

# METAPHYSICS AS A DISCIPLINE: FROM THE “TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE ANCIENTS” TO KANT’S NOTION OF TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY

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The historical study of metaphysics in the early modern period – a time in which so many philosophers self-consciously *rejected* the kind of philosophy practiced up to their time and emphatically presented themselves as offering a *new approach* – is beset by several difficulties. The fact that these philosophers described themselves as developing a new philosophical approach seems to require us only to examine the immediate historical background that they claim to be rejecting; looking for *continuities* with earlier thought seems to be superfluous and perhaps even contradictory. When, in addition, advocates of the new philosophical approach are used by modern historians to demarcate periods in the history of philosophy – as is the case with Descartes and Kant – a division of research and of researchers arises that hinders the development of competence to deal with issues that overlap the different historical periods. Furthermore, it is no easy matter to trace the processes by which earlier thought might have been transmitted to the early modern period, and the earlier thought itself is complex and in need of interpretation. Take as an example of the difficulties involved in the historical study of early modern metaphysics, Kant’s reference to the “transcendental philosophy of the ancients”. What “ancients” does he have in mind? And did he encounter these ancients with his teachers as intermediaries or by going to the sources directly? When Kant links his own new approach to the “transcendental philosophy of the ancients”, what does he understand by ‘transcendental philosophy’? If we trace this concept back to the ideas developed during the “second beginning of metaphysics”<sup>1</sup> associated with the reception of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Honnefelder 1987.

Aristotle in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, any answer to these questions will depend upon how accurately we understand the medieval innovations and their later influence. This last issue has become increasingly urgent as we have come to recognize ever more clearly that we must distinguish between the philosophical preferences exhibited by Neo-Scholasticism in its (meritorious) medieval research, on the one hand, and the historical reality of medieval philosophy, on the other.<sup>2</sup>

Considering these difficulties it is not surprising that the issue of the medieval sources of Kantian transcendental philosophy has been a relatively late addition to the research that has resulted from the rediscovery of Kant, and it is only recently that the outlines of a satisfactory answer have begun to appear on the basis of corresponding research into the history of medieval philosophy – the same can be said of Descartes.<sup>3</sup> In the following, we will investigate metaphysics' status as a scientific discipline, through an examination of the medieval sources of the approach that most profoundly transformed modern metaphysics, i.e. Kantian transcendental philosophy. Starting with Kant's direct sources we will trace the discussion back to the ideas of John Duns Scotus (§ 1) and of Francisco Suárez (§ 2), in order to demonstrate with regard to its most important features just how Kant received (§ 3) and transformed (§ 4) these ideas.<sup>4</sup>

# **1. THE POINT OF DEPARTURE OF KANT'S CONCEPT OF METAPHYSICS AS "TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY": METAPHYSICS AS *SCIENTIA TRANSCENDENS* IN THE DOCTRINE OF JOHN DUNS SCOTUS**

According to N. Hinske,<sup>5</sup> Kant's use of the terms 'transcendental' and 'transcendental philosophy' can be traced back to at least three sources, and these sources owe nothing to the medieval doctrine of the transcendental, reflecting as they do a particular break with the medieval tradition.<sup>6</sup> These three sources are: (a) the conception of transcendental philosophy to be found in seventeenth century metaphysics; (b) the conception of transcendental on which Christian Wolff bases his notion of a *cosmologia transcendentalis* and to which Kant refers in his precritical writings; and

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Honnefelder 1990, ix-xii.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> In the following, §§ 1, 3, and 4 relate to my paper: Honnefelder 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hinske 1968/1970; *idem* 1970, 40-77.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hinske 1970, 52, 76. Cf. Hinske 1998.

finally (c) the conception of transcendental which Kant adopts from Baumgarten's compendium of metaphysics.

There can be no doubt that Kant's use of the term 'transcendental' was influenced by several of the different conceptions that were available to him. Nevertheless – and this is what must be proved in the following – these meanings share a common point of origin in the *Scotistic* conception of transcendental philosophy. That Kant's use of the term 'transcendental' appears to us to be a break with medieval tradition is merely a result of the fact that Kant does not follow the particular medieval approach that nineteenth- and twentieth-century Neo-scholasticism considered to be significant, i.e. the Thomistic; instead Kant used the medieval approach that influenced early modern metaphysics most profoundly, i.e. that of Duns Scotus. Only when the Scotistic origins of the early modern conception of transcendental philosophy are recognized will we truly be able to appreciate the innovations that Kant made to that conception.

### **1.1 *Metaphysica as philosophia transcendentalis* in German Aristotelianism and the *scientia transcendens* of Scotus**

Examining Kant's early vocabulary, it is remarkable that he identifies *metaphysica* and *philosophia transcendentalis*. This identification is, as N. Hinske has rightly pointed out,<sup>7</sup> typical of the German Aristotelianism, or *Schulmetaphysik*, of the seventeenth century, and reveals its continuing influence into the eighteenth century. In fact, one can already find in F. Schmidt's study on the origins of Kant's use of '*transcendens*' the accurate remark that J.H. Alsted "*copiosissime de transcendentibus agit*".<sup>8</sup> In his *Cursus philosophici encyclopaedia* of 1620,<sup>9</sup> Alsted does indeed devote – as later C. Scheibler would – the main part of his treatment of metaphysics to the *transcendentium theoria*. Moreover, J. Scharf not only calls his metaphysics, published in 1624, *Theoria transcendentalis Primae Philosophiae, quam vocant Metaphysicam*,<sup>10</sup> but also notes with regard to his historical sources that "the authors" distinguish two types of *transcensus*: one according to the "pre-eminence of being" (*entis nobilitate*), the other according to the "community of predication" (*praedicationis communitate*).<sup>11</sup> According to Scharf, in view of how

<sup>7</sup> Cf. n. 5 above.

<sup>8</sup> Schmidt 1873, 12; cf. Hinske 1968, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Alsted 1620, 270 and passim; cf. Hinske 1968, 92.

<sup>10</sup> Scharf 1624.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Scharf 1624, 261: "Notant vero autores, et recte, quod Transscensus iste contingat duplici modo, vel Entis nobilitate, vel praedicationis communitate. Illo modo nimirum, ob eminentiam et sublimitatem Entitatis, Deus dicitur Transscendens, et res divinae ...

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