

## CHAPTER 3

*Ontology as Transcendental Philosophy**Huaping Lu-Adler*

How does the Critical Kant view ontology? There is no shared scholarly answer to this question. Norbert Hinske sees in the *Critique of Pure Reason* a “farewell to ontology,” albeit one that Kant took a long time to bid (Hinske 2009). Karl Ameriks has found evidence in Kant’s metaphysics lectures from the Critical period that he “was unwilling to break away fully from traditional ontology” (Ameriks 1992, p. 272). Gualtiero Lorini argues that a decisive break with the tradition of ontology is essential to Kant’s Critical reform of metaphysics, as is reflected in his shift from “ontology” to “transcendental philosophy,” two notions that Lorini takes to be related by mere “analogy” (Lorini 2015).<sup>1</sup>

I agree with Lorini that a thorough reform of ontology is a pivotal part of Kant’s Critical plan for metaphysics and that ontology somehow “survives within the critical philosophy” (Lorini 2015, p. 76). To make this case, however, I deem it important to *identify* “ontology” with “transcendental philosophy” in the sense of extensional equivalence. While we can detect this identification in Kant’s writings, only from his metaphysics lectures can we get a full sense of its historical and philosophical significance. In this chapter I focus on how Kant’s Critical metaphysics represents a definitive turn from, as well as notable continuity with, traditional treatments of ontology, particularly the Wolffian one.

**I. The Status of Ontology: A History of Philosophical Problems**

Kant refers to “ontology” on two occasions in the first *Critique*. The first reference occurs in the context of a distinction between phenomena and noumena:

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed analysis of how Kant’s notion of ontology evolved with “transcendental philosophy,” on the one hand, and “logic,” on the other, from the pre-Critical to the Critical period, see Ficara (2006).

[¶1] the proud [*stolze*] name of an ontology, which arrogates to itself [*sich anmaßt*] the offering of synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general in a systematic doctrine (e.g., the principle of causality), must give way to the modest one of a mere analytic of the pure understanding. (A247/B303; modified translation)

Kant mentions ontology again hundreds of pages later, while discussing the scope and content of metaphysics. Speculative metaphysics or metaphysics of nature, which “considers everything insofar as it is . . . on the basis of *a priori* concepts,” comprises transcendental philosophy and rational physiology. Of these two parts, Kant says:

[¶2] The former considers only the *understanding* and reason itself in a system of all concepts and principles that are related to objects in general, without assuming objects that *would be given* (*Ontologia*); the latter considers *nature*, i.e., the sum total of *given* objects. (A845/B873)

If we read these passages along with Kant’s descriptions of transcendental philosophy and the analytic of pure understanding earlier in the *Critique*, it becomes uncertain what he means by “ontology” and how exactly it relates to “transcendental philosophy.”

The analytic of pure understanding comes down to the “analysis of the faculty of understanding itself, in order to research the possibility of *a priori* concepts by seeking them only in the understanding as their birthplace and analyzing its pure use in general,” an analysis that is “the proper business of a transcendental philosophy” (A65–6/B90–1). In that connection, ¶1 points to a *distinction* between ontology and transcendental philosophy as two sciences with different subject matter: while ontology is a system of certain cognitions of *things*, transcendental philosophy considers the *understanding* in respect of its pure use. But Kant seems to *identify* transcendental philosophy with ontology in ¶2, although he characterizes “transcendental philosophy” in this passage differently than he did in A12/B25, where it was introduced as a system of all concepts for cognizing objects “insofar as this [cognition] is to be possible *a priori*.”

To resolve this apparent tension between ¶1 and ¶2, one may attach distinct notions of ontology to them and show how Kant may reject one while favoring the other. To begin, in ¶1 he is presumably referring to ontology in the customary sense, which allegedly occupies itself with the lofty but unwarranted task of providing a system of synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general (*Dingen überhaupt*). This task is impossible, Kant explains, insofar as *überhaupt* indicates that “abstraction is made from any condition of sensible intuition as the only one that is possible for us,”

and that the concepts of pure understanding are therefore used as pure categories, which however do “not suffice for any synthetic *a priori* principle.” This non-empirical use of categories is “impossible in itself,” because “the understanding can never accomplish *a priori* anything more than to anticipate the form of a possible experience in general” and so “can never overstep the limits of sensibility, within which alone objects are given to us” (A246–8/B303–5).

This qualified rejection of ontology in ¶1 is not an abandonment of ontology per se, but only signals a first step toward clarifying what it *should be*. Although it is not immediately clear how ¶2 serves the latter purpose, the apparent identification of ontology with transcendental philosophy is suggestive. We shall see ample textual evidence for this identification below. In my reading, it epitomizes Kant’s original contribution to the historical debate about the nature of ontology as a distinct metaphysical “science” (*scientia*, *Wissenschaftslehre*). For starters, let me make four preliminary observations about Kant’s relation to that history, as follows.

- 1) There was an established practice of describing a metaphysical science as “transcendental.” John Duns Scotus was the first to call metaphysics *scientia transcendens*, rendering Aristotle’s “meta” as “trans.” Scotus cites the following statement from Book IV of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: “There is a science which deals theoretically with being *qua* being and with what characterizes it as such.” The transcendentals – the one (*unum*), the true (*verum*) and the perfect/good (*bonum*) – are what characterize being *qua* being and are to be “first known.” Metaphysics is the science that considers these transcendentals.<sup>2</sup>

Kant is evidently aware of this scholastic tradition.<sup>3</sup> In the B edition of the *Critique*, having introduced his own “transcendental table of the categories” (B115), he brings up “yet another chapter in the transcendental philosophy of the ancients,” which treats concepts that are distinct from the categories but are counted along with the latter as the “*a priori* concepts of objects.” He reports that the scholastics expounded those concepts in the principle “Quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum” (B113). More recently, Baumgarten had also explicated a version of this principle, holding that every being was “transcendentally” one, true and perfect/good (BM, §73, §89–90, §99–100). These notions now belong in “ontology,” however,

<sup>2</sup> Scotus (1997): 7–8. On metaphysics as “transcendental science” in the scholastic tradition, see Aertsen (2005) and, in greater detail, Aertsen (2012).

<sup>3</sup> About the likely scholastic sources of Kant’s notion of the “transcendental,” see Honnefelder (2003).

which as “the science of the more general predicates of a being” is not equivalent to metaphysics but is the part thereof called “universal metaphysics” (BM, §4). As Rudolph Goclenius had already suggested in his *Lexicon philosophicum* (1613, Frankfurt), the first dictionary referring to ontology (οντολογία) as the philosophy of being (*philosophia de ente*), only this kind of universal science – universal thanks to material abstraction (*abstractio materiae*) – is transcendental philosophy (*philosophia de ... Transcendentibus*) and *prima philosophia* properly so called.<sup>4</sup>

Kant, then, is not the first to identify ontology with transcendental philosophy. The question is what, if anything, makes his identification special.

- 2) To establish something as a distinct *scientia*, one must show that it has a unique subject. Philosophers before Kant characterized the subject of ontology variously as, for example, *ens*, *aliquid* and *nihil*, *res* or some combination of these. According to Marco Lamanna, when Goclenius defined ontology as a science of *ens universale*, the *ens* in question was deemed extensionally equivalent with *res* and *aliquid*. This view, Lamanna notes, was integral to the German *Schulmetaphysik* of the 17th century and was eventually taken up in Wolff’s ontology,<sup>5</sup> defined as “the science of being in general [*scientia entis in genere*], or insofar as it is being” (see Wolff 1736, §1; Dp, §73).

Kant alludes to this historical development when contending that the highest concept of ontology is not “something” (*Etwas*) or what is possible, but the “object in general” (*Gegenstand überhaupt*), which may in turn be possible or impossible, thing (*Ding*, *aliquid*) or nothing (*Unding*, *nihil*), in logical or non-logical senses of these terms.<sup>6</sup> It does not follow, however, that ontology supplies concepts and principles for “cognition of *things in general*.” To the contrary, it is “limited to the much narrower field of *objects of possible experience*” (ÜE, 8:190; my italicization). Ontology so restricted is the “science . . . which consists in a system of all concepts of the understanding, and principles, but *only so far as they refer to objects that can be given to the senses*.” It is ontology in this sense that is “called transcendental philosophy” (FM, 20:260; my italicization).

<sup>4</sup> Goclenius (1613, p. 16, 1011). On a few monographic medieval treatises *de transcendentibus*, see Aertsen (2012, pp. 32–4). On the early history of “ontology,” see Mora (1963); Devaux and Lamanna (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Lamanna (2014), pp. 147–8. <sup>6</sup> ML2, 28:543; MDoh, 28:622; MK2, 28:711; MMron, 29:811.

- 3) When Wolff characterizes ontology as the science that treats that which is common to and can be predicated of all beings and that is therefore designated to explain the general notions presupposed by all other sciences (Dp, §73), he has a standard inventory of such notions in mind. For the sake of argument, we may sort them into four divisions: (i) space and time, (ii) concepts listed in Kant's table of categories, such as cause, existence, necessity and contingency, and possibility and impossibility, (iii) what Kant calls "*predicables* of pure understanding," including action and affection, resistance, alternation and so on, all of which one can find in typical "ontological textbooks" (A82/B108; see Prol, 4:325 n.), and (iv) the three transcendentals mentioned above. Baumgarten's ontology includes a similar list of "predicates of beings," as we can tell from the Synopsis of his *Metaphysica*.

Kant's ontology has a much more limited list of concepts. He first excludes space and time, assuming that ontology is a science that strictly includes pure concepts and principles *of the understanding*. Next, he argues that his table of categories exhausts all the pure concepts of the understanding that are "original" and "primary," namely all "the true *ancestral concepts* of pure understanding" in comparison with which the predicables are only "derivative" (A80-1/B106-7). As for the three transcendentals, they are reducible to the categories of quantity: namely unity, plurality and totality (B114).

Kant needs to make these moves in a principled and non-question-begging manner, of course. He complains that past searches for the pure concepts were so "haphazard" that one could not be certain as to why precisely such and such ones "should inhabit the pure understanding" (A81/B106-7). This complaint reflects a special demand of Kant's notion of rational science; namely that we must be able to derive and systematize its entire content *a priori*. In order to fulfill this requirement, to establish ontology as a true science, one must find a method according to which "the place of each pure concept of the understanding and the completeness of all of them together can be determined *a priori*, which would otherwise depend upon whim or chance." Only "transcendental philosophy," as Kant defines it, can meet such a requirement (A67/B92). Turning ontology into transcendental philosophy in the relevant Kantian sense, then, is essential to securing its scientific status.

- (4) It was a typical practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to divide metaphysics into general metaphysics (ontology) and special

metaphysics. In the Wolffian system, the latter includes cosmology, psychology and theology, all of which presuppose ontology as a source of their “principles.” It is in this sense that ontology is truly the “first philosophy” (Dp, §99).

Kant likewise sees ontology as the first part of metaphysics, the rest being “metaphysics proper.” In the *Critique*, while denouncing “as undone all attempts made until now to bring about a metaphysics *dogmatically*,” he characterizes “metaphysics proper” as that which aims at “extending [reason’s] *a priori* cognition synthetically.” As a preparation for this end, an “analytic” is also required: not as a mere analysis of what is contained in the relevant concepts, however, but as that which “explains how we attain such concepts *a priori* in order thereafter to be able to determine their valid use in regard to the objects of all cognition in general” (B23–4). Accordingly, “the first part of metaphysics” is defined by the task of deducing “concepts *a priori* to which the corresponding objects appropriate to them can be given in experience” and explaining the possibility of cognition *a priori* by their means. As for “the second part of metaphysics,” its whole purpose is to “get beyond the boundaries of possible experience” and make gains in the “field of the supersensible,” a purpose that constitutes “precisely the most essential occupation of this science” (Bxviii–xxi). Elsewhere, Kant explicitly calls the first part “ontology” and affirms that it “does not impinge on the supersensible [*berührt nicht das Übersinnliche*], which is nevertheless the final aim of metaphysics, and thus belongs to the latter only as a propaedeutic, as the hallway or vestibule of metaphysics proper” (FM, 20: 261; modified translation).

Clearly, Kant’s reason for treating ontology as the first part of metaphysics is unique. From the Wolffian standpoint, ontology occupies this place thanks to the *generality* of its concepts and principles, which are assumed as valid for all special domains of metaphysical cognitions. To Kant, by contrast, the relevant sense of ontology must be ontology *qua* transcendental philosophy, namely as a science of the concepts and principles that constitute the conditions of what we can *cognize a priori* (FM, 20:260). In that connection, he criticizes past metaphysicians for using ontological concepts and principles to extend theoretical cognitions about the supersensible.

Now although the supersensible, to which the aim of reason is directed in metaphysics, is actually no land [*Boden*] for theoretical cognition, the metaphysicians still wandered there confidently along the lines [*wanderten ... an dem Leitfaden ... getrost fort*] of their ontological

principles, which are admittedly *a priori* in origin, but valid only for objects of experience. (FM, 20:262; modified translation)

This passage indicates that, from Kant's perspective, to determine the possibility of metaphysics proper it is necessary to begin by examining the nature of ontology and the boundaries for the valid use of its concepts and principles. From this examination emerges Kant's account of ontology as transcendental philosophy.

Overall, the core issues about ontology concern its status as a "science," to establish which one must identify its unique subject, derive its content in a way that can ascertain its completeness and clarify its relation to other parts of metaphysics. Or so Kant would insist, adding that the key to satisfying these demands is finding a *method* by which all the basic ontological concepts and principles can be determined a priori and ordered in an exact system. To this end, no less than a Copernican "experiment" is called for, an "altered method of our way of thinking, namely that we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them." For this method alone "promises to metaphysics the secure course of a science in its first part" (Bxviii). The method is Kant's famed "critique" of pure reason, which "consists in that attempt to transform the accepted procedure of metaphysics, undertaking an entire revolution," with the goal to "catalog the entire preliminary sketch of a whole system of metaphysics" (Bxxii–xxiii).

Kant's conception of ontology as transcendental philosophy is a product of this transformative work. As an ontology built off the critique of pure reason, it is directly opposed to an ontology without the critique. This is an opposition between Critical and dogmatic *approaches* to ontology. Kant's point in the oft-cited "proud name" passage, then, is not so much to bid farewell to ontology itself as to reject the *dogmatic treatment* thereof in order to make room for the Critical one, as is encapsulated in his notion of ontology qua transcendental philosophy.

This point will become most salient when we examine, as I shall do in Sections II and III below, Kant's attempts in the metaphysics lectures to secure ontology as a true science with an eye to explaining the possibility of metaphysics proper.

## II. Ontology as Kantian Transcendental Philosophy

To Kant, "science" in the strict sense must (a) be systematic, as "a whole of cognition ordered according to principles," (b) treat its object "wholly

according to *a priori* principles,” and (c) be apodictically certain (MAN, 4: 467–8). In these terms, he assesses whether metaphysics – or any “treatment of the cognitions belonging to the concern of reason” – has got onto “the secure course of a science” (Bvii). The best metaphysics in existence, namely Wolff’s, has satisfied (a) but failed (b) and (c). On the one hand, insofar as a scientific metaphysics must follow “the *dogmatic procedure* of reason” and be “carried out systematically in accordance with the strictest requirement, hence according to scholastic rigor,” Wolff “gave us the first example . . . of the way in which the secure course of a science is to be taken.” On the other hand, Wolff is guilty of dogmatism in not seeing the need “to prepare the field for [metaphysics] by a critique of . . . pure reason itself” (Bxxxv–xxxvii).

As for ontology, in Wolff’s view it supplies “certain and immutable principles” to all other sciences insofar as they are “to be treated demonstratively,” including not only such special metaphysics as cosmology and psychology but also logic and mathematics (Dp, §87–90 and §97–8; Wolff 1736, §9). But whence do we obtain those alleged ontological principles and how can we ascertain that exactly such and such must be the first principles of human knowledge in general? In other words, what makes ontology itself a true “science”? To Wolff, scientific ontology or *ontologia artificialis* is just a reflected and distinct representation of the same notions and principles that constitute *ontologia naturalis*, which we use commonly, though only with confused representations thereof (Wolff 1736, §21–3). In this way, scientific ontology is ultimately grounded in certain natural predispositions of the human intellect, which in turn depend on God. To borrow the terms in which Wolff describes the relation between natural and artificial logics, “rules are prescribed [by God to the human intellect], by which it regulates itself, without understanding them; just as bodies move by certain rules or laws, and a man, in walking, and in other motions, observes a set of rules, which he does not understand.” Such rules determine a universal and “natural aptitude” on our part to cognize things in a certain way. An artificial or scientific account thereof merely “explains, in a distinct manner, the rules of the natural, and besides, enables us to raise our natural aptitude to a habit” (Wolff 1754, ch. 16, §3).

Two of Kant’s distinctions indicate how he may respond to this Wolffian approach. One is between *quaestio facti* and *quaestio iuris* regarding pure concepts of the understanding. While the former pertains to the *de facto* “possession” of such concepts, the latter concerns the “lawfulness” or “entitlement” with which they may be referred to objects entirely *a priori* (A84–7/B116–19). The other distinction is between an inquiry



about the possibility of metaphysics “as a natural predisposition [i.e. as *metaphysica naturalis*]” and a study of its possibility “as a science.” The former inquiry is to show that, by “the nature of universal human reason,” we inevitably pursue *questions* that define the aim of metaphysics and that are to be addressed in special metaphysics beyond the bounds of experience; e.g. the cosmological question about whether the world has a beginning. It is thereby left undecided, however, whether human reason is even capable of giving determinate answers to such questions. Hence, the possibility of scientific metaphysics cannot be settled by an appeal to *metaphysica naturalis*. A scientific metaphysics presupposes a critique of pure reason instead, which is “to determine, completely and securely [*sicher*], the domain and the bounds of its attempted use beyond all bounds of experience” (B21–3).

For Kant, then, obtaining a scientific ontology cannot be a matter of gaining clear and distinct representations of certain inborn, though still obscurely represented rules that determine our natural aptitude. What is required is rather a critique by which to derive a priori the entire system of concepts and principles that constitutes ontology, without invoking the Wolffian notion of *ontologia naturalis* at all. A Kantian ontology qua transcendental philosophy is to take shape through such a critique, which alone can ensure the completeness of its catalog of pure concepts and demarcate the exact boundaries for their lawful use. Otherwise, an ontology without the requisite critique, such as the Wolffian *ontologia artificialis*, has “no principle [*Princip*] . . . whereby the understanding could be fully surveyed and all of its functions, from which its pure concepts arise [*entspringen*], determined exhaustively and with precision” (Prol, 4:323; see FM, 20:281).

It should come as no surprise, then, that Kant’s remarks about ontology in his metaphysics lectures manifest an ongoing quest to establish it as a science, not only by pinpointing its subject and clarifying its relation to metaphysics proper but also, and indeed most importantly, by seeking the principle (*principium*) from which its entire content can be cognized a priori, with precision and apodictic certainty.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I examine a few texts to highlight these efforts. I shall give special attention to how Kant (re-)interprets “ontology” and “transcendental philosophy” and clarifies their relation in the process, until finally settling on a strict identity between the two.

<sup>7</sup> Note that “principium” chiefly means *source* and *foundation*, which need not take a propositional form.

Before we delve into the representative texts, a few prefatory notes are in order. To begin, here is the Latin version of Baumgarten's definition of ontology.

Ontologia\* (ontosophia, metaphysica, cf. §I [Metaphysica est scientia primorum in humana cognitione principiorum.], metaphysica universalis, architectonica, philosophia prima) est scientia praedicatorum entis generaliorum.<sup>8</sup>

\* *Die Grund-Wissenschaft.* (BM, §4)

This definition is followed by an explanation of why ontology refers to (*refertur ad*) metaphysics: "Entis praedicata generaliora sunt prima cognitionis humanae principia" (BM, §5).<sup>9</sup>

When Kant talks about his plan to use Baumgarten's text in the announcement of his courses for the winter semester 1765–6, he characterizes ontology as "Wissenschaft von den allgemeineren Eigenschaften aller Dinge" (NEV, 2:309). In the *Metaphysik Herder* (c.1762–4), the earliest available record of Kant's metaphysics lectures, ontology is defined as "Wissenschaft von den allgemeinen (generalium) Prädikaten aller Dinge." As it exhibits the first *Grundbegriffe*, this science is "the true *philosophia prima*" and is "for metaphysics what metaphysics is for philosophy" (MH, 28:7).<sup>10</sup>

These remarks suggest two things. First, Kant seems to use "*Eigenschaft*" and "*Prädikat*" (the literal German equivalent of "*praedicatum*") interchangeably while describing the subject matter of ontology. For this reason, I shall translate "*Eigenschaft*" as "predicate," although it is more commonly rendered as "property." Second, ontology constitutes the preparatory part of metaphysics in much the same way as metaphysics is the propaedeutic to the whole of philosophy.

Meanwhile, in some of Kant's *Reflexionen* dated (though sometimes uncertainly) from the mid-to-late 1760s, we can see him exploring the subjective nature of metaphysics itself. Metaphysics is subjective first in the sense that it is "not a philosophy about objects . . . but rather about the subject, namely, the laws of its reason" (R3716 [before 1764–6? 1764–8?], 17:259). In this way, it is like logic because "in both reason is the object" (R3939 [1769], 17:356). But metaphysics is also subjective in a sense that

<sup>8</sup> "Ontologia\* (ontosophia, metaphysica, cf. §I[METAPHYSICS is the science of the first principles in human knowledge.], universal metaphysics, architectonics, first philosophy) is the science of the more general predicates of a being.

\* *The Fundamental Science.*"

<sup>9</sup> "The more general predicates of a being are the first principles of human knowledge."

<sup>10</sup> On Kant's conception of metaphysics in the *Metaphysics Herder*, see Fugate (2015), pp. 65–73.

logic is not. While logic as “a science . . . of human cognition *in general*” treats the subordination of concepts to one another regardless of their origin, metaphysics is “a science of the fundamental concepts and principles of human reason” as “the elements out of which all *rational* [as opposed to sensible] cognition is composed” (R3946 [1769? 1772???], 17:359–60; my italicization; see R3949 [1769], 17:361). Logic is objective in that, by leaving “undetermined the particular nature of human reason,” its laws are “valid for any reason [*gilt vor jeder Vernunft*].” By contrast, metaphysics as a science of *pure* human reason presents “the universal concepts that flow from the nature of human reason and their particular laws” and is to that extent subjective (R3946 [1769? 1772???], 17:360; modified translation; see R3952 [1769], 17:362–3).

Kant came to view ontology along similar lines. He wrote: “ontology is nothing other than a transcendental logic (subjective)” (R4152 [1769–70], 17:436). Ontology is a kind of “logic” as it studies conditions of cognition that lie with the subject. It is “transcendental” because, as Kant defines this notion in the early 1770s, it treats “pure cognition *a priori*, in which thus no sensation is given” (R4643 [1772–3], 17:622). It is therefore “subjective” in a way that logic is not; while the latter presents “the rules of universal cognition *in general*,” ontology (as part of metaphysics) investigates “the particular rules of *pure* reason” (R4163 [1769–70], 17:440; my italicizations). This contrast seems to be a precursor to Kant’s distinction between general logic and transcendental logic in the *Critique*. One “considers only the logical form in the relation of cognitions to one another, i.e., the form of thinking in general,” whereas the other presents “the laws of the understanding and reason . . . solely insofar as they are related to objects *a priori*” and thereby reveals the conditions for “think[ing] objects completely *a priori*” (A55–7/B79–82).

Kant’s notion of the “transcendental” *c.*1770 will turn out to differ in a crucial respect from the one in the *Critique*, though. The textual analysis below will prepare us to appreciate why the difference matters and what it tells us about the significance of Kant’s Critical identification of ontology with transcendental philosophy.

We begin with *Metaphysik L*,/Heinze (mid-1770s?). Here, metaphysics is again characterized as a special kind of “logic.” It treats the use of pure understanding and of pure reason, while logic proper treats the use of understanding and of reason in general. Insofar as it deals with pure concepts, metaphysics “must investigate the laws by which the understanding can obtain [*auf* . . . *gelangen*] such concepts.” This investigation is assigned to ontology, a pure (as opposed to applied) metaphysics that

considers “the most general predicates [*allgemeinsten Eigenschaften*] of things” and asks about how the understanding may arrive at them. Ontology so construed denotes the same thing as “transcendental logic” and has two parts: the “analytic of concepts,” which inspects the concepts of pure understanding, and “the synthetic part,” which presents the principles (*Grundsätze*) that arise from those concepts (MLI, 28:173–4, 185).<sup>11</sup>

In the *Metaphysik Volckmann* (1784–5), the Kantian notion of ontology as a transcendental science gradually takes shape through a broader query about how metaphysics is possible as a science. The form of a science is its unity (*Einheit*), which presupposes an idea of the systematic whole. In that connection, Kant rejects the customary conception of metaphysics as a science of the first principles of all human cognitions regardless of their origin. One cannot, he argues, sufficiently determine the scope of such a science. For example, if we do not take the solidity of a body to be a principle belonging to metaphysics, *why* not? Where should we stop? To answer such questions, one must distinguish between cognitions from a priori principles and those from a posteriori principles. Metaphysics can only be a “science of pure cognition,” which contains “the principles *a priori* of all human cognition.” This science is then divided into pure and applied parts. The pure part is “a reflection about reason itself and not about the things [*Dinge*] amenable to reason.” It determines the nature of our pure reason and the boundaries of its capacity. It can therefore be called “transcendental philosophy or the critique of pure reason, where pure reason is its own object [*eigen Object*].” The applied part “contains the cognition of the objects of pure reason” and constitutes “metaphysics in the stricter sense” (MVol, 28:357–61).<sup>12</sup>

In case you wonder about how ontology fits into this picture and, especially, how it relates to transcendental philosophy, Kant is mindful of the need to clarify his position on this issue. In so doing, he indicates that the very terms “ontology” and “transcendental philosophy” admit varied definitions and that his definitions are substantively different from the traditional ones. As a result, we see him sometimes prying apart ontology and transcendental philosophy but at other times equating them.

Kant deems ontology and transcendental philosophy to be distinct from one another, if the former considers *things* or objects themselves while the latter has pure human *intellect* as its subject.

<sup>11</sup> Translations from the Heinze manuscripts used in this chapter are mine.

<sup>12</sup> Translations from the Volckmann manuscript used in this chapter are mine.

One calls ontology a transcendental philosophy, and yet it is the consideration of objects [*Gegenstände*] through our reason. It is an applied metaphysics [*metaphysica applicata*], where I treat objects by means of pure principles of reason. Transcendental philosophy is however self-cognition of our reason and therefore constitutes an entirely special science. . . . I would therefore examine my reason with respect to the principles, with respect to the origin, use, and boundaries, without talking about things [*Dingen*], . . . as happens in ontology. (MVol, 28:360–1)

If in the *Metaphysik L<sub>I</sub>* manuscript ontology was designated as transcendental logic, in the *Volckmann* notes it is transcendental philosophy that is so designated.

Transcendental philosophy is with regard to metaphysics what logic is with regard to the whole of philosophy. . . . In respect of the pure use of reason, a special logic would be necessary, which is called transcendental philosophy. . . . One could also call transcendental philosophy a transcendental logic, where we consider not objects but our understanding itself, where we see what the elements of our pure cognition of reason are, what its domain [*Umfang*] and boundaries are, without being concerned with the object. (MVol, 28:363; also 391)

As a science that is distinct from Kantian transcendental philosophy (which I hereafter designate “transcendental philosophy<sub>K</sub>”), ontology treats “things themselves [*Dinge selbst*] in accordance with their universal predicates [*Eigenschaften*].” I shall call this ontology<sub>Th</sub>. This form of ontology was considered a transcendental philosophy in the scholastic tradition because the universal predicates in question were supposed to transcend distinctions among various species of being. But transcendental philosophy<sub>K</sub> is transcendental in a different sense. It does not consider beings at all, but only “the capacity [*Vermögen*] of our pure reason, independently of experience, to judge of things” (MVol, 28:363).

Kant’s next move is to argue that the science entitled “ontology,” if it is to be possible as a science, can only be transcendental philosophy<sub>K</sub>. Such a science contains none other than “all the basic concepts [*Grund-Begriffe*] and basic propositions [*Grund-Sätze*] of our *a priori* cognition in general.” It will be unfitting to call it “ontology” in the original sense of the term (ontology<sub>Th</sub>), which would imply that it had a bare thing (*Ding*) as such as its object of investigation. Rather, its proper title is “transcendental philosophy,” meaning a science that “demonstrates how it is possible to cognize something *a priori*” by identifying all the *a priori* elements of our cognition and determining how far human understanding can go in judging completely *a priori* (MVol, 28:391).

We can see a similar progression toward ontology as transcendental philosophy<sub>K</sub> in the *Metaphysik Mrongovius* (1782–3). Here Kant attacks the scholastic account of the relation between ontology and transcendental philosophy from both fronts. On the one hand, noting “the word [‘transcendental philosophy’] has been used and understood as ontology [i.e. ontology<sub>Th</sub>],” Kant complains that “no one has had a true transcendental philosophy,” the true one being “the science of the principles of *pure understanding* and of *pure reason*.” On the other hand, targeting the notion of ontology as “the science that deals with the general predicates of all *things*,” Kant contends that ontology is possible as a science only if it has pure *cognition* as its object (MMron, 29:752, 784; my italicizations). He reasons:

if it is to consider the properties [*Eigenschaften*] of all things, then it [ontology<sub>Th</sub>] has as an object nothing but a thing [*Ding*] in general, . . . thus no determinate object [*Gegenstand*]. . .

. . . the science of all basic concepts and basic propositions upon which all of our pure cognitions of reason rest is ontology. But this science will not be properly called ontology [in its literal sense].<sup>13</sup> For to have a thing in general as an object is as much as to have no object and to treat only of a cognition, as in logic. . . this science has no object that would be distinguishable from the essence of reason, but rather it considers understanding and reason itself, . . . the most fitting name would be transcendental philosophy.

(MMron, 29:784–6)

Ontology qua transcendental philosophy is an ontology secured on the basis of a critique of pure reason. As such it is opposed to an “ontology without a critique,” an “ontology that was not a transcendental philosophy,” which could not be a strict science precisely because it lacks the kind of grounding principle that only the critique can provide (MMron, 29:785).

Notably, Kant seems of two minds about whether ontology is extensionally equivalent to transcendental philosophy or constitutes a proper part thereof. Sometimes, both possibilities are suggested within the space of just a couple of paragraphs. In the *Metaphysik von Schön* (c.1789–91), for example, Kant introduces ontology following a broad construal of transcendental philosophy. The latter investigates the principles of pure intuition and concepts. It therefore consists of two parts: transcendental aesthetic and transcendental logic. Both parts are said to “constitute

<sup>13</sup> The word “ontology,” in terms of its etymology, “just means the *science of beings*, or . . . the *general doctrine of being*” (ML2, 28:542).

transcendental philosophy or ontology” or “pure [as opposed to applied] metaphysics.” A few paragraphs later, however, while summarizing ontology as “the system of our pure concepts of the understanding,” Kant seems to limit its scope to that which is delineated by transcendental logic (MvS, 28:470–4).<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in the *Metaphysik L<sub>2</sub>* (c.1790–1), transcendental philosophy is defined as “the philosophy of principles, of the elements of human cognition *a priori*.” Insofar as these principles are divided into those of “*a priori* sensibility” (space and time) and those of “intellectual human *a priori* cognition” (basic pure intellectual concepts or categories), it includes both transcendental aesthetic and transcendental logic. Ontology, as the first part of metaphysics, “contains the summation of all our pure concepts that we can have *a priori* of things.” But the reference to “pure concepts” in this sentence is not immediately clear. It may refer merely to pure *intellectual* concepts, or to *space* and *time* in addition, since these are called “concepts” as well. At the same time, Kant suggests that both transcendental philosophy and ontology may be limited to a system of pure intellectual concepts and principles: “Transcendental philosophy is the system of all our pure *a priori* cognitions; customarily it is called *ontology*. . . . It embraces all pure concepts of the understanding and all principles of the understanding or of reason” (ML<sub>2</sub>, 28:541–2).

Operative in these texts are two senses of “transcendental philosophy” that differ in scope. It represents either a broad system of all the basic elements of our cognition *a priori*, which include space and time as well as purely intellectual concepts/principles, or a narrow one that only includes the latter. If ontology is extensionally equivalent to transcendental philosophy, it may then be taken either in the broad or in the narrow sense. Alternatively, it may be a system of intellectual concepts/principles that represents only one part of the broadly construed transcendental philosophy.

The fact that we can read all these interpretations into Kant’s remarks about ontology and transcendental philosophy in the aforementioned lectures is understandable, if we keep in view the relevant historical developments. As I pointed out in the first section of this chapter, when Wolff and Baumgarten treated ontology as the science that considers the predicates of being *qua* being or being in general, they had in mind an expansive inventory of predicates that included *space* and *time* along with those which Kant would separate out as basic pure intellectual concepts.

<sup>14</sup> The translation is mine.

Kant's attempt to clarify the nature of ontology as a transcendental philosophy goes hand in hand with his search for a principled way to order all those supposed predicates in a system where each of them is assigned to its proper place. He would eventually discover that only a critique of pure reason can supply the requisite principle for this systematic ordering, and hence make ontology possible as a science. As he writes,

there is a whole science of sheer pure concepts of the understanding. But the question arises: how are the *a priori* cognitions possible? The science that answers this question is called *critique of pure reason*. . . . The first and most important question in ontology is: how are *a priori* cognitions possible? This question must be solved first, for the whole of ontology is based on the solution of this question. (ML2, 28:541–2; see MDoh, 28:650–1)

The critique in question is distinct from, though intimately tied to, ontology qua transcendental philosophy. It is “that philosophy which employs itself with the possibility of the *a priori* cognitions in our reason,” whereas transcendental philosophy, “also called ontology,” is “the system of those cognitions themselves, . . . which contain the elements of pure reason,” and is “the product of the critique of pure reason” (MK3, 29:949; see MDoh, 28:617, 679). In this way, the critique is “the complete idea of transcendental philosophy” but is “not yet this science itself” (A13–14/B27–8). With this distinction, Kant sometimes divides the critique, not transcendental philosophy, into transcendental aesthetics and transcendental logic. As for transcendental philosophy, which “is ontology,” it is the system built on the twelve “elementary concepts” listed in Kant’s final table of categories, concepts that are, to be sure, first *discovered* through the antecedent critique but that are fully *expounded* only in ontology/transcendental philosophy itself (MDoh, 28:651–2, 679).

I take this account of ontology as transcendental philosophy to be Kant’s official position. The reason why he makes so few references to it in the *Critique* is – as he suggests in *Metaphysik K<sub>2</sub>* while explaining the decision not to adopt the standard expository order of ontology in his published writings – his concern not to present, not a system of transcendental philosophy (ontology) as such, but a discussion of the critique presupposed thereby (MK2, 28:714). After all, putting forward this critique is the most urgent and pivotal part of Kant’s effort to break away from the old practice of doing ontology “dogmatically,” without examining the *a priori* origin of its concepts or propositions, and to approach it “critically” instead, by considering how the pure concepts and synthetic *a priori* propositions contained therein are possible (MDoh, 28:650–1).



To put this contrast between dogmatic and Critical approaches to ontology in perspective, Kant explains in a 1792 letter to J. S. Beck that the whole science of “ontology as *immanent* thinking” (i.e. thinking by means of concepts whose “objective reality . . . can be securely established”) emerges from his “plans for a system of metaphysics to handle” the difficulty of explaining the possibility of experience in general, by beginning with the categories (Br, 11:313–14). This genesis of ontology as a system of categories and the associated a priori principles, which can be uncovered with certainty only through an antecedent critique, at the same time limit its domain to the objects of possible experience. By Kant’s own account, this limitation represents his signature contribution to the history of ontology. We could have spared ourselves from the tedious “editing [*Bearbeitung*]” of the system of ontological concepts and principles, he says, “if only we had borne in mind the rules for [their] right use . . . for purposes of empirical cognition” (FM, 20:260, modified translation).

The right use of ontological concepts/principles is the immanent as opposed to transcendent use, the latter pertaining to the supersensible. In this restrictive notion of ontology, I shall argue next, lies the key to understanding Kant’s chief motivation for making it the first part of metaphysics.

### III. Ontology and the Possibility of Metaphysics

Above I suggested that, while Kant had already started seeing ontology as “transcendental” from c.1770, the relevant sense of this term would turn out to differ significantly from his definition thereof in the *Critique*. A brief study of the difference will give us a chance to see that Kant’s critical treatment of ontology, whereby it is transformed into transcendental philosophy<sub>K</sub>, is vital to his greater plan of securing metaphysics as a science.

For openers, note that the notion of ontology as a system of pure intellectual concepts has the following implication: Space and time, as the elements of sensibility a priori, are no longer part of metaphysics. Kant first confirmed this exclusion in the *Inaugural Dissertation* (1770). There metaphysics is defined as “the philosophy which contains the first principles of the use of the pure understanding [*intellectus*],” while the “propaedeutic science” presupposed thereby explicates the distinction between sensible and intellectual cognitions. Sensible cognition hinges on space and time (as principles of sensibility). Intellectual cognition revolves around pure concepts that are “given by the very nature of the understanding” and abstracted “from laws inherent in the mind,” e.g. possibility,

substance and cause (MSI, 2:393–5; see Br, 10:98). These concepts are said to have a “dogmatic” end, whereby “the general principles of the pure understanding, such as are displayed in ontology or in rational psychology, lead to some paradigm” that serves as a common measure for all other realities. This paradigm is “noumenal perfection,” conceivable only by pure intellect (MSI, 2:395–6). It is exactly in this way that the *intellectus*, with the concepts drawn from within its own depths, has “real use” (MSI, 2:393, 411).

The working notion of ontology in these remarks is still a far cry from the Critically rendered one. According to the latter notion, ontology is only the propaedeutic part of metaphysics and cannot impinge upon the supersensible, the latter being the aim of metaphysics proper. Rather, it is a system of concepts and principles of the understanding *only insofar as they refer to objects of possible experience*. Otherwise, an ontology would be impossible as a system of pure cognitions a priori. But this was not Kant’s view in around 1770. If he recognized then that “extremely mistaken conclusions emerge if we apply the basic concepts of sensibility [space and time] to something that is not at all an object of sense” (Br, 10:98), he had yet to find out the same about the intellectual concepts that make up ontology. To this end, it would not be enough to say that these concepts are not sensible but must be abstracted a priori from certain inherent laws of the mind, or that ontology is “transcendental logic (subjective)” in the sense I explained earlier. Rather, as Kant soon came to reckon, he would have to derive these concepts in a way that could account for their objective validity. As he described the situation in his famous 1772 letter to Herz,

In my dissertation I was content to explain the nature of intellectual representations in a merely negative way, namely, to state that they were not modifications of the soul brought about by the object. However, I silently passed over the further question of how a representation that refers to an object without being in any way affected by it can be possible. . . . [or] as to how my understanding may, completely *a priori*, form for itself concepts of things with which concepts the facts should necessarily agree. (Br, 10:130–1)

It is unclear what kind of “objects” are to be represented by the “intellectual representations” in question. Are they noumena as per the *Dissertation*, or phenomena (objects of experience), or both?<sup>15</sup> Regardless, one thing will eventually become clear to Kant. Insofar as ontology is a system of such

<sup>15</sup> On controversies over this question, see Allison (2013), pp. 98–100.

intellectual representations, its prospect as a secure science requires that the objects be limited to those of possible experience.

Thus, ontology will have to be “transcendental” in a sense that goes beyond the definition I mentioned in Section II. If according to the latter a cognition counts as transcendental just in case it is *a priori* and no sensation is mixed therein, Kant now has a more stringent criterion. As he puts it in the *Critique*,

not every *a priori* cognition must be called transcendental, but only that by means of which we cognize that and how certain representations (intuition or concepts) are applied entirely *a priori*, or are possible . . . Hence . . . only the cognition that these representations are not of empirical origin at all and the possibility that they can nevertheless be related *a priori* to objects of experience can be called transcendental. (A56/B80–1)

Accordingly, if in some of his metaphysics lectures from the mid-1770s onward Kant continues to treat ontology as either identical to “transcendental logic” or at least presupposing the latter as part of the critique that undergirds ontology qua transcendental philosophy, he has a new idea of transcendental logic in mind, which comes from the “expectation” of there being pure concepts of the understanding that are not of empirical origin and yet “may be related to objects *a priori*” (A57/B81).

Understandably, then, part of Kant’s discussions of ontology in those lectures is the quest for the principle (*principium*) by which to derive the concepts of pure understanding in a way that both ensures their completeness and limits their valid use to objects of possible experience. In the *Metaphysik L*, manuscript, for instance, having introduced ontology as a transcendental logic that investigates the concepts of pure understanding, Kant highlights two things about those concepts. First, they are “the transcendental elements of the pure understanding that are deduced [*abgezogenen*] from four functions of judgment,” organized under the headings of quantity, quality, relation and modality. The resulting “system” of concepts is guaranteed to be complete and so is preferable to (Aristotle’s or Baumgarten’s) mere “aggregate” of categories, regarding which “one could not know whether there were still more.” Second, the concepts and principles arising from them can only have “immanent” (as opposed to “transcendent”) use with respect to objects of possible experience, although in terms of origin they are not drawn from experience (ML1, 28:185–6).<sup>16</sup> These two points together define Kant’s “splendid discovery” of a true

<sup>16</sup> See MVol, 28:363–4, 390–92; MvS, 28:471–5; ML2, 28:546–8; MDoh, 28:617, 651–2; MK2, 28:710, 713–4; MK3, 28:823; MMron, 29: 785; MK3, 29:960, 987–8.

system of the basic concepts and principles of pure understanding (MVol, 28:396).

A reader would be disappointed who wished to search in the lectures for a substantively more detailed explanation than the one offered in the *Critique* of how to map the categories onto specific logical functions of judgment. One may nevertheless find it instructive to look at how Kant positions his account of the possibility of pure concepts of the understanding vis-à-vis three alternatives: the empiricism represented by Aristotle and Locke; the Platonist nativism found in Leibniz and Crusius; and Wolff's alleged failure to take up the issue in the first place. In so doing, Kant highlights the distinction between *quaestio facti* and *quaestio iuris* about the concepts in question and argues that, to answer the latter question, those concepts must be treated as acquired originally and a priori.<sup>17</sup> That is, only this original acquisition, through "as it were a system of the *epigenesis* of pure reason," can secure their objective validity and explain their necessary agreement with experience (B167). In this way, to explain the possibility of pure concepts of the understanding – an explanation called "deduction" – is at the same time to prove their validity (ML2, 28:548).

If the deduction just mentioned is characteristic of ontology qua transcendental philosophy<sub>K</sub>, it is also crucial to Kant's novel take on the relation between ontology and the rest of metaphysics. As I mentioned in Section I, he follows the tradition of dividing metaphysics into ontology and metaphysics proper. But this division now has a new meaning:

Metaphysics or the system of the pure cognitions of reason divides into two main sections:

- I. Transcendental metaphysics, or that part of metaphysics which exhibits elementary concepts in order to cognize *a priori* objects which can be given: This system of metaphysical cognitions is called ontology and rests on dissection of reason according to all the elementary concepts contained in it, e.g., magnitude, quality, substance, cause, effect, etc.
- II. Metaphysics proper <*metaphysica propria*>, as metaphysics is called when it is applied to objects themselves. (MK3, 29:956)

Kant also adopts the custom of treating ontology as propaedeutic to metaphysics proper, but again with his own reasons for doing so. By his

<sup>17</sup> MVol, 28:371–80; MvS, 28:466–8; ML2, 28:542; MDoh, 28:618–20; MK3, 29:949–59.

analysis, the possibility of metaphysics as a science relies on the concepts supplied by ontology. As he explains, “if there were not [a priori concepts as are exhibited in ontology], then *metaphysics would not at all be possible*,” and it is by virtue of such concepts that “we can expound metaphysics as a system” (ML2, 28: 546). Here is one way this relation of dependence plays out:

The objects of ontology can be given in experience and are cognitions of the understanding. But there are also cognitions of reason, which cannot be given in experience. These arise from the cognitions of the understanding, but reason extends them so that they never can be given in experience. It does this by giving them absolute totality. [We thereby obtain the ideas of reason for cosmology and theology.] (MMron, 29:875)

Given that the supersensible is the true destiny of metaphysics, the *point* of affirming ontology as a transcendental science in the Critical Kantian sense lies precisely in its proaedeutic status.

Metaphysics is concentrated in the transcendent use of reason, because the most interesting objects are there, and it finds no satisfaction in experience. We would not take the trouble to prove and dissect principles – and to produce a science [i.e. ontology] – for the sake of the immanent use of reason unless this seemed to prepare us to climb up to the ideas. (MMron, 29:767)

This account of the relation between ontology and metaphysics proper, I hasten to add as a concluding note, also serves to breathe new life into the Wolffian notions of *metaphysica naturalis* and *metaphysica artificialis*. If the fact of *metaphysica naturalis* tells us that human reason inevitably strives toward the supersensible, only by investigating the possibility of *metaphysica artificialis* can we determine to what (if any) extent and by what means the destined endeavor may be satisfied. Establishing ontology as transcendental philosophy<sub>K</sub> is the preparatory part of this investigation whereby ontology, as “the first stage of metaphysics,” is restricted to the realm of “objects knowable to us merely as appearances, not as things-in-themselves” – just so that human reason can advance toward the supersensible through subsequent stages of metaphysics without the kind of errors that plagued past systems (FM, 20:286–96; also 316–20, 337–8).