” conceived of as an essentially unimodal being. The second section examines the conceptions of necessity and contingency that figure in this part of the argument, while also considering how faithful Kant succeeds in being here to the philosophers that he elsewhere identifies as his main opponents — namely, Leibniz and Wolff (28: 1006). In the third section, the second phase of the argument is scrutinized and found to contain two distinct parts. The first part argues that any essentially unimodal being must be a most real being, or ens realissimum, while the second argues that any most real being must be an “absolutely necessary being” — understood now in the rather different sense of a being that is “necessary from its concept” (A 612/B 640). Kant’s discussion thus incorporates an important, if undeclared, shift in what is meant by “an absolutely necessary being” — or so, at least, I shall argue. The fourth section examines Kant’s discussion of the cosmological argument in the Fourth Antinomy, relating that discussion to certain subsidiary criticisms he makes in the Ideal. The fifth section evaluates Kant’s claim that the

5. In different places, Kant suggests that each of these philosophers falls back on the ontological argument in attempting to complete the cosmological argument. For the claim that Wolff makes this move, see 28: 315, and for the claim that Leibniz makes it, see 28: 599.
cosmological argument presupposes the ontological argument, but not merely because the former appeals to the soundness of the latter as a tacit premise. I argue that this last main criticism is the least successful of the three. In the conclusion, I present these criticisms in what I take to be, rhetorically speaking, their most effective order, and I draw certain broader morals from the preceding discussion.

The scope of the essay is confined — purely for reasons of space — to a consideration of Kant's objections to the cosmological argument. In particular, I will reserve for a future occasion a discussion of his account of how a species of intellectual illusion — the so-called "Transcendental Illusion" — is supposed to instill within finite rational minds a permanent and unavoidable inclination to commit the fallacies that he alleges to be present in the argument.

[1] Kant's Presentation of the Cosmological Argument: The First Phase

In the section of the first Critique devoted to criticizing the cosmological argument, Kant sets out (what I contend is) the argument's first phase in a tantalizingly brief remark:

"If something exists, then an absolutely necessary being also has to exist. Now I myself at least, exist; therefore, an absolutely necessary being exists (A 604/B 633; compare A 584/B 612)"

In spite of its compressed form, this formulation already reveals something important about Kant's conception of his opponent's starting point. It suggests that he sees his opponent as beginning not from the assumption that something exists contingently — the point of departure most commonly suggested in the secondary literature — but rather from the more basic assumption simply that something exists.6

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6. For accounts that portray the cosmological argument as proceeding from an unsubstantiated contingency assumption, see, for example: Weldon (1945, 126), Broad (1978, 297), and Wood (1978, 130). Kant himself helps to create the impression that the contingency assumption is not argued for by neglecting to sound the needed note of caution when reporting the label that Leibniz and Wolff use for the argument, namely, "the proof a contingentia mundi" ("the proof from the contingency of the world") (28: 1029; A 604/B 632).

7. Some evidence that Kant would have agreed with my rendering of "mutabile" as "alterable" is provided by his glossing "Veränderung" (which is standardly translated as "alteration") as "Mutation" in a reflection (B 5225, 38: 124). Compare also his switching between these terms in the Pölitz Religion lectures (28: 1039). Also relevant here is the fact that Baumgarten, whose translations Kant often follows, suggests "Veränderung," as the translation of "mutatio," and "veränderlich" as the translation of "mutabile." (See Metaphysics, §§ 125–27.)
were contingent then it could not be the ground of my existence, since it would once again have need of something else containing the ground of its existence. This absolutely necessary being, however, must contain in itself the ground of its own existence, and consequently the ground of the existence of the whole world. (28: 1006; compare A 605/B 633n*)

Here the Principle of Sufficient Reason is not mentioned by name, but it is clear, both from this passage and from its counterpart in the first Critique (A 584/B 612), that Kant sees the cosmological argument as making use of it.8 Importantly, the passage makes clear that the contingent fact that initiates the explanatory regress is the fact that the self exists as it does and not otherwise.9 As we shall see, this choice of contingent fact has an important bearing on the way in which Kant’s criticisms of the argument unfold.

Drawing these points together, we may offer the following as a first-pass reconstruction of the version of the cosmological argument — or of its initial phase — that Kant selects as his target:

P1. I exist and undergo alteration.

P2. Whatever alters is contingent (in the sense of being capable of having existed in some other way).

8. Kant follows Crusius in rejecting the label ‘the principle of sufficient reason.’ Kant does so because he takes the term ‘sufficient’ to be ‘ambiguous [ambigua]’ since “it is not immediately clear how much is sufficient” (1: 393) — one suspects that he should have said ‘vague.’ When Kant is prepared to give the principle a name, he tends to refer to it either as “the principle of the determining ground” (1: 391) or, as in the first Critique, as the “the allegedly transcendental natural law of causality” (A 605/B 633n*).

9. A remark from Kant’s pre-critical writings shows this conception of contingency to be one he settled on early (2: 124). The conception is manifest again in Kant’s Religion Lectures, where he portrays the proponent of the cosmological argument as positing an ‘absolutely necessary cause’ as the terminus of an explanatory regress generated by asking of each contingent thing in the series why it exists “so and not otherwise” (28: 1029).

So,

L1.10 I am contingent (in this sense).

P3. If a being exists that is contingent (in this sense), then, by the Principle of Sufficient Reason, an absolutely necessary being (conceived of as a being that contains within itself the ground of its own existence) must also exist.

So,

C. An absolutely necessary being (so conceived) exists.

The argument is valid and its first premise is relatively uncontroversial. However, for reasons that Kant states in the Fourth Antinomy — reasons that we will examine in section 4 — the warrant for premise P2 is unclear. The warrant for P3 is also unclear — among other things — its reliance on the Principle of Sufficient Reason — a point that we will also examine in section 4.

Although in the Religion Lectures, Kant (correctly) portrays the first phase of the argument as seeking to establish the existence of a being that is absolutely necessary in the sense of containing the cause or ground of its existence within itself,11 he believes that what it ought to seek to establish is the rather different conclusion that there exists a being “whose nonbeing is impossible” (A 593/B 621). Since it incorporates this feature, Kant’s understanding of the kind of being for which, in his view, the argument should be arguing represents a clear departure from the stated positions of Leibniz and Wolff. But what this departure amounts to, I think, is less a distortion of their views than a charitable emendation of them — one motivated by Kant’s view that

10. I use ‘L’ for “lemma,” ‘P’ for “premise,” and ‘C’ for “conclusion.”

11. Wolff, Theologia Naturalis, 1, §29; Leibniz, Theodicy §7, 127.
Leibniz and Wolff operate with a frankly incoherent conception of what an absolutely necessary being would have to be.

This view is one at which Kant arrived early in his career. In the *New Elucidation* of 1755 he deems “absurd” *absolucionum* the idea that something should be capable of containing within itself the ground of, or reason for, its own existence (1: 394). And he draws the moral that if anything is said to exist with absolute necessity, “that thing does not exist because of some ground [*ratio*]; [rather] it exists because the opposite cannot be thought at all” (1: 394). Kant rejects the very idea of a self-grounding being, first, because he supposes that such a being would have to be its own cause and, second, because he supposes that “the concept of a cause is by its nature prior to the concept of that which is caused” (1: 394). Although he states this view in an early work, Kant continues to maintain it during the critical period. Thus in the first *Critique* Kant says: “Reason cognizes [*erkennt*] as absolutely necessary only what is necessary from its concept” (A 612/B 640; compare 28: 1032, emphasis added). Since he does not believe that reason knows anything to be absolutely necessary (28: 1033), he must mean that reason cannot conceive of absolute necessity except in this way. And, in line with this thought, Kant at one point simply equates absolute necessity with “an existence from mere concepts” (A 607/B 635).

In Kant’s view, then, the proper goal of the cosmological argument is (and can only be), to prove the existence and status as an *ens realissimum* of an absolutely necessary being, where this being is conceived of as one whose non-existence is impossible (A 607/B 635). As we shall see, in the first *Critique* Kant treats his opponents as if they are attempting to establish this result instead of pursuing their actually professed goal of demonstrating the existence of a self-caused or self-grounding being. In case it might seem unfair of him to proceed in this way, we should stress that his motive for thus distorting his opponents’ position seems simply to be the charitable one of securing, as his target, a version of the argument that provides a conclusion he views as at least *coherent*. A second point we need to keep in mind is that — as I will argue — the term “absolutely necessary being” shifts its meaning in the course of Kant’s discussion of the cosmological argument. As Kant sees it, the first phase of the argument purports to demonstrate the existence of an absolutely necessary being conceived of only as what I have termed “an essentially unimodal being.” But he treats the argument’s proper ultimate goal as being to demonstrate the existence and attributes of “an absolutely necessary being” in the rather different sense of a being whose non-existence is impossible. It is precisely Kant’s failure to flag this shift in the meaning of the phrase “absolutely necessary being” that, I think, accounts for much of the obscurity in his discussion. The hypothesis of such a shift, I shall argue, enables us to make sense of his reconstruction and, most importantly, to explain why Kant should suppose that the cosmological argument derives all of its force from the ontological argument (A 607/B 635). As we shall see, it also sheds light on certain central passages in Kant’s discussion that are otherwise rather opaque and that tend to be skipped over by his commentators.  

**[2] The Role of Contingency in the Argument**

Kant’s presentation of the cosmological argument, as we have seen, departs from his opponents’ actual formulations of it in its understanding...
of the notion of an absolutely necessary being. It also seems to depart from those formulations in its understanding of the notion of contingency. For, at first glance, neither Leibniz nor Wolff appears to be conceiving of the self’s contingency as consisting in the fact that it is capable of having existed in some other way. On closer inspection, however, it emerges, first, that Kant is not in fact misrepresenting Wolff’s position—or, at least, his position in the German Metaphysics—and, second, that, although he is to some extent misrepresenting Leibniz, that is plausibly only because he is—once again—offering a charitable emendation of the Leibnizian argument. Wolff’s version of the cosmological argument in the German Metaphysics is worth examining in detail, for, as we shall see, it seems likely to be the version of the argument with which Kant is most directly engaging.

Wolff’s presentation of the cosmological argument in his German Metaphysics agrees with Kant’s insofar as it begins with the observation that the self exists, and then proceeds to argue that it exists contingently. Since at the start of his discussion Wolff is conceiving of an absolutely necessary being as an (exclusively) self-grounding (hence self-subsistent) being, his strategy at this point is to argue that the self is contingent because it depends on something distinct from itself (§938). That dependence, he argues, follows from the self’s having its “being and nature” in a faculty of representation whose component representations depend on the states of things in the mind-external world (the states, that is, of bodies) (§941; compare §§755–56). Nonetheless, immediately after making this argument for the self’s contingency, Wolff goes on to consider a way in which his opponent might seek to resist it, namely, by raising the skeptical possibility that the world might be nothing more than (the content of) the self’s representations. If this were how things happened to be—so the imagined objector argues—the aforementioned grounds for contingency would be lacking. And therefore, the objector continues, if the cosmological argument is not to depend on an antecedent proof of the existence of the external world, it had better establish the contingency of the self by some other means.

Wolff’s response to this envisaged objection is, in effect, to concede its force, and to fall back on a revised conception of contingency that renders the objection irrelevant. He argues that, even if the “egoist”—his name for a philosopher who believes in the self while denying the existence of the external world (§944)—were right, there would still have to be a reason why the self represents the world as existing thus and not otherwise. The clear implication is that, since the self might have represented things differently—something presumably attested to (in Wolff’s view, but not, as we shall see, in Kant’s) by the fact that it represents the world differently at different times—it qualifies as contingent in the sense of being capable of having existed in some other way. Wolff concludes that, for this reason, even the egoist’s self can be known to be a contingent being (§943)—now, of course, in this revised sense of contingency.

Kant, since he depicts the cosmological argument as appealing to the contingent fact that “I am as I am and not otherwise” (28: 1006), does not, then, misrepresent Wolff’s considered position in the German Metaphysics. But just how faithful is he being to Leibniz? One might reasonably have doubts on this score because in a passage from the Theodicy—one that Kant would likely have seen—Leibniz at one point suggests that the contingency to be explained in the cosmological argument is the fact that the world exists at all. We must, he says, “seek the reason for the existence of the world” (Theodicy, § 7, 127, emphasis added and reading the initial ‘Welt’ as ‘Wenn.’). I take it that Wolff is not implying that the chain of explanations will end with the soul’s nature. Rather, his view seems to be that once the soul’s nature has been appealed to the question why the soul has this nature and not another will in turn arise. For, as he goes on to observe, other kinds of souls are possible (ibid). In consequence, the chain of explanations thus generated will not end (on Wolff’s way of thinking) until one posits the existence of a self-caused being understood as a being that is itself the (sole) cause of its being the way it is and not otherwise.

16. Wolff seems to think of self-grounding as a matter of something’s being its own sole cause, so that it entails a lack of dependence on other things.
added). But, although this difference cannot be denied, two points serve to diminish the appearance of unfairness. First, in this same section of the *Theodicy*, Leibniz appeals also to the fact that the world exists as it does and not otherwise. He says: "Time, space and matter ... might have received entirely other motions and shapes, and [existed] in another order" (ibid.). Moreover, the same starting point for the argument is suggested — as an option, at least — by a formulation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason that occurs later in the *Theodicy*. This runs: "Nothing ever comes to pass without there being a cause or at least a reason determining it, that is, something to give an *a priori* reason why it is existent rather than non-existent, and in this wise rather than in any other" (§ 44, Huggard 147, emphasis added). The second point that serves to diminish the appearance of unfairness is the fact that by assimilating Leibniz’s version of the argument to Wolff’s Kant is in fact treating the former charitably. For, as we shall see, the version of the argument that proceeds from the assumption that the self is contingent in the sense that it might have existed in some other way turns out to have, by Kant’s lights, a better chance of establishing the existence of an *ens realissimum* than the version that begins by assuming merely that the self (or the world) exists at all.


As Kant presents it, the cosmological argument has two further phases. In the second phase it is argued that the essentially unimodal being whose existence was contended for in the first phase is an *ens realissimum*. In the third phase, which Kant equates with the ontological argument, it is argued that this *ens realissimum* is a conceptually necessary being.

Kant describes the reasoning of the second phase in the following terms:

18. The clause I have highlighted runs: "et pourquoi cela est ainsi plutôt que de toute autre façon."

The cosmological proof infers further from the existence of an absolutely necessary being to the conclusion that this being must also be an *ens realissimum* [that is, a most necessary being].

19. Kant means "by only one of the pair."

20. I take it that this last remark means that the concept of the most real being fits the role of the absolutely necessary being as *that notion is at this stage understood*, namely, as the essentially unimodal being. And, as we shall see, Kant thinks that establishing the stronger conclusion that the most real being cannot fail to exist requires the ontological argument.

21. Kant expressly attributes this inference to Wolff: “Now from the absolute necessity of such a being Wolff inferred its highest perfection” (28: 1006). Kant, it should be noted, uses “highest being” synonymously with “most real being” and "*ens realissimum*" (8: 138; 28: 1013–14; 29: 1001).
real being]. The inference runs as follows: This necessary being can be determined in only one way: this is, with respect to all possible *praedicata contradictorie opposita* [contradictorily opposed predicates] it must be determined by one of these opposed predicates, consequently it must be thoroughly determined by its concept. But there is only one possible concept of a thing which determines it thoroughly *a priori*, and this is the concept of the *ens realissimum*, since in every possible pair of *praedicata contradictorie opposita* only the reality always belongs to it. Hence the concept of a most real being is the only concept by means of which a necessary being can be thought. (28: 1029–30)

Both this passage and its counterpart in the first *Critique* seem to have caused Kant’s commentators a fair deal of trouble. Wood, for example, declines to engage with the details of either passage, and deems the second of them “obscure” (1978, 125). James Van Cleve, for his part, quotes the passage from the first *Critique*, but makes no attempt to explain its reasoning (1999, 200). And Jonathan Bennett, commenting on this same passage from the first *Critique*, complains that we are not told why a necessarily existing being must be completely determined through its concept (1974, 249).

Nonetheless, the fog begins to clear—or so I would argue—if we assume that in explicating the first phase of the cosmological argument Kant is using the term “absolutely necessary being” for an essentially unimodal being. If that is so, then, contrary to Bennett, we have been told why a necessary being must be thoroughly (or completely) determined through its concept: it must be so determined precisely because it is an essentially unimodal being (We shall consider the reasoning behind this explanation shortly). Our assumption also serves to allay another potential concern, namely, that if the first phase of the argument did suffice to establish the existence of an absolutely necessary being (understood as a self-grounding being), the argument for this same conclusion could hardly be supposed to rely on the ontological argument. Our reading manages to avoid delivering this unfavorable verdict on Kant’s criticism precisely because it assumes that he sees the first phase of the cosmological argument as purporting to establish only that an essentially unimodal being exists.

On the present reading, each of the two passages just quoted should be thought to contain the following argument:

**AP1.** Any essentially unimodal being is an object that is thoroughly determined through its concept.

**AP2.** Any object that is thoroughly determined through its concept is a most real being.

So,

**AC.** Any essentially unimodal being is a most real being.

This argument is valid, but the truth of its premises is not immediately obvious. In order to convince ourselves that Kant would have regarded them as true—or, at least, as sufficiently plausible that they might be charitably attributed to his opponent—we must arrive at a clearer understanding of what it is for an object to be “thoroughly determined through its concept.”

I want to suggest that—to a first approximation, at least—an object is “thoroughly determined through its concept” just in case the content of its concept—that is, the concept that expresses its traditional Aristotelian essence—fixes the object’s intrinsic properties determinately.22 So, to illustrate, no human being is thoroughly determined through his or her concept—namely, the concept *human*...
being — because the content of this concept fails to determine whether or not the individual in question has, for instance, the property of being six feet tall. By contrast, on the assumption that all realities are necessarily compossible, the concept of the most real being — that is, the concept of the most real being there could possibly be — does plausibly fix its object’s intrinsic properties. The argument for this last conclusion would run as follows. We make two assumptions: first, that all realities are necessarily compossible; second, that for each property, \( F \), exactly one of \( F \) and its negation is a reality.\(^{24}\) Now, by the first assumption, the most real being — that is, the most real being there could possibly be — must have every reality. But, by the second assumption, the most real being will therefore be determined by its concept to have exactly one property from each pair of contradictorily opposed intrinsic properties, for it will possess the reality (and only the reality) in the pair. It will therefore be thoroughly determined through its concept.

We can make the idea of “thorough determination” more precise by enlisting the concept of entailment. We will say:

An object, \( x \), is thoroughly determined through a concept, \( F \), just in case, for any intrinsic property, \( G \), the proposition that \( x \) is \( F \) either entails that \( x \) is \( G \) or entails that \( x \) is not-\( G \).

So, for example, Madonna is not thoroughly determined through the concept human being because — among other things — the proposition that Madonna is a human being entails neither that she is six feet tall nor that she is not six feet tall. On the other hand, given our two assumptions, the most real being is thoroughly determined through the concept, the most real being. To see this, consider an arbitrary intrinsic property, \( G \). By our second assumption, exactly one of \( G \) and its negation is a reality. Call the reality in this pair, \( R \). And call the proposition that the most real being is a most real being, \( p \). Then, by our first assumption, \( p \) will entail the proposition that the most real being has \( R \). If \( R \) is identical with \( G \), this means that \( p \) entails that the most real being is \( G \). If, on the other hand, \( R \) is identical with non-\( G \), then \( p \) entails that the most real being is not \( G \). But, since \( R \) is, by construction, identical with exactly one of \( G \) and non-\( G \), this means that one or other of these entailments must hold. Finally, since \( G \) is arbitrary, that means that the most real being is thoroughly determined through its concept.

With this understanding of “thoroughgoing determination” in place, we may return to the argument for the claim that any essentially unimodal being is a most real being (our AC). I take it that the first premise in this argument — AP1 — would be established by the following reasoning. Suppose, for reductio, that some essentially unimodal being, \( x \), were not thoroughly determined through its concept. Then there would be some intrinsic property, \( G \), such that the proposition that \( x \) is an essentially unimodal being entailed neither that \( x \) was \( G \) nor that \( x \) was not \( G \). But then it would be possible for \( x \) to be \( G \), and it would also be possible for \( x \) not to be \( G \). But then \( x \) would be capable of existing in more than one way, and so would not be an essentially unimodal being. Contradiction. QED.

This argument is plausibly sound. Premise AP2, on the other hand, seems doubtful. There is no obvious argument in its favor and — worse — it seems to face counterexamples. For example, one wonders why a Leibnizian complete individual concept or “notion” should not qualify as a concept that thoroughly determines its object.\(^{25}\) If, for example, the notion of Caesar contains — as Leibniz supposes it does — a constituent concept for every property that has ever held or will ever hold of Caesar, then, surely, this concept will thoroughly determine its object. Another concept that might seem to thoroughly

\(^{23}\) In his discussion of the ontological argument, Kant objects that this assumption has not been proven (A 602/B 631). I take it, however, that in the present context he is granting it for the sake of argument.

\(^{24}\) That Kant is operating on this assumption is clear from his remark that ‘In every possible pair of praeicata contradictorie opposita only the reality always belongs to the most real being’ (28: 1029–30, emphasis added).

\(^{25}\) Bennett seems to be raising this worry, or something like it, when he claims that the concept of the ens realissimum is not the only “saturated concept” (249).
determine its object — if the concept of a most real being does — is the concept of a thing possessing every reality save benevolence.

Why these concepts should not be thought of as thoroughly determining their objects is a question that deserves an answer, but I think Kant would not wish to challenge AP2 on these grounds. For, in the first place, even if he had known of it — and that seems unlikely — Kant could not have regarded the Leibnizian conception of a complete individual concept as coherent. For a concept of this sort would have to contain infinitely many component concepts — something that is, by Kant’s lights, impossible (B 40) — (The concept of the most real being, by contrast, contains only a handful of constituents, namely, the concepts most, real, etc.). Our second putative counterexample requires more delicate handling because the concept in question contains only finitely many component concepts. The reason why Kant would not, I think, see this example as providing grounds for rejecting AP2 is that he is acquiescing in the traditional idea that the divine attributes are somehow mutually grounding. As his contemporary, Moses Mendelssohn, puts the point:

A single chain of inferences combines all perfections of [the supreme being]. His independence, infinity, immensity, his supremely perfect will, unbounded intellect, and unlimited power, his wisdom, providence, justice, holiness, and so forth are reciprocally grounded in one another in such a way that, without the others, each of these properties would be contradictory. 

Kant shows himself to have a similar conception of how the divine attributes are related in his Religion Lectures. There, speaking of God’s divine attributes, which he characterizes as “single realities without limitation,” he says: “I think of each such unlimited reality equally as a ground from which I understand every other unlimited reality” (28: 1015). Mendelssohn’s talk of a single chain of inferences strongly suggests that mutual or reciprocal grounding is supposed to imply mutual or reciprocal entailment. But if that is so, there will be a way of resisting the present objection. For, given such a view, the argument for AC may be trivially reformulated in a way that gets around the problem. The reformulation would run:

A*P1: Any essentially unimodal being is thoroughly determined through its concept, where this concept is capable of exemplification.

A*P2: Anything that is thoroughly determined through its concept, where this concept is capable of exemplification, is a most real being.

So,

AC: Any essentially unimodal being is a most real being.

The new argument gets around the present objection simply because, on the assumption that the perfections (or realities) of the most real being are mutually entailing, the concept of a being with every reality save benevolence is not capable of exemplification and so will not constitute a counterexample to A*P2. Granted, a positive argument for A*P2 has still not been provided, but, so long as counterexamples to this premise are not in the offering, we can plausibly suppose that Kant would have been prepared to grant it for the sake of argument.

There is a residual problem for Kant — one of which, I suspect, he was unaware. Since the grounding relation is transitive, by committing oneself to its symmetry one thereby commits oneself to its reflexivity — a property that Kant explicitly denies grounding to possess. I suspect that Kant’s failure to see this problem is owed to the fact that the logic of relations had not been developed in his day. I am grateful to audience members at the University of

26. As it is well known, Kant did not have access to the works in which the theory of complete individual concepts is developed.

One moral we may draw from all of this, independently of the finer details of our discussion, is that Kant sees the argument for the thesis that the absolutely necessary being is an *ens realissimum* as proceeding along strikingly different lines from the argument for the similar-sounding thesis that Leibniz offers in the *Theodicy*. There, Leibniz had argued that the absolutely necessary being allegedly proved to exist by the first phase of the cosmological argument would—in virtue of its assumed role in choosing and actualizing the best of all possible worlds—have to be absolutely perfect in respect of its power, wisdom, and goodness (*Theodicy* 1, §7). Since Leibniz’s argument relies on substantive assumptions about how the necessary being goes about creating the world, it is not at all surprising that Kant should proceed differently when trying to offer a sympathetic reconstruction of the cosmological argument. Instead, he first conceives of an absolutely necessary being as an essentially unimodal being, and then proceeds to argue (on his opponent’s behalf) that such a being must be an *ens realissimum*; and he does so by introducing a consideration—the concept of thoroughgoing determination—to which Leibniz’s argument for the corresponding conclusion makes no appeal.

This observation helps to explain why Kant should tend to focus on Wolff’s rehearsal of the argument in preference to Leibniz’s. We have already seen that Kant would likely prefer Wolff’s version to Leibniz’s because it incorporates an argument for its crucial contingency assumption. We now see that, in addition, Wolff’s version suggests a natural route by means of which one might attempt to argue that the “absolutely necessary being” contended for in the first phase of the cosmological argument is an *ens realissimum*. For, as we have just seen, there is a passably coherent—if not in the end demonstrably sound—argument that any essentially unimodal being must be an *ens realissimum*. And Wolff’s version of (the first phase of) the argument—since it starts by assuming a being that is conceived of as contingent in the sense of being capable of having existed in some other way—is naturally viewed as properly culminating in the positioning of an essentially unimodal being, even if Wolff does not draw this conclusion himself.

Let us turn our attention now to the third phase of Kant’s reconstruction of the argument. This attempts to deduce the existence of a conceptually necessary being from the existence of an *ens realissimum*. Kant sees such an inference as presupposing the ontological argument—and, I would argue, he means that it relies on the ontological argument as an inferential subroutine. The present part of the article will endeavor to show how, in Kant’s view, it does so.

Kant says that having established (to his own satisfaction) the existence of a “being of the highest reality” (that is, an *ens realissimum*) the proponent of the cosmological argument then presupposes [voraussetzt] that from the concept of such a being the concept of an absolutely necessary being may be inferred (A 607/B 635). This inference, Kant says, is something that the ontological proof “asserted” and which “one thus assumes in the cosmological proof and takes as one’s ground [zum Grunde legt], although one had wanted to avoid it” (ibid.). The reason he offers for equating this last step with the ontological argument is that he construes absolute necessity as “an existence from mere concepts” (ibid.). Clearly then, at the close of his reconstruction of the cosmological argument Kant is understanding the phrase “an absolutely necessary being” to mean a being whose existence follows from its very concept, rather than (merely) a being that is capable of existing only in one way.

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29. Only “similar-sounding” because, for Leibniz, the absolutely necessary being is not merely an essentially unimodal being.

30. Wolff, it should be noted, does not argue in this way himself. Instead, he attempts to establish that the necessary being has the traditional divine attributes by appealing to its status as an *ens a se*—that is, a being that contains the sufficient reason for its existence within itself (*Theologie Naturalis*, 1, 2, §31. For some of the relevant arguments see §§624–74). However, since Kant rejects Wolff’s conception of an *ens a se* (as we have seen), he would reject along with it Wolff’s argumentative path to the divine attributes.
In the Religion Lectures, Kant remarks that the ontological argument gives the cosmological argument “all its probative force [Beweiskraft]” (28: 1006–7; compare A 607/B 635).\footnote{I owe this felicitous translation to Vallicella (2000).} We shall shortly consider why he should say such a thing. But the point to note for now is just that the first phase of the cosmological argument, even when it is supplemented by the argument for AC, will not have shown that there is an absolutely necessary being (understood as a being that cannot fail to exist), for it will not have shown that the most real being cannot fail to exist. This point, I take it, is what Kant is driving at when he says, “The greatest perfection, no less than the smallest, hovers without support before speculative reason” (A 613/B 641).\footnote{Here, I prefer Kemp Smith’s rendering of “wie” as “no less than” to Guyer and Wood’s “as well as.” For Kant is surely trying to convey that, for all the argument has so far shown, the most real being— for all its perfection or reality—is no better supported in existence than a being with the lowest (non-zero) degree of reality.} He means that, unless we assume the ontological argument as an inferential subroutine—and unless that argument is sound— even the most real (or most “perfect”) being will lack a proof of its necessary existence. Accordingly, Kant supposes that the ontological argument is required to license the inference from the most real being’s (supposed) existence to its necessary existence. Since this extra step is required, the cosmological argument, as it stands, establishes— at best, and waiving certain other objections that Kant will make— only the existence but not the necessary existence of an ens realissimum. Since the argument establishes less than it purports to establish, its proponent (who fails to recognize this fact) commits an ignoratio elenchi (A 609/B 637). The second of Kant’s three main charges against the cosmological argument is thus substantiated.

In connection with this last point, it is important to note that the conclusion of an ignoratio elenchi need not be unrelated to the desired conclusion: indeed, it might even be a step on the way to that conclusion. The fallacy of ignoratio elenchi consists merely in the fact that (unbeknownst to the philosopher who commits the fallacy) the conclusion attained is weaker than the desired conclusion. This point is illustrated by an example of an ignoratio elenchi that Kant gives in his logic lectures. In the example, one commits the fallacy in question because one merely argues for a “future life”— that is to say, life after bodily death—when one was supposed to be arguing for immortality, which— as Kant makes clear in his metaphysics lectures (28: 284; 29: 911)— is the natural impossibility of the soul’s ceasing to exist (28(2): 778). A weaker— if still interesting, and to some extent pertinent— conclusion is thus (unwittingly) passed off as the desired, stronger conclusion.

In Kant’s view, the cosmological arguer reasons by means of an a priori “digression” from the conclusion that the essentially unimodal being exists to the conclusion that an ens realissimum exists. But if that is so, one wonders why Kant should claim that this digression brings us back to the “old path” of the ontological argument (A 609/B 637). The opening assumption of the ontological argument, after all, is quite obviously not the assumption that an ens realissimum exists. To resolve this difficulty it helps to recall that the version of the ontological argument that Kant takes as his target in “The Ideal” resembles Leibniz’s version insofar as it begins with an attempt to demonstrate the most real being’s possibility— something that Leibniz equates with the consistency of that being’s concept.\footnote{New Essays, bk. 4, chap. 10, 437–38. Kant attributes the relevant possibility assumption to the proponent of the ontological argument when he says: “and [you say that] you are justified in assuming [the most real being] as possible” (A 596–97/B 625).} Accordingly, we can think of the digression as bringing us back to the beginning of the broadly Leibnizian ontological argument because, if sound, it will establish a conclusion from which we can trivially infer the consistency of the concept of the ens realissimum— the conclusion, namely, that the ens realissimum exists.\footnote{I am grateful to Randy Clarke for a question that helped me to think through the problem discussed in this paragraph.}
as strong as the existence of an *ens realissimum*. But we may, I think, view this as merely yet another symptom of his thoroughgoing concessiveness. Officially, he thinks that we cannot establish this result; indeed, he sees the reasoning in question to be flawed at numerous points (A 609–10/B 637–8). Nonetheless, Kant’s interest is not merely in raising objections to the cosmological argument: he wishes to raise the deepest and most telling objections he can. And Kant seems to think that none of his objections to the argument for the existence of an *ens realissimum* can rival in power his charge that the inference from the existence of an *ens realissimum* to its necessary existence depends on the ontological argument. It would, of course, be natural for Kant to hold such a view because he takes himself already to have demonstrated the unsoundness of the ontological argument by showing that it relies on the false assumption that *being* is a real predicate (A 599/B 627).

Consequently, if he can demonstrate the dependence of the cosmological argument on the ontological argument, his objection to the former will (he thinks) have demonstrative force.

It therefore suits Kant’s purposes to consider how far the argument would carry us if we were to allow his objections to its first phase to lapse. And the answer turns out to be: not far enough for the purposes of the speculative theologian. We would, at best, establish merely the existence of a most real being; but we would lack the warrant to clothe this being in its traditional theological garb. For, if the rationalist speculative theologian is to earn the right to treat the *ens realissimum* as (something like) the God of the Abrahamic tradition, he or she will need to argue that it exists necessarily. If that is not established — if, for all we know, the *ens realissimum* might exist contingently — then, since, by the Principle of Sufficient Reason, contingent things exist only on some condition, a rationalist speculative theologian would have to conclude that, for all we know, the *ens realissimum* might exist only on some condition. But then it might, for all we know, be in that respect limited, and so not qualify as *infinite* in the traditional sense of the term.

35. For a discussion see Proops forthcoming.

Given this diagnosis, one can readily appreciate why Kant should have declined to develop his other criticisms of premise P3 in the argument that we presented in section 1. Since he sees the argument from a contingent self to the essentially unimodal being as a red herring, the issue of that argument’s cogency becomes moot. The important point for Kant is just that if the ontological argument is sound, there is no need for the elaborate train of reasoning that leads from the existence of the self, by way of the essentially unimodal being, to existence of a most real being. If, on the other hand, the ontological argument is not sound, then the cosmological argument will also lack cogency. For the elaborate chain of reasoning in question — even if it were otherwise impeccable — would bring us only as far as the existence, but not the necessary existence, of an *ens realissimum*, and so would need to be supplemented by an appeal to the ontological argument. This, I think, is why Kant says that the cosmological argument draws “all its probative force” from the ontological argument (28: 1006–7, emphasis added, compare A 607/B 635). But how exactly does Kant see the cosmological argument as relying tacitly on the ontological argument? To answer this question we need to recall that Kant understands a necessary being as a being whose existence follows from its concept (A 607/B 635). Accordingly, in order to demonstrate that a given being, *x*, is a necessary being, one must exhibit the fact that *one can derive the conclusion that x exists merely from a consideration of x’s concept*. If the cosmological arguer wishes to show that the *ens realissimum* exists necessarily, therefore, it will, by Kant’s lights, be incumbent on him or her to exhibit, through a derivation, the alleged fact that the *ens realissimum’s* existence follows from its very concept. If one accepts Leibniz’s criticisms of Descartes’s ontological argument, this means that one will need to demonstrate two things. First, one will have to establish the consistency of the concept of the *ens realissimum*; second, one will have to derive the existence of the *ens realissimum* from its concept. As Kant sees it, the first step — as I have already mentioned — is purportedly established by the first two phases of the cosmological argument. For this stretch of reasoning purports
to establish the existence of the *ens realissimum* — hence, trivially, the consistency of its concept. The second thing to be shown is purportedly established by arguing that since the *ens realissimum* has every reality, and since existence is a reality, the *ens realissimum* exists. If Kant is correct in holding this reasoning — the heart of the ontological argument — to be unsound, one will fail to exhibit the derivability in question, and so one will fail to show the *ens realissimum* to be a necessary being.\(^{36}\) This, I think, suffices to establish the correctness of Kant’s first main criticism of the cosmological argument — or rather, it does so if we grant him his conception of what it is to be an absolutely necessary being. For, given that conception, the cosmological argument does, indeed, assume (the soundness of) the ontological argument as a tacit premise.

36. We should not worry that the *ens realissimum*’s existence has (allegedly) already been established earlier in the cosmological argument for at this stage the question is whether that existence follows merely from the *ens realissimum*’s concept.

37. See note 8 for an explanation of Kant’s reservations about the label.

38. I agree with Robert Adams (1997, 807–8) that, when Kant speaks of a principle or a concept as lacking “meaning” or “significance” [*Bedeutung*], he does not mean that the phrase expressing it lacks a sense. But I would emphasize, beyond this, that what it is for a principle to have meaning or significance in

to yield *a priori* knowledge only if it is construed as employing the *schematized*, hence temporally anchored, concepts of contingency and cause.\(^{39}\) But then, since time is a form of sensibility, the principle will have legitimate application only within the “world of sense” — within, that is to say, the spatiotemporal world.

In his discussion of the cosmological argument, Kant makes this criticism with special reference to the concept of contingency. He claims that Leibniz and Wolff’s version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason incorporates “the merely intellectual concept of the contingent” (A 609/B 635), a concept which, he claims, lacks any empirical criterion of application. Consequently, the principle in which this concept figures itself lacks any “mark of its use” (ibid.).

In the Fourth Antinomy, Kant explains why he takes the “merely intellectual” concept of contingency to lack an empirical criterion of application:

> In the pure sense of the category, the contingent is that whose contradictory opposite is possible. Now from empirical contingency one cannot at all infer this intelligible contingency. When something is altered, its opposite (the opposite of its state) is actual at another time, and hence possible; hence this is not the contradictory opposite of its previous state, for which it would be required that the very time when the previous state was, its opposite could

\(^{39}\) It is somewhat misleading of Kant to refer to the principle of sufficient reason as the “transcendental principle of inferring from the contingent to a cause” because the term “transcendental” suggests that the principle is, by its very nature, one that purports to apply to things beyond the world of sense. His actual view, however, is that the principle has a legitimate, as well as an illegitimate, domain of application. Nonetheless, his point is clear. To put it in more modern terms, we might say that there are two versions of the principle: one — employed by Leibniz and Wolff, but rejected by Kant — that purports to hold of objects in general — and one — approved of by Kant — that purports to speak only of possible objects of experience.
have been there in place of it, which cannot at all be inferred from the alteration. (A 459–60/B 488)

In other words, empirically observed alteration — although it is evidence for empirical contingency (which means: being dependent on something else) — cannot constitute evidence for intelligible contingency; contingency, that is to say, in the “pure” or unschematized sense of the category. It cannot do so because it cannot furnish any assurance that a state observed to exist at a given time might have failed to exist at that same time. Observed alteration does, Kant thinks, constitute evidence for empirical contingency because, by the argument of the Second Analogy, we know that whatever alters has a (temporally located) cause, and so depends in some way on some other temporal entity. But what matters for our purposes is that Kant denies that we can have evidence that a state that exists at a given time might not have existed at that time, and he insists that observed alteration cannot constitute such evidence.41

Although Kant emphasizes this point about our lack of empirical evidence for intelligible contingency in the Fourth Antinomy, he mentions it only briefly in the Ideal (A 609/B 637). Nonetheless, it amounts to a trenchant criticism of Wolff's mode of proceeding.42 The naïve thought is that the fact that the self can exist in more than one way is established by the fact that it actually exists in more than one way (at different times) when it alters. As Kant recognizes, however, alteration does not in fact serve to establish the self's intelligible contingency. To put the point in contemporary terms, what Wolff needs to show is that there is one possible world in which the self is F at a given time and another world at which it is not-F at that same time. To show this, it will not suffice to show that there is a world in which it is F at one time and not-F at another. Kant sees that Leibniz and Wolff do not, for this reason, succeed in establishing the contingency of the self by an appeal to alteration. And, since he clearly has no time for brute appeals to “our modal intuitions,” Kant takes it that his opponents do not, therefore, demonstrate the self's intelligible contingency. For that reason — among others — Kant supposes that the Principle of Sufficient Reason is applied without warrant in the cosmological argument.

[5] Kant’s Third Main Criticism: The Nervus Probandi and its Converse

Let us turn finally to the third of Kant’s main criticisms of the cosmological argument. This criticism, I believe, represents a fresh start. Kant is waiving his other criticisms and imagining that his opponent had, after all, succeeded in establishing the existence of an absolutely necessary being (a notion whose interpretation at this stage in the argument is unclear). The third criticism then focuses on the second step in the traditional breakdown of the argument: the step that attempts to show that this absolutely necessary being is an ens realissimum.

Kant now contends that, if the inference from the absolutely necessary being to the most real being (or ens realissimum) were to be sound, the ontological argument would be sound, too. And since Kant takes himself to have demonstrated the latter argument’s unsoundness earlier in “The Ideal,” he infers, by modus tollens, that the cosmological argument is not sound.

Kant’s argument for the conditional to which he applies this modus tollens runs as follows:

If the proposition is correct “Every absolutely necessary being is at the same time the most real being” [das aller-realeste Wesen] (which is the nervus probandi of the cosmological proof), then, like any affirmative judgment, it must at least be convertible per accidens, thus: “Some most real

40. Kant’s notion of “empirical contingency” thus corresponds closely to the conception of contingency that Wolff begins with (but ultimately abandons) in his presentation of the cosmological argument in the German Metaphysics.

41. Kant makes the same point at A 243/B 301.

42. Recall that, in his Religion Lectures, Kant portrays Leibniz and Wolff as attempting to infer the contingency of the self from the fact that it alters (28: 1006). This seems to be a fair representation at least of Wolff’s position, since, as we have seen, in his Ontologia Wolff claims that “Whatever is alterable [mutable] is contingent” ($296).
beings are at the same time absolutely necessary beings.” But now one ens realissimum does not differ the least bit from another, and thus what holds of some beings contained under this concept holds also of all. Consequently, I will also be able (in this case) to convert the proposition absolutely, i.e., [infer from it] “Every most real being is a necessary being.” Now, because this proposition is determined merely from its concepts a priori, the mere concept of the most real being must also carry with it the absolute necessity of this being—which is just what the ontological proof asserted, and the cosmological proof did not want to recognize, despite the fact that it underlay its inferences, though in a covert way. (A 608–9/B 637)

Kant does not indicate whether at this stage he means to be granting for the sake of argument the assumption that an absolutely necessary being exists. But it is clear that he is conceding for these purposes the assumption that the proposition that any absolutely necessary being is a most real being is known to be true and, indeed, so known a priori because it is a conceptual truth.

Kant’s objection takes the form of the following (somewhat dubious) argument:

[1] Suppose, for the sake of argument, that it is a conceptual truth, and so known a priori, that every absolutely necessary being is a most real being.

[2] Then, by the rule of per accidens conversion, some most real being is an absolutely necessary being.

[3] But what holds of one most real being holds of all.

[4] By [2] and [3], all most real beings are absolutely necessary beings.

43. The rule, which is nowadays discredited, permits the inference from “All F are G” to “Some G is F.”

[5] But our derivation of [4] begins from a conceptual truth and employs only logically or conceptually valid reasoning. So [4] itself is a conceptual truth—it is, as Kant puts it, “determined merely from its concepts a priori” (A 608/B 637). Accordingly, the mere concept of a most real being carries with it the absolute necessity of this being.

[6] But that—the conclusion of [5]—is just what the ontological argument purports to establish.

If we suppose that Kant is conceding for the sake of argument that the first phase of the cosmological argument has established the existence of an absolutely necessary being on empirical grounds, then the first part of this argument—that is, steps [1]–[4]—is, by our lights at least, valid—(Whether Kant himself is really entitled to view it as valid given his other commitments is a question to which we shall return.). For, as Wood has observed, given this assumption it does not matter that the argument relies on the nowadays discredited rule of per accidens conversion. For the existential commitment of that inference, while not warranted generally, is nonetheless warranted in this particular instance by the assumption that the first phase of the cosmological argument has (somehow) already proved the existence of an absolutely necessary being.44

To put the point slightly differently, the following argument is (by our lights) logically valid:

BP1: Every absolutely necessary being is a most real being.

BP2: There exists some absolutely necessary being.

BP3: All most real beings have exactly the same properties.

So

44. See Wood (1978, 127). Wood generously credits the observation to Remnant (1959), but his own formulation of the point is considerably clearer.
BC: Every most real being is an absolutely necessary being.

The validity of this argument can be established by the following reasoning. Consider an arbitrary most real being, $a$. We want to show that $a$ is an absolutely necessary being. Now consider the absolutely necessary being—or beings—asserted to exist by BP2. Call it—or one of them—$b$. We know that $b$ is an absolutely necessary being; so by BP1, $b$ is a most real being. But because both $a$ and $b$ are most real beings, we know, by BP3, that they have exactly the same properties. So, in particular, since $b$ has the property of being an absolutely necessary being, $a$ has that property, too. QED.\(^{45}\)

The initial part of the argument—steps [1]–[4]—is, therefore valid in the context (of what we have supposed to be) Kant’s concessive assumption that a most real being exists. Nonetheless, his argument as a whole—steps—[1]–[6]—remains problematic. The problem lies with Kant’s claim that if the absolutely necessary being is the most real being, then it follows that the converse of this assumption—our proposition BC—is knowable a priori. Kant needs to make such a claim because it is the alleged status of BC as a conceptual truth that is supposed, as Kant sees it, to show that the most real being exists from its very concept. And the conclusion that the most real being exists from its concept was required because one wanted to show that the most real being was a necessary being (which, for Kant, just means that its existence follows from its very concept).

The problem for Kant is that he has not demonstrated that his opponent’s assumption of premise [1] entails the a priori status of BC. For, as we have already seen, a valid argument for BC would depend on the empirical premise, BP2. In the end, then, the fact that per accidens conversion is not today recognized as logically valid does turn out to matter. For, although in the present context it does not undermine the reasoning of parts [1]–[4] of the argument, it does undermine the claim that that reasoning is logically or conceptually valid. In its stated form, then, Kant’s third criticism fails.

But are we to conclude that the very idea behind Kant’s third criticism is flawed, or might the fault rather lie merely in Kant’s formulation of that criticism? The question is worth asking because it turns out that Kant’s third criticism can be reformulated in a way that gets around the present difficulty.

The reformulation involves disambiguating the notion of an “absolutely necessary being” by interpreting it as the notion of a conceptually necessary being. The third criticism then runs as follows: suppose for the sake of argument that the cosmological argument had somehow shown that a conceptually necessary being exists, and suppose that it had also shown that any conceptually necessary being is a most real being. Let us call these imagined results P1 and P2 respectively. Kant’s contention would then be, first, that on the basis of these assumptions, we would also be able to establish the converse of P2—1 will call it “L1”—namely, that any most real being is a conceptually necessary being, and second, that L1 would itself suffice (in the context of P1 and P2) to demonstrate the soundness of the Leibnizian ontological argument.

The reasoning behind this last claim would run as follows. Call the (or one of the) conceptually necessary being(s) whose existence, according to P1, has been established, $a$. By P2, $a$ is a most real being. So, we know that $a$ is both a conceptually necessary being and a most real being. Let us further assume that $a$’s concept is the concept most real being. Then since $a$ is a conceptually necessary being, $a$’s existence can be derived from $a$’s concept, and so from the concept most real being. And since $a$ is an existent most real being, it follows trivially that the concept most real being is consistent. We thus arrive at the two propositions that the Leibnizian ontological argument aims to establish.

The task of reconstructing a viable version of the third objection therefore reduces to that of arguing that it follows from P1 and P2 that any most real being is a conceptually necessary being.

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\(^{45}\) I agree with James Van Cleve (305n51), against Wood (1978, 126) and Henry Allison (2004, 418), that this argument does not rely on the identity of indiscernibles.
The argument for this claim runs along by now familiar lines. Suppose P1. Call the (or a) conceptually necessary being thus assumed to exist, a. Then by P2, we know that a is a most real being. Let b be any most real being. Then since all most real beings have all their properties in common, and since a is a conceptually necessary being, b must be one too. But b was an arbitrarily chosen most real being; so any most real being is a conceptually necessary being. QED.

Thus reformulated, the argument is an improvement on the version that Kant offers. But certain difficulties remain. First, it is not altogether clear why we ought to grant that the concept of the most real being is *most real being*. This might follow if the essence of a most real being were to be *a most real being*, but the warrant for such an assumption seems unclear. Second, and more decisively, there is reason to doubt that Kant could himself see the argument just rehearsed as sound. For it is central to his critique of the ontological argument to deny that the property of being (construed as the property of existence or actuality) is a reality. It also seems central to that critique to deny that the property of being a conceptually necessary being is a reality; for if it were, the ontological argument could be run directly on this property. This matters in the present context because the assumption that all most real beings have all their properties in common seems to rely on the background assumption that any most real being has all and only the realities (Kant, let us suppose is conceding this background assumption to his opponent for the sake of argument.). The idea is that all most real beings share all of their properties only because those properties are supposed to include all and only the realities. But with that understanding of the ground for this assumption (our BP3) in place, it seems that “properties” in BP3 must be understood in a restricted sense; for the properties all most real beings can be assumed to have in common are only the realities. But if that is so, it follows that Kant could not endorse the inference to the conclusion that b is a conceptually necessary being. For such an inference would be valid only on the unKantian assumption that the property of being a conceptually necessary being is a reality. It seems, then, that Kant could not even see this reformulated version of the argument of his third criticism as sound.

**Conclusion**

I hope to have shown that Kant’s case against the cosmological argument does — in spite of Wood’s doubts — contain all three of his main announced criticisms. These criticisms are, I think, most illuminatingly presented in the following order.

First, the first phase of the Wolffian cosmological argument, since it contends that the self is contingent in respect of its character — the way in which it exists — rather than in respect of its very existence, locks itself into building a case only for the existence of an essentially unimodal being. And yet what is actually required is an argument for the existence of a being that could not fail to exist. Further, even when the first phase of the argument is supplemented by the reasoning that constitutes the second phase, we still reach — at best (that is, waiving certain other objections) — the conclusion that an *ens realissimum* exists, and not the desired conclusion that it exists necessarily. The proponent

46. This claim is defended in Proops forthcoming.

47. I owe these points about the problems for the reformulated version of the argument to Brian Cutter.

48. Could one read Kant as treating “a most real being” at this stage of the argument as meaning “a being that has the most reality that any being could possibly have”? If one could, then the conclusion that all most real beings have the same properties would follow trivially from the uniqueness of such a being. One would not need to assume that the property of being a conceptually necessary being is a reality (and, arguably, Kant would be prepared to grant that it is at least a property). Unfortunately, however, this does not seem to be how Kant is arguing; for if he were, he would not need to bother with the assumption that all most real beings have all their properties in common. Instead, he would argue as follows: “All conceptually necessary beings are most real beings; so by *per accidens* conversion, some most real being is a conceptually necessary being; but since there is only one most real being it follows that all most real beings are conceptually necessary beings.” (I owe this point to Brian Cutter.)

49. Kant would, I think, have been aware that, if the argument had begun with the assumption that the self is contingent in respect of its very existence, the problem of establishing the contingency assumption would have been even more acute.
of the cosmological argument thus—at best—establishes something weaker than the desired conclusion, and so commits an ignoratio elenchi.

Second, if a defender of the argument should seek to rectify this flaw by arguing that we can use this argument for the existence of an *ens realissimum* as a proof of the consistency of its concept, and if he or she should argue thence by means of the (rest of) the Leibnizian ontological argument to the conclusion that the *ens realissimum* is a necessary being, then, obviously, the argument would rely on the ontological argument and so would inherit its vulnerabilities.

Third, these objections having been waived, Kant’s third objection would run as follows. If the argument had managed to show both that there is an absolutely necessary being (construed as a conceptually necessary being) and that any conceptually necessary being is a most real being, then the cosmological argument would be sound only if the ontological argument were also sound. But the ontological argument has been shown earlier in “The Ideal” not to be sound. So, by a simple *modus tollens*, the cosmological argument is not sound either.

In addition to doing justice to Kant’s claim that his discussion contains all three criticisms, our interpretation has, I would claim, three further advantages. First, it explains why Kant should represent the cosmological arguer as claiming that the “absolutely necessary being” whose existence is purportedly established by the first phase of the argument can be determined “only in one single way” (A 605/B 633). This is so because at this stage such a being is conceived of only as an essentially unimodal being. Second, it explains why Kant should think that this being is “thoroughly determined through its concept,” and, indeed, why he should see this claim as playing a central role in the second phase of the argument. Third, our interpretation brings out Kant’s exact grounds for denying that the principle of sufficient reason can have application in the argument. The problem is that it could only apply to a being that had been shown to be contingent in the sense of being capable of existing in some other way, and yet the fact that something alters, which is in fact all we have to go on, does not demonstrate that the thing that alters could have existed in some other way.

Finally, there are two broader morals that we may draw from our discussion. The first concerns Kant’s own conception of God. We have seen that, in Kant’s view, the only way in which there could be “an absolutely necessary being” worthy of the name would be if—*per impossibile*—some being existed from its own concept. Since in his preamble to the ontological argument Kant denies that anything falls under this concept (A 594–5/B 622–3), it follows that his own conception of God must be one according to which God is not in this sense an absolutely necessary being. His own conception of God, then, must be a conception of a being that lacks at least one of the traditional divine attributes. This, I take it, is a problem for Kant given his endorsement of the thesis that the divine attributes are mutually grounding. It is also a problem that Kant scholars need to address. One wonders: to what degree was Kant aware of this problematic feature of his position? And one wonders too: does it mean that he was not, after all, strictly speaking, a theist?

The second broader moral is that we have developed a better understanding of why Kant should think himself entitled to characterize his criticisms of speculative metaphysics as amounting, specifically, to a critique of *pure* reason. One might wonder how he could be entitled to conceive of his critical project in this way while including within its scope an argument that proceeds from an *empirical* premise. The answer is that the cosmological argument—to the extent that it aims at its proper (immediate) goal, namely, demonstrating the existence of a conceptually necessary being—derives whatever force it has entirely from the *a priori* ontological argument. The root criticism of the cosmological argument, then, must be a criticism of the ontological argument, and hence, because that argument is wholly *a priori*, a criticism—or critique—of pure reason.50

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Abbreviations

Theologia Naturalis in Wolff 1962–, sect 2, vols. 7.1 and 7.2.

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