

## Kant's theory of metaphysical controversies\*

### 1. Introduction

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a grand revival of metaphysics in analytic philosophy. The anti-metaphysical stance of the early analytic philosophers resulted among other things from the attempt to provide an account of meaning that was faithful to the type of knowledge that characterizes the exact sciences and the empirical sciences. Interestingly, the revival of metaphysics in analytic philosophy does not signify departure from science. The majority of analytic metaphysicians, in particular philosophers of mind, continue to be faithful to the scientific methods. Moreover, the dispute within analytic philosophy between the new metaphysicians and their opponents is, to a large extent, a dispute between those that endorse the scientific attitude in addressing traditional philosophical questions – the metaphysicians – and those that deny that this approach to philosophy is sound.

The reunion of science and metaphysics in one of the most influential trends in analytic philosophy is an historical event that deserves to be understood. Is metaphysics distinguished from the empirical sciences, and how is it distinguished? How is the cooperation between metaphysics and science possible? What are the distinctive features of the discourse of metaphysics?

In the introduction to *Individuals* (1959), a book that marks one influential mode of the revival of metaphysics in analytic philosophy, the late Sir Peter Strawson presents the following clarification of the significance and goals of what he dubbed “descriptive metaphysics”

The idea of descriptive metaphysics is liable to be met with skepticism. How should it differ from what is called philosophical, or logical, or conceptual analysis? It does not differ in kind of intention, but only in scope and generality. Aiming to lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure, it can take far less for granted than a more limited and partial conceptual inquiry. Hence, also, a certain difference in method. Up to a point, the reliance upon a closer examination of the actual use of words is the best, and indeed the only sure, way in philosophy. But the discriminations we can make, and the connection we can establish, are not far reaching enough to meet the full

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\* Empfohlene Zitierweise: Senderowicz, Yaron (2008): Kant's theory of metaphysical controversies. In: Fest-Platte für Gerd Fritz. Hg. und betreut von Iris Bons, Dennis Kaltwasser und Thomas Glöning. Gießen 18.11.2008. URL: [http://www.festschrift-gerd-fritz.de/files/senderowicz\\_2008\\_kants-theory-of-metaphysical-controversies.pdf](http://www.festschrift-gerd-fritz.de/files/senderowicz_2008_kants-theory-of-metaphysical-controversies.pdf).

metaphysical demand for understanding. For when asked how we use this or that expression, our answers, however revealing at a certain level, are apt to assume, and not to expose, those general elements of structure which the metaphysician wants revealed. The structure he seeks does not readily display itself on the surface of language, but lies submerged. He must abandon his only sure guide when the guide cannot take him as far as he wishes to go. (1959: 10)

Descriptive metaphysics is not disconnected from language. Its task is to uncover the conceptual capacities that ground the most general and basic features of understanding and meaning. One can “take for granted” that one knows only part of what these capacities involve. Making them explicit require a unique method. According to Strawson, one central assumption underlies this method. Concepts, at least some of them, are susceptible to change. But it is erroneousness to suppose that metaphysics is merely “an instrument of conceptual change”:

For there is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history – or known recorded in histories of thought; there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all. Obviously these are not the specialties of the most refined thinking. They are the commonplaces of the least refined thinking; and yet are the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings. It is with these, their interconnections, and the structure that they form, that descriptive metaphysics will be primarily concerned. (1959:10.)

The metaphysician does not attempt to reform or revolutionize human thought and human language but rather to reveal the “commonplaces of the least refined thinking”. It is unlikely, claims Strawson, that she will be able to discover “new truth”. Nevertheless, the recovery of the “core of human thinking” is not a task that accomplishes once and for all what the metaphysician aims to realize:

It has constantly to be done over again. If there are not new truths to be discovered, there are old truth to be rediscovered. For though the central subject matter of descriptive metaphysics does not change, the critical and analytical idiom of philosophy changes constantly. Permanent relationships are described in an impermanent idiom, which reflects both the age’s climate of thought and the individual philosopher’s personal style of thinking. No philosopher understands his predecessors until he has re-thought their thought in his own contemporary terms... (1959: 10-11.).

This tension full oscillation between recovering the “central core of human thinking which has no history” and expressing it in “the new critical and analytic idiom that changes constantly” is a significant feature of metaphysics. But what is the method by means of which the central metaphysical core of human thinking is uncovered? And what could ground the supposition of its alleged a-temporal, a-historical character? We may assume that the method Strawson has in mind – the method involved in his investigations – is that

of conceptual analysis. Conceptual analysis appears to be an unconditioned mode of investigation that addresses directly its subject matter. It appears, indeed, as if its subject matter, the conceptual structures uncovered by means of it, has no history. But conceptual analysis is guided by previous investigations and the descriptive metaphysician has to *re-think* “the thoughts of his predecessors in his own contemporary terms”.

Strawson’s account of the practice and goals of metaphysics is not the only possible approach, but it does seem to express features that are generally accepted. Eloquent and deep as it may be, there is, however, one feature of the practice of metaphysicians concerning which Strawson has nothing to say. The idea that the subject matter of metaphysics consists of a conceptual core that needs to be reformulated in the new idiom that each epoch generates seems to imply either that there is *general agreement* as to what this consists of or that there is a *general method* opened to all thinking beings by which one can uncover it. Needless to say, nothing is more remote from the actual state of the art. Nor can we say that this is a proper description of metaphysics in past times. There is not even one metaphysical issue the account of which has the status of general agreement. These include the nature of truth, of time, the questions as to the existence of abstract entities, the nature of causality, of events and propositions, of mind and of mental states, of qualia, of material substances, of personal identity, existence and being, the possible and the actual and the other metaphysical issues. Though the *discourse* of metaphysics sometimes appears to approach its subject in an unconditioned manner, it also manifests the fact that the metaphysician is unable to argue for her case *without arguing against that of a rival position*. In other words, the present and past discourse of metaphysics *is fraught with controversies* of various kinds, and the question as to their nature and value to metaphysics qua rational epistemic discipline seems to be particularly pressing if one wishes to shed light on the nature of this intellectual field.

## 2. The Knowledge argument as a paradigmatic example

The idea that in metaphysics one aims to rethink old truths might lead one to suppose that this intellectual field does not allow progress or epistemic change that has rational grounds, change that is not merely a result of an act of faith. But this supposition is, I suggest, mistaken. Here is just one outstanding example. In 1982 Frank Jackson, an eminent metaphysician, published his paper “Epiphenomenal Qualia” where the knowledge argument was first presented, an argument that establishes the epiphenomenal character of qualia. This paper and the one that followed it “What Mary Didn’t Know?” (1986) were extensively discussed and debated. In his paper “Mind and Illusion” (2004) published almost twenty years later Jackson abandons his previous contentions. In contrast to his previous claims, Jackson now believes that the knowledge argument does not pose a

threat to physicalism. His novel account combines features related to a position called in the literature “representationalism” and to Lewis’s and Namirow’s ability hypothesis. As Jackson’s (2004) arguments clarify, arguments that I cannot spell out in detail here, the epistemic change it expresses is not a result of an act of faith. As the extensive literature on the knowledge argument indicates, it is mistaken to suppose that Jackson and those that followed him simply missed some “good reasons” that were available already in 1982. The reasons that encourage one to endorse representationalism or the ability hypothesis were not properly speaking available in 1982. The reasons provided by Tye (2000) for representationalism, Lewis (2004) for the ability hypothesis, and by Jackson (2004) in his recent response to his previous claims are novel philosophical contributions. A close inspection of the development of the literature on the subject reveals two features that need to be addressed if one wishes to provide an account of the *rational change* that took place between these periods. One is that it was not initiated by new *empirical evidence* in psychology, neurophysiology, or any other branch of empirical science. The other is that the arguments for each of the respective competing positions are not merely based on conceptual analysis. *They inextricably involve criticism and denunciation of competing positions.*

My intention in the present paper will be to convince the reader that some ideas that are part of Kant’s theory of metaphysical controversies (not necessarily his explicit theory) could be used in order to account for the role of controversies in promoting rational epistemic change in metaphysics. I will first present some general features of Kant’s philosophical scheme some of which need to be preserved and others that need to be amended. Then I will uncover some necessary features of Kant’s implicit view by analyzing one antinomy of pure reason.

### 3. The Kantian scheme

We may begin by noting that Kant’s explicit view as to the nature of metaphysics has some affinities to Strawson’s view. Kant accepts Strawson’s claim that metaphysics does not really have a history. Yet, his position differs from Strawson’s in two important respects. On the one hand, in Kant’s view metaphysics as it was practiced in the past (before Kant’s critical turn) *does not* contain justifiable claims *to* knowledge. On the other hand, as Kant’s own theory attests, metaphysics *is* opened to *genuinely* new ideas<sup>1</sup>. The path to these *new* ideas involves, according to Kant, recognition of the significance of *the fact* of previous metaphysical controversies to the possibility of progress in this field. Kant’s

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<sup>1</sup> Kant’s controversy with Eberhard addressed Kant’s claim to novelty. See Allison (1973), Eberhard (1789a, 1789b, 1789c, 1790), Maaß “(1789, 1791). On this subject see also Senderowicz (1998).

view was that to the extent that metaphysics is bound to involve irresolvable disputes, nothing is known in it. But his approach to metaphysics is not merely dismissive.

Let it be noted that the notion of controversy that will be hereafter used involves *having rational grounds* for holding opposed views, though not necessarily grounds that have the same justificatory force at a given historical state. In other words, the epistemic reasons for favoring a position involved in a controversy are *defeasible*. They allow for a change in their epistemic force.<sup>2</sup> This was not Kant's explicit view. He thought, indeed, that to the extent that there are controversies in metaphysics they cannot be solved. But he also believed that the reasons that decide that the relevant metaphysical controversies are insolvable *are not defeasible*. Moreover, their only possible solution is a solution within a position that depicts the alleged controversy as *avoidable*. i.e., that can free us once and for all from the controversy by undermining the very grounds of its possibility.

One way of uncovering Kant's hidden insights that may serve as fruitful guiding lines in perusing an account of metaphysical controversies, begins by resisting Kant's alleged claim to a "final solution". In order to uncover the implicit layer of Kant's theory my first task will be to separate the features of Kant's position that are responsible for the alleged a-historical nature of metaphysics from those relevant to the possibility of genuine epistemic change.

Kant's conception of science and his comparison between science and metaphysics is at least partly responsible for his idea that metaphysical controversies must be solved once and for all if metaphysics is indeed a possible branch of knowledge. This is clearly expressed in the passage that begins the *prolegomena*:

If it [metaphysics] be a science, how is it that it cannot, like other sciences, obtain universal and lasting recognition? If not, how can it maintain its pretensions and keep the human mind in suspense with hopes never ceasing, yet never fulfilled? Whether then we can demonstrate our knowledge or our ignorance in this field, we must come once and for all to a definite conclusion respecting the nature of this so called science. It seems almost ridiculous, while every other science is continually advancing, that in this, which pretends to be wisdom incarnate, for whose oracle everyone inquires, we should constantly move round the same spot, without gaining a single step. And so its votaries having melted away, we do not find men confident of their ability to shine in other sciences venturing their reputation here, where everybody, however ignorant in other matters, presumes to deliver final verdict, because in this domain there is actually as yet no standard weight and measure to distinguish sound knowledge from shallow talk. (Ak. 4. 256-257)

If metaphysics is a science, its historical development must manifest progress, that is, "universal and lasting recognition". In this respect metaphysics possesses conflicting features. On the one hand, one can determine a priori the set of concepts and question with which metaphysics is occupied in all times. These include ontological concepts that are

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<sup>2</sup> On this subject see Senderowicz (2001, 2004).

part of *all* claims to knowledge. In Kant's view, the differences between the validity of the metaphysical claims and mathematical or empirical claims require an elaborated account of the differences between *the types of use* of the ontological (pure) concepts that are equally used in the various rational fields. One type of *use* – empirical use – is a condition for the possibility of science. Another type of use, the transcendental use, is *empty* use.<sup>3</sup> The criteria of demarcation between science and metaphysics are linked to the distinction between the types of use.

The critical theory within which one purportedly solves “once and for all” the relevant metaphysical disputes involves an account of the nature of mathematical claims and empirical (scientific) claims not merely in order to uncover the features of the “good” sciences and to spell out what is “bad” in metaphysics, but also in order to set *the limits* with which the meta-philosophical theory *is not allowed to conflict*. Even if one assumes (as does Kant) that knowledge gained by the empirical sciences and mathematics is incomplete, incompleteness does not allow one to *rationally* hold views that conflict with what is known in the empirical sciences and mathematics.

As I noted, the criteria of demarcation between science and metaphysics are linked to the distinction between the types of use allowed by the ontological concepts. Yet, although these criteria explicitly spell out *the epistemic gap* between the validity of the respective claims to knowledge in science and metaphysics, they do not lead to the *elimination* of metaphysics. In this respect, Kant's image of science is notoriously complex. On the one hand, knowledge is feasible only in mathematics and the empirical sciences. On the other hand, Kant's image of science involves the idea of its principle *incompleteness* with regard to the *goals* of knowledge. The gap between what can be known and what one aspires to know is filled by metaphysical claims and is bound to issue metaphysical controversies. In other words, the demarcation between science and metaphysics involves the idea of a *conceptual gap* that separates the two, a gap that *does not* undermine *the epistemic unity of the rational enterprise that involves them both*. To be sure, this is not harmonic unity, but rather tension full unity.

The conception of the epistemic gap between science and metaphysics as a gap that does not undermine their epistemic *unity* is, I suggest, a powerful and fruitful idea. It grounds the hermeneutic of metaphysics.

#### 4. The required revisions

As I noted, Kant believed *a priori grounds* distinguish between science and metaphysics. We may wish to follow him in upholding this view and we may refuse to do so. My sug-

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular the chapter “on the ground of the distinction of all objects in general into *phenomena* and *noumena* in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. on this subject see also Senderowicz (2005).

gestion is to suspend judgment on this matter. As far as the goals of the present inquiries are concerned, we cannot decide this matter in advance without supposing that one of the most fascinating metaphysical controversies, the controversy as to *the possibility* of metaphysics, is settled. We may therefore replace the claim to a priori demarcation with the *descriptive claim* that a gap between science and metaphysics could be detected by spelling out the way in which new claims and positions are established in metaphysics and in the sciences.<sup>4</sup> The gap may have the character of horizons that shift together with the historical evolution of science and metaphysics. It has to be rediscovered and restated in each historical context, though we must assume that throughout history there is enough similarity between the various disciplines conceived as metaphysical that justify their being depicted as such.

We therefore need to modify some of the features of Kant's official position. These features are:

1. The scope of the subject matter of metaphysics.
2. The criteria of demarcation for distinguishing between metaphysical claims to knowledge and empirical or scientific claims to knowledge;
3. The implicit claim that metaphysics does not allow real progress.

*The scope of the subject matter of metaphysics.* In Kant's view the subject matter of metaphysics includes three themes: rational psychology, rational cosmology and rational theology.<sup>5</sup> This classification apparently resulted from Kant's belief that the relevant themes of metaphysics involve irresolvable disputes, his belief that the other themes do not involve similar disputes, and that the disputes that the first invoke do not affect the other intellectual disciplines. Isolating the themes of metaphysics from the other disciplines is, in fact, part Kant's *rhetorical move* by which he endeavors to establish his critical theory. Yet, blocking the possibility of controversies in the related intellectual fields by a priori detaching them from metaphysics unwarrantedly implies that the metaphysical controversies appear within a background of agreement regarding the blocked intellectual fields. Leaving out the questions as to the nature of logic, truth, meaning, the infinite, abstract objects, the reality of relations etc. seems to be particularly wanting when one con-

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<sup>4</sup> I will address the alternative "descriptive" demarcation between science and metaphysics in what follows.

<sup>5</sup> In his prize essay "What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Times of Leibniz and Wolf?" Kant defines metaphysics as "the science of advancing by reason from knowledge of the sensible to knowledge of the supersensible" (Ak. 20: 260). By contrast, "ontology (as part of metaphysics) is the science that comprises a system of all concepts and principles of understanding, but only insofar as these extend to objects given by the senses and can, therefore be justified by experience (ibid.). According to this classification, ontology is part of metaphysics. Yet this characterization presumably results from the polemical intentions of this essay. For in the *Metaphysics* Mrongovius from 1782-1783 ontology is characterized as the science of the properties of all things in general (Ak. 29: 784) and is, therefore, more general in scope than metaphysics.

siders the metaphysical controversies with which Kant was involved in person.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the fact that the question as to the nature of “meaning” and “truth” is inextricably involved in the metaphysical disputes that Kant addresses in the dialectic, is manifested by the solution that he offers to these disputes.<sup>7</sup> They require substantial revision in the concepts of objectivity, of empirical knowledge, of the nature of space and time and all the other issues connected to the doctrine of transcendental idealism.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the questions as to the nature of “meaning” and “truth” are crucial to the most central distinctions of Kant’s transcendental philosophy, the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. It cannot be disconnected from the issues with which metaphysics is concerned. Kant’s view on this matter may very well be plausible<sup>9</sup>, but they are not indisputable, and the controversies concerning these matters cannot be disconnected from the dispute as to the other metaphysical themes.

Criteria of demarcation. The second issue that requires revision concerns the criteria that allegedly distinguish metaphysical knowledge and empirical (scientific) knowledge. Kant’s idea is that *the* condition involved in synthetic judgments is the relation between concepts and sensible intuitions. A judgment could be part of knowledge only if it involves sensible intuition either directly or derivatively. i.e. by means of *schematic* ostensive exhibition of a concept “*in concreto*”, or by being connected to experience. According to Kant, this condition cannot be satisfied by metaphysical judgments. This idea is connected to the previous one, and it has to be suspended together with the first. I do not claim that it is groundless, but rather that in aiming to account for metaphysical controversies

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<sup>6</sup> The controversy between Kant and his collaborators and Eberhard and his collaborators specifically addressed the features of Kant’s theory of judgments and in particular Kant’s distinction between synthetic and analytic judgments. Kant believed that his theory was not opened to controversies, that it was, rather, part of a well established logical theory. Yet as Kant’s controversy with Eberhard demonstrates, Kant’s account allowed the rational holding of opposed views. On this subject, see Senderowicz (1998).

<sup>7</sup> Kant’s solution to some of the metaphysical disputes addressed in the first *Critique* involves the account of meaning presupposed by him. The fallacy involved in the paralogism is characterized in the second edition of the first *Critique* as a fallacy per *sophisma figurae dictionis*. It presupposes that the subject term could be considered in twofold meaning, as a transcendental I and as an object that could be given in intuition. See CPR B, 410-412. Kant detects a similar dialectical fallacy per *sophisma figurae dictionis* in the case of the cosmological inferences that are involved in the antinomies of pure reason. see CPR A, 499-500/B 527-528.

<sup>8</sup> The idea that ‘object’ has twofold meanings and that a priori concepts have two types of meanings related to two types of use, transcendental meaning and empirical meaning related to transcendental use and empirical use of a pure concept, are essential to Kant’s program as well as to the solution he offers to the metaphysical disputes he addresses in the first critiques. The twofold meanings in which an object should be considered, a distinction that is sometime expressed as a distinction between objects in the logical sense and objects in the real “weighty” sense, is essential for the division between things in themselves and appearances. As I showed in another place, the very idea of transcendental idealism involves a distinction related to the above between “mere possibility” and “real possibility”, a distinction that is based on the distinction between the transcendental *meaning* and the empirical *meaning* of the pure concepts. See Senderowicz (2004, 2005) chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> I argued at length for their plausibility in (Senderowicz, 2005).

one is not allowed to assume that this epistemic criterion belong to *the indisputable and infeasible background of general agreement* presupposed by the parties involved in the controversy. The verificationist and anti-realist views regarding meaning linked to this criterion *are not indisputable*. Moreover, given the general realistic stance of current metaphysical discourse, Kant's account is, to say the least, controversial.

*Does metaphysics allow real progress?* The last issue that requires revision concerns the possibility of progress in metaphysics. The revisions required by features (a) and (b) facilitate the conceivability of epistemic change in metaphysics. Kant's claim that metaphysics (before his critical turn) manifest no progress is probably the most questionable feature of his theory. It is quite clear, I suppose, that Kant's theory, whether it solved "once and for all" the problems of metaphysics or not, represents, at least in its own terms, *genuine progress*. It presents a new metaphysical account of space and time; it attaches new significance to the concept of an object, new significance to the subjective features of experience and to many other metaphysical issues. Endorsing the required revisions enable one to abandon the supposition that progress in metaphysics is possible only if one solves once and for all the disputes in metaphysics. It enables one to conceive the possibility of progress also without having a final solution to the dispute, and therefore, also to look for progress in the history of metaphysics before Kant's times.

## 5. The modified scheme

So far I addressed the features of Kant's theory that need to be abandoned. There are, however, some features involved in Kant's account that need to be sustained in the proposed framework in a modified form. These include:

1. The idea that there is *an explanatory link* that connects the empirical sciences and metaphysics based on the rational demand for *complete* scientific explanation.
2. The idea that there are differences between the methodologies and grounds of evidence related to the exact and empirical sciences and metaphysics.
3. The claim that the type of epistemic justification that fits metaphysical claims to knowledge is the notion of justification associated with coherentism.

*The explanatory link between the empirical sciences and metaphysics.* The explanatory link that connects empirical issues and metaphysical issues involves two ideas, one that is central to Kant's account of experience and another that represents the "pure employment of reason". Regarding experience, Kant appears to hold two distinct claims. On

the one hand, causal relations are conditions of possibility of experience. But knowledge of causal relations is limited to the type of evidence provided by the *application of concepts* to the indefinitely extendable temporal series of sensuous objects, events, and processes. Each event the occurrence of which *explains* that of another event requires in itself a similar type of explanation. The feasibility, indeed the necessity of such knowledge does not entail that a *complete* explanation of the occurrence of an event is feasible. In Kant's theory, the notion of complete explanation is founded on the *pure* employment of reason. In contrast to the understanding, the faculty of concepts and *judgments*, reason is the faculty of *inferences*. It does not consist in the application of concepts to what is given in sense experience but rather to the judgments of the understanding. Although these two levels of explanation are relatively independent, they are not mutually exclusive or disconnected.

This is a central aspect of Kant's tension full gappy account of reason and the human capacity to have knowledge. This gappy epistemic whole, is a whole in which scientific explanations and scientific judgments that involve the application of concepts to intuitions and are *sufficient for predication* are both (in one respect) isolated from and yet (in another respect) connected to the rational grounds involved in the idea of complete explanation that do not allow the application of concepts to sensible date.<sup>10</sup> In Kant's theory, this gappy whole involves recognition of the *relative epistemic autonomy* of the first layer of explanation. One can causally explain why an event E occurred by referring to its cause C. C cannot explain the occurrence of E independently of the fact that the occurrence of C itself requires explanation. But the concept of an indefinitely extendable series of sensuous objects and events that may be related as explanandum and explanans in a way that involves the immediate (perceptual) application of concepts does not require as one of its conditions of possibility an *unconditioned explanans*. As Kant notes, the conditioned analytically entails *some* condition and not an unconditioned (CPR A 308/B 364). The further demand for an unconditioned explanans is derived from reason. It is based on (a) the principle of pure reason according to which "if the conditioned is given, the whole series of conditions, subordinate to one another – a series which is therefore itself unconditioned – is likewise given" (CPR A 307-308/B 364-365), and (b) on the regulative employment of reason in constructing scientific theories, the employment by which features such as simplicity, overall unity and parsimoniousness guide the construction of scientific theories. Though these are clearly relevant to the *content* of the causal concepts involved in causal explanations, they are not concerned with the application of concepts to experiences but rather to the way in which empirical concepts are arrived at. The account of the content of the concepts used in judgments must involve the inferential (explanatory) links between the judgments of the understanding, inferential links that in

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<sup>10</sup> To be sure, this gap is related the underdetermination argument of which Kant was implicitly aware as the relevant passages from the appendix to the dialectic of pure reason and the first and second introduction to the *Critique of Judgment* indicate.

themselves are inherently connected to the idea of an unconditioned without undermining the relative autonomy of the judgments of the understanding with regard to their possibility to fulfill their function.

The pure employment of reason at least *seems* to have existential implications. These are due the link between the *maxim* of pure reason that requires one “to find for the conditioned knowledge obtained through the understanding the unconditioned whereby its unity is brought to completion” (CPR A307/B364) and the above noted principle of pure reason. Kant believed that the link between the logical principle of pure reason and the logical maxim of pure reason is natural and deceptive alike. The maxim of pure reason *presupposes* the principle of pure reason. But the link between the logical maxim and the logical principle of reason responsible for the alleged existential implication (the givenness of the unconditioned series) connected to the employment of reason in perusing complete explanation is in fact the main source for the various transcendental illusions.<sup>11</sup> The regulative employment of reason is unavoidable. But it must be clearly distinguished from the constitutive role of the concepts of the understanding.<sup>12</sup> For Kant, this distinction constitutes two distinct intellectual fields with distinct types of validity. Yet, given my previous suggestions for revision, we may uphold the *epistemic* distinction between the two respective layers of explanation by pointing out their distinct types of grounds of evidence without rendering illusory the existential implications of the claims involved in the higher level. In other word, we may uphold the epistemic continuum of the two respective intellectual fields while acknowledging the rational epistemic gap that it contains.

The demand for knowledge of the unconditioned applies to what is given in empirical perception, to the domain of empirical knowledge. But the theories and explanatory moves that are typically part of the metaphysical inquiries are separated from those of the empirical sciences by various gaps. The current metaphysical controversy regarding subjectivity and qualia is probably the most notable example in this respect. Being “merely conceptual” does not entail that one’s knowledge in these matters is a priori *certain*, i.e., irrefutable. It indicates *the relative autonomy* of the activity of metaphysical inquiries in the gappy epistemic continuum that contains metaphysics and the sciences alike. The inherent interplay between empirical knowledge and metaphysical knowledge means among other things that empirical innovations may be used in metaphysics by reshaping what is *conceived* to be possible. The *objects* of metaphysical inquiries need not be *nonsensible*. A position that maintains that the ontology of the empirical science that consists merely of what can be established on the basis of observations and scientific experiments is the only ontology one can have involves the relevant idea of the unconditioned. It is therefore, metaphysical in Kant’s sense. Yet, the reasons that ground the acceptance of

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<sup>11</sup> On this subject see Grier (2001).

<sup>12</sup> The account of how the content of empirical concepts used in scientific explanations is connected to reason’s demand for complete unconditioned explanation is explicated in detail in the appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic.

such a position cannot consist merely of observational data that involve the application of concepts to sensible data.

*The type of justification in metaphysics is associated with coherentism.* As I noted, in Kant's theory sharp a priori lines of demarcation distinguish between empirical knowledge and pretensions of knowledge of the unconditioned. I suggested above that we need to suspend this claim. Nevertheless, this does not entail that one cannot extract from Kant's theory ideas that are useful for a descriptive account of the metaphysical discourse. My suggestion is that Kant's principle of demarcation could be replaced by a weaker principle that concerns the type of evidence and the type of *experiments* that are used in the metaphysical discourse and metaphysical disputes. Although an explanatory link connects metaphysics and the sciences, it is not entailed that the evidence and experimental data used in metaphysics is of the same kind as that used in the other scientific disciplines.<sup>13</sup> Although the metaphysician is assisted by what seem to be empirical observations, these are almost never part of the data that is used in warranting a metaphysical position. This by itself does not entail anything as to the origin of our concepts or the scope of possible knowledge. Nor does it entail that the metaphysical concepts are disconnected from the scheme of concepts of empirical knowledge. One notable distinguishing mark of metaphysical inquiries is the fact that they are *conceptual investigations* inextricably connected to the rational demand for complete explanations of observable phenomena, explanations that inherently involve the idea of the *unconditioned*. But metaphysical investigations are "merely" conceptual and the experiments used are thought experiments that aim to uncover intuitions regarding one's conceptual scheme.

Finally, regarding the justification of metaphysical propositions, the only available notion of justification is that of internal coherence:

But pure reason is a sphere so separate and self-contained that we cannot touch a part without affecting all the rest. We can do nothing without first determining the position of each part and its relation to the rest; for, as our judgment within this sphere cannot be corrected by anything without, the validity and use of every part depends upon the relation in which it stands to all the rest within the domain of reason (*Prolegomena*, Ak. 4: 263)

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<sup>13</sup> Let me stress that I am not suggesting that this is explicitly acknowledged by current metaphysicians. Many of them regard their projects as a proper extension of the normal "hard" sciences. The fact that the only type of experiments used in metaphysics are thought experiments and that the only type of evidence are intuitions in the non technical sense of this term is not regarded by them as requiring one to distinguish between metaphysics and the sciences. But it is questionable whether the role of thought experiments in physics is the same as that in metaphysics.

Coherentism in epistemology was recently attacked by many.<sup>14</sup> Yet given that experimental and observational evidence is not available for warranting metaphysical propositions, the only available form of justification is internal coherence.

Below are the propositions that constitute the modified version of the Kantian framework.

1. Controversies in metaphysics cannot be isolated and disconnected from disputes regarding the nature of logic, meaning, truth, explanation etc.
2. We are not allowed to assume that there is no progress in metaphysics.
3. There are no a priori criteria of demarcation that distinguish between science and metaphysics.
4. The demand for a metaphysical account of reality originates from the interest that rational beings have in a complete explanation of the phenomena.
5. Metaphysical claims are not allowed to conflict with scientific claims. They must cohere with the latter.
6. An explanatory continuum connects science and metaphysics. It affects the concept formation of the empirical concepts used in empirical explanation of scientific phenomena.
7. The type of *evidence* and the type of arguments that are typically used in metaphysical discourse and metaphysical controversies is different than that used in empirical science.
8. The canonical type of justification involved in metaphysics is that of internal coherence.

## 6. The first antinomy: the explicit argument

Kant's official account of the role of controversies in metaphysics apparently involves his transcendental theory. The question I will address now is whether his relevant claims allows one to uncover an effective account of the role of controversies in metaphysics that does not entail the central claims of his transcendental theory. I will show that such an account is feasible by analyzing the first antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Making explicit the complex structure of Kant's argument is significant not merely for grasping Kant's "hidden" view, but also for grasping the role of metaphysical controversies in metaphysics.

The first antinomy addresses the metaphysical question of whether the world has a beginning in time and is limited in space. The thesis of the first antinomy (hereafter T) is that the world has a beginning in time and is limited in space. The antithesis (hereafter A)

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<sup>14</sup> See Bonjour L. & E. Sosa (2003).

denies that it has a beginning in time or is limited in space. Below is the argument for the temporal part of the thesis<sup>15</sup>.

For if we assume that the world has no beginning in time, then up to every given moment an eternity has elapsed, and hence an infinite series of states of things in the world, each following another, has passed away. But now the infinity of a series consists precisely in the fact that it can never be completed through successive synthesis. Therefore an infinitely elapsed world series is impossible, so a beginning of the world is a necessary condition of its existence; which was the first point to be proved. (CPR A 426/B 454)

The argument for the antithesis is the following:

For suppose that it has a beginning. Since the beginning is an existence preceded by a time in which the thing is not, there must be a preceding time in which the world was not, i.e., an empty time. But now no coming to be of any sort is possible in an empty time, because no part of such a time has, in itself, prior to another part, any distinguishing condition of existence rather than its non-existence (whether one assumes that it comes to be of itself or through another cause). Thus many series of things may begin in the world, but the world itself cannot have a beginning, and so in past time it is infinite. CPR A 427/B 455

Kant's argument implicitly addresses the question of whether the actuality of a temporal series of objects and events is compatible with two claims: (a) that actual infinity is impossible, and (b) that the coming to be of an event or an object, including the world conceived as a whole, must have a *sufficient reason*. The argument *presupposes* that it is *generally agreed* that these two claims *must be* involved in a temporal series. Yet, although the notion of a temporal series must allow both the denial of actual infinity and having a sufficient reason, Kant's argument aims to demonstrate that each of the respective conflicting positions (T) and (A) allows *only one* of the respective features.

Now, each of the respective positions (T) and (A) argues for the claim it defends by showing that a temporal series that has the property assigned to it by the proposition that is central to the rival position say (T) entails that one of these features (a) or (b) cannot be instantiated. In the case of (A) this is the denial of actual infinity and in the case of (T) this is the having of a sufficient reason. In other words, the overall argument of the first antinomy aims to demonstrate that the respective two features of a temporal series of objects and events – a temporal series the reality of which *is assumed to be certain* – cannot be instantiated together according to *any* of the two conflicting positions. In this sense

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<sup>15</sup> The argument for the spatial part for the thesis and the antithesis depends on the argument for the respective temporal part. Since my intention is to analyze the argumentative structure of the first antinomy, and since the spatial part of the argument does not manifest any feature that is not manifested by the temporal part, I will not address here the spatial part of the argument.

Kant's argument addresses the conflict from the point of view of an outside observer, that is, a *third* (apparently neutral) position.

Kant's argument does not end at this point. It also involves the solution that he offered to the conflict. The solution consists in two respective steps. The first step identifies a general principle that seems also to be part of the background of beliefs:

(P) *If the condition is given (a temporal event) the whole series of conditions must also be given.*

It should be noted that this principle neither entails the thesis of the first antinomy nor the antithesis. Its role in the argument is rather to provide reasons to believe that *only one* of the respective conflicting possibilities could be true. For assuming that the givenness of the conditioned (an empirical event) entails the existence of the complete series of conditions, then either the beginning of the world is entailed by any temporal event or an infinite series of events is entailed. Yet since neither of the respective possibilities (T) and (A) is compatible with (a) and (b) together, (P) *cannot cohere* with the idea that both must be true. This I suggest is the goal of the argument, to uncover *the need for a conceptual change* in order to *render coherent* the rational grounds of our concept of temporal series.

Kant's solution to the first antinomy, indeed his solution to all the antinomies, requires one to abandon P. The solution first identifies a link between (P) and another claim:

(Q) *The objects and events that are given must be things as they are in themselves.*

Kant assumes that (P) is implied by (Q). One should be careful to note, however, that (P) and (Q) do not possess the same epistemic status. As I noted above, (P) is a principle of reason. As Kant painstakingly aims to convince the reader of the first *Critique*, there is no conceivable direct or indirect *perceptual experience* that can warrant the acceptance of (P). On the other hand, (Q) at least appears to be grounded on *commonsense*. But according to Kant, indeed according to many metaphysicians, the judgment that is based merely on commonsense or common practice is to be respected only up to a certain point. In the present context, Kant's basic idea is that (Q) could be abandoned by showing that it *does not possess perceptual evidence* as it is allegedly assumed, and by showing that it could be replaced by a principle that entails its negation without being incompatible with the sensible evidence that we have at our disposal:

(R) *The sensuous things given to us are appearances and not things in themselves.*

## 7. The first antinomy: implicit argument

Kant's argument seems to address a well defined subject. Its explicit goal is to solve a conflict of reason within itself. Yet its implicit goal, a goal connected to the explicit one, is *to warrant Kant's doctrine of Transcendental Idealism*. The explicit goal is to provide a *solution* to a rational problem. We may assume that if the argument that establishes Kant's solution is known to be sound, the argument solves, indeed, the problem it is set to solve "once and for all". But the argument is sound only if all of its premises *are true*. Yet as Kant himself attests, when metaphysical propositions are concerned, there is no epistemic ground other than *coherence* with the other propositions. What appears to provide an "Archimedean point", is the alleged incontestable certainty of (a) and (b). Yet, it should be noted that neither (a) nor (b) possess absolute certainty, nor does Kant claim that they do. They are assumed to be *better justified* than either (P) or (Q). This claim is not argued for explicitly. The argument implicitly assumes that (a) and (b) are indeed incontestable.

Let it be noted, that if the negation of (a) and the negation of (b) would have been impossible, there would have been no room for an implicit argument. But arguments in metaphysics do not "prove" their conclusion in the mathematical or deductive sense. This fact is central to the type of rationality that Kant assigns to this intellectual field. It consists, according to Kant of synthetic a-priori judgments, or at least of pretensions of such judgments. Metaphysical arguments are different from mathematical arguments.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the difference between mathematical and metaphysical arguments cannot consist in the claim that nothing could be "really known" in metaphysics. For this would have excluded Kant's own position, indeed *his solution* to the antinomies. There is no reason to suppose that the above examined argument that establishes Kant's claims in the first *Critique*, an argument that inextricably involves recognition of the conceptual gap uncovered by Kant's description of the conflict and resolution of the gap by introducing novel distinctions and novel concepts, indeed, Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism, belongs to the mathematical or the logical type. It should be stressed that the implicit argument to be spelled out below is not "external" to Kant's critical theory. It is rather founded upon the above noted modified scheme.

In order to grasp Kant's implicit argument, one has first to point out the central idea that underlies Kant's approach to metaphysics.

- 1) *One is not allowed to assume that the set of the metaphysical concepts and propositions that form the core of our commonsense and common practice constitutes a self-consistent whole.*

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<sup>16</sup> See in particular CPR A712-713/B 740-741

This is, in fact, Kant's initial step. The conceivability of different metaphysical possibilities is inherent to what is pre-critically conceivable.

- 2) Metaphysical controversies are the locus of the conflict between these incompatible positions. They uncover the fact that the set of conceivable metaphysical possibilities is not a consistent set.

The metaphysician cannot avoid the need to respond in one way or another to the position(s) that conflicts with her own. There are various types of available response that result from the significance attached by the metaphysician to the opposed positions.

- 3) The response inherently involves one's own *representation* of the metaphysical controversy in which one is involved.

(3) is not explicitly recognized by Kant. It is rather a blind spot in the rhetoric of the argument, something involved in the argument without having an explicit role to serve in the official theory.

- 4) A key feature of the way the controversy is represented concerns *the epistemic value* that the proponent implicitly assigns to each of the beliefs that are part of the *background* of the debated propositions.

(4) is also not stated explicitly by Kant. Yet, the implicit assignment of epistemic values is mirrored in the arguments that are used by Kant. The implicit assignment of epistemic values expresses what one believes to be *rationally* acceptable.

The assignment of epistemic values to the background beliefs may indeed converge with the assignment of epistemic values to the opponent's background beliefs. Yet this is rarely the case when two conflicting metaphysical positions are concerned. Clearly, the assignment of epistemic values to metaphysical beliefs is not disconnected from what is known in the mathematical and empirical sciences. In the case of the first antinomy, the denial of actual infinity was part of the mathematical knowledge of Kant's time, that is, part of the background knowledge of the controversy.

Two other implicit assumptions involved in Kant's argument are the following:

- 5) The epistemic value of a metaphysical belief is partly constituted by its connection to science.

But,

- 6) The assignment of epistemic value is also or even mainly due to the way it figures in the overall system of metaphysical concepts and beliefs. The assignment is opened to change.

According to Kant, metaphysics is not a self-enclosed moving whole disconnected from what is known in the empirical and the exact sciences.<sup>17</sup> Metaphysical claims *must cohere* with the claims of the warranted scientific theories. Yet even this supposition, the supposition that concerns the way in which knowledge is structured, involves the assignment of epistemic values that is in principle opened to the possibility of controversies.

7) *The assignment of epistemic value is inherently connected to the interest that one has in the controversy, that is, to what one believes to be important.*

The notion of interest and the closely related notion of intuition are probably the most opaque notions involved here. Kant thought that the *rationality* of metaphysical controversies cannot be disconnected from the interest that the parties involved have in the debate.<sup>18</sup> The interest is connected to *the human kind of desire and the human kind of (rational) will*. This idea is some times expressed in Kant's exegesis as the "primacy of the ethical".

We may therefore assume that the assignment of epistemic values to metaphysical beliefs is constituted by two types of reasons. One type of reasons *vertically* connects the metaphysical beliefs, individually or collectively, to what is considered to be *scientifically warranted*. But in most cases, the vertical connection to scientific corroborated knowledge does not settle metaphysical controversies. The other type of reasons horizontally connects the metaphysical beliefs to other metaphysical and ontological beliefs. The interest that one has in metaphysical claims to knowledge affects the second type of reasons and not the first. But normally, one is *blind* to the extent to which it affects one's judgment and the assignment of epistemic values. This sort of blindness is one of the main reasons why controversies in metaphysics are indispensable for the possibility of criticism in this field.

A fundamental point revealed by Kant's argument is the following:

8) *The assignment of epistemic values to metaphysical beliefs is opened to change.*

Again, this is not an explicit part of the argument. Yet the conceivability of Kant's own claim to a revision in our notion of objectivity, a revision required as a result of recognizing the gap revealed by the (so far) irresolvable controversy(ies), is explainable only if (8) is true. We may assume that each metaphysical position is bound to assign epistemic values to the various metaphysical concepts and propositions that are different from the assignment of epistemic values by the conflicting position(s). The operation on the as-

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted, however, that these commitments that reflect what we may dub the primacy of science in constituting the epistemic value of a proposition need not be shared by all proponents. For example, some will be disposed to regard religious beliefs as being more central than scientific beliefs. Yet, the Kantian model fits better the present practice of metaphysics in analytical metaphysics.

<sup>18</sup> See in particular the chapter "The Antinomy of Pure Reason, Third Section, On the interest of reason in the conflicts" CPR A 462/B 490, and the chapter "The Canon of pure reason" in the "transcendental Doctrine of Method" CPR A 795/B 823.

signment of epistemic values, the weakening of the epistemic value of some beliefs and the strengthening of values of others by revealing new metaphysical possibilities or new conceptual connections could indeed be made by means of deliberation. Yet even in this case, it must be made *by considering the possibility of rival incompatible positions that cannot be dismissed merely as being contradictory*.

Given Kant's own example of how innovations in metaphysics could be pursued, one can spell out one type of role that controversies have in metaphysics. The arguments that are acknowledged by the community of metaphysicians as having the *normative status* of real metaphysical innovations either implicitly or explicitly involve a recognition of a metaphysical problem that has no solution within the available conceptual resources, known conceptual connections etc. This is the initial step of an argument for a metaphysical position. A position is admitted as successful to the extent in which it is able to resolve the conflict it implicitly or explicitly identifies as part of the argument itself. The conflict is manifest by the real controversies which the new position intends to resolve.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, *the motives to construct a metaphysical position* cannot be disconnected from the problem manifested by the relevant controversies. This, I suggest, is central to Kant's concept of metaphysics. Actual and imagined metaphysical controversies are inherently involved in the creative activity of constructing metaphysical positions and arguing for them.

Kant's argument in "the first antinomy" can be regarded as a paradigmatic example of the creative force of one powerful type of arguments that are used in the metaphysical controversies. The explicit representation of the conflict may obstruct one from seeing what the argument involves. It misleadingly presents Kant as an outside observer. The conflict addressed by the argument involves, in fact, *three* distinct positions. The representation of the controversy between two of these positions is meant to *lead* to the conclusion that the conflict is insolvable without changing the background beliefs that make possible the conflict. The argument intends to shift the epistemic value of (Q) in order to *explain away* the metaphysical conflict involved in the antinomies. But, this mode of representation cannot be disconnected from the assignment of epistemic value that is *unique to the third position*, the position from which viewpoint the other two positions are represented as involved in an irresolvable conflict. This by no means entails that the assignment of epistemic value is arbitrary. Assignment of epistemic value is a normative issue. Yet as far as logic and epistemology is concerned any assignment leaves room for conflicting assignments presumably influenced by the different type of interest one has in the conflict.

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<sup>19</sup> As some have noted, Kant's arguments in the antinomies was apparently a response to the Leibniz Clarke correspondence. See Bennett 1974.

## 8. Conclusion

Kant believed that a change in metaphysics is possible but he believed that it was possible only at the price of ruling out all further changes.<sup>20</sup> We need not follow him on the second matter in order to follow him on the first. Not all changes in metaphysics are of the same radical type of change exemplified by Kant's own Critical philosophy. My suggestion is, however, that the features his implicit argument reveals could serve as a basis for the account of the epistemic role of controversies in metaphysics, of why they are both unavoidable and fruitful.

The assignment of epistemic values that is part of the representation of the controversy, each position from its own unique standpoint, cannot be secured "once and for all" without involving the supposition that one can conceive "once and for all" *all* the metaphysical concepts and propositions and how they are connected. It cannot be disconnected from the *interest* that one has in the conflict, of why one believes that the holding to be true of one's own position is valuable and important. As the history of metaphysics manifests, indeed, as Kant's own metaphysical innovations attest, no such attempt was so far successful. The shift in the epistemic value can result from new scientific discoveries. When Kant's argument in the first antinomy is concerned, the new mathematical concept of infinity discovered by Cantor undermines the alleged truth of (a). This discovery need not entail that Kant's metaphysical position is untenable, but it requires painstaking work in order to adjust the overall conceptual scheme of the position to the new results.

At least from the descriptive viewpoint, the attempt to secure "once and for all" the epistemic value of the metaphysical claims to knowledge seems to be unavoidable. It is manifest in the majority of metaphysical works and debates. The hope to reach such eternally stable ground in metaphysics seems to ground the very activity of metaphysical inquiries. But whether or not this hope could be fulfilled, it should not mislead us. We must not fail to grasp properly the creative force of metaphysical arguments that Kant uncovered for us, arguments that belong to the intrinsic character of metaphysics qua human rational discourse.

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<sup>20</sup> To the extent that the explicit argument is concerned Dascal's claim that "...metaphysical controversies do not play any constitutive role in the actual progress of knowledge for Kant" seems to be true. See Dascal (2005: 4-5). Yet as I have tried to demonstrate here, the explicit argument is in fact part of far more complex *implicit* argument in which controversies serve a constitutive role in actual epistemic changes in metaphysics.

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