

Title	Contextualizing Kant : the legacy of theism
Sub Title	
Author	Ertl, Wolfgang
Publisher	Centre for Advanced Research on Logic and Sensibility The Global Centers of Excellence Program, Keio University
Publication year	2010
Jtitle	CARLS series of advanced study of logic and sensibility Vol.3, (2009.) ,p.307- 313
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	Part 5 : Logic and Informatics
Genre	Research Paper
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=KO12002001-20100331-0307

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Contextualizing Kant: The Legacy of Theism

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I. Introduction

The topos of a new beginning abounds in the works of those who are generally taken to be the founding fathers of modern philosophy. Its cash value, however, has been cast in doubt in recent years, for example as far as Descartes is concerned. Rather, important traces of continuity have been uncovered, which suggest a picture of gradual evolution and fine tuning instead of a total overthrow of the existing order.

Another famous example of a philosopher who is usually read in terms of this topos of a fresh start is of course Immanuel Kant. Coupled with the image we have of him as an “all crusher” of metaphysics, as Mendelssohn put it, this suggests that he cut the connection in particular with those lines of tradition which originated in the high middle ages, such as scholasticism, but which as a matter of fact continued to be influential until well into the 18th century.

This view of Kant, however, is often the result of what one could call functionalisation of both the followers and opponents of Kant, as a closer analysis of debates within, to take just one example, Neokantianism and Neothomism could show. In both movements, Kant’s name was used — approvingly or disapprovingly — to foster their own cause with very little concern for the historical truth. The issue here was, in manner of speaking, mainly political.

A more detailed look into (so-far often neglected) passages of his most famous works, such as the appendix to the transcendental dialectics and the doctrine of

methods of the first critique puts this view into question. A far more *eirenic* or conciliatory picture emerges, which, to a certain extent at least, is reminiscent to that of Aristotle and his method of *endoxa*, which is based on the assumption that the finest minds of the past are unlikely to have got it entirely wrong. Moreover, this conviction also underlies Leibniz's very attempt of a synthesis of Aristotelianism and mechanism itself, with which Kant's has much in common.

And taking into consideration one particular dimension of his philosophical activity, which has started to attract attention again in recent years, this image gets even sharper contours. What I have in mind is Kant's work as a philosophy teacher in his lectures given at the university of Königsberg.

As far as metaphysics is concerned, a doctrine it was his fate to be — in his own rather surprising and in fact uncharacteristic words — “in love” (AA II, 367) with, Kant was required to base his lectures on Alexander Baumgarten's textbook “*Metaphysica*”. Into his interleaved handcopy, or more precisely, handcopies, he jotted notes on which his lectures were delivered in a rather free style. Although these copies have been lost, his notes have been carefully transcribed by Erich Adickes, arranged in a (not altogether uncontentious) chronological order and made available in section II of the academy edition. Of some of Kant's lectures, in turn, we have transcripts stemming from students attending these classes. Taken together, this material provides a pretty reliable indication of what was going on in these lectures.

In the vein of Kant's image as the all crusher and new beginner, Kant's interpreters have often been at a loss as to how to assess these lectures. Some went as far as to say that he was leading a philosophical double life, serving his time and earning his salary as a university teacher on a text he took to be outdated and obsolete while at the same time publishing books which undercut what he was teaching his students.

Taking into account that he lectured on metaphysics about 50 times in his career, this thesis forces us to assume a degree of insincerity on the part of Kant which is completely at odds his own moral philosophy and the extremely high value it places on honesty towards others and, in particular, towards oneself. In fact, or so I believe, no such unfavourable assumption is necessary, since Kant did not regard the lectures as a duty to be complied with in an attitude bordering on hypocrisy.

The picture we obtain from the lectures is rather the picture of a philosopher who is moving in an intellectual space, which provides the point of reference for his own claims put forward in his published works. These claims in turn, far from undercutting what he said in the lectures, shine in an entirely different light when read against this point of reference. I am not suggesting that Kant uncritically endorsed what he found in this intellectual space, far from it. Nevertheless, he tried to save and reconstruct as much as he could. Moreover, it seems as if he took his

readers to be familiar with this intellectual space within which he wished to be understood.

Now, what was that intellectual space? Baumgarten arranged the material of his textbook more or less in accordance with Wolff's map of philosophy and in particular of metaphysics as laid out in the *discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere*. Wolff, in line with earlier proposals by Pereira, distinguished general metaphysics consisting of ontology and special metaphysics consisting of psychology, cosmology and natural theology.

II. Kant and the Scholastic Conception of Divine Knowledge

The theology sections both of Baumgarten's textbook and Kant's lectures in particular seem to be obsolete from a Kantian perspective given Kant's famous attacks on the arguments for the existence of God in the first critique, non of which he considered to be sound. This conclusion, however, would be premature. First of all, it overlooks the sophisticated way in which Kant is drawing on theistic conceptions in his philosophy, for example as far as the regulative use of reason and as far as practical philosophy in general and the postulates of pure practical reason in particular are concerned, and this recourse requires a careful analysis of the concept of God, which Kant, with some modifications, takes over from Baumgarten and the predecessors of Baumgarten. More importantly this conclusion would amount to overlooking the crucial philosophical move Kant is able to make by drawing on the intellectualist dimension of theism without claiming that a highest being actually exists. According to intellectualism, God's perfect intellect is only tracking certain truths which are both independent of him and cannot be influenced by him. An example of such truths according to an intellectualist position would be the moral law, the laws of logic, and the real definition of essences, which are not only necessary, but necessarily necessary truths. Taken this way, if the divine mind is tracking something which is there independently of any activity on the part of God's will, the divine intellect can be — as it were — taken out of the picture without necessarily affecting that something the divine mind is supposed to be tracking in the first place.

In order to elaborate this point we need to briefly look at the paragraphs in Baumgarten dealing with the intellect of God or *intellectus dei* (i.e. Met. §§863–889). Although arranged in a different manner, important aspects of the doctrines laid out here can be traced back at least to Thomas Aquinas's most influential treatment of these matters in both the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*, for example in SThIa_q14–18.

According to this account, the divine knowledge about the world is, in a man-

ner of speaking, self-knowledge. It is not dependent on anything external to God, or to be more precise, to God's mind. Aquinas is here subscribing to one of the key elements of theism according to which God is *a se* and hence does not require anything apart from himself for his perfections.

Aquinas claims that the crucial sources of the divine knowledge about the world are the divine ideas and the divine will. Roughly put, the divine ideas are (specimen of) possible individuals and through the divine will some of these individuals are transferred into the status of existence. He makes it clear, though, that he takes God's knowledge to comprise every detail of the actual world. The actual individuals, to be sure, exist outside God's mind according to Aquinas. Nevertheless, all God knows about these individuals he knows through his ideas and his will.

In the course of the sixteenth century and in the context of the inter and intra confessional conflicts surrounding philosophy the scope as to what can be known by God through his intellect alone and what needs the contribution of the will was the object of fierce debates. These debates were concerned with or at least had implications for key questions of both practical and theoretical philosophy. In practical philosophy, one example is the debate about intellectualism and voluntarism regarding the validity of moral norms: are moral norms valid in virtue of an arbitrary command by God, or are they valid without any command on the part of a highest being? As far as theoretical philosophy is concerned, there was almost unanimous agreement that the existence of a world (apart from God) owes itself to the divine will. The disagreement, rather, concerned the ontological architecture of this (and every possible) world and the relation of its elements to the divine intellect and the divine will: Are essences and necessary truths preceding the divine will and, above all, are there any *contingent* properties and truths which precede the divine will?

Luis de Molina and Descartes may be taken as representing positions from the opposite end of the spectrum. According to Descartes (vd. AT I, 53; VII, 435), even necessary truths are dependent on the divine will. Molina, on the other hand, held that there are in fact contingent truths which precede the divine will (vd. Conc. disp. 52, 10), namely the nowadays so-called "conditionals of freedom" which state how free beings would actually act in any possible circumstances.

Molina did not, and to some extent could not take into consideration the developments in physics represented by Galilei and others. Whether he is an appropriate target for the charge according to which many early modern Aristotelians, in particular those belonging to scholastic schools, wasted their energies in acrimonious infighting instead of addressing the state of the art of the emerging new Galilean science of their day, remains to be seen. At any rate, it was left to philosophers such as the so-called "novantiqui" like Johannes Clauberg but also to other Je-

suit thinkers to explore ways of integrating the new mathematical physics into the scholastic framework. Similarly, far from being opposed to Aristotelianism *tout court*, some of the main proponents of the new science drew on methods developed by outspoken Aristotelians.

At any rate, Molina himself was considering a universe which is not causally deterministic. His main concern was to show that human freedom is compatible with both divine knowledge of human free acts and with divine creative activity. If one of the key virtues of his account was the disentangling of causal and epistemic considerations regarding necessity in relation to divine knowledge, Molina pointed out that human freedom was after all *incompatible* with the assumption that necessary or rather necessitating external (efficient) causes are acting on the allegedly free agent.

The physical laws of the new science, on the other hand, are, to simplify things a bit, in general taken to be concerned with relational properties and cover change in non-essential properties of substances. And it is precisely the key idea of Newtonian physics (as laid down in the principle of inertia) that such changes are owed to external causes.¹

III. The Problem of Freedom in Kant

These considerations are highly relevant for understanding Kant's philosophical enterprise, in particular his core idea of transcendental idealism ("TI"), as we shall see in a moment. That TI is at least in part meant to accommodate human freedom within a Laplacian universe is a well known and accepted assumption. But that the instruments developed within scholastic thought provide the key for getting clear about this project altogether is a different issue.

In one of the most important passages in one his lectures on natural theology,² Kant states that God legislated the laws of nature by virtue of knowing all the singular events occurring in the world, including the free actions of human beings (AA XXVIII, 1111). This is a rather surprising, indeed baffling claim, in that it suggests that the events can be cognized prior to the corresponding laws. Hence, the striking point about this remark is that the laws are subsequent to divine knowledge of these events and not the other way round.

1. To be sure the default state is that of movement in a straight line in case of Newton's Law of Inertia, not a state of rest.

2. Kant gave separate lectures on the theology section on several occasions, namely in 1774, and most strikingly in 1783/84, 1784/85 and 1787, i.e., during one of the most productive periods of his career. Usually they were part of the metaphysics lectures.

This means that, along the lines of the classical eternity solution, divine knowledge neither presupposes nor implies causal necessity, but that causal necessity is something ‘superadded’ to the objects of divine knowledge. This goes well beyond the traditional scholastic framework and can be called an adaptation of these doctrines to the findings of mathematical natural science precisely in the spirit of the *novantiqui*.

As to the way God knows about the free actions of human beings according to Kant’s lectures on natural theology, many commentators take Kant to dismiss Baumgarten’s notion of *scientia media*. And indeed, according to the Pölitz text at least, he does consider it as an ‘entirely useless distinction’ (AA XXVIII, 1055). As a closer analysis shows, however, that Kant is only opposed to distinguishing *scientia media* from *scientia simplicis intelligentiae* and therefore suggests to count *scientia media* as one form of *scientia simplicis intelligentiae*. Hence, far from dismissing *scientia media*, Kant seems to endorse Molina’s position according to which the objects of *scientia media*, namely the conditionals of freedom, are known through the divine intellect alone which seems to imply that their truth is independent of the divine will. It must be said though, that these passages may also be consistent with a Suárezian reading, according to which *scientia media* does not play any role in the divine knowledge of those actions which occur or will occur in the actual world, a point on which Molina and Suárez disagreed. Nevertheless, what matters here is that for Kant *scientia media* is knowledge through the intellect alone, that knowledge about the actual world involves knowledge about the divine will, and that all these forms of knowledge arise internally in the divine mind.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The background of theism sketched above not only helps us come to terms with Kant’s theory of freedom and determinism, but provides the means for understanding Kant’s TI as a whole. Of course this is a highly contentious issue, but it is safe to say that one aspect of TI is the distinction of things in themselves and appearances. As to this distinction, Kant seems to make a number of rather puzzling claims: (i) He seems to account for this distinction in an apparently inconsistent manner. On the one hand he indicates that things in themselves and appearances are composite wholes (i.e. two sides of one entity respectively), but on the other hand he holds that they belong to two completely separate realms or spheres. (ii) He maintains that whereas appearances are spatio-temporal, things in themselves are not, and with regard to this claim there seems to be a certain tension with the view that things in themselves and appearances are composite wholes. Moreover he does not seem to have an argument for ruling out spatio-temporality of things in

themselves. According to a widespread view, all he could claim, is that we cannot *know* whether things in themselves are spatio-temporal.

Both problems might be solvable by taking Kant to subscribe to the conception of divine cognition of which the theory of divine foreknowledge of human free action is just one example. If divine knowledge is essentially self knowledge via ideas and if God, unlike us, knows things in themselves, it is possible to assume that things in themselves are on the one hand part of composite wholes and that, on the other hand, these things have counterparts within the divine mind. Furthermore, if space and time are essentially connected to affection, i.e. some sort of causal efficacy of things in themselves on a human cognitive subject, there may be a way to render plausible that at least as far as they are divine ideas, things in themselves are not spatio-temporal. As we have seen above, the divine mind does not operate via affection from without.

These sketches need to be worked out in full detail, but this cannot be accomplished in this limited space here. To be sure, though, contextualizing Kant can of course not replace a thoroughgoing assessment of Kant's arguments for TI. Nonetheless, contextualizing Kant can help us understand the position he wishes to argue for in the first place, and this is vital for judging whether his arguments are strong enough to get him there.

References and abbreviations

- AA: *Immanuel Kants gesammelte Schriften*. Herausgegeben von der königlich preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften [und ihren Nachfolgern]. Berlin: Reimer et al.: 1900–
- AT: *Œuvres de Descartes*. Publiées par Charles Adam et Paul Tannery. Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin 1996.
- Conc.: Ludovici Molina *Liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobatione Concordia*. Ed. crit. cur. Iohannes Rabeneck S.I. Oniae, Matriti 1953.
- DP: Wolff, Christian: *Discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere*. Lateinisch-deutsch. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe. Übersetzt, eingeleitet und herausgegeben von Günter Gawlick und Lothar Kreimendahl. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog 1996.
- KrV: Kant, Immanuel: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Nach der ersten und zweiten Originalauflage neu herausgegeben von Jens Timmermann. Hamburg: Meiner 1998 (= PhB 505).
- Met.: Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb: *Metaphysica*. 4. Auflage 1757. In: AA XV, 5–54 and XVII, 5–206.
- STh: Sancti Thomae de Aquino *Summa Theologiae*. *Opera omnia* recognovit ac instruxit Enrique Alarcón automato electronico Pampilonae ad Universitatis Studiorum Navarrensis aedes a MM A.D.