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Kant and Early Modern Scholasticism: New Perspectives on His Critical Philosophy

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1. Introduction

The distinction between discursivity and sensibility lies at the heart of Immanuel Kant's philosophical enterprise, and yet it has so far proved to be rather difficult to pin down precisely, how Kant's arguments for his core claims are supposed to work. As far as theoretical philosophy is concerned, he maintains that knowledge of objects is possible only within the bounds of sense, whereas for his ethics it is of crucial importance that pure reason can lead to actions.

My main concern has been to take a fresh look at Kant's thought by investigating the relevance of specific early modern traditions in philosophy for understanding his approach, in particular early modern scholasticism (henceforth "EMS"). EMS is usually divided, for example by Martin Stone (2006), into Scotism, Thomism and Jesuit scholasticism. These early modern scholastics kept alive the legacy of John Duns Soctus and Thomas Aquinas, and their influence on major philosophers until well into the 18th century has until recently been severely underestimated. One of the few contemporary Kant scholars who is not only acknowledging this influence on Kant, but even sees Kant's philosophy as a whole as one of the last attempts to answer the questions of the 16th and 17th century is Allen W. Wood, for example in (Wood, 2006: 1). These problems were on the one hand the integration of the new

mathematical science of nature into the scholastic framework of metaphysics on the one hand and the adaptation of the medieval theory of practical natural law on the other. This theory needed to face up to the realities of religious disunity and to the mechanism essential to the new mathematical sciences which put pressure on the basically teleological metaphysics.

In what follows I shall outline my approach by (i) providing some introductory information about how Kant may have come into contact with EMS and then (ii) by a sketch of how taking this tradition as a highly relevant context can help getting clear about some of Kant's core philosophical claims.

2. Foundations

A key figure to look at in order to show the relevance of EMS for Kant is Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the author of a number of influential textbooks, which were used by Kant in his lectures on metaphysics and practical philosophy. Baumgarten has sometimes been seen as a rather unimportant thinker who in a sense did the opposite of what Christian Wolff did before him. Whereas Wolff turned Leibniz's philosophy into a huge comprehensive system, so the rather simplifying story goes, Baumgarten summarized this system into compact and usable manuals. But this account is rather implausible; it underestimates the originality of both Wolff and Baumgarten. Wolff himself was strongly influenced by other philosophical traditions, whereas Baumgarten was more faithful to Leibniz's original ideas. At any rate, looking at, to take just one example, the section on natural theology — i.e. the third discipline of "metaphysica specialis" as opposed to "metaphysica generalis" or ontology — a striking similarity between Baumgarten's and the Scholastic account emerges as far as a purely philosophical investigation of God is concerned. Kant in turn, discussed Baumgarten's ideas extensively in his lectures and he did that on the one hand rather critically, but on the other hand with the clear intention of preserving as much as possible from this general approach. Put briefly, Kant undercuts all attempts to prove the existence of God, which Baumgarten (as a follower of Leibniz) tried to achieve mainly by means of the so-called ontological argument, whereas he retains much of Baumgarten's claims on the level of a purely conceptual account of the notion of God. But even here, Kant at times differs markedly from Baumgarten.

One of the most important points on which Kant disagrees with Baumgarten

is what is traditionally called “*finis creationis*”, i.e. the end or purpose of the creation. In contrast to Baumgarten, Kant claims that the purpose of the creation is that finite rational beings act morally and do so on their own account, i.e. freely. That they will ultimately do so is an entirely contingent matter for Kant and yet it is also something, which is beyond the divine power to cause. Conversely, this means that if God had known that the finite rational beings were not ‘cooperative’, he would not have created the world. Hence, Kant is coming surprisingly close to the doctrines of Luis de Molina (vid. (Freddoso 1988)) and Francisco Suárez (vid. (Craig 1988: ch.8)), who are both primary representatives of the Jesuit line of EMS mentioned above. These theories are concerned with the so-called “prevolitionality” of hypothetical future contingents involving claims about human free action.

3. EMS and Kant’s Critical Thought

3.1. Practical Philosophy

In turning human freedom into the limiting condition of divine power, these Jesuit scholastics had clearly anticipated what we could call the “metaphysical equality” thesis, which is at the centre of the doctrine of autonomy and thus of Kantian moral theory, as Jerome Schneewind (1998) has shown. In what sense the Jesuit scholastics themselves put these ideas into capital for moral theory requires further investigation. Without doubt turning these into capital for practical philosophy was precisely what Kant did. It allowed him to draw important conclusions from the assumption that normative theory must, on the most general level, be applicable to God as well.

As far as the theory of practical reason is concerned, Kant is following a model of *vis directiva* which assumes that there are two different kinds of justificatory force, that of *consilia* and that of *praecepta* (he uses the latter two terms in GMS II). It is therefore a huge mistake to project modern theories of obligation back onto Kant; this is particularly true of theories of obligation, which are modelled on obligation under positive law. Obligation, rather, is the force of demand on those creatures, who do not by their very nature follow these demands. Yet, the norms are the same for each rational being.

For Kant, a good will is a will which does follow the demands in virtue of the contents of these demands, and not because they are obligatory. In virtue

of the ‘ought implies can principle’, however, there are formal constraints on the contents of these demands, namely that the maxims on which we act must be universalisable. Nevertheless, Kant’s is a value based ethics. According to Kant, value is actualised in virtuous dispositions such as honesty etc.

The focus on modern action theory and its so-called “desire belief model” has obfuscated this fact. Kant, though, is not so much interested in the engineering aspect of the agency, i.e. how we are designed to respond to reasons, although his transcendental idealism is meant to provide a general framework for explaining just that. It must be said, however, that those who draw on scholastic philosophical psychology in the contemporary discussion must address the problem of how these accounts can be squared with the success of the natural sciences in dealing with human action. In this respect, Kant’s strategy can give important clues as to how this can be done successfully.

The problem of obligation had of course also been tackled with great ingenuity by the early modern scholastics. Suárez, for example subscribed to a divine command theory in order to explain both obligation (as created by God) and at the same time why God himself is under no obligation.

Gabriel Vazquez, Suárez’s great opponent in the Jesuit order, took a rather different line instead: for him, rather strikingly, the moral law needs no lawgiver, and this is precisely also Kant’s position, although many interpreters fail to see this. They take it that Kant, simply in virtue of his notion of legislation has to concede the existence of a lawgiver who in virtue of autonomy can be no other than the human being himself. The moral law, on that line of reasoning, arises out of constraints on the discretion of the agent. As a close reading of *Grundlegung* III can establish, however, moral legislation has its seat in ontological considerations regarding the architecture of being. In that vein, an individual entity is, albeit not necessarily sufficiently, determined by its essence.

Thus, a picture of Kant’s philosophy emerges which takes him to move in an intellectual space stretching back far further into the history of philosophy than commonly assumed. And there are more elements of this picture: Kant’s action theory, for example, just as the one originating in Aquinas, is drawing on two types of *actus voluntatis*, i.e. *actus elicited* and *actus imperatus*. This has the important consequence that decisions count as actions, a crucial difference to modern physicalist theories of agency, which take their inspirations from Hobbes. Moreover, this explains why contemporary interpreters have

difficulties in making sense of Kant on the basis of these theories. Rather, Kant's philosophy should be seen as a challenge to these doctrines and all the more so, since he is taking natural science as seriously as one could possibly wish from the standpoint of today.

3.2. Theoretical Philosophy

As I hope to show, the scholastic background is not just relevant for moral philosophy. It offers a rather powerful device for understanding the centrepiece of Kant's theoretical philosophy altogether, namely transcendental idealism¹.

In his 1783/84² lectures on natural theology, to take just one example, Kant puts forward an account of divine knowledge, which bears striking similarities to that developed by, again, Molina and Suárez. Kant develops his ideas dealing with the respective paragraphs of Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* (4th edition version, 1757).

The following features of the Jesuit doctrine in particular turn out to be crucial for understanding Kant's transcendental idealism, namely; 1) the claim that divine knowledge arises internally in the mind, 2) the doctrine that God himself is not spatio-temporal and hence does not stand in spatio-temporal relations to the world, 3) the thesis that some contingent truths precede the divine will, and along with that thesis, 4) its implication that there are constraints imposed on divine discretion through these contingent truths. This, as we may put it, intellectualist conception of divine knowledge, allows Kant to subtract God and divine knowledge from the picture, and at the same time to exploit the argumentative potential of these conceptions on purely hypothetical grounds, *i.e. without any commitment to theoretically justified existence claims*.

Put in a nutshell, the mind-internal character of divine knowledge allows us to cash in Kant's claims of empirical realism without compromising his

¹ In what follows I am using material from my article "Kant and the Early Modern Scholastic Legacy" forthcoming in the proceedings of the founding conference of the European Society for Early Modern Philosophy ("ESEMP") in Essen, Germany, 2007.

² For a very helpful account of the main issues regarding the value of Kant's lectures in general vid. Naragon (2007).

famous thesis that space and time are mere forms of human sensible intuition.

Taken this way, a reading of transcendental idealism is taking shape, which combines elements of what has been called the two aspect („TA“) reading and the two world („TW“) reading, (vd. Allisson 2004: part I) and which is based on the following two core ideas:

- What we humans are typically dealing with in experience are mind-external spatio-temporal objects. These objects, though, really do have properties which are not accessible to human cognition. This is obviously an element of the TA reading.
- A divine mind, if it existed, could and would not cognize these objects directly, but their ideas or archetypes in the divine mind, and these would be devoid of those properties appropriate for human cognition. In contrast to human cognition, the divine ideas have primacy over the spatio-temporal objects, since it is by virtue of the corresponding ideas that there are those objects in the first place. This claim can be retained from the TW reading.

4. Concluding Remarks

For many decades, important traces of continuity between the high middle ages and the philosophy of the enlightenment have been overlooked, or in some cases even deliberately ignored. To a large extent this has been due to the widespread usage of rather misleading confessional categories, in that, for example, scholasticism has been simplistically associated with Catholicism whereas the Enlightenment, and in particular Kant has been taken to be related to Protestantism. The same is true for the rather unfortunate common distinction of catholic and protestant natural law theories in early modern thought. Yet, if we wish to stick to these confessional categories at all, what is far more important are the disagreements within one category and the agreements beyond these categories. More often than not, there are far deeper conflicts between rationalism and irrationalism and between intellectualism and voluntarism, which do not neatly coincide with confessional distinctions. We had better not go into the trap of ideological struggles, which in some cases profoundly distorted historical research, in particular at the end of the 19th century.

The traces of continuity become obvious once we start to appreciate Kant's embedding into the tradition of German school philosophy which was itself deeply indebted to EMS. Taking these continuities seriously also forces us to reconsider Kant's style of philosophizing. Put briefly, he clearly wrote for an audience, which he — possibly somewhat naively — expected to put his own doctrines into the perspective of the intellectual space he himself was moving in. Taken this way, he himself was a 'school' philosopher in the literal sense of the term, i.e. writing for professionals sharing a common horizon. As we all know, however, due to the very lack of this common horizon what resulted was often bafflement and misunderstanding on the part of his readers. In short, we need to be aware that an important paradigm shift in philosophical 'poetics' (from the principle of *imitatio et aemulatio veterum* to the principle of genius which, ironically, has received some philosophical underpinning by Kant himself) may separate us from one of the true masters of Enlightenment thinking.

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