Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

A Critical Reconstruction of Tillich's Implicit Possibility Proof for the Existence of God in Relation to Kant's Precritical Beweisgrund

Darko Cvijić

dcvijic2@gmail.com

Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Belgrade

Research Article

Keywords: real possibility, essence, potentiality, ground of being, real ground, existence

Posted Date: November 24th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11667819/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This paper examines whether an implicit possibility proof can be critically reconstructed from Tillich's doctrine of essences and of God as the ground of being, and whether its structure corresponds to that of Kant's precritical argument in *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund*. It first outlines Kant's distinction between the formal and material elements of possibility and his claim that real possibility requires an actual, absolutely necessary ground. It then considers Tillich's account of essences as potentialities and real possibilities, and his understanding of God as the ground of being. The paper argues that the reconstructed argument exhibits a primarily functional correspondence with early Kant: essences possess an ontological status that cannot be reduced to purely logical or nominal constructions, while their real content ultimately requires God as the first real ground. Particular attention is given to whether Tillich's refusal to attribute existence to God limits such a reconstruction. A significant difference nevertheless remains: for Kant, the formal and material elements together constitute possibility as such; for Tillich, the real element primarily concerns the ontological status of essences, whereas the formal element concerns the epistemological conditions under which they can become objects of thought. The paper concludes that Tillich's system permits this critical reconstruction, although he did not present his doctrine as an argument for God's existence, nor can it be established that he was familiar with Kant's precritical argument.

1. Introduction

Tillich adopted a critical stance towards the formal aspect of the ontological argument, accepting Kant's critical position that its proponents had made an illegitimate transition in attempting to deduce existence from the concept of a necessary being. However, according to Tillich, Kant failed to refute the content of the ontological argument, if by "content" one understands the phenomenological description of thought. Throughout his writings, Tillich frequently refers to Kant and, alongside Aristotle, regards him as a key figure from whom he learned "philosophical discipline" and who provided the Western world with "philosophical tools" (Tillich, 1989, 416). Nevertheless, all his references to Kant concern Kant's critical period, which suggests that he was most likely unfamiliar with Kant's precritical and lesser-known work *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes*.[1]

In this work, eighteen years before the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant developed his famous critique of the ontological argument, according to which existence is not a real predicate and cannot be deduced through the mere analysis of a concept. In the same work, however, he also developed his own so-called possibility proof, in which he proceeds *a priori* from the ontological status of possibility (*Möglichkeit*) and concludes that God exists as the real ground of possibility.

Prominent commentators on Tillich have recognized that what Tillich calls the "content" of the ontological argument is nothing other than its concealed "form", and that, despite accepting Kant's critique, he fell into the very critical trap he sought to avoid. However, the subject of this paper is not an investigation of Tillich's concealed form of the ontological argument, but rather a critical examination of

whether another form of argument lies hidden within his system, one that structurally corresponds to Kant's precritical argument in *Beweisgrund*. Unlike the ontological argument, which, as Kant maintains, proceeds "from the possible as a *ground* to the existence of God as a *consequence*", we assume in this paper that Tillich, like the early Kant, proceeds "from the possible as a *consequence* to the divine existence as a *ground*" (Kant, 1992, 195; Kant, 2012, A189–A190, 129–130). It is precisely in this sense that the guiding hypothesis of this paper is that, beneath the surface of Tillich's doctrine of essences and God as the *ground of being*, an implicit possibility proof can be critically reconstructed. This argument structurally corresponds to Kant's precritical argument, particularly with respect to the distinction between the formal and material elements of possibility and the understanding of God as the first and ultimate real ground of all real possibilities.

The term "possibility proof" was coined by A. Wood to designate Kant's precritical argument, and in this paper we shall also use it to refer to Tillich's implicit argument (see Wood, 1978, 66). We characterize Tillich's argument as "implicit" for two reasons. First, Tillich explicitly rejects the validity of the formal aspect of all arguments for the existence of God; consequently, he never understood or presented his own doctrine of essences as an argument for God's existence. Second, as far as we are aware, Tillich nowhere explicitly indicates that he was directly familiar with Kant's argument in *Beweisgrund*. Had he been familiar with it, it would be reasonable to expect him to have mentioned it, at least in passing, alongside the other arguments for God's existence.[2] Moreover, even if he had been familiar with it, he would probably have sought to reject its formal aspect, as in the case of the other arguments. Thus, in this paper, we do not assume that Tillich was directly influenced by Kant's argument and consciously developed his own form of the argument, but rather that his doctrine of essences and God as the ground of being implicitly contains the structure of such an argument shaped along Kantian lines.

To the best of our knowledge, apart from S. Palmquist's brief observation that "Tillich's notion of God as 'being itself' or the 'ground of being' has obvious Kantian roots" (Palmquist, 2019, 76), and R. Ross's insight that Tillich's essences, as "ontic concepts 'point to' the reality of God" (Ross, 1977a, 130), no possible structural connection between Kant's precritical argument and Tillich's doctrine of essences and God as the ground of being has been identified in the existing literature, nor has any comparative study of this kind been undertaken. Such an investigation constitutes precisely the principal research objective and anticipated scholarly contribution of this paper.

The significance of such a reconstruction is not limited merely to establishing a previously unnoticed structural parallel between Kant in his precritical period and Tillich. If this reconstruction is justified, Tillich's rejection of formal arguments for the existence of God should be read in light of the fact that his ontology of essences and God as the ground of being nevertheless implies an argumentative structure in which God functions as the necessary real ground of all real possibilities. This also raises the broader systematic-theological question of whether Tillich's critique of traditional arguments for the existence of God genuinely signifies the abandonment of the metaphysical grounding of discourse about God, or rather its reconfiguration within his own ontology of essences.

The paper is divided into two main sections. In the first section, we shall outline the structure of Kant's precritical possibility proof and show that, unlike the classical ontological argument, it proceeds not from the possible concept of a necessary being but from the ontological status of possibility. The second section presents a critical reconstruction of Tillich's implicit possibility proof and is divided into three subsections. The first subsection examines whether Tillich's concept of *essence* can be brought into close relation with Kant's formal and material elements of possibility. In the second subsection, we shall examine how the conclusion that God constitutes the real ground of essences as real possibilities can be reconstructed from Tillich's account of their ontological status. Finally, in the third subsection, we shall analyze the problem arising from Tillich's rejection of the claim that God exists, examining whether this position precludes the possibility of reconstructing an implicit possibility proof.

2. Kant's Precritical Possibility Proof in

2. Kant's Precritical Possibility Proof in *Beweisgrund*
Kant presented his possibility proof in two works: first, in the short Latin essay *Nova dilucidatio* (1755), and subsequently in the considerably more extensive and significant German-language work *Beweisgrund* (1763). Scholars have extensively discussed the possibility proof in both works (the following classical studies are particularly important for a critical examination of Kant's possibility proof: Wood, 1978, 64–93; Schmucker, 1980, 53–107; Schönfeld, 2000, 183–208; Fisher & Watkins, 1998, 369–395). This section, however, is less concerned with critical assessment; its primary aim is to present the basic structure of the possibility proof on the basis of *Beweisgrund*.

In *Beweisgrund*, Kant seeks to establish two points: that the classical ontological argument is mistaken and that it is nevertheless possible to demonstrate God's existence by proceeding from the material status of possibility. In the first section of *Beweisgrund*, Kant adopts an entirely different view of existence, treating it not as a predicate, as in the ontological argument, but as "the absolute positing of a thing" (*absolute Position/Setzung*) (Kant, 1992, 119; Kant, 2012, A8, 17). He distinguishes between relative and absolute positing. In relative positing (*respectus logicus*), only the logical relation between a subject and its predicates is posited within a possible concept, whereby "being [...] is nothing other than the copula in a judgement" (Kant, 1992, 119–120). By contrast, in absolute positing, the subject itself is posited together with all its predicates. Existence does not add any new predicate to the content of the concept; rather, it changes the manner in which that content is given, since there is a transition from a state of possibility to one of actuality (reality) (see Kant, 1992, 119).[3] Thus, according to Kant, proponents of the ontological argument err in treating existence as a real predicate and consequently regarding the denial of God's existence as logically contradictory; yet, as Kant himself emphasizes: "His existence must belong directly to the manner in which His concept is posited, for His existence will not be found among the predicates themselves" (Kant, 1992, 120).[4]

Since, according to Kant, the classical ontological argument is unsuccessful, he maintains that the possibility proof represents the only possible way to demonstrate God's existence. The possibility proof proceeds from the premise that something is *a priori* possible in itself, that is, from the existence of

possibilities as such (*Möglichkeit*). For something to be possible, two conditions must be satisfied. The first is the formal or logical element of possibility (*Formale der Möglichkeit*), which requires that a possible concept be non-contradictory, that is, that its determinations be compatible (see Kant, 1992, 123; Kant, 2012, A17–A18, 23–24). Otherwise, "anything which is self-contradictory is internally impossible" (Kant, 1992, 122) and cannot be thought.

The second condition, crucial to Kant's argument, is the metaphysical or ontological condition of possibility, or what Kant calls the "material" (*Materiale*) or "the real element of possibility" (*Reale der Möglichkeit*), which, unlike the formal element, requires the existence of material "data" (*Data*) (Kant, 1992, 123; Kant, 2012, A17–A18, 23–24). Thought does not operate solely in accordance with the formal law of contradiction; for something to be really possible, according to Kant, there must be, in addition to the logical condition, "something" (*etwas*) that constitutes "the material element which [...] can be thought" (Kant, 1992, 123; Kant, 2012, A17, 23).[5] This means, to take Kant's example, that the concept of a "fiery body" (*feuriger Körper*) is logically non-contradictory, but if the material elements "space" (*Raum*) and "extension" (*Ausdehnung*) are absent, that concept remains an "empty word" (*leeres Wort*), and the real possibility of a fiery body becomes an "illusion" (*Blendwerk*) (Kant, 1992, 125; Kant, 2012, A24, 28). U. Abaci formulates this material condition as the "actualist principle", according to which every real possibility must in some way be grounded in existence. According to his interpretation, this principle should therefore be understood ontologically rather than epistemologically. The question is not "How do we know that something is possible?", as the critical Kant will later ask, but rather "What is it in reality (actuality) itself that makes something possible?" (Abaci, 2017, 261; 269). In this sense, N. Hoffer rightly identifies a certain Platonist structure in Kant's argument: Kant reifies concepts and treats possibilities as though they possessed an autonomous ontological status, which would not be possible if they were merely concepts understood as logical constructs of thought (Hoffer, 2020, 342; 355). Thus, Kant proceeds from the ontological status of possibility and maintains, most likely under the strong influence of Leibniz and C. Crusius, that every real possibility presupposes existence; that is, it is grounded in something that already actually exists, thereby affirming, in Aristotelian terms, the primacy of actuality over potentiality.[6] For this reason, Kant concludes that "possibility disappears not only when an internal contradiction [...] is present, but also when there exists no material element, no *datum*, to be thought" (Kant, 1992, 123).

Having shown that real possibilities presuppose existence as their material ground, Kant, in the second part of his argument, seeks to demonstrate, by means of what may be described as a counterfactual thought experiment (*what if?*), that existence is absolutely necessary and must ultimately be identified with an absolutely necessary being, namely God. The argument can be presented as follows. If we were to imagine cancelling (*aufheben*) all existence (*Dasein/Existenz*), there would be no material content (*datum*) for thought, and without material content all real possibilities would be cancelled. Since real possibilities exist – and we know this because we can think of real possibilities – it would be contradictory to maintain simultaneously that something is really possible and that nothing exists (Kant, 1992, 123–124; Kant, 2012, A19, 25).[7] Therefore, existence, as the ground of real possibilities, must be

absolutely necessary (*die absolut notwendige Existenz*) (see Kant, 1992, 123–124; Kant, 2012, A25, 29). According to Kant, something is absolutely necessary if its cancellation would eliminate all possibility. At the level of logic, the law of contradiction is absolutely necessary, whereas all other logical truths are necessarily true only on the assumption of its validity.[8] The law of contradiction stands in the same relation to logical possibilities as absolutely necessary existence does to real possibilities: just as the suspension of the law of contradiction would eliminate the entire domain of logical possibility, so the cancellation of existence would eliminate the entire domain of real possibility (see Kant, 1992, 126–127; for a more detailed analysis of the distinction between absolute and conditional necessity in Kant, see Stang, 2010, 281–285).

Kant then identifies existence, as the absolutely necessary ground of real possibilities, with God: "the actuality [Wirkliche], by means of which, as by means of a ground [Grund], the internal possibility of other realities is given, I shall call the first real ground of this absolute possibility [den ersten Realgrund absoluten Möglichkeit]" (Kant, 1992, 124–125; Kant, 2012, A21–A22, 27). There are two reasons for this identification. First, Kant maintains that real possibilities cannot be grounded in individual and contingent things, but must presuppose an absolutely necessary real ground. This means that the real possibility of a thing does not depend on the actual existence of that very thing. Kant offers an example: if we were to ask whether something such as a "fiery body" is really possible, "neither bodies nor fire need be real things: and yet, nonetheless, a fiery body is internally possible" (Kant, 1992, 125). Second, such a real ground must be unique (*einig*). If two absolutely necessary beings existed, the possibility of one necessary being would have to be grounded in the other, and *vice versa*, so that neither could be the ultimate absolute ground (Kant, 1992, 128; Kant, 2012, A30–A31, 32–33). Finally, since all real possibilities have their ultimate ground in God as the absolutely necessary and unique being, Kant concludes that God is "the most real of all possible beings" (*das realste unter allen möglichen*) and the "ultimate real ground" (*ersten Realgrund*), since all realities are found in God. Thus, "It is thus apparent that all reality is, in one way or another, embraced by the ultimate real ground" (Kant, 1992, 129–130; Kant, 2012, A34, 35).[9]

It is not entirely clear how, according to Kant, real possibilities are grounded in God. He does not devote much attention to this question in *Beweisgrund*, although he explicitly maintains that all realities are grounded in God, "either as determinations of it [Bestimmungen desselben], or as consequences [Folgen] which are given through the necessary being" (Kant, 1992, 129; Kant, 2012, A34, 35). However, a passage from the second section of "The Ideal of Pure Reason" in the first *Critique* is crucial for understanding this point – that is, what Kant means by the claim that God is the real ground (*Grund*) of all real possibilities. Kant emphasizes that the grounding of all real possibilities in God must not be understood as a division or limitation of God's reality: "for then the original being would be regarded as a mere aggregate [Aggregat] of derivative beings [...] Rather, the highest reality would **ground** [zum Grunde liegen] the possibility of all things as a ground [Grund] and not as a **sum total** [Inbegriff]" (Kant, 1998a, 557; Kant, 1998b, A579/B607, 658). Kant here seeks to emphasize that the concept of *Grund* must not be understood as *Aggregat* or *Inbegriff*. For if God were an aggregate or collection of all possible realities,

this would mean, first, that God depends on His parts and would therefore be composite; and second, that the real predicates of finite and sensible things would constitute parts of God's being, which would bring Kant's position closer to Spinozistic pantheism. Thus, for the early Kant, the claim that God is the real ground of all realities "is not to be understood to mean that all possible reality is included among its determinations" (Kant, 1992, 130). For this reason, some realities are directly grounded in God as His own determinations, such as God's power, whereas others are possible only through Him, insofar as they owe their real possibility to God as their first real ground.[10]

3. Tillich's Implicit Possibility Proof in Relation to

Kant's Argument in Beweisgrund

3.1. The Formal and Real Elements of Essences

The concept of *essence* is itself polysemous and has a rich philosophical and theological history, as Tillich himself recognized when he enumerated its various meanings (see Tillich, 1951, 202–203).[11] In his system, he employs the concept in several different senses. Given the subject of this paper, our aim is to examine whether Tillich assigns this concept a specific meaning that structurally corresponds to Kant's precritical understanding of *Möglichkeit*, that is, whether Tillich's *essence* can be read as Kant's *possibility*. There is no doubt that Tillich develops his understanding of essences primarily on the basis of Plato and Aristotle.[12] Nevertheless, regardless of whether he was directly familiar with Kant's *Beweisgrund*, we argue that his understanding of essences also exhibits significant structural similarities to Kant's precritical concept of *Möglichkeit*. These similarities are discernible both at the terminological level and at the level of philosophical reflection, as we shall seek to demonstrate below.

As we understand it, Tillich distinguishes between essence and existence in two senses. The first is normative-axiological. In this sense, essence has ontological primacy over existence. Drawing on Plato, Tillich understands essence as "eidos" or "Idea" (Tillich, 1967b, 73; cf. Tillich, 1989, 418), as the "truth" of being (Tillich, 1951, 101) and as the "really real" (Tillich, 1951, 101), whereas existence, by contrast, is "the state of estrangement" (Tillich, 1957b, 44) and is interpreted as a "fall" (Tillich, 1989, 418) from original essence.

The second sense of the distinction concerns the modality of being, that is, the modal distinction between potentiality and actuality. Tillich maintains that "potential is the essential" (Tillich, 1957b, 22) and that potentiality represents "the state of relative non-being" (Tillich, 1957b, 20). However, "relative non-being" does not mean here that essence as potentiality is "nothing" (Tillich, 1957b, 20). On the contrary, it is "more than *non-being*" (Tillich, 1989, 416); it is a "kind of being" (Tillich, 1963, 12), for "the potentialities of existence which we usually call the essences of things [...] have being, too" (Tillich, 1965, 45). By contrast, existence signifies the actualization of essence, since "if we say that something exists, we say that it has left the state of mere potentiality and has become actual" (Tillich, 1957b, 20–21).

Thus, in this second, modal sense, existence as actuality has primacy over essence as potentiality – in Aristotelian terms – because it represents a higher degree of actualization of being.[13]

For Kant, as we have shown, possibility is a composite of formal and material elements. With regard to the material, or real, element of possibility, the parallel with Tillich is particularly striking. To begin with, Tillich employs almost the same terminology as Kant: he characterizes essence as potentiality directly in terms of the Kantian concept of "real possibility". He explicitly states: "Potentiality is the state of real possibility, that is, it is more than a logical possibility", because "Potentiality is the power of being which, metaphorically speaking, has not yet realized its power" (Tillich, 1957b, 20). Thus, for Tillich, essence, potentiality, and real possibility are three closely related concepts. Furthermore, essence as real possibility is, for Tillich, a "kind of being" and a "power of being", that is, it is "more than a logical possibility". Here we see the closest parallel with the early Kant. Just as, for Kant, material or real content (*datum*) is a necessary condition for something to be really possible, so Tillich maintains that *being* is a necessary condition for something to be really possible. The expression "more than a logical possibility" denotes precisely this ontological surplus: essence is grounded in being, and although it is not actual in the same respect as existing objects, it is not a purely logical and nominal construct. This allows Tillich to treat essences as entities with a robust ontological status.[14] In this sense, we argue that Tillich's concept of *essence*, understood as real possibility, functionally corresponds to what Kant calls the material or real element of possibility.

In addition to the real element of possibility, we argue that Tillich, like Kant, also presupposes a formal, or logical, element of possibility. This is indicated above all by Tillich's previously cited claim that potentiality, as a state of real possibility, is "more than a logical possibility". To our knowledge, this is the only passage in which Tillich explicitly relates essence as potentiality to logical possibility. Nevertheless, this statement is somewhat ambiguous, since it could give the impression that Tillich identifies potentiality exclusively with real possibility, thereby excluding logical possibility from the definition of potentiality. We do not, however, think that this is his intention. Tillich does not deny that potentiality is logically possible, nor does he oppose real and logical possibility; rather, he merely emphasizes that real possibility is "more than a logical possibility". The phrase "more than" is crucial here: it implies that what is really possible, that is, what possesses being, has ontological primacy – in Aristotelian terms – over what is merely logically possible. Thus, Tillich seeks to show that potentiality, as a state of real possibility, also presupposes a state of logical possibility; yet, in Kantian terms, the material element of possibility takes precedence over the formal element, since it is precisely the former that is grounded in being.

According to Kant, something is logically possible if it can be thought as a concept and if that concept is non-contradictory. Tillich nowhere explicitly defines logical possibility in this way; nevertheless, we believe there are grounds for such an interpretation. First, he directly associates essence with logic, stating that "essence is a logical ideal" and that it has a "logical character" (Tillich, 1951, 203). What exactly Tillich means by the expressions "logical ideal" and "logical character" is not entirely clear, but it is clear that he uses the term *logical* primarily when speaking of formal logic. Thus, he writes that the

"principle determining the rational character of theology is *logical rationality*". He explains that this principle refers to structures formulated in the "discipline of logic", and adds that "Theology is not expected to accept a senseless combination of words, that is, genuine logical contradictions" (Tillich, 1951, 56). If essences, as real possibilities, are also "logical ideals", then they must satisfy the minimum condition for any object of thought: they must be subject to the law of contradiction as the fundamental law of thought. Therefore, everything that is a "logical ideal" is also logically possible.

More significantly, Tillich speaks of "ontological concepts", which he describes as less universal than being, "but more universal than any ontic concept, that is, more universal than any concept designating a realm of beings" (Tillich, 1951, 164). Ontological concepts are predicated of members of all kinds of beings, whereas ontic concepts are predicated only of members of a particular kind of being. This further implies, as Ross rightly observes, that ontic concepts, in Tillich's framework, actually represent essences, since Tillich understands essences as the real possibilities of kinds of beings, such as the essence "redness", which applies to every individual red object (Tillich, 1967b, 73; see Ross, 1977a, 130). An ontic concept can be thought; therefore, if essences are ontic concepts, then essences, too, can be thought. Tillich explicitly states: "One perceives mentally the essence 'red' in every red object" (Tillich, 1967b, 72).[15] Since, as we have shown, all thought is subject to the law of contradiction, it follows that Tillich's essences, as ontic concepts, must also be subject to the law of contradiction if they are to be objects of thought at all. Therefore, essence necessarily presupposes logical possibility as well.

Kant maintains that the material, or real, content of possibility can be an object of thought, thereby bringing thought and being into very close relation. Does Tillich, like Kant, also ontologize thought? Tillich provides an unequivocal answer. He maintains "that everything which can be conceptualized must have being" (Tillich, 1951, 179; cf. Tillich, 1936, 83) and that "Every epistemological assertion is implicitly ontological" (Tillich, 1951, 71). He grounds this position in the idea that knowing is "a form of union" and therefore participates in being (Tillich, 1951, 94). In every act of knowledge, the subject participates in some way in what it knows. The knowing subject could never apprehend an object as an object of knowledge if there were no original unity between them. The possibility of knowledge, therefore, presupposes a profound ontological affinity between the structure of thought and the structure of reality; without such an affinity, an epistemological statement could never be a true expression of being (Tillich, 1951, 18–20). It is precisely for this reason that Ross speaks of "an extreme form of realism" (Ross, 1977a, 127), and I. Thompson refers to Tillich's "realist epistemology" (Thompson, 1981, 78; for a more detailed discussion of the relationship between thought and being in Tillich, see Schick, 1966, 67–79; Ross, 1977a, 122–125; Thompson, 1981, 158–173).

However, this raises a further question: if "everything which can be conceptualized must have being", does this mean that, for Tillich, thought is capable of thinking the real content of possibility, to put it in Kantian terms? It seems to us that Tillich's answer points in this direction. As we have shown, Tillich maintains that essences can be thought. At the same time, he states that "'Being something' means having a form", that "form should not be contrasted with content", and that "the form which makes a thing what it is, is its content, its *essentia*" (Tillich, 1951, 178). Tillich thus directly links form, content, and

essence. He then adds that “Every form forms something”, asking: “What is this ‘something’?”. He identifies this “something” with potentiality, that is, with “dynamics”, which “cannot be thought as something that is; nor can it be thought as something that is not” (Tillich, 1951, 179). Here we discern a strong structural parallel with Kant’s early argument. Just as Kant proceeds from the premise that thought has the material, or real, *datum* of possibility as its object, so Tillich proceeds from the premise that thought has the “content” of essence as its object. Both designate this content as “something” (*etwas*), thereby intending to show that this “something”, which is the object of thought, is not a mere logical construct, but possesses an autonomous ontological status. This is precisely what Tillich has in mind when he emphasizes that potentiality cannot “be thought as something that is not”. Thus, essence, understood as real possibility, is, in Kantian terms, material content which, as such, can also be an object of thought.

However, Tillich remains somewhat unclear on this point. In one passage, he maintains that “there are other essences which do not have this power, such as geometrical forms (for example, the triangle)” (Tillich, 1963, 12). This would imply that a triangle is not really possible in the same sense as actual (existing) objects, since it does not possess the potentiality for actualization. But how can this be reconciled with his earlier claim that “Every epistemological assertion is implicitly ontological”? If a triangle can be conceptualized – as it can, because it is logically possible – then a triangle, too, must in some sense have being. It seems to us that Tillich’s position can also be reconstructed here along Kantian lines. Kant maintains, as we have seen, that there are both logically non-contradictory concepts, which may nevertheless be mere “empty words”, and logically contradictory concepts, such as a “quadrangular triangle”, which are necessarily impossible. Yet, this does not mean that such concepts are nothing, since their individual determinations constitute the material content of thought. In this sense, it may be assumed that Tillich, too, does not regard geometrical essences as pure nothing, but attributes to them a certain ontological status. The concept of a triangle is logically non-contradictory, but although it is not really possible in the sense that it can be actualized, it nevertheless constitutes material content that can be an object of thought.

3.2. The Implicit Possibility Proof: God as the Real Ground of Essences

A counterfactual thought experiment enabled Kant to conclude that it is contradictory to maintain simultaneously that something is really possible and that nothing exists. The real content of possibility must be grounded in existence, but not in the existence of contingent beings; rather, it must be grounded in absolutely necessary existence. For this very reason, imagining the cancellation of absolutely necessary existence necessarily entails the cancellation of all real possibilities. This raises the question: from what does Tillich derive the ontological status of essences as real possibilities? And does he, like Kant, arrive at the same conclusion by means of a similar counterfactual thought experiment?

First, under the influence of Aristotle, Tillich maintains that “an essence is not a thing beside other things. It is the transtemporal potentiality” (Tillich, 1967b, 73). If, for example, we speak of the essence

redness, this means that the real possibility of something being red does not exist separately from concrete red objects. There are not two separate realities – the essence *redness* and individual red objects – which might suggest, at first glance, that for Tillich, unlike Kant, the ontological status of essences as real possibilities depends on the existence of concrete things (Tillich, 1967b, 73).[16]

However, Tillich is not entirely clear, since he seems to abandon this Aristotelian intuition quite quickly and move towards a Platonist understanding of essences. We argue that, like Kant, he too conducts a counterfactual thought experiment in which he imagines the cancellation of the existence of all concrete members of a given kind. Thus, he imagines that "even if suddenly a scourge should cause all trees to disappear, the tree, or the power of becoming a tree, would still be there" (Tillich, 1965, 45). He applies the same argument to human beings: human beings may not have existed for billions of years, but "man never could have appeared if the essence 'man' had not belonged to the potentialities of being" (Tillich, 1967b, 73). He therefore concludes that essence is "independent of any particular moment [...] even of a situation in which cosmic events could produce its complete disappearance" (Tillich, 1967b, 73). The conclusion is clear: even if all individual trees or all human beings ceased to exist, their essences, as real possibilities, would retain a certain ontological status – "would still be there". Ross rightly identifies a Platonist influence here, since Tillich treats essences as real entities independent of sensible things (Ross, 1977a, 131–132). We have identified precisely such a structure in the early Kant. The actual existence of a fiery body is not necessary for the concept of a fiery body to be really possible. Likewise, for Tillich, the ontological status of the essences of *trees* or *man* does not depend on the existence of particular trees or particular human beings. On the contrary, as Tillich himself maintains, the concrete "tree in my back yard does exist [...] only because it participates in that power of being which is treehood" (Tillich, 1957b, 21). Essences, therefore, do not derive their ontological status from individual things; quite the reverse: individual things owe their existence to participation in essences. The logic of Tillich's thought experiment is thus structurally identical to Kant's. If we imagine, counterfactually, the complete destruction of all individual existing members of a kind, the real possibility of that kind nevertheless persists. This implies that, for Tillich as for Kant, the existence of finite things is not absolutely necessary, since only something whose cancellation would eliminate all real content of possibility can be absolutely necessary. Since essences, as real possibilities, persist even after the destruction of individual existing things, Tillich's position fully corresponds to Kant's: there is no contradiction in simultaneously imagining the disappearance of all concrete members of a kind and the persistence of their real possibilities.

On the basis of the foregoing, one might conclude that Tillich advocates a strong Platonist position, namely, that essences as real possibilities possess an autonomous ontological status independent of the existence of actual objects. However, Tillich, like Kant, rejects such a strong Platonist position, since he implicitly develops an argument for God's existence from the ontological status of essences. First, he maintains: "God is the ground of being, he is the ground of the structure of being. He is not subject to this structure; the structure is grounded in him" (Tillich, 1951, 238–239). Although Palmquist considers that Tillich's concept of *ground* "has obvious Kantian roots" (Palmquist, 2019, 76), presumably having Kant's precritical argument in mind, it is difficult to accept with certainty as "obvious" that Tillich directly

drew on Kant's *Beweisgrund*.[17] Moreover, alongside the concept of *ground*, Tillich frequently employs the non-Kantian concept of *root* to explain the relationship between God and essences.[18] Regardless of the difficulty of establishing the genealogy of these concepts in Tillich's framework, we argue that their use functionally corresponds to Kant's concept of *Grund*.

Tillich nowhere uses Kant's formulation that God is the "first real ground" (*der erste Realgrund*) of essences; however, his frequently used expression *ground of being* implicitly includes such an understanding. First, as already noted, Tillich maintains that essences as potentialities have being. This means that everything that has being – whether as potentiality or as actuality – must also possess some reality. It is impossible for something to have an ontological status, even a potential one, without being real at all. If, as we have shown, the *real* in Tillich's understanding of essences is interpreted as the functional equivalent of the material content of Kant's real possibilities, and everything that has being also possesses some reality, it follows that God, as the ground of being, is also the real ground of the material content of essences. This is particularly evident in Tillich's claim that "That which is the 'real' (*Reale*) in all things is not itself a reality", but rather "the unconditionally real that constitutes the root of reality" (Tillich, 1969, 150). From this, as we understand it, it follows that Tillich does not make a functional distinction between the concepts of *ground* and *root* when speaking of God: if having being also means possessing some reality, then we do not see how the claim that God is the ground of the being of essences could be incompatible with the claim that God, as the Unconditional, is the root of reality of essences.[19]

It further follows from this that a certain anti-Platonist position can be discerned in Tillich, as in Kant. Tillich explicitly endorses such a position by maintaining that essences are "dependent on God's internal creativity; they are not independent of him, standing in some heavenly niche as models for his creative activity" (Tillich, 1951, 254). Elsewhere, explaining the meaning of the phrase "in God", he states that the preposition "in" "points to the presence of everything that has being in the divine ground of being, a presence that is in the form of *potentiality* (in a classical formulation, this is understood as the presence of the essences or eternal images or ideas of everything created in the divine mind)" (Tillich, 1963, 421). More significantly, he maintains that the preposition "in" signifies an "ontological dependence", that is, it refers to "the inability of anything finite to be without the supporting power of the permanent divine creativity" (Tillich, 1963, 421).[20] These passages clearly indicate that, for Tillich, although essences are ontologically independent of the existence of actual objects, they are not Platonist entities possessing an absolutely autonomous ontological status; on the contrary, they derive their being and reality from God's reality. In this respect, we argue that there is no essential difference between Kant and Tillich: Tillich implicitly arrives at the conclusion that God, as the ground of being and root of reality, is also, in Kantian terms, the first real ground (*der erste Realgrund*) of essences as real possibilities.

This brings us to the question of how Tillich implicitly arrives at the conclusion that God is the real ground of essences. In his analysis of the premises of Tillich's implicit ontological argument, J. Russell criticizes Tillich's underlying assumption that God is a necessary condition for both thought and being, just as the law of contradiction is a necessary condition for every logically meaningful proposition.

Russell's criticism is that Tillich does not sufficiently explain why God, rather than something else, must be the ground of thought and being, or why thought should require any grounding at all (Russell, 1993, 11–13). If we now transpose Russell's question to Tillich's implicit possibility proof, it takes a somewhat different form: does this mean that, for Tillich as for Kant, God is the absolutely necessary real ground of essences as real possibilities, and that the cancellation of this ground would entail the cancellation of the essences themselves? In other words, is it justified to claim that Tillich implicitly follows Kant's method of argumentation, according to which God, as the real ground, must ultimately be identified with *absolut notwendige Existenz*? We believe that the answer is affirmative. This, in our view, is precisely Tillich's implicit position, since we see no other way to explain how essences, as real possibilities, acquire their ontological status in his account. Let us hypothetically suppose that Tillich continues Kant's counterfactual thought experiment and imagines the cancellation of God's reality. If God is the real ground of essences and if essences, as Tillich himself maintains, are ontologically dependent on God, then imagining the cancellation of God's reality would necessarily entail the cancellation of the real content of essences, and thereby the cancellation of the essences themselves. Concrete human beings and concrete trees may not have existed for billions of years, but the essences *man* and *treehood*, as potential powers of being, nevertheless possessed a certain ontological status. Without God's reality, however, these potential powers would no longer have an ontological ground and would consequently lose their reality. Two important consequences follow from this. First, we argue that Tillich implicitly accepts Kant's position that God, as the real ground of essences, must be identified with the absolutely necessary ground, that is, with absolutely necessary existence (*absolut notwendige Existenz*), just as the law of contradiction is an absolutely necessary condition of logical possibility. This, in our view, is what Tillich's reasoning implies; whether such a position is philosophically defensible, as Russell points out, is an entirely different question. Second, Tillich, like Kant, would have to acknowledge that it is contradictory to imagine simultaneously that something is really possible and that God, as the absolutely necessary ground, does not exist. If God is the real ground of essences, then it is logically impossible to imagine that the real content of essences "would still be there" after the cancellation of God's reality. It is precisely here that we discern the same argumentative structure that Kant develops in his counterfactual thought experiment.

Tillich frequently maintains, drawing on the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, that essences are the "patterns of all things in the divine mind", according to which God creates (see Tillich, 1951, 202; 254). However, it is difficult to determine with certainty how, in Tillich's view, essences as real possibilities are grounded in the divine mind, or whether, like the early Kant, he rejects the view that God, as the real ground of essences, is an aggregate or collection of all possible realities. He does not seem to develop this issue fully. First, he maintains that there is only one literal and entirely nonsymbolic statement about God – namely, that God is "being-itself" (Tillich, 1951, 238–239). As being-itself, God is the ground of being, that is, a reality "common to all" things that have being (Tillich, 1959, 13). On the other hand, Tillich maintains that "the concept of being as being [...] points to the power inherent in everything" (Tillich, 1951, 236). According to him, everything participates in being in some way. As we have already shown, thought itself participates in being, and even the individual determinations of logically contradictory

concepts possess a certain ontological content. If everything participates in being, and if God, as being-itself, is the ground of everything that has being, then one possible interpretation, to borrow Ross's characterization, is that God functions in Tillich's framework as the most universal and fundamental predicate of everything that has being (Ross, 1977b, 129). In that case, one might conclude that, for Tillich, God encompasses all real predicates within Himself or, in Kantian terms, that He represents an aggregate of all possible realities. The concept of *ground*, when applied to God, would then functionally correspond to Kant's concepts of *Aggregat* and *Inbegriff*. Palmquist also takes this view: "Tillich is assuming all of this, it seems to me, whenever he calls God the ground of being" (Palmquist, 2019, 77). However, we believe that such an interpretation would lead Tillich into a serious difficulty, since his position would approach Spinozist pantheism: the realities of the essences of finite and sensible things would be constituent parts of God's own being.

Nevertheless, it is not certain that this is Tillich's intention. We find another interpretation proposed by Ross more convincing. According to Ross, Tillich's definition of God as being-itself need not imply that God is the most universal predicate that is simply predicated of everything that has being. It is possible, rather, that Tillich understands God as the inexhaustible "source" of being, by virtue of which all finite beings have being. Tillich, indeed, maintains that God is the "power of being", "giving the power of being to everything that has being" (Tillich, 1951, 250–251). In other words, the "power of being" present in everything is not something that finite beings possess autonomously; instead, it is something in which they continuously participate. Their being is therefore derivative in nature: they receive it from God (Ross, 1977b, 135).

Ross's interpretation finds support in another passage in which Tillich, responding to J. H. Randall, acknowledges that "the structure of being, although it is rooted in being-as-such, is certainly not identical with it, and should perhaps have been more sharply distinguished from it" (Kegley & Bretall, 1964, 335). This statement may indicate that Tillich seeks to preserve the distinction between God as "being-as-such" and "the structure of being" that is rooted in God. If God, as the ground of being, transcends the structure of being, then it is difficult to suppose that He simply encompasses within Himself, as His own determinations, all possible real predicates of finite being. Otherwise, the very distinction between being-itself and the structure of being upon which Tillich insists here would be lost. In that case, his position comes considerably closer to Kant's: God is neither an aggregate nor a collection of all possible real predicates, but their ontological ground and root, from which everything that has being receives its reality.

3.3. God as the Real Ground of Essences: Does God Exist?

A serious difficulty arises in Tillich's system. If God is the real ground of essences, how is this possible when Tillich simultaneously maintains that "God does not exist"? (Tillich, 1951, 205). In other words, how can essences, as real possibilities, be grounded in something that possesses no reality? Or, to put the question in Kantian terms: how is it possible to imagine the cancellation of God as absolutely necessary existence – a cancellation that would also eliminate the real content of real possibilities – if God does not exist at all?

There are two principal reasons why, according to Tillich, God does not exist. First, it is contradictory to claim that God, as the creative ground of essence and existence, exists as a particular finite "*a* being". Second, if God exists, a distinction between essence and existence is introduced into Him – a distinction that characterizes finite beings (Tillich, 1951, 204–205). The source of the entire problem lies in Tillich's understanding of the concept of *existence*. As we have already shown, for Tillich, this concept carries a distinctly negative connotation in its normative-axiological sense. Only finite beings, determined by the ontological categories of finitude, exist as separated from their original essence (Tillich, 1957b, 36–39). God, by contrast, as being-itself, is "beyond essence and existence" (Tillich, 1959, 15). To claim that God exists would mean reducing His being to the level of finite beings that are estranged from their own essence. Hence, according to Tillich, "discussions about the existence or non-existence of God" are "meaningless" (Tillich, 1957a, 46; cf. Tillich, 1969, 71), "atheistic" (Tillich, 1951, 237) and "blasphemous" (Kegley & Bretall, 1964, 339).

By denying God's existence, Tillich refuses to acknowledge the validity of arguments for God's existence, which *prima facie* suggests that it is unjustified to seek some implicit form of an argument for God's existence within his system. However, the difficulty with Tillich's denial of God's existence is that he is not entirely consistent in his use of the concept of *existence*, thereby opening the possibility of examining whether he nevertheless affirms God's existence and thus implicitly advocates some form of argument. What, then, is the nature of this difficulty?

According to Tillich, Kant successfully neutralized the form of the ontological argument, but his criticism did not affect its content, provided that by "content" we understand the phenomenological description of the structure of human thought (see Tillich, 1967a, 164–165; Tillich, 1959, 15; 81). Thought as such can raise the question of God only because God, as the Unconditional principle and the *prius* (*Unvordenkliche*) of every question, is already present in thought itself (see Tillich, 1959, 81; Tillich, 1987a, 361). In this sense, the ontological argument is meaningful only as one of the "expressions of the question of God which is implied in human finitude" (Tillich, 1951, 205). Since, as we have already noted, Tillich proceeds from the idea that knowledge is possible only because there is an original unity between subject and object, the original "point of identity" of this unity, according to him, is the Unconditional principle, which he identifies with God as "Veritas", and the "divine ground" of thought (Tillich, 1959, 25; Tillich, 1951, 207; Tillich, 1967a, 163).[21] The task of the phenomenological method is to bring God's presence within thought itself to awareness through a description of thought. For Tillich, therefore, description is not the same as argument: it involves "awareness" and "certainty" (*Gewissheit*) of the Unconditional, whereas argument involves a process of inference (see Tillich, 1967a, 165; Tillich, 1959, 22–23; Tillich, 1987b, 77; for a more detailed discussion of Tillich's relation to the ontological argument, see Tritten, 2017, 69–76; Seigfried, 1978, 46–48).

Prominent commentators on Tillich have recognized that what he calls the "content" of the ontological argument – understood in terms of phenomenological description, awareness, and certainty – represents merely a concealed form of the ontological argument of Augustinian-Hegelian origin.[22] Common to all these interpretations is the conclusion that, given his own assumptions, Tillich can hardly

consistently maintain the claim that “God does not exist”. The criticism of Tillich’s position can be formulated as follows. If thought participates in being, and God, as being-itself and Truth, is the point and ground of that unity, then God must have being and, consequently, must also exist. In other words, how is it possible for God to be the ground of thought and being while simultaneously not existing? Paradoxically, Tillich himself was aware of this difficulty, but never offered a fully satisfactory answer (Tillich, 1989, 416). He attempts to distance himself from the concept of *existence*, claiming that when the scholastics spoke of God’s existence, “they did not mean ‘existence.’ They meant the reality” (Tillich, 1951, 205). Elsewhere, he simply states that “He [God] is” (Tillich, 1951, 239). However, this terminological distinction is insufficient: if God is “real” and if He “is”, then He must, in some way, also exist. In other words, Tillich must explain how something can be real without existing in some way.[23] The answer to this difficulty lies in a proper understanding of his intention. Tillich did not intend to deny God’s existence as such, but rather to reject the application of this concept in the sense in which it is applied to finite beings. This means, as W. Rowe rightly points out, that Tillich wishes to say only that God does not exist factually, as one being among other beings.[24] God, therefore, is real; that is, God exists in a unique way that differs essentially from the existence of finite beings.[25] This is why Tillich is not always entirely consistent in his use of the concept of *existence*, and he seems to have been willing to accept a certain kind of compromise concerning it. In one passage, Tillich maintains that the very question of “whether the Unconditional ‘exists’” already “presupposes that which exists unconditionally” (Tillich, 1969, 71), while elsewhere he refers to God as the “Überseiende” (Tillich, 1990, 74). Responding to C. Hartshorne’s critical objections, he states that he is prepared to accept two ways of using the concept of *existence*. If existence does not denote a separation from one’s own essence, as is the case with finite beings, but rather a perfect unity and convergence with it, then it can be said that God exists. In that case, there is no estrangement in God from His own essence, since His existence is precisely His essence (Kegley & Bretall, 1964, 339–340). However, whether he uses the concepts of *reality*, *is*, or *Überseiende*, or employs the concept of *existence* in a specific sense, Tillich is, we argue, nevertheless compelled to acknowledge that God exists in some way, even if in a unique and non-finite manner.

If we return to Tillich’s implicit possibility proof, we believe that we arrive at the same conclusion: Tillich implicitly infers God’s existence from the real content of essences as real possibilities. Otherwise, Tillich would face a serious difficulty in explaining how something that, in a certain sense, does not exist can be the root of reality of everything that is real. Our hypothesis is that the difficulty with Tillich’s position lies not so much in his refusal to acknowledge that God, as the real ground of essences, exists in some way, but rather in the terminological difficulties that persist in his treatment of both the concept of *reality* and the relationship between *being* and *existence*.

Regarding the concept of *reality*, we argue that the problem is as follows. Tillich refuses to apply the concept of *reality* to God, because he frequently equates it with the concept of *existence*. He explicitly rejects the application of the traditional metaphysical concept of *ens realissimum* to God, criticizing Anselm for transforming the Unconditional element of thought as *primum esse* into *ens realissimum*, thereby making the transition “from a principle which is beyond essence and existence to something that

exists" (Tillich, 1959, 15). According to Tillich, Anselm's error lies in the fact that, through his argument, he transformed the Unconditional element into a finite existing being – even if that being were conceived as the most real of all beings. The problem, therefore, once again lies in terminology, since the foregoing suggests that, in these passages, Tillich appears to equate the concepts of *reality* and *existence*, insofar as possessing reality implies existing in a finite manner. The same tendency is evident elsewhere, where, in criticizing arguments for God's existence, he maintains "that these arguments are not arguments for the existence of an unknown or doubtful piece of reality, even if it is called 'God'" (Tillich, 1967a, 161), and that God, as the object of religion, "is not real in the sense of some particular affirmation" (Tillich, 1969, 71). All these qualifications – that reality is "doubtful" and "particular" – indicate that Tillich, in these passages, equates the concept of *reality* with existence in the finite sense. If this is accepted, it becomes clear why, for him, God cannot be *ens realissimum* and why it is impermissible to claim that God, as the real ground of essences, exists. In that case, even God, as the real ground, would be reduced to the status of a finite being, that is, to one particular reality among other realities.

Tillich himself, however, is not entirely consistent in his use of the concept of *reality* either. As we have already seen, he maintains that when the scholastics spoke of God, they did not mean existence but reality. Here it is evident that Tillich seeks to establish a sharp distinction between these two concepts and, when speaking of God, to distance the concept of *reality* from that of *existence*. Just as he uses the concept of *existence* in several senses, we argue that he does the same with the concept of *reality*. This is also evident from Tillich's claim that "the object of religion is not only real, but is also the presupposition of every affirmation of reality" (Tillich, 1969, 71). The logic of this claim clearly indicates that God must in some way be real if essences are granted a real status. If the reality of essences is grounded in God, from whom they derive their ontological status, then God, as their ground and "presupposition", must Himself be real, since everything that is real must also exist in some way. With regard to God, this means that Tillich does not equate the concept of *reality* with *existence* in its finite sense, but rather primarily with the concept of *Überseiende* or with *existence* in its specific sense. In this respect, we argue that it is justified to suppose that Tillich implicitly argues that God is real, that is, that He exists in a unique and non-finite way, distinct not only from the mode of existence of finite beings but also from the way in which essences themselves are real.

A related difficulty arises in connection with Tillich's distinction between the concepts of *being* and *existence*, which might suggest a fundamental divergence from Kant's early position. Tillich's doctrine of God as being-itself and the ground of being appears incompatible with Kant's argument, since Tillich rejects the claim that God exists, whereas Kant identifies God with *absolut notwendige Existenz*. However, we argue that this difference is less significant than it initially appears, since it concerns not the ontological status of God but the very meaning of the concepts involved. Unlike Kant, who uses the concepts of *Dasein* and *Existenz* almost synonymously in the *Beweisgrund*,[26] Tillich seeks to preserve a distinction between *being* and *existence*. As we have seen, essence and existence, in a modal sense, represent two distinct modes of being for him – potential and actual – in which both essences and existing things participate in being (Tillich, 1965, 45). This means that Tillich understands the concept of *being* as broader and more fundamental than that of *existence*. Owing to this distinction, he can maintain

that essences as real possibilities have being even though they do not actually exist, and that God is the real ground of all being – both potential and actual – without Himself being one existing being among other finite beings. However, as we have already established, Tillich acknowledges in several passages that it is nevertheless possible to affirm that God exists, provided that the meaning of the concept of *existence* is modified in a specifically Tillichian sense. If this is accepted, then Tillich, when speaking of God, also implicitly modifies the relationship between the concepts of *being* and *existence*, associating God's being with the concept of *Überseiende* and with *existence* in its specifically modified sense, just as he modifies the meaning of the concept of *reality* when applying it to God. It follows that Tillich tacitly presupposes that God, as being-itself and ground of being, exists in a unique and non-finite way.[27] In that case, we argue that his divergence from Kant's early position is primarily terminological, since we see no way in which Tillich's understanding of God, as being-itself and ground of being, would functionally differ from Kant's understanding of God as absolutely necessary existence. For both thinkers, God is the first real ground of every real possibility; the difference is that Kant refers to this ground as "absolutely necessary existence" (*absolut notwendige Existenz*), whereas Tillich cautiously avoids explicitly characterizing it in terms of the concept of *existence*, since doing so would, for the reasons already discussed, expose him to the possible criticism that he had reduced God to one finite existing being among others.

4. Concluding Remarks: The Scope and Limits of Structural Correspondence

In this paper, we have sought to substantiate our initial hypothesis that a clear structural correspondence with Kant's early possibility proof can be discerned in Tillich's doctrine of essences and of God as the ground of being. Our analysis has shown that this correspondence is primarily functional. Both Kant and Tillich proceed from the assumption that real possibilities possess an ontological status that cannot be reduced to purely logical or nominal constructions, and both arrive at the same conclusion that the real content of possibilities must be grounded in God as the first real ground. Nevertheless, the scope of this structural correspondence remains to be examined more closely and critically, particularly with regard to the extent to which their argumentative structures diverge.

Unlike Kant, Tillich establishes a considerably weaker connection between thought and reality when thought takes real possibilities as its object. For Kant, possibility is a composite of two elements – the formal and the material. This means that the law of contradiction and material content are equally constitutive conditions of possibility itself. Although Abaci and Hoffer have rightly pointed out that Kant is primarily concerned with an ontological question – what it is in reality that grounds real possibility – we argue that they overemphasize the material element, overlooking the fact that, for Kant, this element is not sufficient in itself for something to be possible. Without the formal element, that is, without the law of contradiction, there would be no possibilities as such, since the material element, as Kant himself states, must be in "agreement" (*Übereinstimmung*) with the formal element (see Kant, 1992, 123; Kant, 2012, A17, 24). Kant explicitly confirms this when he states "that through the cancellation of the law of

contradiction, the ultimate logical ground of all that can be thought, all possibility *vanishes* [alle Möglichkeit *verschwinde*] and there is nothing left to think" [emphasis added] (see Kant, 1992, 127; Kant, 2012, A27–A28, 31). In other words, when thought takes real possibilities as its object, it necessarily thinks possibilities that are constituted both materially and formally, since without either of these two elements possibility vanishes (*verschwindet*). Some caution is, of course, necessary here. We do not wish to claim that Kant holds that thought grounds the real content of possibilities. On the contrary, we argue that his intention is to demonstrate that God, as the ground of the real content of possibilities, indirectly grounds thought itself insofar as thought takes real possibilities as its object. In this respect, we depart from the position of M. Rukgaber and align ourselves more closely with the view of M. Fisher and E. Watkins that Kant's possibility proof can be characterized as transcendental.[28] Nevertheless, we argue that it is not transcendental in the specific sense that this term would acquire in Kant's critical philosophy, namely, as an examination of the *a priori* conditions of the possibility of experience, but only insofar as the law of contradiction, as a law of thought, constitutes a necessary condition of possibility as such.

Although we have shown that a functional equivalent of Kant's formal element of possibility can be identified within Tillich's conception of essence, Tillich nowhere explicitly maintains that the formal and material elements are equally constitutive conditions of the very nature of essences. On the contrary, his understanding of essences as potentialities suggests rather that their nature is not conditioned by thought. As we have seen, Tillich explicitly emphasizes that the essence of *man* would retain its ontological status even if no individual human being existed. Therefore, in Tillich's framework, we must distinguish between the ontological status of an essence and the formal conditions under which it can become an object of thought. This, of course, does not mean that thought, when it takes essences, understood as real possibilities, as its object, can think them independently of the formal conditions of thought. Our conclusion is more limited: for Tillich, the real element belongs to the ontological constitution of the very nature of an essence, whereas the formal element primarily constitutes an epistemological condition under which an essence can become an object of thought. For the early Kant, by contrast, the formal and material elements together constitute possibility as such. In this sense, Tillich's implicit possibility proof cannot be characterized as transcendental in the same way as Kant's, although it is certainly reasonable to suppose that Tillich's claim that "everything which can be conceptualized must have being" implies that God indirectly grounds thought itself insofar as thought takes real possibilities as its object. It is precisely here, we argue, that one of the more significant differences between them lies: compared with Kant, Tillich ontologizes the real element of possibility to a greater extent and grants it greater autonomy in relation to the formal element, even though both thinkers maintain that the real content of possibilities must be grounded in God.

Finally, the question of the limits of the present reconstruction remains. During Tillich's lifetime, scholars such as J. H. Randall suggested that his system implicitly contained a form of the ontological argument; it is therefore entirely possible that Tillich himself was aware of such interpretations (see Kegley & Bretall, 1964, 136). However, it remains an open question how Tillich would have responded to the thesis that a Kantian form of the possibility proof can be reconstructed from his doctrine of essences and of

God as the ground of being. It is impossible to determine with certainty whether, as in the case of other arguments for God's existence, he would have sought to neutralize its argumentative form while accepting only its content as an expression of the question concerning the Unconditional. A further question is whether Tillich's implicit possibility proof could withstand the critical objections that Kant, in his critical period, raised against his own early argument. Although Kant nowhere explicitly mentions his early argument in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is widely accepted in the literature that he abandoned its probative force. More precisely, he did not abandon the very idea of the argument but rather modified its function: the idea of the *ens realissimum* lost its status as an objectively existing real ground of all possibilities and became a subjectively necessary idea of reason with a regulative function.[29] Kant's critical transformation of his own early position could therefore provide a basis for a critical evaluation of Tillich's implicit possibility proof. An examination of this problem, however, lies beyond the scope of the present paper and constitutes a topic for future research.

Declarations

Author Contribution

D.C. is the sole author of this manuscript and was responsible for its conceptualization, research, analysis, interpretation of sources, and writing. D.C. reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr Bogdan Lubardić, head of the Department of Philosophy at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Belgrade, for his valuable comments, critical remarks, and suggestions on this article.

References

Primary Sources:

• Kant, I. (1978). *Lectures on philosophical theology* (A. W. Wood & G. M. Clark, Trans.). Cornell University Press.

• Kant, I. (1992). The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God. In D. Walford (Trans. & Ed.), *Theoretical philosophy, 1755–1770* (pp. 107–201). Cambridge University Press.

• Kant, I. (1998a). *Critique of pure reason* (P. Guyer & A. W. Wood, Trans. & Eds.). Cambridge University Press.

• Kant, I. (1998b). *Kritik der reinen Vernunft: Nach der ersten und zweiten Originalausgabe* (J. Timmermann, Ed.). Felix Meiner Verlag.

• Kant, I. (2012). *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes: Historisch-kritische Edition* (L. Kreimendahl & M. Oberhausen, Eds.). Felix Meiner Verlag.

• Tillich, P. (1936). *The interpretation of history*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

• Tillich, P. (1951). *Systematic theology* (Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press.

• Tillich, P. (1957a). *Dynamics of faith*. Harper & Brothers.

• Tillich, P. (1957b). *Systematic theology* (Vol. 2). University of Chicago Press.

• Tillich, P. (1959). *Theology of culture*. Oxford University Press.

• Tillich, P. (1963). *Systematic theology* (Vol. 3). University of Chicago Press.

• Tillich, P. (1965). *Ultimate concern: Tillich in dialogue* (M. Brown, Ed.). SCM Press.

• Tillich, P. (1967a). *A history of Christian thought: From its Judaic and Hellenistic origins to existentialism*. Simon & Schuster.

• Tillich, P. (1967b). *My search for absolutes*. Simon and Schuster.

• Tillich, P. (1969). *What is religion?* Harper & Row.

• Tillich, P. (1987a). Biblical religion and the search for ultimate reality. In C. H. Ratschow (Ed.), *Paul Tillich: Main works / Hauptwerke* (Vol. 4, pp. 357–389). De Gruyter–Evangelisches Verlagswerk GmbH.

• Tillich, P. (1987b). Die Überwindung des Religionsbegriffs in der Religionsphilosophie. In C. H. Ratschow (Ed.), *Paul Tillich: Main works / Hauptwerke* (Vol. 4, pp. 73–91). De Gruyter–Evangelisches Verlagswerk GmbH.

• Tillich, P. (1989). Philosophical background of my theology. In C. H. Ratschow (Ed.), *Paul Tillich: Main works / Hauptwerke* (Vol. 1, pp. 411–421). De Gruyter–Evangelisches Verlagswerk GmbH.

• Tillich, P. (1990). Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur. In C. H. Ratschow (Ed.), *Paul Tillich: Main works / Hauptwerke* (Vol. 2, pp. 69–85). De Gruyter–Evangelisches Verlagswerk.

Secondary Sources:

• Abaci, U. (2017). Kant, the actualist principle, and the fate of the only possible proof. *Journal of the History of Philosophy, 55*(2), 261–291. https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2017.0029

• Arboleda Mora, C. (2010). El argumento ontológico en Paul Tillich y Jean-Luc Marion. *Escritos, 18*(40), 36–51.

• Craighead, H. (1975). Paul Tillich's arguments for God's reality. *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review, 39*(2), 309–318.

• Dourley, J. P. (1975). *Paul Tillich and Bonaventure: An evaluation of Tillich's claim to stand in the Augustinian-Franciscan tradition*. E. J. Brill.

• Dreisbach, D. F. (1980). Essence, existence, and the fall: Paul Tillich's analysis of existence. *Harvard Theological Review, 73*(3–4), 521–538. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000002303

• Emmet, D. (1964). The ground of being. *The Journal of Theological Studies, 15*(2), 280–292. https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/XV.2.280

• Fisher, M., & Watkins, E. (1998). Kant on the material ground of possibility: From "The only possible argument" to the "Critique of pure reason." *The Review of Metaphysics, 52*(2), 369–395.

• Hoffer, N. (2020). The dialectical illusion in Kant's only possible argument for the existence of God. *Kantian Review, 25*(3), 339–363. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1369415420000199

• Kegley, C. W., & Bretall, R. W. (Eds.). (1964). *The theology of Paul Tillich*. The Macmillan Company.

• Kemp Smith, N. (2003). *A commentary to Kant's Critique of pure reason*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230595965

• Leiner, M. (2009). Tillich on God. In R. Re Manning (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Paul Tillich* (pp. 37–55). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521859899.003

• Oberst, M. (2020). The possibility proof is not what remains from Kant's *Beweisgrund*. *Kantian Review, 25*(2), 219–242. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1369415420000059

• Olson, D. (2005). Paul Tillich and the ontological argument. In C. Danz, W. Schüßler, & E. Sturm (Eds.), *Wie viel Vernunft braucht der Glaube?* (pp. 119–133). LIT Verlag.

• Otto, R. E. (1990). The doctrine of God in the theology of Paul Tillich. *Westminster Theological Journal, 52*(2), 303–323.

• Palmquist, S. (2000). *Kant's critical religion: Volume two of Kant's system of perspectives*. Ashgate.

• Palmquist, S. (2019). Does Tillich have a hidden debt to Kant? *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research, 21*(81), 73–88. https://doi.org/10.22091/jptr.2019.4191.2093

• Ross, R. R. N. (1975). The non-existence of God: Tillich, Aquinas, and the Pseudo-Dionysius. *Harvard Theological Review, 68*(2), 141–166. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000017107

• Ross, R. R. N. (1977a). A form of ontological argument. *Harvard Theological Review, 70*(1–2), 115–135. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000017661

• Ross, R. R. N. (1977b). God and singular existence. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, 8*(2), 127–141. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00138084

• Rowe, W. L. (1968). *Religious symbols and God: A philosophical study of Tillich's theology*. University of Chicago Press.

• Rukgaber, M. (2014). Kant's criticisms of ontological and onto-theological arguments for the existence of God. *Kant Yearbook, 6*(1), 87–114. https://doi.org/10.1515/kantyb-2014-0106

• Russell, J. M. (1993). Tillich's implicit ontological argument. *Sophia, 32*(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02772304

• Scharlemann, R. P. (1981). *The being of God: Theology and the experience of truth*. Seabury Press.

• Schick, T. (1966). Reason and knowledge in the epistemology of Paul Tillich. *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review, 30*(1), 66–79.

• Schmucker, J. (1980). *Die Ontotheologie des vorkritischen Kant*. Walter de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110849417

• Schönfeld, M. (2000). *The philosophy of the young Kant: The precritical project*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0195132181.001.0001

• Seigfried, A. (1978). *Gott über Gott: Die Gottesbeweise als Ausdruck der Gottesfrage in der philosophisch-theologischen Tradition und im Denken Paul Tillichs*. Ludgerus Verlag Hubert Wingen.

• Smith, J. E. (1961). *Reason and God: Encounters of philosophy with religion*. Yale University Press.

• Stang, N. F. (2010). Kant's possibility proof. *History of Philosophy Quarterly, 27*(3), 275–299. https://doi.org/10.2307/27809510

• Thatcher, A. (1978). *The ontology of Paul Tillich*. Oxford University Press.

• Thomas, J. H. (2000). *Tillich*. Continuum.

• Thompson, I. E. (1981). *Being and meaning: Paul Tillich's theory of meaning, truth and logic*. Edinburgh University Press.

• Tritten, T. (2017). Existence as the question of faith: Tillich's existential reorientation of the arguments for God's existence. *Roczniki Teologiczne, 64*(2), 69–91. https://doi.org/10.18290/rt.2017.64.2-4

• Wainwright, W. J. (1971). Paul Tillich and arguments for the existence of God. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 39*(2), 171–185. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/XXXIX.2.171

• Wood, A. W. (1978). *Kant's rational theology*. Cornell University Press.

• Zhang, J. (2017). A critical examination of Anselm's ontological argument. *Frontiers of Philosophy in China, 12*(1), 137–150. https://doi.org/10.3868/s030-006-017-0010-8

Footnotes

1. In the remainder of this paper, we shall use the abbreviated title *Beweisgrund* to refer to this work by Kant.
2. Tillich was undoubtedly well acquainted with Kant's critical philosophy, since he was familiar with and analyzed Kant's considerably less well-known moral argument for the existence of God from the *Critique of Practical Reason* (see Tillich, 1959, 20).
3. Thus, Kant distinguishes between "what [was] is posited" and "how [wie] it is posited". In terms of content (*was*), an actual thing has no more predicates than a possible thing, which means that the possible concept and the actual thing coincide in content. However, in terms of the manner of positing (*wie*), the actual thing is posited "more" (*mehr*) than the possible one, for whereas in the case of a possible concept there is only a logical relation of predicates to a subject, in absolute positing the thing itself is posited together with all these relations (see Kant, 1992, 121; Kant, 2012, A12, 20).
4. According to Kant, strictly speaking, ordinary language is not philosophically precise, since it treats existence as a predicate that increases the content of a concept. However, since existence is not a predicate but the absolute positing of a thing, instead of the statement "A sea-unicorn (or narwal) is an existent animal", it would be correct to say: "The predicates, which I think collectively when I think of a sea-unicorn (or narwal), attach to a certain existent sea-animal" (Kant, 1992, 118).
5. Kant illustrates this with the example of a quadrangular triangle. The concept of a "quadrangular triangle" is in itself formally impossible because it is contradictory. However, both "quadrangular" and "triangle", considered separately, nevertheless signify "something" (*das Etwas*), that is, they possess material content that can be thought (see Kant, 1992, 123; Kant, 2012, A17–A18, 23–24).
6. On the influence of Leibniz and Crusius on Kant regarding this issue (see Stang, 2010, 277–281).
7. At this point, Kant does not claim that denying existence as such is contradictory; the contradiction arises only if one simultaneously maintains that real possibilities exist and that nothing exists, since in the absence of all existence the material content of every real possibility would disappear, and with it real possibility itself (see Kant, 1992, 123–124).
8. Thus, for example, it is conditionally necessary that a triangle have three angles, since the truth of this judgment is conditional upon the law of contradiction as an absolutely necessary logical law.

9. Although the argument of "thoroughgoing determination" (*durchgängige Bestimmung*), which will later be developed in the "Transcendental Ideal", has not yet been introduced in *Beweisgrund*, Kant already maintains here that God is the most real being and the ultimate real ground of all possibilities. It is precisely this idea that will take on a new form in the *Critique*, in the doctrine of *ens realissimum* as *omnitudo realitatis* (Kant, 1998a, 553; Kant, 1998b, A570/B598, 652).
10. For a more detailed discussion of how real possibilities are grounded in God according to the early Kant, as well as of his mature position on his own precritical argument in the first *Critique* (see Wood, 1978, 71–93; Hoffer, 2020, 342–345; Oberst, 2020, 225–236; Stang, 2010, 277–281; Abaci, 2017, 272–287; Kemp Smith, 2003, 522–531; Palmquist, 2000, 420–425).
11. For Tillich's broader understanding of the concept of essence, see the important studies (Dourley, 1975, 50–114; Thatcher, 1978, 99–116; Dreisbach, 1980, 521–525; Seigfried, 1978, 56–67).
12. Tillich explicitly states that he adopted the doctrine of essences from Plato, while from Aristotle he adopted "the distinction between the two main ways of being, namely, *potential being* and *actual being*" (Tillich, 1989, 413; 416).
13. If the normative-axiological and modal senses of Tillich's distinction between essence and existence are not kept distinct, as sometimes happens in the literature, certain interpretations may appear to contradict one another. Thus, Thatcher maintains that, according to Tillich, "The realm of essence [...] has a higher ontological status" (Thatcher, 1978, 116), while Ross similarly emphasizes: "the state of potentiality could hardly be a world of 'half-real' beings. Rather, it is the realm of essences, of 'true being,' of the 'really real'" (Ross, 1977a, 131). By contrast, Dreisbach writes: "Hence existence, although ontologically a higher state of being, is a distortion of and a falling away from essential possibilities" (Dreisbach, 1980, 531). Whereas Thatcher and Ross have in mind the normative-axiological primacy of essence, Dreisbach refers to the modal primacy of existence as actuality over essence as potentiality.
14. Tillich explicitly distances himself from nominalism and characterizes his own theoretical position as realism. He writes: "There is hardly a day that I do not fight against nominalism on the basis of my comparatively medieval realistic kind of thinking, which conceives of being as power of being" (Tillich, 1967a, 143). Whether such an understanding is closer to Plato's or Aristotle's position is a separate question that lies beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of our investigation, it is sufficient to observe that Tillich, like the early Kant, understands essences as ontologically grounded rather than as mere products of thought. For a more detailed analysis of Tillich's relationship to nominalism (see Thompson, 1981, 57–83).
15. Cf. Tillich's statement: "The particular object [...] *contains* essential structures with which the cognitive subject is essentially united" (Tillich, 1951, 94–95).
16. Cf. Tillich's statement: "But it is wrong if it establishes a second reality behind empirical reality" (Tillich, 1951, 178).
17. In her article, D. Emmet argues that Tillich's frequently used expression *ground of being* was inspired by the German mystical tradition and the subsequent idealist philosophy of Hegel, relating it to Böhme's concept of *Ungrund* and Eckhart's concept of *Abgrund* (see Emmet, 1964, 280–292). On

Schelling's influence on the formation of these concepts in Tillich's framework (see Otto, 1990, 314–319).

18. For example, Tillich maintains that "The essential powers of being belong to the divine life in which they are rooted, created by him who is everything he is through himself"" (Tillich, 1951, 254).
19. Although Dourley is primarily concerned with Tillich's epistemological problem of knowing essences, he also maintains that, for Tillich, to know essential truth means to apprehend essential reality as God knows and grounds it (see Dourley, 1975, 78).
20. In order to emphasize, in contrast to Plato, the ontological dependence of essences on God's reality, Tillich maintains in several passages that essences possess a power of being that derives from the infinite power of God's being (see Tillich, 1951, 64; Tillich, 1959, 64).
21. Tillich's underlying motivation is distinctly anti-skeptical. According to him, the skeptic must presuppose the existence of truth, since, if he were to claim that truth does not exist, he would thereby already presuppose the truth of his own claim. Ultimately, the skeptic is compelled to acknowledge that every truth is possible only on the basis of God as the first Truth (see Tillich, 1967a, 164).
22. Ross speaks of a "form" of the ontological argument (see Ross, 1977a, 115), Russell of its "implicit" form (see Russell, 1993, 1), while D. Olson and C. Arboleda Mora maintain that Tillich's argument rests on a "transcendental deduction of the conditions of knowing" (see Olson, 2005, 123; Arboleda Mora, 2010, 41).
23. Numerous authors have raised this critical objection against Tillich (see Rowe, 1968, 77; Thomas, 2000, 76; Russell, 1993, 6–7; Craighead, 1975, 309; Thatcher, 1978, 76–78; Zhang, 2017, 141; Wainwright, 1971, 177–178; Scharlemann, 1981, 94–98; Leiner, 2009, 39–42; Smith, 1961, 169–171).
24. According to Rowe, Tillich does not simply wish to say that the proposition "God exists" is false and the proposition "God does not exist" is true. Both propositions are problematic if they imply that God is the sort of entity of which one can ask whether it exists or does not exist. Rowe explains this by distinguishing between two kinds of negative assertions. In the first case, as in the statement "Jones does not have red hair", the negation indicates that Jones does not actually have red hair, although it is conceivable that he could have it. In the second case, as in the statement "The number two is not red", it is inconceivable that the number two could be red, since it is not the sort of thing that could possess this property. When Tillich maintains that "God does not exist", according to Rowe, he has precisely this second kind of negation in mind: it is inconceivable that God should exist, not because of a contradiction in the concept of God, but because the very notion of existence is incompatible with the nature of God (see Rowe, 1968, 74–76; cf. Ross, 1975, 149).
25. Ross raises the question of why the concept of *existence* should necessarily carry connotations of finitude and spatio-temporality. The word *existence* does not itself carry such connotations. For example, if a winged horse existed, it would be a finite, spatio-temporal object, but only because the concept of a *winged horse* has spatio-temporal connotations, not because the word *existence* does. In this sense, there is no reason to deny the claim that God exists merely on the grounds that

existence implies finitude, provided that existence is not understood in Tillich's specific sense associated with finitude (see Ross, 1975, 152–153; cf. a similar view in Rowe, 1968, 75). By contrast, Olson rightly points out that Tillich's resistance to the concept of *existence* when speaking of God is conditioned by his existentialist heritage, within which this concept primarily denotes a state of estrangement within finite reality (see Olson, 2005, 121).

26. Particularly striking examples are the title of the Third Reflection, "Von dem schlechterdings notwendigen Dasein", and that of its first subsection, "Begriff der absolut notwendigen Existenz überhaupt", where Kant uses the terms *Dasein* and *Existenz* interchangeably, since both refer to the same concept of necessary existence. This is also evident in the English translation, in which both terms are rendered as *existence* (Kant, 1992, 126; Kant, 2012, A25, 29).
27. Even more radically than Thomas Aquinas, Tillich maintains in several passages that God "is beyond essence and existence" (see Tillich, 1959, 15; Tillich, 1951, 236; Tillich, 1965, 45). However, if everything discussed thus far is taken into account, then, as Ross rightly observes, the term *beyond* in Tillich should not be understood as meaning that God is "without" essence and existence, but rather as indicating that God possesses a unique mode of being that transcends their finite distinction. In this respect, Tillich's position does not differ essentially from that of Aquinas (see Ross, 1975, 157–158).
28. Rukgaber criticizes Fisher and Watkins's position that Kant's argument is transcendental (see Rukgaber, 2014, 100; Fisher & Watkins, 1998, 385, n. 32). Even before Fisher and Watkins, Wood, drawing on Kant himself, characterized his possibility proof as transcendental, arguing that it depends to a considerable extent on Kant's identification of possibility with thinkability (see Wood, 1978, 66, n. 59; 68).
29. For Kant's mature attitude towards his own early argument, see his *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, preserved in notes taken by his students (Kant, 1978, 58–81).