

Spinoza's God in Kant's Pre-Critical Writings: An Attempt at Localizing the 'Threat'

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Abstract

The paper discusses Kant's pre-critical 'possibility proof' for the existence of God against a background of recent reinterpretations of this argument, which point at Spinozist consequences for Kant's conception of God that can follow from the 'proof' (O. Boehm, A. Chignell). I contend that, in the light of textual evidence, attributing a Spinozist conception of God to the pre-critical Kant would misrepresent his view. However, while he would never openly subscribe to Spinozism, Kant seems to be well aware, especially in the critical period, that the dogmatic metaphysics he endorsed before the 'Copernican revolution' was under a Spinozist 'threat.' In this paper I attempt to find out what the source of the 'threat' might be and I reach a conclusion that the potential for Spinozism contained in Kant's pre-critical metaphysics derives from his account of the divine grounding of possibilities, on some plausible accounts of grounding, and in particular from the incompatibility between his conception of spatial extension as one of the basic features of reality and the divine nature that is supposed to 'ground' the basic properties of reality and their consequences.

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1. Introduction

In the recent Kant scholarship – perhaps due to the growing interest in the influence of Spinoza on the Enlightenment in general, and on the ‘Radical Enlightenment’ in particular – more and more attention has been focused on possible affinities between Spinoza and Kant. Special interest has been taken in Kant’s pre-critical conception of God. Thus, Omri Boehm would attribute substance monism to the early Kant, a theoretical position that, he thinks, would be transformed later on into ‘regulative Spinozism.’¹ According to Andrew Chignell, Kant’s pre-critical God provides a ‘ground of possibilities’ by jointly exemplifying the greatest possible set of them. Chignell takes it that for Kant what is really possible can harmoniously coexist with the greatest possible set of properties. This greatest possible set of harmoniously coexisting properties would be identical with the actually existing world and with God understood as the ‘necessary being’ (*ens necessarium*) and the ‘most real being’ (*ens realissimum*), the all of reality.² Beth Lord brings Kant and Spinoza together in that she reconstructs the history of post-

¹ *Kant’s Critique of Spinoza*, OUP, New York 2014; ‘Kant’s Regulative Spinozism,’ *Kant-Studien* 103 (3), 2012, pp. 292-317. It has also been argued that the *critical* Kant would endorse a version of substance monism, akin to the monism of Spinoza. See: A. Hahmann, *Kritische Metaphysik der Substanz: Kant im Widerspruch zu Leibniz*, De Gruyter, Berlin/New York 2009, ch. 9.

² ‘Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being,’ *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 91, 2009, pp. 157-192; ‘Kant, Real Possibility, and the Threat of Spinoza,’ *Mind* 121 (483), 2012, pp. 635-675.

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Kantian idealism, identifying both Spinozist and Kantian overtones in the works of Jacobi, Maimon, Herder, Fichte, and (somewhat anachronistically) Deleuze. Lord, however, emphasizes essential divergences between the two great modern thinkers, pointing e.g. to Kant's views on man as an intermediary between nature and God, two radically separate realms.³ Also, without turning Kant into a latter-day Spinozist, Yirmiyahu Yovel highlights similarities between Kant's and Spinoza's doctrines of religion.⁴ Surely, research undertaken by these authors has its predecessors; for instance, at the turn of the previous century, Friedrich Heman devoted an article to examining a widespread belief that Kant's knowledge of Spinoza was second-hand and that there cannot be much in common between the ideas of Kant and those of the (first) great (secular) Jewish thinker.⁵

Yet however compelling the ideas about Spinoza's impact on Kant may seem – and they are far from being *merely* intellectually provocative; after all, Spinoza remained an important figure throughout the 18th century, with lots of bad press before the *Pantheismusstreit* (1785-6) but almost revered thereafter⁶ – much textual evidence can be adduced to show that these ideas cannot be easily endorsed. Drawing on this evidence, Christopher Insole argues that there are significant affinities between the early Kant and Leibniz, and he reads Kant as an intellectualist about relations between the divine mind and real possibilities, or essences,

³ Cf. *Kant and Spinozism. Transcendental Idealism from Jacobi to Deleuze*, Palgrave Macmillan 2011.

⁴ *Spinoza and Other Heretics. The Adventures of Immanence*, Princeton UP, Princeton NJ 1989, ch. 1.

⁵ Cf. 'Kant und Spinoza,' *Kant-Studien* 5, 1901, pp. 273-339. On Spinoza as the 'first secular Jew,' see: Y. Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics. The Marrano of Reason*, Princeton UP, Princeton 1989, ch. 7.

⁶ On Spinoza's presence in the 18th century Germany see: V. Morfino (ed.), *La Spinoza-Renaissance nella Germania di fine Settecento*, Edizioni Unicopli, Milano 1998, esp. pp. 1-37 and V. Morfino, '«Sotto stratti di notte». Il «caso» Spinoza nella Germania della prima metà dell'Ottocento' in: G. Battistel, F. Del Lucchese, V. Morfino (eds.), *L'abisso dell'unica sostanza. L'immagine di Spinoza nella prima metà dell'Ottocento*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2009, pp. ix-xx. I am grateful to Dr. Iva Manova for drawing my attention to these sources.

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of things that God's mind is supposed to 'ground.'⁷ Peter Yong also supports the intellectualist reading of Kant's doctrine of the grounding of real possibilities, on which possibilities are considered the contents of the divine understanding.⁸ Thomas Wyrwich, in turn, in a reply to Boehm, highlights those passages in Kant in which Spinoza is explicitly criticized for having conflated the notion of substance as an *ens per se* with the notion of substance as an *ens a se*; and in which Kant stresses God's transcendence in relation to the world.⁹ (In fact, the argument from the faulty notion of substance is not originally Kantian; it can also be found, for example, in Diderot's entry on Spinoza in his *Encyclopaedia*.) Thus, if one follows these authors, one may concede that arguing for the claim that the pre-critical Kant conceived of God as immanent to the world, identical with the totality of reality, and at the same time extended in space, hence similar to the God of Spinoza, seems to be a tortuous enterprise, albeit because Kant *explicitly* denies such claims.

Whatever arguments one could provide for any of the opposing positions, though, Kant admits in his later works that the pre-critical metaphysics – i.e. the kind of metaphysics that would not recognize the indispensability of transcendental idealism – was indeed under the 'threat'¹⁰ of Spinoza. This does not mean that he would ever openly subscribe, in the pre-critical writings, to Spinoza's conception of God, if only because he must have been aware of the notoriety of Spinozism and preferred to keep a low profile. In this paper I will not take sides in the debate on how close to Spinoza or Spinozism Kant's conception of God has ever been. Rather, I will aim at identifying a possible source of the 'threat' that the early Kantian philosophy may seem to be exposed to (see esp. section 4). As I see it, the 'threat' would

⁷ 'Intellectualism, Relational Properties and the Divine Mind in Kant's Pre-Critical Philosophy,' *Kantian Review* 16 (3), 2011, pp. 399-427.

⁸ 'God, Totality and Possibility in Kant's Only Possible Argument,' *Kantian Review* 19 (1), 2014, pp. 27-51.

⁹ 'Kants Anti-Spinozismus – Eine Antwort auf Omri Boehm,' *Kant-Studien* 105 (1), 2014, pp. 113-124.

¹⁰ I borrow this term from Chignell's article, mentioned in footnote 2.

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derive from Kant's conception of God's grounding possibilities, on some plausible interpretations of grounding, and especially from the incompatibility between Kant's conception of spatial extension as one of the basic features of reality and the divine nature that is supposed to 'ground' the basic properties of reality and their consequences. Interestingly, if one considers Kant's attitude to Spinoza and Spinozism,¹¹ developing from his pre-critical 'possibility proof'¹² for the existence of God (1755 and 1763) to as late as the *Opus Postumum*, one may discover that this attitude itself was not free from ambiguities. I will start from an outline of the 'possibility proof' and its possible Spinozist consequences (section 2), and in the subsequent section I will consider ways in which Kant would strive to overcome his 'Spinozist tendencies' (section 3).

¹¹ By Spinozism we shall understand here a simplified version of the philosophy of Spinoza, popularized in the 18th century e.g. by Pierre Bayle, the author of *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. See: P. Bayle, R. C. Popkin, C. Brush, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis 1991, pp. 288-338 (entry 'Spinoza'). A simplified version of the philosophy of Spinoza one can also find in the monumental work on 'Radical Enlightenment' by Jonathan Israel who characterizes this philosophy as 'a comprehensive and consistent system of naturalism, materialism, and empiricism, eliminating all theism, teleology, miracles, and supernatural agency' (*Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man 1670 – 1752*, OUP, Oxford 2006, p. 37). While all these terms capture some important aspects of Spinoza's philosophy, they can be interpreted in different ways: for instance, the elimination of theism does not have to be equivalent to the endorsement of atheism, but may result in a pantheistic position. This is why we can be tempted to charge Israel with oversimplification.

¹² This term has been employed in Kant scholarship; see e.g. N. Stang, 'Kant's Possibility Proof,' *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27 (3), 2010, pp. 275-299.

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2. Kant's 'possibility proof'

In his early theistic argument for the existence of God, which he would never expressly reject,¹³ Kant advocates the necessary existence of God as the ground of all that is possible. He presents this argument as an alternative to the ontological one, known from the philosophical tradition in the versions of Anselm, Descartes, and Leibniz, which he undermines by refuting what he takes to be its basic assumption on which existence is 'a predicate or a determination of a thing.'¹⁴ Kant's claim appeals to Leibniz's doctrine of 'complete concept.' On this doctrine, if God thinks e.g. of Julius Caesar, he must know all Caesar's properties. According to Kant, in an act of creation God imparts existence to the Roman consul but no new properties that would not have been previously contained in God's concept of Julius Caesar.¹⁵ Thus, in Kant's view, there is a

¹³ In the *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, a collection of notes published by Pölitz in 1817, Kant says that 'of all possible proofs' the possibility proof remains 'the one which affords us the most satisfaction,' but, like other theistic proofs, it is not apodictically certain. Although grounded in the nature of human reason, the proof 'cannot establish the objective necessity of an original being, but establishes only the subjective necessity of assuming such a being' (V-Phil-Th/Pölitz, AA 28:1034. References to this work are based on I. Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. By A. W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni, CUP, Cambridge 1996). That the proof is not 'apodictically certain' means that it leads at most to an hypothesis that best explains a certain fact about our cognition. But this is Kant's *critical* view; in the pre-critical period he attaches to the 'proof' more certainty than to any other demonstration of the divine existence (cf. BDG, AA 2:161-3). References to this work are based on I. Kant, 'The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God,' in: *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, trans. and ed. by D. Walford in collaboration with R. Meerbote, CUP, Cambridge 1992).

¹⁴ BDG, AA 2:72. Kant repeats this claim in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV, A 598ff/B 626ff), where he also gives the famous example with twelve dollars, real and merely conceived (possible).

¹⁵ Kant says: '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

non-cognitive aspect in the existence of an object, which cannot be fully captured by means of concepts. On the other hand, there is something in the existence of an object that goes beyond its being merely thinkable. Even if one knew, then, every predicate that can be rightly ascribed to an object, one would not thereby know whether the object exists or not.

This 'non-conceptual' aspect related to the existence of objects is what we may take as, roughly, accounting for Kant's distinction between real and logical possibility (or any other modality of thought and/or being¹⁶). What is logically possible must be consistent, i.e. it cannot involve a contradiction, whereas what is really possible must be both consistent and based on the *existence* of something actual. Thus, while Julius Caesar's being logically possible means that we can consistently think a determinate number of predicates attributable to Julius Caesar, Caesar's being really possible means either that he exists, or that the concept of Julius Caesar relates to something existent.

Paul Guyer has pointed out¹⁷ that Kant's real vs. logical modality distinction would subsequently give rise to the distinction between intuitions and concepts, where intuitions, as has been argued elsewhere,¹⁸ would provide a *sui generis*, non-conceptual kind of content to concepts, one of the key tenets of Kant's critical theory of logic. The

regard him as a merely possible thing which, in the absence of that Being's decision to create him, would not exist' (BDG, AA 2:72). Speaking of God's conception, we employ a metaphor; that is, we mean the kind of knowledge of particular objects that could be had by an omniscient subject who would also know every causal relation occurring in the world. On Kant's use of the doctrine of complete concept in his early theistic argument, see: M. Schönfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant*, OUP, Oxford 2000, esp. pp. 197-208.

¹⁶ On 'real repugnancy,' another kind of modality distinguished by Kant, see the example with forces acting in different directions, so as to bring an object to a standstill, in: BDG, AA 2:86.

¹⁷ Cf. 'Absolute Idealism and the Rejection of Kantian Dualism,' in: K. Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, CUP, New York 2000, pp. 37-56.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Caimi, 'Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer,' *Kant-Studien* 96, 2005, pp. 135-146.

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distinction between real and logical possibility, as Kant introduces it, is perhaps not entirely clear or obvious, and it seems that it can be best explained by means of examples. To this end, let us consider two passages from Kant's pre-critical works, *A New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition* (1755) and *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763)¹⁹:

- (1) Possibility is only definable in terms of there not being a conflict between certain combined concepts; thus the concept of possibility is the product of a comparison. But in every comparison the things which are to be compared must be available for comparison, and where nothing at all is given there is no room for either comparison or [...] for the concept of possibility.²⁰
- (2) [...] in every possibility we must first distinguish the something which is thought, and then we must distinguish the agreement of what is thought in it with the law of contradiction. A triangle which has a right

¹⁹ For my current purposes, I shall not present the *New Elucidation* and *The Only Possible Argument* as offering different 'proofs' for the existence of God, as in fact could be done in an exegetically more accurate work. One of the reasons for my omission is that the differences between Kant's 1755 and 1763 arguments are not so great that they would entirely overshadow relevant similarities, which I rely on in my reconstruction of Kant's 'possibility proof' in this paper. Another reason is simply that this article is not a comparative study on PND and BDG. An argument that BDG should be read as diverting from some important tenets of the PND can be found in a dissertation by T. Pinder, *Kants Gedanke vom Grund aller Möglichkeit. Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte der 'transzendentalen Theologie'*, defended at the Freie Universität Berlin in 1969. Pinder claims that Kant's 1755 essay reveals a tendency to Spinozism (a 'spinozistische Tendenz' or a 'latenter Pantheismus'), which the later work attempts to mitigate (cf. pp. 61, 124-5, 191 of the manuscript). I am grateful to the anonymous Reader for *Kant Studies Online* for directing me to this source. The view that the 'proof' from BDG provides a more developed version of the argument from PND one can find in: K. Śnieżyński, *Immanuela Kanta krytyka metafizyki klasycznej w okresie przedkrytycznym*, Wyd. Uniwersytetu im. A. Mickiewicza, Poznań 2002, p. 346.

²⁰ PND, AA 1:395. References to this work are based on: I. Kant, 'A New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition,' in: *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, op. cit.

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angle is in itself possible. The triangle and the right angle are the data or the material element in this possible thing. The agreement, however, of the one with the other, in accordance with the law of contradiction, is the formal element in possibility. I shall also call this latter the logical element in possibility [...] The something, or that which stands in this agreement, is sometimes called the real element of possibility.²¹

On the one side, Kant says, there is a formal or logical ‘element in possibility,’ and on the other side – a material or real element thereof. Kant introduces two opposite pairs of concepts, roughly equivalent here but acquiring a different meaning in the critical philosophy. The first opposition, to be significantly transformed in the critical period, is between the formal and the material (or form and matter) and the second one – between the logical and the real. The latter will be reintroduced in the critical writings as characterizing two kinds of possibility.²² So far, however, we can state that by the real or material ‘element in possibility’ Kant means something that is given, or provides data for thought, whereas the logical or formal element pertains to the relation between these data.

From quotes (1) and (2) we can see that while there is a sense in which logical possibility is more basic than real possibility – for some things that are logically possible are not really possible; for example, a man made of ice seems to be possible logically but not really,²³ as is the case with an extended thinking being, on Kant’s tenets²⁴ – there is also a sense in which the logical kind of possibility is built upon the real one. For if we are to be able to examine whether

²¹ BDG, AA 2:77-8.

²² Cf. e.g. FM, AA 20:325-6 References to this work are based on: I. Kant, ‘What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolf?’ in: *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, trans. by H. E. Allison, P. Heath, G. Hatfield, M. Friedman, CUP, Cambridge 2002.

²³ Yong makes an extensive use of this example in: ‘God, Totality and Possibility in Kant’s Only Possible Argument,’ op. cit.

²⁴ BDG, AA 2:85.

combinations of concepts are free from contradiction, something must first be ‘given’ through these concepts (cf. quote 1). Now, whether something is ‘given’ through our concepts does not depend on the relations between concepts, but on the existence of something which is indispensable for the ‘givenness’ of the ‘given’, as one can see from the following passage of the *Only Possible Argument* (henceforth: *Beweisgrund*) essay, in which Kant discusses the concept of extension:

(3) Suppose that you can now no longer break up the concept of extension into simpler data in order to show that there is nothing self-contradictory in it – and you must eventually arrive at something whose possibility cannot be analysed – then the question will be whether space and extension are empty words, or whether they signify something. The lack of contradiction does not decide the present issue; an empty word never signifies anything self-contradictory. If space did not exist, or if space was not at least given as a consequence through something existent, the word ‘space’ would signify nothing at all.²⁵

Kant shows here that when we analyze concepts (such as e.g. ‘fiery body’²⁶), we will arrive at some point in which what is left cannot be further analyzed. These concepts that defy any further analysis, such as the concept ‘space’ (or ‘extension’), will be empty if nothing exists which these concepts could be related to. This is a fairly vague claim which could be read as a thesis about the senses of concepts or, more specifically, about the origin of conceptual content. Recalling Kant’s famous ‘slogan’ from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, one may read the claim as foreshadowing the doctrine of concepts without any objects corresponding to

²⁵ BDG, AA 2:80-1.

²⁶ This is Kant’s example; see BDG, AA 2:80.

them (in intuition) being empty.²⁷ Now, how do these considerations bear on Kant's distinction between the logical and the real element in possibility? One can see whether a 'fiery body' is really possible first by making sure that the concept 'fiery body' is not made out of concepts that would exclude one another (as it is the case with the concept 'square circle') and then by verifying if something exists which accounts for the simple concepts, like 'space,' not being empty.²⁸ In other words, what explains the real possibility of something is its existence or the existence of something of which the really possible is a consequence (cf. quote 3). Note that rather than talking about possibility in general, we have considered here the possibility of an object and that we have construed the possibility of an object as, roughly, equivalent to the concept of an object. It seems, then, that Kant's considerations about possibility, both real and logical, involve an irreducibly epistemological, or cognitive, aspect, and that being possible can be reduced, or relativized, to being thinkable, or representable, by a mind.

However, Kant clearly intends his argument to have ontological purport, aiming to provide a '*Beweisgrund*' for the existence of God. It is this ontological, rather than the epistemological, aspect of the 'proof' that we should now bring to the fore to proceed with the argument. On the basis of the above analysis we can thus establish, more generally, that for a thing to be really possible, it is necessary that something exist. That is to say, Kant endorses the idea that possibility presupposes existence; or that what exists pro-

²⁷ KrV, A 51/B 75. References to this work are based on: I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood, CUP, Cambridge 1998.

²⁸ Boehm calls these basic elements 'simple notions' (*Kant's Critique of Spinoza*, op. cit., p. 24). Intended or not, there is an analogy with Descartes' concept of simple natures which, in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, would be described as proper objects of intuition: a cognitive act in which the mind comprehends its object immediately and in its entirety. God's veracity is supposed to guarantee that this object exists with the same properties it is cognized to have.

vides the ‘ground’ of what is possible.²⁹ From this point onwards, Kant’s theistic argument can be taken to develop in the following way. It is not self-contradictory, hence it is logically possible, that nothing at all exists; for we may combine concepts in predicating of objects (e.g. ‘God is omnipotent’³⁰) without presupposing that the objects of our predication exist. However,

(4) [if] I cancel all existence whatever and the ultimate real ground of all that can be thought therewith disappears, all possibility likewise vanishes, and nothing any longer remains to be thought.³¹

Thus, paradoxically, we may *think* that nothing exists provided that there is some material element (the ‘given’) our thought is related to (cf. quote 1 and 2), and this in turn, according to Kant, entails that something necessarily exists. Kant rests this necessity of the existence of something on logical grounds. For it is necessary that p if it is not possible that $\neg p$. What is not possible, on merely logical grounds, is for sure a contradiction, which has the form of $A \ \& \ \neg A$. The claim that nothing exists entails a contradiction here, since it implies both that something can be thought (i.e. ‘that nothing exists’) and that nothing can be thought (for if nothing exists, there is no material or real element that could constitute any thought); therefore, it follows that something has to exist. The problem is that this contradiction might be spurious, as the contradictory statements are based on a

²⁹ I do not claim that Kant takes it for granted that something is possible; this would be true only with regard to logical possibility, i.e. conceptual consistency or conceivability. Stang seems to hold a different view when, in ‘Kant’s Possibility Proof,’ op. cit., p. 275, he writes: Kant’s argument ‘assumes merely that something is possible.’ This is true, considering e.g. Kant’s statement from BDG, AA 2:91 *but* it should also be noted that in his argument Kant tries to descend to the conditions of the possibility he assumes; in this the ‘possibility proof’ is reminiscent of ‘transcendental’ arguments, developed later on in the *Critique*.

³⁰ BDG, AA 2:74.

³¹ BDG, AA 2:82.

different concept of possibility each: the first one on the logical, and the second one – on the real possibility.

Now, it may seem unclear what kind of possibility, for Kant, requires that something exist. The idea may be, however, that nothing can be logically possible unless something is really possible, but since the real possibility of a thing can be verified by finding out that something exists which this real possibility is somehow related to, in the end something has to exist if something is to be *really* possible. Thus, the ground of the real possibility is provided by something existent. Furthermore, the *necessity* of the existence of something derives from the assumption about the connection between real possibility and existence (and, from the assumption that something must be possible). At this point, Kant's 'proof' would leap from the necessity for something to exist to the existence of a necessary being – God.³² The necessary being (*ens necessarium*) is such that its nonexistence would cancel all real possibility altogether (cf. quote 4).³³ For Kant, what exists 'absolutely necessarily' turns out to be identical with God, whom he further characterizes as 'one in its essence [...] simple in its substance [...] a mind according to its nature [...] eternal in its duration [...] immutable in its constitution; and [...] all-sufficient in respect of all that is possible and real.'³⁴

Boehm justifies Kant's leap by appealing to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR).³⁵ If possibilities had their grounds in the existence of contingent beings – that is, if it were only *necessary that* something exist, but this 'something' would be a contingent, or finite, being – or if there were many beings existing necessarily, different possibilities could have different grounds. But then what

³² Boehm's reconstruction of Kant's 'possibility proof' clearly renders this leap from 'Necessarily, something exists' to 'There is a being that exists necessarily.' See: *Kant's Critique of Spinoza*, op. cit., p. 21.

³³ As Kant puts it, 'that, the cancellation of which eradicates all possibility, is absolutely necessary. Therefore, something exists absolutely necessarily' (BDG, AA 2:83).

³⁴ BDG, AA 2:89.

³⁵ O. Boehm, *Kant's Critique of Spinoza*, op. cit., pp. 27-8.

would ground the relations between these grounds? Thus, as Boehm suggests, there has to be one entity in which both possibilities and relations between beings would be grounded. This account sounds plausible although one should note that Kant does not advocate the unrestricted use of the PSR: in Prop. VI of the *New Elucidation* he denies that we can talk about the ground of existence with regard to a being that exists ‘absolutely necessarily.’³⁶ Hence, not every possibility can be grounded, according to Kant (in other words: grounding has to stop at some point).³⁷

In any case, it seems that Kant’s argument might also veer in the direction that would *not* lead to the conclusion about the existence of God *as* described above. Since for a thing to be really possible it suffices that something exist, it is only when all that exists is cancelled that nothing at all is possible. Since the nonexistence of all that exists would lead to the cancellation of all real possibility, it seems that the necessary being can also – surprisingly or not – be all that exists: the totality of reality. This claim would directly take us to Spinoza’s monism. On Spinoza’s view, there is only one substance – God or Nature³⁸ – that exists necessarily³⁹ and provides the *immanent* cause of all things,⁴⁰ so that ‘everything that is, is in God.’⁴¹ We shall now examine

³⁶ PND, AA 1:394.

³⁷ *Pace* Boehm, who says that ‘by the PSR, all possibilities must be grounded’ (*Kant’s Critique of Spinoza*, op. cit., p. 28). In the case of God, there can be no distinction between possibility and existence (in other words, unlike for dependent beings, for God to be possible means to exist); thus, God’s possibility is God’s (ungrounded) existence.

³⁸ See: *Ethics* (henceforth: E), 1p14; E 4p4d.

³⁹ E 1p11.

⁴⁰ E 1p18.

⁴¹ Cf. E 1p18d: ‘Everything that is, is in God, and must be conceived through God (by p15), and so (by p16c1) God is the cause of [NS: all] things, which are in him [...]. And then outside God there can be no substance (by p14), that is (by d3), thing which is in itself outside God [...].’ B. Spinoza, *The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. by E. Curley, Princeton UP, Princeton, NJ 1994, p. 100. B. Lord emphasizes (see: *Kant and Spinozism*, op. cit., p. 13) that Spinoza’s equation of God with the totality of being should not be conflated with the identification of God with the empirical world. The latter was done by Bayle, which resulted in a widespread misinterpretation of Spinoza in the 18th century. Lord’s observation remains

these Spinozist strands, potentially involved in Kant's possibility argument.

3. The challenge of Spinozism

The argument presented in the previous section⁴² may lead to conclusions compatible with the philosophy of Spinoza. For, first, the necessary being can be equated with the all of reality. And, second, along the lines of Boehm's reading, since all possibilities must be grounded in God and – which we will discuss in more detail later on in this section – if grounding consists in God's instantiating possible realities, spatial extension included, then the God of the pre-critical Kant will very much resemble the God of Spinoza.

Obviously, Kant would not be happy about these consequences. Indeed, despite very few explicit references to Spinoza, one can find in the *Beweisgrund* essay a number of arguments that are likely aimed at thwarting possible conclusions to Spinozism. First, Kant argues that since the divine nature is spiritual, with understanding and will being its main attributes, God cannot be an extended being; for in an entity that would be both extended and equipped with understanding and will, there would be 'real repugnance,'⁴³

compatible with those readings of Spinoza's God that equate God with existence. Cf. Y. Y. Melamed, 'Spinoza's Deification of Existence,' in: D. Garber and D. Rutherford (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*. Volume VI, OUP, Oxford 2012, pp. 75-104.

⁴² A full reconstruction of the possibility proof should not stop at this point (in particular, it should discuss a passage from the *ens necessarium* to the *ens realissimum*) but it is sufficient for the purposes of our considerations if we do stop here. For a fuller reconstruction of Kant's argument, see: N. Stang, 'Kant's Possibility Proof,' op. cit. Cf. also R. M. Adams, 'God, Possibility, and Kant,' *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (4), 2000, pp. 425-440.

⁴³ BDG, AA 2:85. In V-Met-K2/Heinze, Kant says that 'how matter could have representations is wholly ungraspable and inconceivable to us' (AA 28:760. References to these notes are based on I. Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, trans. and ed. by K. Ameriks and S. Naragon, CUP, Cambridge 1997). It is a version of the problem that in the modern philosophy can be traced back to Descartes: how can two substances, different in nature, have anything in common by way of interacting with one another? Kant is agnostic about the possibility of a solution to this problem.

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and this cannot pertain to the divine nature. Second, Kant claims that for its imperfections and deficiencies, the world cannot be ‘an accident of God,’⁴⁴ thus, God is not the only substance but there must be other substances apart from him. Third, Kant’s ‘anti-Spinozism’ would be based on the supposition that the order, beauty and harmony perceivable in nature are indicative of ‘an intelligent creator,’ so they must be sustained by the divine mind, rather than inhering in an infinitely extended being. Kant contends that ‘from the point of view of its possibility, extensive harmony is never adequately given in the absence of an intelligent ground.’ God becomes thus presented as a ‘Wise Being’ and the designer of essences, or possibilities of things themselves,⁴⁵ hence as an individual intelligent agent – a person or spirit – rather than just the totality of reality, or Nature governed by necessary laws.

Spinoza would clearly dismiss these arguments as promoting a false, since anthropomorphic, picture of God.⁴⁶ However, insofar as one can consider them a merely rhetorical device, they may not suffice to prove that there is no tendency to Spinozism latent in Kant’s theistic argument. For to see whether there is this tendency in the *Beweisgrund* essay or not, one should not take Kant’s statements at face value, but rather address a more basic question. This question concerns the relation between God and the possibilities he grounds. What is the status of the possibilities in

⁴⁴ BDG, AA 2:90.

⁴⁵ BDG, AA 2:123-5.

⁴⁶ For Spinoza, perfection is equivalent to reality (see: E 2d6), but the notions of perfection and imperfection also capture the human way of evaluating nature as to whether it corresponds to the ideas humans have fabricated of it, according to the purposes their desires impose upon it. In the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza explains, ‘So when they [i.e. men] see something happen in Nature which does not agree with the model they have conceived of this kind of thing, they believe that Nature itself has failed or sinned, and left the thing imperfect. We see, therefore, that men are accustomed to call natural things perfect or imperfect more from prejudice than from true knowledge of those things.’ B. Spinoza, *The Ethics and Other Works*, op. cit., p. 198. As regards the concept of intelligent creator, it presupposes teleology, which Spinoza also rejects as an anthropomorphic way of thinking about God.

their relation to the necessary being? What does the grounding relation consist in? Do all relations between beings have to be grounded?

In order to address the question of grounding, let us first look at the context in which Kant speaks of the necessary being as the ground of possibilities. In the *New Elucidation*, Kant describes God as ‘the Creator, the ultimate ground of effects, and the fertile ground of so many consequences.’⁴⁷ On such a construal, grounding seems to consist in a causal relation between the necessary being and its consequences. Indeed, if we look into Kant’s later notes on metaphysics, we will see that he talks there about grounding in terms of causal power. Accordingly, one can say that X is a ground of Y in A if X produces Y in A.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, Kant defines a ground as ‘that by which something else is posited,’ ‘that upon which something follows in a wholly necessary way; or [...] that upon which something follows according to necessary rules.’⁴⁹ In the *Beweisgrund* essay one can read:

(5) Since the necessary being contains the ultimate real ground of all other possibilities, it follows that every other thing is only possible in so far as it is given through the necessary being as its ground. Accordingly, every other thing can only occur as a consequence of that necessary being.⁵⁰

Another way of describing the relation between Kant’s God and possibilities involves what I would call a Containment Model (CM). On this model, ‘the necessary being contains supreme reality,’⁵¹ i.e. it instantiates the maximum

⁴⁷ PND, AA 1:399.

⁴⁸ Cf. V-Met/Herder, AA 28:52. References to these notes are based on I. Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ V-Met-L2/Pölitiz, AA 28:548. Kant distinguishes between a ‘logical’ and a ‘real’ ground, which provides a minor piece of evidence against his endorsement of Spinozism; for, as we can see from Spinoza’s E 2p7, the conflation of logical and causal relations characterizes the type of rationalism represented by the author of the *Ethics*.

⁵⁰ BDG, AA 2:83.

⁵¹ BDG, AA 2:85.

of all positive properties (*realitates*). On the CM, possibilities may be taken to inhere in God as properties inhere in a substance. This looks familiar to a reader of Spinoza for whom the relation between substance and modes comes down to the latter being ‘in’ the former, in a special sense of the ‘in’.⁵² Arguing that there can be only one ground for all possibilities, Kant writes that:

(6) the data for anything which can be thought must be given *in* the thing of which the cancellation is also the opposite of all possibility; and [...] therefore, that which contains the ultimate ground of one internal possibility also contains the ultimate ground of all possibility whatever.⁵³

In a nutshell, possibilities can be construed either as consequences of God’s existence, which seems to suggest that they may exist separately from God; or as contained ‘in’ God, which suggests an opposite picture. In other words, the relation between God and possibilities can be construed either as a relation between cause and effect, or a relation of instantiation. To illustrate the point about containment: we can say that, e.g., a sentence *contains* two errors if there are two errors *in* the sentence, that is, however strained it sounds, if the sentence provides an *instantiation* of two errors. We can say that something instantiates a property if, in a certain sense, it has this property. For example, red is instantiated by rose petals if the rose petals are red. Some would be even inclined to say that mind can instantiate some properties in the sense that mind can represent these properties.⁵⁴ For example, red can be instantiated in my memory if I remember what red objects look like.

⁵² Cf. E 1d5. When Spinoza speaks of modes being ‘in’ substance, he does not mean the modes’ spatial location in relation to the substance, but their both conceptual (logical) and ontological (causal) dependence on it.

⁵³ BDG, AA 2:84-5 (italics mine).

⁵⁴ Cf. R. M. Adams, ‘God, Possibility, and Kant,’ op. cit., pp. 436ff.

Kant distinguishes two modes in which possibilities can relate to their 'ground': either as 'consequences,' or as 'determinations.' But the distinction becomes obliterated in that he adds that whether as determinations or as consequences, 'all reality' can be, 'in one way or another, embraced by the ultimate real ground.'⁵⁵ This seems to suggest that even if possibilities are construed as consequences of the existence of the necessary being, they are no separate entities, ontologically independent from it (i.e. substances); rather, they all belong to the totality of reality instantiated by the necessary being. Accordingly, Boehm has argued for a conception of the relation between ground and possibilities, which does away with a clear distinction between possibilities as 'determinations' and possibilities as 'consequences' of the necessary being. Boehm's rejection of the alternative that 'determinations' and 'consequences' could relate to the divine entity in two essentially different ways is based on the argument that considering consequences caused, or created, as separate substances by God would necessitate recourse to a cosmological argument about which Kant was rather sceptical in the *Beweisgrund* essay.⁵⁶ The cosmological argument, Boehm continues, is aimed at conditions of the *existence* of things, whereas Kant's argument, based on the notion of possibility, is intended to explain the conditions of the *possibility* of things.⁵⁷ Thus, if Kant endorses the CM, he commits himself to a Spinozist view of the relation between the necessary being and possibilities, because he takes all consequences to exist 'in' God.

However, matters may be more complex than this account suggests. First of all, as we shall see in the next subsection, textual evidence supports, to an extent, the claim that Kant conceived of the consequences of the necessary being as beings existing separately from it, that is, as substances. Secondly, it also seems quite plausible, on

⁵⁵ BDG, AA 2:85.

⁵⁶ Cf. BDG, AA 160-3.

⁵⁷ O. Boehm, *Kant's Critique of Spinoza*, op. cit., p. 31.

Kant's doctrine, to read the CM in a way in which the Spinozist implications become (at least *prima facie*) blocked. This can be the case if we construe the instantiation of possibilities by God *not* in terms of God's actualizing them, or possibilities' inhering in God as his properties, but if we think of the possibilities as 'the contents of God's thoughts' and of instantiation as of their being represented in God's mind.⁵⁸ I am not quite sure to what extent these strategies are successful in removing the 'Spinozist threat' from Kant's pre-critical metaphysics; nonetheless, I present them as Kant's strategies against Spinoza.

3.1. 'The cause of the world'

In the first book of the *Ethics* Spinoza equates God with 'a cause of itself.'⁵⁹ This notion emerged earlier in the debate between Antoine Arnauld, a Jansenist theologian, and Descartes, in the fourth set of objections to *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Arnauld argued that the notion of a cause of itself is incoherent since it implies that we think of cause and effect, by definition two different things, as identical. Kant endorses the same conception of cause as Arnauld when he argues, in § 19 of the Inaugural Dissertation, *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World* (1770), that the necessary being, the cause, must be different from the world, the caused, and transcendent in relation to it. Kant writes that:

(7) [...] no necessary substance is connected with the world unless it is connected with it in the way in which a cause is connected with what is caused. It is,

⁵⁸ Insole's and Yong's intellectualist interpretations illustrate this second strategy. The problem is that these interpretations come close to what Mendelssohn called 'purified pantheism,' that is, a view according to which 'all things exist only in the infinite intellect of God and have no existence other than as objects of his ideas' (F. C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, Harvard UP, Cambridge MA, London, England 1987, p. 104).

⁵⁹ The concept of *causa sui* is spelled out in E 1d1.

accordingly, not connected with the world in the way in which a part is connected with its complementary parts to form a whole [...]. Therefore, the cause of the world is a being which exists outside the world [...].⁶⁰

If God were not a transcendent cause of the world, that is, if he were an intramundane object, he would have to be in a reciprocal relation with other constituents of the world, a relation Kant calls *commercium* (interaction, *Wechselwirkung*).⁶¹ And if there were no transcendent cause of the *commercium* between parts of the world, relations between these parts would not be grounded in anything.⁶² Thus, the relation between God and world cannot be one of co-ordination, as in an aggregate, that is, a composite whole, but must be one of subordination, terms Kant uses again as late as in the *Opus Postumum*.⁶³ One should note, however, that this argument speaks more against the Stoic conception of God as ‘the world-soul’ than against Spinoza’s conception of God as *causa sui*, although Kant would on occasion mention the two conceptions jointly.⁶⁴ What counts as an

⁶⁰ MSI, AA 2:408. References to this work are based on: I. Kant, ‘On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World’ in: *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, op. cit. That the ‘cause and effect must be different’ (emphasis mine) Kant states e.g. in V-Met/Mron, AA 29:926. References to these notes are based on: I. Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, op. cit.

⁶¹ Cf. V-Met-L1-Pölit, AA 28:196 (references to these notes are based on I. Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, op. cit.), V-Phil-Th/Pölit, AA 28:1043. For an argument for the transcendence of the Kantian God, based on the notion of *commercium*, see: M. Moors, ‘Die Bestimmungsgestalt von Kants Gottesidee und Gemeinschaftsprinzip,’ in: *Proceedings of the Sixth International Kant Congress*, ed. by G. Funke and T. M. Seebohm, Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and University Press of America, Lanham 1989, pp. 49-66. I am grateful to Prof. Moors for a discussion about this argument at Second Leuven Kant Conference in May 2014.

⁶² Cf. V-Met/Herder, AA 28:51, V-Met-L2/Pölit, AA 28:581 (references to these notes are based on: I. Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, op. cit.).

⁶³ Cf. OP, AA 21:12. References to this work are based on I. Kant, *Opus Postumum*, ed. by E. Förster, trans. by E. Förster and M. Rosen, CUP, Cambridge, 1993.

⁶⁴ Cf. OP, AA 21:15-19, OP, AA 22:58, V-Met/Dohna, AA 28:667 (references to these notes are based on: I. Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, op.cit.), V-Phil-Th/Pölit, AA 28:1042-3. Let us note that sometimes Kant tends to conflate Spinoza with Malebranche, as is the case in the following

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argument against Spinoza, though, is Kant's emphasis on the transcendence of God, as one can see from his notes, published as *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*.⁶⁵

Moreover, what could also weigh against Spinozism boils down to Kant's explicit rejection of ontological monism. For Kant claims that 'God is not the only substance which exists; all other substances only exist in dependence upon God.'⁶⁶ However, for this to count as an argument against Spinozist monism, rather than a rhetorical device, Kant would have to proffer an argument for the pluralism of substances. We encounter such an argument in the *Lectures*, but it is Cartesian in spirit, appealing to self-consciousness, the awareness of oneself as an independent entity, and in particular, to a certain 'perception' that one is not 'the predicate of any further thing.'⁶⁷ From the critical point of view, this argument remains unacceptable: against Kant's considerations in the paralogisms chapter from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it supports the rationalist claim about the substantiality of self or ego. In the light of the criteria of the rationalist metaphysics, it does not stand its ground either: appealing to subjective experience, or to a 'brute fact,' may be susceptible to the sceptical challenge (especially without

passage from the *Opus Postumum*: 'There is a God, not as a world-soul in nature, but as a personal principle of human reason [...]. God is not the world-soul. Spinoza's concept of God and man, according to which the philosopher intuits all things in God, is enthusiastic [*schwärmerisch*] (*conceptus fanaticus*)' (OP, AA 21:19).

⁶⁵ V-Phil-Th/Pölit, AA 28:1041-55.

⁶⁶ BDG, AA 2:91.

⁶⁷ The argument proceeds as follows: 'For my own self-consciousness testifies that I do not relate all my actions to God as the final subject which is not the predicate of any other thing, and thus the concept of substance arises when I perceive in myself that I am not the predicate of any further thing' (V-Phil-Th/Pölit, AA 28:1042). On Kant's definition, substance is 'everything real which exists for itself, without being a determination of any other thing' (V-Phil-Th/Pölit, AA 28:1041). Kant distinguishes the notion of substance as a thing for itself (*ens per se*) from the notion of substance as an *ens a se*, 'cujus existentia non indiget existentia alterius' (ibidem). He claims that Spinoza arbitrarily adopted the latter notion, in fact borrowing it from Descartes. From this faulty conception of substance Spinoza would derive his ontological monism.

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the whole repertoire of Descartes' metaphysics). And if we read this argument as one concerning no more than our form of thinking and referring to ourselves, it will also miss the point, which was to establish *ontological* pluralism.

The above-outlined argument for pluralism of substances, from the *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, remains far from convincing, as we have seen. But is the *commercium* argument for God's transcendence in relation to the world any more successful? There are at least two charges that hinder a positive answer. First, there is a version of the third man argument. As Kant contends, (a transcendent) God is needed to ground relations between objects constituting the (or a) world. But what would ground relations between God and world? A third element seems to be required to do the job. But then the question about grounding can be iterated *in infinitum*. This makes it tempting to resign from the conception of grounding altogether. Michael Della Rocca, in a recent article,⁶⁸ proposed a strategy in this vein. According to Della Rocca, we should dispense with the grounding relations if we want to have an ontology that respects the PSR and does not violate 'Ockham's razor'. Roughly, the idea is that if one posits a grounding relation, one has to distinguish the fundamental level from the non-fundamental one, the grounding from the grounded. Given that the grounded necessarily follows from the grounding, it must be 'latent' in the ground, it must be 'already there'. In this case, though, there are no good reasons to distinguish between the two levels. Supposing, in turn, that the grounded were not 'latent' in the grounding, it would not follow necessarily from it, so the ground would not play its fundamental (necessary) role. As a result, grounding relations seem either to be posited arbitrarily, or not to explain anything at all. Now, with regard to Kant – and this is the second charge against the *commercium* argument establishing God's transcendence – it might well

⁶⁸ 'Razing Structures to the Ground,' *Analytic Philosophy* 55 (3), 2014, pp. 276-294.

turn out that Della Rocca's critique affects Kant's conception of the grounding of real possibilities by God. Thus, real possibilities would either be 'latent' in God, that is, constitute the divine nature, or simply be identical with God, in which case we arrive at Spinozism, and then there is no reason to separate God from realities; or God could not be a ground for possibilities, which subverts the Kantian 'possibility proof' as it stands. Still, alternatively, God could provide a ground for the possibilities but in some unintelligible way.

To these charges I would venture the following reply. As I noted earlier in this section, Kant's notion of ground can be construed in terms of causal power, or disposition, to bring about effects in accordance with necessary laws. Since having a power differs from executing it, God may be the ground of possibilities in virtue of just *being able* to actualize them.⁶⁹ And since, by Prop. VI of the *New Elucidation* and § 19 of the Inaugural Dissertation, God is not a *causa sui*, for Kant, he cannot be identical with the totality of realities he grounds. One would also be mistaken to demand a ground for the relation between God and what he grounds because, we may contend, it lies in God's *nature* to have the power to bring about effects in accordance with necessary laws. We may not be able to explain why this is a case about God, or how exactly this power can be executed, but, as Prop. VI makes clear, Kant does not recommend applying the PSR to God without restrictions. The problem, however, is that, on such an account, it remains rather mysterious why realities are posited at all, since if we do not apply the PSR to God, the rational basis for reality seems to collapse.

3.2. The divine mind

In the previous subsection, I discussed Kant's construal of the relation of grounding which implies that possibilities follow 'from' the necessary being as its conse-

⁶⁹ Such a view would be clearly unacceptable to Spinoza. Cf. E 1p17s.

quences, i.e. effects caused by the necessary being. The construal does not entail Spinozism if we stipulate that cause and effect must be different, at least logically independent entities, as indeed Kant does. But I also pointed, at the beginning of this section, to a way of thinking of the relation between God and possibilities on which possibilities would be regarded as determinations of the necessary being, i.e., as inhering in the necessary being like modes inhere in a substance. I labelled this account a Containment Model (CM) since on it all possibilities would be ‘contained’ in, or instantiated by, the necessary being which Kant describes as the ‘maximum of reality’ (*ens realissimum*).⁷⁰

The CM can be read in a way which entails Spinozism, but this, at least *prima facie* (as we shall see later), does not have to be the case. Spinozism seems to follow if one thinks of real possibilities as actual *non-intentional* properties of the necessary being, as well as properties derived from them. Chignell offers a reading along these lines. On his interpretation, Kant’s real possibility should meet three criteria: consistency (lack of contradiction), content (embodying a positive property, *realitas* in the rationalist metaphysics) and harmony. Satisfying the harmony criterion requires that a given property, if it is to be really possible, should be actually exemplified in its connectedness with other properties of an entity. As an *ens realissimum* God would contain all possibilities, that is, he would instantiate possible properties *or* all fundamental (unanalyzeable and positive) properties from which other properties could be derived.⁷¹ Clearly, if all fundamental properties were *instantiated* by the necessary being, Kant’s God would bear

⁷⁰ Cf. V-Phil-Th/Pöhlitz, AA 28:1005.

⁷¹ On Chignell’s definition, ‘a *fundamental* predicate is both *unanalyzeable* and *positive*’ (‘Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being,’ op. cit., p. 166). God, that is, the ‘*ens realissimum*,’ is ‘the being that essentially exemplifies a maximal version of every fundamental positive predicate or “reality” (*realitas*) which can be possessed by anything else’ (ibid., p. 158). On Chignell’s reading, ‘Kant goes on to argue that a unique, necessary being grounds the possible possession of *all* predicates, and that it does so by jointly exemplifying the maximal, fundamental predicates’ (ibid., p. 165).

the relevant characteristics of the God of Spinoza: containing all possible determinations, he would also have to instantiate extension, which belongs to fundamental properties according to Kant (cf. quote 3).

One of the more convincing evidence for Boehm's and Chignell's Spinozist interpretation may lie in the fact that, with the transcendental turn, Kant changed the status of the *ens realissimum* from an existing entity to a 'transcendental ideal' in the *Critique of Pure Reason*,⁷² or an idea of reason, the real possibility of which one cannot have any knowledge of, as we can read in the *Lectures*.⁷³ For given that Kant was satisfied with the 'possibility proof' (as opposed to other theistic arguments), if the argument presented in the 1755 and 1763 essays had not implied Spinozism, what else would have motivated this change?⁷⁴

⁷² Cf. KrV, A 572/B 600 – A 583/B 611.

⁷³ Kant says that reason 'must think of some maximum reality from which it can proceed and according to which it can measure other things. A thing of this kind, in which all realities are contained, would be the only complete thing, because it is perfectly determined in regard to all possible predicates. And just for this reason such an *ens realissimum* would also be the ground of the possibility of all other beings. For I need only think the highest reality as limited in infinitely many ways and I thereby also think the possibility of infinitely many things' (V-Phil-Th/Pölitz, AA 28:1005). In an essay *What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Times of Leibniz and Wolff?* (1793), the idea of God as embracing all reality can be found in a famous passage with the metaphor of 'marble quarry': 'This One which metaphysics [...] has now conjured up for itself [...] contains the wherewithal for the creation of all other possible things, as the marble quarry does for statues of infinite diversity, which are all of them possible only through limitation [...]; in which carpentering of a world this *metaphysical God* (the *realissimum*) likewise falls very much under the suspicion (despite all protestations against Spinozism), that as a universally existing being He is identical with the universe' (FM, AA 20:302). Kant expresses skepticism about the real possibility of the *ens realissimum* e.g. in: V-Phil-Th/Pölitz, AA 28:1016.

⁷⁴ Such a motivation for Kant's change is plausible if only because Spinoza did not have favourable press among philosophers until the outbreak of the *Pantheismusstreit* between Jacobi and Mendelssohn (1785-6). Perhaps more as a result of taking a stance in the pantheism controversy and as a reaction to Jacobi's proclamations, rather than a thorough analysis of Spinoza's writings, Kant would associate Spinozism with enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*); see e.g. WDO, AA 8:144 (references to this work are based on: I. Kant, 'What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' in: *Religion and Rational Theology*, op.cit.); OP, AA 21:19. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* enthusiasm emerges as one of the key enemies of criticism. The latter, according to Kant, is the

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However, as some interpretations show, even on the CM one could think of an alternative construal of the relation between God and possibilities, which would not, apparently, have to lead to Spinozism. On this construal, the grounding relation would consist in God's *representing* real possibilities, and in possibilities furnishing the contents of the divine thoughts.⁷⁵ Yong spells out this idea in the following way:

(8) Kant seems to believe that an intellectual order can be grounded only by an intellect. But it is precisely such an order that constitutes the domain of possibility. The totality of possibility is conceptually ordered in that its constituent possibilities are not fragmented but stand together as a single space of thinkable content.⁷⁶

On this reading – which I call intellectualist because of the role it attaches to the divine intellect in the relation of grounding⁷⁷ – possibilities would provide intentional, rather than non-intentional determinations of God, in contrast to Chignell's interpretation. Textual evidence from Kant's pre-critical writings seems to corroborate this reading. For example, Kant maintains that 'the necessary being is a mind,⁷⁸ possessing both understanding and will. Otherwise, 'it would be a blindly necessary ground of other things and even of other minds.'⁷⁹ For what speaks for God as an

only remedy for 'materialism, fatalism, atheism, [...] freethinking unbelief, [...] enthusiasm and superstition [...], and finally also of idealism and skepticism' (KrV, B xxxiv). See also H. E. Allison, 'Kant's Critique of Spinoza,' in: R. Kenington (ed.), *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington 1980, pp. 199-222.

⁷⁵ I admit that this is a rather loose way of characterizing the 'grounding-as-representation' reading. Space does not permit me to analyze different accounts of representation here; but I take it that, *pace* the intellectualist interpreters mentioned in this paper, representation does not have to be a matter of entertaining *conceptual* content only.

⁷⁶ P. Yong, 'God, Totality and Possibility in Kant's Only Possible Argument,' *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁷⁷ In this paper, I deliberately take intellectualism out of its proper context, which is a debate with voluntarism about the nature of God, and place it in opposition to the Spinozist, or pantheistic, reading.

⁷⁸ BDG, AA 2:87.

⁷⁹ BDG, AA 2:89.

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infinite intellect, rather than an all-encompassing, both thinking and extended entity, is the ‘order and appropriateness’⁸⁰ displayed in nature, which call for a ‘Wise Being’ as their author. It is thus God’s wisdom that ‘presupposes the possibility of things in general,’⁸¹ with possibility characterized as the ‘essence of things’⁸² (Kant also calls it ‘internal possibility’⁸³). Like the transcendental subjectivity in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which accounts for the unity and the lawlikeness of experience, Kant’s pre-critical God would account for the ‘unity of the world’⁸⁴ by authoring its laws. Also, all kinds of relations would be established by the divine intellect. Indeed, according to Kant, relations between objects constituting the world should be authored by an intellect prescribing laws for the world and maintaining its constituents in existence.⁸⁵ The mere multiplicity of substances as such cannot make up a whole whose parts would be interrelated and interacting – and so would form a world – since, as Kant says, there is nothing in the existence of substances that would imply their relatedness to other substances (e.g. no inner force that would prompt them to causally interact with one another).⁸⁶ Thus, the ‘domain of possibility’ would acquire its grounding in God’s mind. Such an interpretation seems to shield Kant against the accusations of Spinozism but, as I will argue in the next section, also this interpretation ultimately fails to dispel the ‘threat.’

⁸⁰ BDG, AA 2:123.

⁸¹ BDG, AA 2:125-6.

⁸² BDG, AA 2:162-3.

⁸³ BDG, AA 2:157.

⁸⁴ BDG, AA 2:127.

⁸⁵ Cf. e.g. PND, AA 1:413.

⁸⁶ See Kant’s following notes: ‘The influence of the substances in the world is called interaction <commercium> or reciprocal influence <influxus mutuus>.’ Substances need ‘no other substances for their existence.’ ‘All substances must have a ground of their reciprocal connection. The cause of their existence and also of their reciprocal connection is God. The interaction <commercium> of substances is thus not at all to be conceived from the existence of substance’ (V-Met-L2/Pölitiz, AA 28:581).

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4. Intellectualism and problems with space

On the intellectualist reading, offered by Yong and Insole, possibilities furnish the contents of the divine thought. Relations between substances, necessary to constitute a world, are grounded in the divine understanding. This implies that all relations, including spatial ones, should be as much as *represented* in God's intellect to become really possible. The intellectualist reading, I claim, is thoroughly problematic, though. First, it is not clear whether it really delivers Kant from Spinozism: for the account advocated by Boehm and Chignell may be replaced by what Mendelssohn called a 'purified pantheism' that claims that all reality is contingent upon God's mind, which now becomes the only substance.⁸⁷ (This objection, however, has the unpleasant consequence of recruiting to the Spinozist camp philosophers who would denounce any ties with Spinoza, such as Berkeley.) Second, grounding relations in the divine mind generates the problem of how God can represent space, especially considering Kant's characteristics of spatial extension as a 'simple notion,' that is, a notion that bears *direct* reference to (i.e. requires the existence of) its object. Third, even if we accommodate the problem of the divine representation of space, we can still argue that if objects and relations are grounded in God's mind, and God is the author of the empirical world with human beings in it, Kant ends up in Spinozism because he will have to admit that all the constituents of the world, human beings included, must be subject to the divinely ordained causal laws governing relations between objects, and this entails determinism (or perhaps even necessi-

⁸⁷ Cf. F. C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, op. cit., p. 104. It seems to me that Adams' account, on which he argues that representation requires exemplification, is compatible with 'purified pantheism.' For fundamental qualities, grounded in God's mind, may be exemplified in the divine 'consciousness.' Cf. R. M. Adams, 'God, Possibility and Kant,' op. cit., p. 437ff.

tarianism).⁸⁸ Jacob Freudenthal supported a view in this vein in his 1895 essay, where he said:

(9) In the same year in which Mendelssohn [...] appeared in Spinoza's defence, the father of the new critical philosophy employed the fundamental idea of the Spinozistic philosophy in order to solve a problem which much occupied the natural philosophy of the eighteenth century. How do substances affect each other? [...] Kant answers, *in the spirit of Spinozism*, that they affect each other only because they depend upon a common principle, the divine Intelligence, which maintains their mutual relations.⁸⁹

Now, let us look at the above-formulated second objection more closely. How can God provide grounding for spatial extension in that he represents it? As noted earlier, on the basis of quote 3, space belongs to 'simple notions', which directly refer to their objects, and so they presuppose the existence of these objects. Space must then *exist in* God's representation. But in what way exactly? In the way in which my summer trip to the Tatras exists in my memory (i.e. as an image or series of images caused by or resembling their objects)? Or in a way in which colours, sounds, and tastes exist in the perceiving subject, on Locke's account of perception? This issue is rather unclear. Moreover, if the possibility of spatial extension is grounded in the divine mind in that God represents it, then God grounds space by having its idea. But, if we understand quote 3 correctly, 'simple notions,' for Kant, refer to those basic features of reality that must be instantiated in something – i.e. that have to exist – in order to be possible (and to render other less

⁸⁸ The claim that God grounds all relations between objects leads to a problem called theological determinism. Cf. K. Brewer and E. Watkins, 'A Difficulty Still Awaits: Kant, Spinoza, and the Threat of Theological Determinism,' *Kant-Studien* 103 (2), 2012, pp. 163-187.

⁸⁹ J. Freudenthal, 'On the History of Spinozism,' *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 8 (1), 1895, p. 58 (italics mine).

basic things possible). Spatial extension that exists in the divine mind as an idea only is no more instantiated than the 'π' number that I am thinking of at the moment; to put it briefly, it is a mere abstraction.

To recap: if spatial extension were to be grounded by being instantiated as a property in God, Kant would have to endorse the view of Spinoza, in which extension is an attribute of God. On the other hand, if spatial extension were to be grounded by being instantiated as a representation in the divine mind, then it would exist merely as God's idea, rather than as a fundamental feature of reality. Malebranche, with his conception of *l'étendue intelligible*, would favour the second alternative but it is just for Malebranche that the problem of the existence of the extended (material) reality arises. For Kant, neither of the two alternatives seems to be an option; this becomes clear when we look at the development of his pre-critical conception of space that turns towards what some scholars have called sensationist intuitionism.⁹⁰ Accordingly, already in his pre-critical writings Kant characterizes space (1) as related to what in the critical period will be called intuition (a non-conceptual kind of representation which cannot be a result of any inferential reasoning) and (2) as related to sensibility. Regarding the latter, in the Inaugural Dissertation (1770) Kant describes space as a form that 'co-ordinates everything which is *sensed* externally.'⁹¹ Thus, the representation of space presupposes the ability to acquire sensations (receptivity). Space is described as related to intuition in an earlier essay, *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* (1764), where one can read that the analysis of space makes it possible for one to:

(10) notice that there is a manifold in space of which the parts are external to each other; [...] notice that this

⁹⁰ Śnieżyński (after Giovanni Sala) offers a reading along these lines. Cf. *Immanuela Kanta krytyka metafizyki klasycznej w okresie przedkrytycznym*, op. cit., pp. 354, 369-70.

⁹¹ MSI, AA 2:403 (italics mine).

manifold is not constituted by substances [...]; and [...] notice that space can have only three dimensions *etc.* Propositions such as these can well be explained if they are examined *in concreto*, so that they come to be cognised intuitively, but they can never be proved.⁹²

Kant's development of the theory of space as a subjective representation seems thus to address the failed attempt to ground basic features of reality, such as spatial extension, in God's mind, replacing the latter with the mind of a finite human subject. Insole suggests however that, for the pre-critical Kant, there is no problem with grounding properties such as space in the divine understanding. This is because, according to Insole, Kant is an intellectualist and essentialist about spatial relations, which means that he considers them contingent on essences of substances containing, apart from certain intrinsic properties, also dispositional properties.⁹³ The divine intellect grounds essences containing both intrinsic and dispositional properties, and the latter determine what kinds of relations substances may have. Thus, God does not have to represent spatial relations in order to ground them: it should suffice that he authors essences of things.

Insole's reading brings the pre-critical Kant close to Leibniz and Wolff, the school whose main tenets Kant seems to have been critical of already in his early writings

⁹² UDGTM, AA 2:281 (references to this work are based on: I. Kant, 'Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality,' in: *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, op. cit.). Kant makes a very similar claim six years later in the Inaugural Dissertation: 'That space does not have more than three dimensions, that between two points there is only one straight line, that from a given point on a plain surface a circle can be described with a given straight line, etc. [...] can only be *apprehended* concretely, so to speak, in space itself' (MSI, AA 2:402-3). This suggests that already in the pre-critical period Kant consistently develops a doctrine of space that will emerge as complete in the Transcendental Aesthetic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

⁹³ A dispositional property, says Insole, is 'a property such that the substance would have determinate relational properties in the event that the substance were placed in connection with other substances.' Ch. Insole, 'Intellectualism, Relational Properties and the Divine Mind in Kant's Pre-Critical Philosophy,' op. cit., p. 409.

(for example, as we indicated above, by rejecting the unrestricted scope of the application of the PSR; another example is Kant's criticism of the primary role of the principle of (non)contradiction, also formulated in the *New Elucidation*⁹⁴). Besides, on Insole's interpretation, space cannot be considered one of the basic features of reality, which undermines our reading of quote 3, adduced in section 2, but rather a 'relational property, derivative upon the relations that substances have to other substances' and 'added to substances by the divine mind.'⁹⁵ Still, it might be argued, this reading remains compatible with the idea that space is a feature of the objective reality and if it is to be a phenomenon, then a well-founded one (as it derives from real objects, or things in themselves, in Kant's later terminology), rather than an appearance in the Kantian sense.

One of the crucial problems with this reading, I believe, is that it does not permit to make full sense of the epistemological strand in Kant's pre-critical metaphysics, which we distinguished when providing an outline of the 'possibility proof' in section 2, and hence that it does not enable us to understand how this epistemological strand, present in the early writings of Kant, further gives rise to the epistemological orientation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The intellectualist interpretation, supported by Insole, seems not to be able to effectively explain why, in the critical period, Kant would maintain the following:

(11) [...] were space and time constitutions of the things themselves, then they would have to be properties of God [...] since the reality of things rests in God as the ground, both would also be able to be attributed to God only, and the hypothesis of Spinozism actually consisted in this, that one took

⁹⁴ Cf. PND, AA 1:388-391.

⁹⁵ Ch. Insole, 'Kant's Transcendental Idealism, Freedom and the Divine Mind,' *Modern Theology* 27 (4), 2011, p. 610.

space and time for things in themselves and for properties of God.⁹⁶

(12) If this ideality of space and time is not adopted, nothing remains but Spinozism, in which space and time are essential determinations of the original being itself [...].⁹⁷

As the analysis of Kant's 'possibility proof' shows, the epistemological strand in the argument can be expressed as the idea that God provides the condition of the possibility of all thought in that he encompasses the totality of reality – the content for all thought⁹⁸ – in particular, the basic features of objects, such as extension. However, as I have suggested, since some of these basic features are clearly not tailored for the divine understanding, their source should not be located in it. Indeed, it should not be located in God at all, whether in his understanding or in other attributes, unless Kant is ready to endorse the Spinozist conception of God (and much indicates that he is not⁹⁹).

Now, with the 'Copernican revolution' and transcendental idealism comes what Henry Allison calls a radical

⁹⁶ V-Met-K3/Vigil, AA 29:977. References to these notes are based on: I. Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, op. cit.

⁹⁷ KpV, AA 5:101-2 (references to this work are based on: I. Kant, 'Critique of Practical Reason,' in: *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by M. J. Gregor, CUP, Cambridge 1996). It should be noted that the view Kant calls Spinozism here is not identical with the view of Spinoza himself. For Spinoza distinguishes two perspectives from which things can be considered: *sub specie aeternitatis* and *sub specie durationis*. Imagination considers things in the second of these modes and reason – in the first one. Thus, since only rational cognition can be conducive to truth, one should abstract from the *temporal* aspect of cognition as long as one aims at truth. Reason does not present its objects as temporal, and therefore God (substance) cannot be temporally determined as long as he is the object of rational cognition. Cf. E 2p44 and its corollaries. Accordingly, Spinoza's God can be attributed only the property of spatiality – and that only as long as space is equated with extension. Cf. E 2p2.

⁹⁸ Cf. K. Śnieżyński, *Immanuela Kanta krytyka metafizyki klasycznej w okresie przedkrytycznym*, op. cit., p. 412.

⁹⁹ In both the critical and the pre-critical writings, Kant would scornfully label Spinozism as 'absurdity' (see e.g.: BDG, AA 2:74, KpV, AA 5:102) or 'enthusiasm' (see footnote 74).

change of perspective.¹⁰⁰ This radical change entails a departure from the key tenet of all rationalist philosophies, which is that of ‘the harmony of reason and nature, the isomorphism of thought and being.’¹⁰¹ Within this framework it is now the mind of the finite human subject that will account for, and so ‘ground’, certain basic features of reality, such as spatiality. The reality the structures of which mirror the structures of the human mind will be cognitively accessible to finite subjects. But the contents of our thoughts will now have, so to say, both the subjective and the objective side. Due to the former, that is, due to a priori structures originating in the mind, it will be possible for the contents to be the contents of *our* thoughts. Their objective side, in turn, is what will ensure that our thoughts hook up to reality, rather than being mere figments of the brain.

I am thus inclined to suggest that Kant’s pre-critical theory of the divine grounding of realities splits into two parts. The first part is the account of the finite human mind as providing the ground for the basic features of the cognitively accessible, i.e. empirical, reality: spatiality, temporality, causality, etc. The second part is Kant’s account of the relation between the mind and the extra-mental reality, described sometimes as (transcendental or noumenal) ‘affection.’¹⁰² This is a rather mysterious, quasi-causal process in the course of which the mind acquires the matter of cognition and becomes related to the mind-independent reality.¹⁰³ The ‘problem of affection’ represents the notoriously dark side of Kant’s transcendental theory of cognition. I think, however, that we could begin to fathom it out if we construed the ‘affection’ of the mind by the cognitively inaccessible, extra-mental reality as already

¹⁰⁰ H. E. Allison, ‘Kant’s Critique of Spinoza,’ op. cit.

¹⁰¹ F. C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁰² For a discussion of this problematic notion see my paper, ‘The Transcendental Object and the “Problem of Affection.” Remarks on Some Difficulties of Kant’s Theory of Empirical Cognition,’ *Diametros* 11, 2007, pp. 61-82.

¹⁰³ Cf. KrV, A 19/B 33.

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adumbrated in the pre-critical theory of grounding, understood as causation effected by the ‘necessary being.’

The fact that the critical Kant did not renounce the ‘possibility proof,’ and the consequent account of the relation between God and world/human mind, encourages the hypothesis that Kant’s pre-critical theory of grounding, in one of its shapes, might underlie his later critical metaphysics of experience. But since the cognitively accessible features of reality now have their source only in the human mind, and in the absence of the rationalist dogma about the isomorphism of thought and being, we are not in a position anymore to describe the relation between the ‘necessary being’ and reality/human mind in anything like intelligible terms. We cannot claim that God authors the essences of objects *as* we know them through ordinary and scientific experience, because the path to the knowledge of God is now completely cut off for us. It is not only that we cannot get to know the determining reason of God, and hence apply the PSR to the divine reality (as Kant began to establish in the pre-critical period), but the very relation between God and reality/human mind becomes entirely unfathomable. Thus, we cannot make sense of the contents of our thoughts by appealing to the contents of the divine thoughts: the latter and the former are entirely incommensurable. Interestingly, for Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, God though not rational theology may still have an important part to play. This may seem a murky ground of speculation but before leaving it let me suggest that perhaps reading the critical philosophy through the lenses of the pre-critical rational theology may as much as cast some light on the notoriously dark elements of the critical philosophy itself.

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5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to discuss Kant's 'possibility proof' for the existence of God, expounded in his pre-critical writings: *A New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition* (1755) and *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763), against a background of recent reinterpretations of the 'proof' that discover in it a tendency to Spinozist pantheism. Although I would hesitate to subscribe to these interpretations, I hope to have shown that one cannot consider Kant's early theistic arguments without seriously taking Spinoza into account. The Spinozist concern arises when one examines Kant's conception of grounding, that is, a relation between God and reality (in the rationalist metaphysical sense of *realitas*, i.e. that which is possible). I have distinguished three ways in which one can construe the grounding relation: (1) grounding as causation by God, (2) grounding as (non-intentional) instantiation of realities by God, and (3) grounding as representation in the divine understanding.

As I have argued, none of the above three accounts remains unproblematic. (1) renders the divine grounding a mysterious causal process. For if reality is not, in some sense, 'in' God, but exists separately as an effect of the divine power, grounding will look like God's blindly exercising his power, without it being possible to satisfactorily explain what makes determinate realities possible at all. (2) implies Spinozism, since on this account God has to be the subject of all possible predicates taken together, including extension. Finally (3) leads to the problem of representing space in God's mind, unless we concede (following Insole) that space derives from relations between objects, the essences of which are authored by God.

Insole's proposal, however, requires that one acknowledge Kant's move, in the pre-critical period, from a

Leibnizian to a Newtonian metaphysics of space. Indeed, the Inaugural Dissertation (1770) promotes the doctrine of space as a ‘phenomenon of the divine omnipresence,’¹⁰⁴ which Kant later on would expressly attribute to Newton.¹⁰⁵ One may surmise, on this basis, that Kant’s critical admonitions to the effect that if one does not endorse transcendental idealism, one will inevitably wind up in the ‘absurdity’ of Spinozism, address his 1770 (that is, *later* pre-critical) theory, one which has more affinities with Newton than with Leibniz.¹⁰⁶ But quote 10 from section 4 suggests that Kant did not support the Leibnizian conception of space at about the time of writing the *Beweisgrund* essay (we can read there, e.g., that the ‘manifold’ in space, that is, spatial relations, ‘is not constituted by substances,’ a claim which seems to defy Leibniz’s relational conception of space). Above all, it is telling that Kant’s warning, encapsulated in the claim that ‘Spinozism is the true conclusion of all dogmatic metaphysics,’¹⁰⁷ equally targets the school of Wolff and Baumgarten, the rationalist followers of Leibniz, as well as, of course, Kant’s own pre-critical metaphysical positions.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Cf. MSI, AA 2:410.

¹⁰⁵ V-Met-K3/Vigil, AA 29:1007-8.

¹⁰⁶ On the discrepancy between the Christian conception of God and Newton’s idea of the ‘divine sensorium’ see: Ch. Insole, ‘Kant’s Transcendental Idealism and Newton’s Divine Sensorium,’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72 (3), 2011, pp. 413-36, and E. W. Strong, ‘Newton and God,’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13 (2), 1952, pp. 147-67. According to Strong, Newton’s conception of space as divine sensorium marked a ‘radical departure from traditional Christian cosmology’ (p. 167).

¹⁰⁷ HN, AA 18:436. The reference to these notes is based on: I. Kant, *Notes and Fragments*, ed. By P. Guyer, trans. by C. Bowman, P. Guyer, F. Rauscher, CUP, Cambridge 2005.

¹⁰⁸ I would like to thank the reader at *KSO* for helpful comments on the draft of this article, I would also like to thank audiences at modern philosophy conferences in Leuven, Białystok, and Groningen, and at Prof. Justyna Miklaszewska’s Kraków seminar on Enlightenment, for fruitful discussions on earlier versions and fragments of this paper. This article is a result of research jointly funded by an EU grant obtained for the realization of a Science – Environment – Technology project at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków for the years 2013-2015, and by a grant, received for the years 2013-2016 from the National Science Centre in Poland, for a project on ‘Radical and conservative thinkers in the Enlightenment’ (2012/07/B/HS1/00265).

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