UC San Diego

UC San Diego Previously Published Works

Title

What real progress has metaphysics made since the time of Kant? Kant and the metaphysics of grounding

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4p15d8q8

Journal

Synthese, 198(Suppl 13)

ISSN

1111-4924

Author

Watkins, Eric

Publication Date

2021-06-01

DOI

10.1007/s11229-019-02180-2

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made Since the Time of Kant?: Kant and the Metaphysics of Grounding

Eric Watkins (UCSD)

Introduction

Admittedly, at first glance, Kant's conception of the subject matter of traditional metaphysics would appear to have nothing in common with the subject matter of metaphysics at work in contemporary analytic philosophy. For according to Kant traditional metaphysics is ultimately concerned with God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul, whereas many recent analytic metaphysicians express little interest in these topics, instead conceiving of (much of) their subject matter in terms of what they call grounding, which is often characterized as a special kind of asymmetrical, transitive, irreflexive dependence relation that is applicable to a wide range of subject matters.[1] A ***first*** main claim I argue for in this paper is that appearances are misleading in this case since both Kant and contemporary metaphysicians are in fact focused on a similar, perhaps even the very same, kind of relation whose nature and implications they are both attempting to describe.

If Kant and contemporary metaphysicians agree about the basic subject matter of metaphysics, it is tempting to ask what real progress metaphysics has made since the time of Kant. The enormous expenditure of intellectual effort over the past several decades has undoubtedly been extremely useful. Contemporary metaphysicians have helped us to understand more clearly the nature of modality as well as the significance of an extramodal dimension to a wide range of issues, and the distinctions they have drawn along the way both sharpen our focus and allow us to specify in greater detail what our metaphysical options are. If there are more options

than we had seen before, then clearly we have made progress, and if we can also see the various options more clearly, then that is even more progress. The ***second*** main claim I want to argue for is that the contemporary focus on grounding allows us to make progress in understanding Kant insofar as it can be used to bring much-needed clarity to what Kant means when he refers to a condition.[2] Given how central that notion is to Kant's entire project, attaining clarity about it would be quite useful for better understanding Kant's position. And one might think that making progress in understanding Kant is an important kind of progress as well.

At the same time, it would be premature to infer that the progress contemporary metaphysicians have made could justify one in finally leaving Kant behind as a once useful, but now thoroughly superseded figure of merely antiquarian interest. For Kant's criticisms of the pretensions of dogmatic metaphysics have still not been sufficiently appreciated among practitioners of metaphysics today along at least two dimensions. First, though Kant conceives of philosophy at a high level of generality, his mode of argument on many especially important issues is not "short", but rather "long".[3] That is, in these cases he does not start by defining the weight-bearing concepts in the most general of terms and then put them to use in "short" arguments that would immediately support his most general claims. Instead, he consistently begins by analyzing specific issues, attending to what is unique to them, and then uses the details that come to light to construct "long" arguments for specific claims. It is only when those specific

issues are all viewed together that he can consider whether they involve any general features that could justify more general conclusions. For example, Kant bases his main arguments for Transcendental Idealism (in the Transcendental Aesthetic and the Antinomy of Pure Reason) not on a generic notion of representation, but rather on features that are specific to the sensible intuitions we happen to have, namely space and time.[4] And it is only on the basis of these specific issues that he can then make claims about what we can and cannot cognize in general. The method that Kant uses in developing his own philosophy thus recommends that one not argue solely at the most generic level, without first determining that all relevant particular instances support the general claims, nor that one either concentrate on one specific topic to the exclusion of others or focus only on several specific topics without also attending to the general issues of which they are instances. What his practice recommends is instead a comprehensive perspective that is at once specific and general, but where the more specific receives methodological priority over the more general.

Second, precisely because Kant lived through an extended period of contentious metaphysical debate that many viewed as unproductive or even scandalous, he came to see the value of stepping back from first-order metaphysical claims to identify the conditions of the possibility of establishing substantive cognition of the objects of traditional metaphysics and to analyze the nature and scope of our different cognitive faculties, such as sensibility, understanding, and reason so as to determine whether they

can meet the requisite conditions. These reflections led Kant to be attentive to the difference between the explanatory demands that motivate a complete metaphysical account of the world, and the cognitive limitations that would prevent human beings from ever being able to satisfy those demands in full. That is, even if we have a clear sense of what an exhaustive explanation of the world would be like, it does not follow that we could ever adequately support such an explanation. As a result, Kant comes to the conclusion that claims concerning certain metaphysical objects outstrip our capacity to cognize them.

Now many contemporary metaphysicians have certainly followed Kant in stepping back from first-order metaphysical claims to reflect on the nature of the claims that philosophers (including metaphysicians) make.[5] However, some seem at times not to have reflected sufficiently on whether we have substantive reason to assert the actuality of at least some of the metaphysical possibilities whose conceptual space they have devoted their time to exploring. The issue of concern is not so much modal epistemology in general, as it is that certain claims involving grounding relations are asserted as basic self-evident principles, or, to put it in Kantian terms, as analytic truths, when they are in fact synthetic and, what's more, lack sufficient justification. This is all the more problematic when these claims concern the objects of traditional metaphysics, which are of perennial concern to human beings. The result is a metaphysical practice that can *seem* to be as dogmatic as the views held by Kant's immediate predecessors. The ***third***

main claim I argue for is that even if contemporary metaphysicians have made significant progress in many areas and on many topics, they may not have made so much progress that there is nothing of importance left in Kant from which they could learn.

In the first section of this paper, I describe (1) how Kant's detailed critical analyses of the arguments of traditional metaphysics are instances of long rather than short arguments by showing how each one makes crucial use of a specific notion (composition, causation, and representation) that involves an asymmetrical metaphysical dependence relation, and (2) how these analyses can be generalized in a way that illustrates how our cognitive limitations make it impossible to satisfy reason's demands for complete explanation, demands that find expression in the conclusions of the arguments of traditional metaphysics. In the second section, I describe some of the motivations for introducing the notion of grounding that is at the heart of current debates in contemporary metaphysics, and point to some of its defining characteristics. Specifically, I describe some of the contexts in which grounding is often thought to be present, note the features that are typically (though not universally) thought constitutive of it–its asymmetry, transitivity, irreflexivity, and direction of dependence–and consider ways in which these claims can be called into question. In the third section, I undertake an extremely abbreviated comparison and contrast of Kant's perspective on metaphysics and central features of contemporary discussions of grounding relations, so as to support the three main claims just mentioned. In this way,

I aim to offer a sense of how contemporary metaphysics has made progress in some respects, while still allowing for room for more progress in others, especially insofar as Kant has important insights into the fundamental limits of our metaphysical practices.

1. Kant on the extension of cognition in metaphysics

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*'s Transcendental Dialectic, Kant discusses the claims of traditional metaphysics in the hopes of determining whether such claims could ever amount to synthetic a priori cognition. In the Transcendental Aesthetic and Transcendental Analytic Kant provides an analysis of how sensibility and the understanding contribute to satisfying two important conditions on cognition (the givenness condition and the thought condition). Specifically, through sensible intuition objects can be given and through discursive concepts objects can be thought. Accordingly, if an object is both given and thought through these representations, then we can have a cognition of it, since a cognition, for Kant, involves an awareness of an object (meeting the givenness condition) as having some positive general features (meeting the thought condition).[6] In the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant then investigates whether reason can extend our cognition to objects that are not given immediately in intuition. That is, even if I do not immediately perceive an object, one might think that reason could nonetheless infer its existence from objects that are immediately given. Accordingly, insofar as traditional metaphysics lays claim to cognition of objects that are not immediately

given, the question the Dialectic attempts to answer is whether reason, through its inferences, can extend our cognition in the field of metaphysics to objects that are not given through our senses.

Now Kant takes traditional metaphysicians to have given a positive answer to this question insofar as they offer arguments concerning a wide range of objects not immediately given to sense, including God, the world, and the soul. For example, they often think that one can infer from the existence of representations to the existence of the soul, where the soul is understood as a simple immaterial substance, for it can seem that one needs something to serve as the subject of those representations, something that is responsible for thinking them. Often, they also think it appropriate to infer from the existence of contingent objects in the world to the existence of God as a necessary cause of such objects, since it can seem that the existence of something contingent requires a cause that is itself not contingent. Finally, some also find irresistible the move from the existence of a composite (e.g., the world) to the existence of the simples that must compose it, for it can seem that a whole cannot exist without ultimate parts.[7] In short, traditional metaphysicians often think that even though we do not directly experience the existence of the soul, God, or simples, one can still feel warranted in inferring the existence of such entities, because something that we do experience depends on them and they seem to explain something that stands in need of explanation.[8]

Now Kant's main goal in the Transcendental Dialectic is to show that these inferences are not in fact capable of delivering cognition of the objects of traditional metaphysics and thus that reason cannot extend our cognition by means of them. For he argues that the conclusion does not in fact follow in each case, at least not without significant qualification, because each inference involves some illegitimate step. To support this contention, Kant offers a complex diagnosis of the fallacious step and of what the illusion is that naturally and inevitably tempts one into making it. At the same time, Kant's intent is not purely negative in the Dialectic, for he agrees with traditional metaphysicians that each of these inferences *starts* with something that cannot stand on its own and that therefore calls out in some way for explanation. Thus he grants that representations cannot in fact float free of mental subjects, even if it does not follow that we can cognize the mental subject in question as a simple immaterial substance. What's more, he himself insists that a contingent event requires a cause involving necessity, even if that cause might not be God (as traditional understood). Finally, he readily acknowledges that a composite entity really does depend on its parts, even if those parts might not be simple, as the argument contends. Thus, whatever conclusions one might legitimately draw from the arguments put forward by traditional metaphysicians, they fall short of the kind of specific, positive claims that such metaphysicians have in mind when asserting cognition of the soul (as a simple immaterial substance), God (as

an *ens realissimum*) or freedom (as an uncaused cause of a series of appearances).[9]

To understand in more detail Kant's complex attitude toward the claims of traditional metaphysics, it is useful to consider his discussion of the arguments that support these claims. For the sake of brevity, I discuss only the Second and Third Antinomies and the First Paralogism, given that analogous considerations pertain to Kant's treatment of the remaining arguments in the Dialectic. The Second Antinomy concerns the existence of simples, with the Thesis arguing that simple parts must exist and the Antithesis arguing against the existence of simples. The argument in favor of simples is based on two main ideas: first, that a whole necessarily depends on its parts and second, that if one removes all composition, the parts that remain must be simple. The argument against simples is based on the infinite divisibility of space, for if a simple entity is spatially extended (and an object we could experience), then it must be divisible and thus cannot be simple.

Now it is striking that both arguments turn, either explicitly or implicitly, on composition relations. The Thesis argument depends on composition explicitly because it must be possible to remove all composition from a composite given that composition is a merely accidental relation between parts and because the simples are supposed to compose the whole. The Antithesis argument also turns on composition, though more implicitly, by presupposing that because space itself is infinitely divisible, whatever

occupies space must also be infinitely divisible into the parts that compose it. And in both arguments, though he does not advertise it at all, Kant understands the composition relation as an asymmetrical, transitive metaphysical dependence relation. For the whole depends on its proper parts, without those parts in turn depending on the whole, and if these parts themselves have further parts, then those further parts are parts of the original whole as well.

Since Kant accepts this account of composition and acknowledges that a spatially extended object must depend on the parts that compose it, how does he avoid the contradiction between the conclusions of the Thesis and Antithesis arguments? Kant's resolution of the Second Antinomy is naturally quite complicated, as it involves Transcendental Idealism among much else, but for current purposes, two points are crucial. First, at a certain level of generality, the conflict between the Thesis and Antithesis positions is about whether the series of composition relations that a whole involves is finite or infinite. If the series of division into parts terminates at some point, then it must do so with something that is simple (the Thesis), whereas if it does not, then, since composition goes all the way down, the whole must be infinitely divisible (the Antithesis). Second, Kant maintains that given our cognitive limitations, we cannot cognize whether the series of composition relations is finite or infinite. We cannot cognize it as infinite, because we can only ever cognize a finite number of divisions and thus a finite number of parts. But we cannot cognize it as finite either, because whatever finite parts are given to

us at any particular moment in time must be in space and since space is infinitely divisible, whatever parts one cognizes at a particular moment in time must be divisible as well. Thus with respect to no particular part could we ever say that we are cognizing the terminal member.[10] (Note that it does not follow from this argument that there cannot *be* simples, but only that if there are, we cannot cognize them. Transcendental Idealism thus does figure into the resolution in a central way.) Therefore, we cannot cognize what is asserted by either the Thesis or the Antithesis, which resolves the conflict between them and prevents us from having the kind of metaphysical cognition that the traditional metaphysician claims to be able to support.

The structure of the Third Antinomy is similar to that of the Second. Its Thesis asserts, while its Antithesis denies freedom. The argument in favor of the Thesis turns on the impossibility of causal determinism being able to provide a truly sufficient explanation, while the argument in favor of the Antithesis turns on the impossibility of a free, or uncaused cause taking place in time, since every event in time must be caused to happen when it does and thus cannot be uncaused.[11] Both arguments clearly turn on features of causality, which Kant understands, again without explicitly noting or arguing for it, as an asymmetrical, transitive metaphysical dependence relation. For an effect depends on its cause, without the cause depending on the effect, and, as Kant understands it, if a causes b and b causes c, then a causes c. The resolution of the Third Antinomy is also similar to that of the Second. The conflict between the Thesis and the Antithesis is about whether

the series of causes that bring an event about is finite, which would entail freedom (Thesis), or infinite, which would entail determinism (Antithesis). The resolution affirms the truth of determinism, but only if it is restricted to what we can cognize, and therefore allows for the possibility of freedom, but only among objects that we cannot cognize. Without such an acknowledgement of the limitations of our cognition, determinism would apply to everything and freedom would be impossible. With such an acknowledgment of humility, we cannot have cognition of freedom and thus cannot have metaphysical cognition in this particular instance.

The Paralogisms are both similar to and different from the Antinomies. They differ in their subject matter—objects of inner sense vs. objects of outer sense —in their formal structure—categorical syllogisms for an unopposed dogmatic claim vs. pairs of arguments for contradictory claims based on the assumption of Transcendental Realism—and in the notion that the argument depends on—composition and causality vs. thinking/representing. However, much like those presented in the Antinomies, the arguments discussed in the Paralogisms make crucial use of a particular relation, namely thinking or representing, that Kant, without explicitly noting it, takes to be an asymmetrical metaphysical dependence relation.[12] For Kant holds, as does the rational psychologist, that all representations depend on a mental subject that thinks them, but also that a mental subject does not in turn depend on its representations. And the arguments of the Paralogisms turn on precisely this notion, since they attempt to infer from some feature of

representations—their accidentality and unity—to some feature of the I—its substantiality and simplicity—on the basis of what is required for a representation to be adequately supported. They are also similar, at least in broad outline, with respect to their resolution. For Kant wants to object that we cannot in fact cognize the features of the soul that the paralogistic arguments attribute to it. For all we know, the mental subject, or I, that thinks representations is an accident of a more fundamental substance, or is not in fact a simple thing, but a collection of things, and without an intuition of the I that could decide the matter, the arguments offered in support of them cannot exclude the scenarios that would need to be excluded. Thus, as in the case of the Second and Third Antinomies, our cognitive limitations prevent us from extending our cognition to the objects of traditional metaphysics since they are not given immediately in intuition and the inferences that would take us to them trade on fallacy and illusion.

As insightful as Kant's critical analyses of these metaphysical arguments might be, he does not leave it at that. In addition, he steps back from the details of each case and looks to see what general features they might have in common and what might unify them. One point he notes is that all of these arguments make use of a real conditioning relation between a condition and what is conditioned by it.[13] Thus, he calls parts conditions of the whole that they compose, a cause the condition of its effect, and the I that thinks a condition of its representations.[14] Second, Kant notes that each argument starts with some conditioned feature, and then draws on these

conditioning relations to infer to something unconditioned, that is, something that is not conditioned in the way in which the conditioned items are. In the case of the Paralogisms, the unconditioned is the soul (as a simple immaterial substance), since there is nothing prior to the I think on which it depends to think its representations. In the case of the Antinomies, the unconditioned could be the terminal member of the series, that is, simples and freedom, since a simple is not conditioned with respect to its composition and a free action is not caused to act in the way that it does. But note that Kant thinks that the unconditioned could also be the infinite series of conditions itself, that is the infinite whole of parts and causes, since such a whole contains all relevant conditions and thus cannot leave out any further conditions that could condition it.

That Kant introduces this notion of a condition and notes that all of these arguments infer to something unconditioned has systematic importance for his larger philosophical project. For it allows him not only to characterize reason as a spontaneous faculty that seeks the totality of conditions for what is conditioned, and thus the unconditioned, but also to see that in doing so reason demands complete explanations, that is, explanations that include everything which is part of an explanation and that terminate with something that admits of no further explanation. Reason can be satisfied with nothing less. At the same time, as Kant's analysis of the arguments of traditional metaphysics reveals, what we can in principle cognize falls short of reason's demands. That is, reason demands a complete

explanation, and because reason is the highest, most authoritative faculty we have, we would be dissatisfied with anything that could not withstand its criticisms.[15] At the same time, the fact that reason demands something does not entail that we are also able to satisfy them. It turns out that our cognition is limited to whatever is given in space and time, which is always conditioned, and for that reason our (theoretical) cognition necessarily falls short of what reason demands, namely cognition of what is unconditioned.

2. Grounding

After the rise and fall of logical positivism, which used verificationist principles to dismiss metaphysical claims as meaningless, and after the ascent and inevitable decline of Quine's taste for ontologically sparse desert landscapes, which allowed only an extreme nominalist ontology, analytic metaphysicians reasserted themselves in a more robust way by insisting on the importance of modal claims, which were typically cashed out in terms of possible worlds and made use of notions such as supervenience. As useful as these modal notions proved to be in certain contexts, after a while they came to be thought of as insufficient to characterize some important metaphysical issues, which find expression in locutions such as *because of*, *in virtue of*, *determines*, *makes up*, *gives rise to*, *generates*, etc. For example, we are inclined to say that an action is loved by the gods *in virtue of* being pious, that glass is fragile *because* of the arrangement of the molecules that make it up, that if an act is wrong, it must be *due to* some

feature it has, that being in a certain brain state *gives rise to* or *generates* a certain mental state, etc. While one might try to explain these claims in modal terms, success has been elusive, in part because supervenience is a reflexive and non-symmetric relation, while the relations these locutions express are irreflexive and asymmetrical. The clearest problem case would be one that relates two necessary truths, where the one depends on the other for its truth. For example, (A or ~A or B) is true because (A or ~A) is true. Or if the gods necessarily love pious actions, then what the gods love and what is pious will be coextensive in all possible worlds. As a result, modal terms cannot capture the fact that the gods love pious actions because they are pious. As soon as it became clear that modal terms could not capture this difference, it became necessary to look to other resources, and this is one important source of interest in the relation that has come to be called grounding in the literature (though there are other terminological proposals, such as “building”).[16]

Much attention has been devoted over the past couple decades to analyzing and describing the precise features of grounding. It is generally agreed that grounding is an asymmetrical dependence relation, since one thing, what is grounded, depends in some way on another, the ground, without the other in turn depending on it. How this notion of dependence is to be understood is still a matter of debate. If it is not taken as a primitive, it is sometimes thought to involve determination. Typically, though not always, grounding is also thought to be transitive and irreflexive, so that grounding is

often taken to be a strict ordering relation. Further, grounding is most often characterized as explanatory and as hyperintensional. That is, it is generally agreed that a ground must explain, at least in part, what is grounded by it by using extra-modal terms.

Though vigorous debate about the existence and precise features of the grounding relation continues unabated, two issues seem to be particularly important in the present context, one concerning the nature and direction of dependence that grounding involves, the other concerning the unity of grounding. To see what is at issue with respect to the nature and direction of dependence, it can be useful to consider the relations that obtain between proper parts and a whole. It is standard to define proper part-whole relations as being irreflexive, asymmetrical, and transitive. Since, as we have seen, grounding relations also have these features, the part-whole relation satisfies several conditions that are usually viewed as necessary for a grounding relation. But note that simply specifying the proper part-whole relations among various entities does not decide what depends on what. For one could maintain that the whole depends on its parts, as the pluralist maintains, but one might instead maintain that the parts depend on the whole, as the monist maintains.[17] As a result, the notion of an asymmetrical dependence that is contained in that of grounding would seem to be what is required to distinguish these two options. Those part-whole relations in which the direction of the dependence is settled as the pluralist maintains would view *composition* as the relevant grounding relation, while those part-whole

relations in which the direction is settled as the monist would have it, would view *partitioning* as the relevant grounding relation.

Now, skeptics of grounding might counter that, at least as far as part-whole relations are concerned, one can distinguish between the positions of the monists and the pluralists without invoking distinct grounding relations, namely by appealing to the fundamental and the derivative.[18] For example, a defender of pluralism might assert that the parts are fundamental and that the whole is derivative (or non-fundamental), just as the monist might claim that the whole is fundamental and the parts derivative. That is, rather than building dependence into a strictly ordered part-whole relation so that it then satisfies the conditions of grounding, one can dispense with the dependence relation, and thus with grounding as well, by introducing a new primitive, fundamentality. And if this kind of move can be generalized, one could deny the existence of all grounding relations. In this way, one can, it seems, be a skeptic about grounding, but still be able to explain the “in virtue of” claims that initially motivated the introduction of the grounding relation.

A second issue that has been discussed in some detail concerns the unity of grounding. Advocates of grounding think that grounding relations are relevant to a wide range of topics (physical composition, ethical voluntarism, mental reductionism, metaphysical naturalism). Given this rich diversity, it is natural to ask how these different grounding relations are related to each other. One might think that they are all simply distinct notions: composition is distinct from determination, which is distinct from

generation, and so on. On this construal, grounding$_1$ is distinct from grounding$_2$, which is distinct from grounding$_3$, etc. However, it is quite natural to think that some more general Grounding relation unifies the different instances. Yet there are different ways in which one might describe the unity of such instances. Perhaps Grounding is the genus, and grounding$_1$, grounding$_2$, and grounding$_3$ are species thereof, just as polar, grizzly, and brown are different species of bear. But perhaps Grounding is a determinable, and grounding$_1$, grounding$_2$, and grounding$_3$ are determinates thereof, just as red, yellow, and blue are determinate colors. Either way, on this view, the different particular instances of grounding have something significant in common, namely some close relation to Grounding, which in some way unifies the different instances.

But again, one might be skeptical about Grounding (if not about grounding). What is the point of positing Grounding in addition to grounding$_1$, grounding$_2$, and grounding$_3$? What distinct explanatory work could Grounding accomplish? If one accepts the genus-species account of the Grounding-grounding$_x$ relation, the genus might be a useful device for notational purposes or for our mental economy, but it could seem to do no explanatory work, leaving one with no reason to posit it as something distinct from the various particular grounding$_x$ relations. An analogous point holds if one accepts the determinable/determination account of the Grounding-grounding relation. In short, if the devil is in the details, there seems to be no reason to

posit a more generic Grounding relation, since it could not help with any of the details.

Though this description of the contemporary discussion of grounding is highly selective and quite brief, I hope that it is still clear that there is a genuine phenomenon—extra-modal dependence or “in virtue of” relations—that can be seen as central to a wide range of important philosophical topics. One should also have a clear sense of the defining features of the grounding relation, since it is often thought to be an asymmetric, transitive, irreflexive metaphysical dependence relation that is hyperintensional and explanatorily significant. At the same time, one ought to be able to appreciate that various aspects of this relation could be called into question on grounds that seem, at least prima facie, to be worth taking seriously. Contemporary analytic metaphysicians are grappling with serious issues and have real work ahead of them.

3. Comparison and Contrast

Now that we have some sense of Kant’s conception of traditional metaphysics and of analytic metaphysicians’ conception of the grounding relation, we can compare and contrast the two so as to address the three main claims mentioned above and see what real progress is possible. As we have seen, though Kant holds that the proper subject matter of traditional metaphysics is God, the soul, and freedom, he also maintains that several different relations, such as composition, causality, and representation, are

the argumentative vehicles that traditional metaphysicians use to attempt to infer to the existence of God, the soul, and freedom. As necessary means to necessary ends, these three relations are crucial to traditional metaphysics. Since they are all asymmetrical metaphysical dependence relations that are explanatory in character, just as grounding relations are, they are at least similar in several important respects to the kind of relation that contemporary metaphysicians are interested in.

This is not to say that there are no differences. For example, Kant and contemporary metaphysicians disagree about whether causation is an instance of grounding. However, at least some of this difference may derive from their differing analyses of causation, since Kant takes causation to be an asymmetrical, irreflexive, and transitive metaphysical dependence relation, whereas many contemporary philosophers adopt other accounts, such as Humean regularity theories or counterfactual views.[19] Relatedly, one might take Kant to be challenging the asymmetry condition on grounding relations since he views mutual interaction as a symmetrical relation. But insofar as mutual interaction involves two asymmetrical causal bonds that involve substances determining each other's states, we have only the appearance of a conflict, and not a genuine disagreement.[20] Similarly, Kant's interest in representation as a conditioning relation does not overlap perfectly with what is discussed in contemporary philosophy of mind, but this reflects more an interest in different philosophical issues within the philosophy of mind rather than a fundamental conflict.[21] In sum, Kant and

contemporary analytic metaphysicians may offer different analyses in particular cases, but these differences are best understood as internecine disputes among fellow metaphysicians rather than calling into question their shared interest in analyzing and making use of grounding-like relations in their metaphysics. Thus, it turns out that, initial appearances to the contrary, Kant and contemporary metaphysicians are in fact both interested in grounding or grounding-like relations. This was my first main claim.

This comparison also allows us to see that one can make good use of the detailed analyses that contemporary metaphysicians have provided of grounding to make progress in clarifying exactly what a condition in general is for Kant. As we have seen above, in the Antinomies and Paralogisms, Kant is most immediately interested in particular relations, composition, causality, and representation, and in showing that certain inferences that involve them are fallacious. But as we have seen, Kant does not advertise, or even argue for understanding, these particular relations as being asymmetrical metaphysical dependence relations. That contemporary metaphysicians have focused so intensely on the features that grounding relations have clearly helps us to see what features these particular relations have. What's more, Kant's interest in what they have in common—that they are all instances of a generic real conditioning relation—finds expression in what can seem to be more incidental contexts (e.g., in prefatory remarks that set up a given issue, in statements about syllogisms in logic, and in concluding remarks). This fact, combined with Kant's failure to offer an explicit

definition, goes some ways toward explaining why scholars have not provided a detailed account of Kant's conception of a real condition.

At the same time, since Kant uses the term consistently and for the sake of larger, systematic purposes, it would be extremely helpful to have a general account of what a real condition is. Here I can offer only a preliminary suggestion rather than a full description. On my view, Kant has a generic notion of real conditioning that can be defined as an asymmetric metaphysical dependence relation that has an explanatory dimension.[22] This general notion is instantiated in the cases of causation, composition, and representation (among several others), despite the fact that they have specific differences that make them different instances of a real conditioning relation. One particularly important lesson to be learned here is that because of the special kind of primitive metaphysical dependence relation whose explanatory dimension involves the hyperintensionality of the grounding relation, Kant's notion of a real condition cannot be understood either in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, as one might at first think, or in purely modal terms. These considerations support the second main claim of this paper.

Kant's account of real conditioning relations and of the ways in which they can and cannot be used to draw certain kinds of inferences can also be a source of insight in contemporary discussions of grounding. Specifically, reflection on Kant's distinction between the kinds of metaphysical claims one might be interested in making and the kinds of cognition of which we are

capable provides an interesting perspective on the practice of contemporary metaphysics. For as we have seen, Kant argues that despite the indispensability of the concept of the unconditioned to our cognitive practices, the limitations of our cognitive faculties entail that we cannot in fact have cognition of the unconditioned, even if we are committed to the existence of what is unconditioned. Specifically, since our intuitions are limited to spatio-temporal objects that are thoroughly conditioned, we can never have the kind of awareness of unconditioned objects that would be required to determine what the unconditioned is. Part of the problem, to put it in distinctively Kantian terms, is that our concepts of unconditioned objects lack objective reality. Another part, which is more significant in this context, is that we simply do not have the kind of conscious access to what is unconditioned that would be needed to support substantive metaphysical claims about it. While we can form whatever concepts we want and we can make whatever speculative claims we want, it is a mistake to think that this puts us in a position to *validate specific*, *positive*, *determinate* claims about them.

Though this point cuts against some of the ways in which the concept of the unconditioned can be used, it is crucial to note that it need not affect all claims about real conditioning, or grounding relations per se, as a radical skeptic might maintain. For causation, composition, and representation are grounding relations that we can certainly cognize in some contexts; Kant famously argues that they are conditions of the possibility of objects of

experience.[23] Kant's crucial point, emphasized throughout the Transcendental Dialectic, is simply that one cannot immediately infer from cases of grounding relations that are perfectly legitimate, namely, cases in which one does have the requisite kind of experience of the grounding relation (including the ground), to substantive claims in cases in which we do not. For even if it is legitimate to infer from the existence of what is grounded to the existence of its ground (since what is grounded is analytically related to its ground), if we lack the requisite experience of that ground, we are not in a position to legitimate any positive determinate claim about it. That is, we would be justified in inferring that there must *be some* ground, but not that the ground must be identified as one particular object with a specific set of properties rather than another. As we have seen, Kant explicitly points out that the regress of grounding relations could be finite or infinite, and thus we cannot cognize which one obtains even if we were to know that one of the two must obtain. More significant yet, he also notes that even if we were somehow to know which of these options must be the case, we would still have no way of cognizing the objects that constituted the regress. In this way, Kant argues that one must place significant limitations on the practice of metaphysics.

To see how Kant's position might bear on a particular issue in contemporary metaphysics, it can be useful to consider Jonathan Schaffer's treatment of grounding relations in his important paper, "Monism: The Priority of the Whole." To make his case in favor of monism—the position

that the cosmos is fundamental and the whole is prior to its parts—Schaffer provides a series of definitions and assumptions that is meant to provide a neutral conceptual framework. For example, he defines mereological part-whole relations and metaphysical priority-posteriority relations, and assumes that metaphysical priority relations (such as grounding) are not only irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive, but also what he calls “well-founded”, which means that “all priority chains terminate. This assumption provides the kind of hierarchical structure against which the question of what is fundamental makes sense.”[24] But is the assumption of the well-foundedness of grounding relations analytic or synthetic? It clearly *seems* to be synthetic, since Schaffer notes that one could deny it by accepting either metaphysical coherentism or metaphysical infinitism, and he feels the need to argue against these positions. In fact, in support of his rejection of these positions, he notes: “There must be a ground of being. If one thing exists only *in virtue of* another, then there must be something from which the reality of the derivative entities ultimately derives.”[25] Given this assumption, he goes on to argue that the something from which the reality of the derivative entities derives must be the cosmos, and thus that monism is true.

However, Kant’s position can help us to think through Schaffer’s argument. For the justification that Schaffer provides for his assumption of the well-foundedness of the grounding relation, seems to be based on an analysis of the concept of something being derivative or grounded and thus seems to be analytic. (The existence of a derivative being entails the

existence of that from which it derives its existence.) And this seems to be similar to Kant's idea that the existence of something conditioned entails the existence of its condition, since that is true in virtue of what it means for something to be conditioned. But note that this result would conflict with Schaffer's apparent admission that the assumption of well-foundedness is a synthetic claim.

But perhaps it was a mistake to interpret Schaffer's assumption of well-foundedness as a synthetic claim. If so, then it obviously must be analytic. Now one might think that this is actually a very welcome result for Schaffer. For in that case monism would be an analytic truth! However, Kant's position reveals that there are dangers lurking in these waters too. For as we have seen, even if the existence of something conditioned entails the existence of something unconditioned, it does not follow that we must be able to cognize what it is that is unconditioned, and that is true even if we cognize both the conditioned object and its real conditioning relation.[26] What this analysis means for Schaffer's argument is that even if there are metaphysical priority relations that, given the well-foundedness assumption, must have an ultimate ground, we have no reason to think that we can specify what the ultimate ground is. As Kant notes, if the series of conditions terminates, there is no guarantee that we can specify any of the intrinsic positive features of the thing in which it terminates. And if that is the case, it does not follow that the ultimate ground has to be the cosmos (on any ordinary understanding of that term). To see this, recall that Kant notes that it is just

as metaphysically possible that the series of conditions does not terminate, in which case the ultimate ground is an infinite series of beings. Now Schaffer could say that this infinite series of beings just is the cosmos, and thus declare victory for monism. But this declaration would be rather hollow, because even if we knew that the cosmos has priority over its parts, we would not actually know what it is that has priority over its parts, a single all-encompassing entity or an infinite series of things.

Turning now to a different issue, it may also be useful to consider a Kantian perspective on the question of the unity of grounding relations. On the one hand, Kant would clearly side with those who think that, methodologically, one must investigate all of the relevant details of each particular grounding relation in constructing long arguments for each particular topic. His starting point is with the particular claims of traditional metaphysicians, whatever they are, and he then provides detailed analyses of the grounding relations they involve, in order to show that we cannot have cognition of the unconditioned, or of what is ungrounded. There is no way of limiting in advance the scope of the claims that one would need to consider. And he would also be concerned about those who might focus on only one particular grounding relation and then either leave it at that or immediately generalize without having done all the work that is required to establish a more general conclusion.

Though I cannot go into detail here, one hypothesis is that different participants in the debate about grounding are taking different relations as

their paradigm instance of grounding and then attempting to generalize, though perhaps without being able to capture all of the other cases without regimentation.[27] For example, Schaffer seems to be concerned primarily with the worldly cases of composition and partition. Paul Audi, by contrast, is attempting to provide an account of our various uses of the phrase “in virtue of”. Gideon Rosen, in contrast to both, is primarily interested in whether or not what is derivative is real. But note how different these interests are. These are certainly different topics, and while it is possible that one and the same grounding relation could be central to all of them, the seemingly persistent nature of the debate about grounding suggests that either different relations are involved in the different areas and some participants in the debate are talking past some others, or the move to generalize has not gone off as smoothly as one might have liked. In such a case, it can be worth stepping back from the details of the specific issue that one happens to be focusing on and looking at others that can then seem to be closely related.

At the same time, Kant would not be in favor of simply resting content with a plurality of specific analyses and long arguments. After having completed the arduous work of analyzing a wide range of grounding relations, he does generalize. What’s more, there are real benefits to be had from the generalizing move. One clear benefit is that it allows him to identify in a principled way our cognitive limitations. It is one thing to establish that we cannot have cognition of simples, or freedom, or God’s existence, it is

quite another to establish that we can never cognize anything unconditioned, for that says something general and principled about the finitude of our cognitive abilities. A second clear benefit, which runs along similar lines, is that the generalizing move allows Kant to see more clearly what principles of explanation come with human reason, regardless of its particular subject matter. For by looking to what all the particular cases have in common, he can establish not only that our explanations tend in the direction of God, the soul, and the world as a totality, but also that reason demands *complete* explanations in terms of what is unconditioned, and that says something general and principled about the unlimited ambitions that we take to our attempts to cognize the world. And it is in taking these two points together that allows Kant to identify a fundamental mismatch between the scope of reason's demands and the limits of our cognition, a mismatch that can affect the aspirations and practice of metaphysicians, both traditional and contemporary.

This mismatch is crucial insofar as it allows him, and those who would heed his advice, to see two fundamental truths. First, that reason "is burdened with questions that it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason" (Avii). Second, it allows us to hope that our future discussions no longer resemble the battlefields of the past, where "[b]oth parties fence in the air and wrestle with their shadows, for they go beyond nature, where there is nothing that

their dogmatic grasp can seize and hold. Fight as they may, the shadows that they cleave apart grow back together in an instant, like the heroes of Valhalla, to amuse themselves anew in bloodless battles” (A754/B784).[28]

[1] For representative examples of analytic metaphysicians, see Kit Fine, “Guide to Grounding,” in *Metaphysical Grounding*, (eds.) Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 37-80; Gideon Rosen, “Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction” in Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology (eds.) Bob Hale and Aviv Hoffmann, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 109-36; Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, (eds.) David Manley, David Chalmers, and Ryan Wasserman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 347-83; and Michael Raven, “In Defence of Ground,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90 (2012): 687–701.

[2] It is quite surprising how little attention scholars have devoted to clarifying exactly what a condition is. For some discussion, see Wolfgang Malzkorn, *Kants Kosmologie-Kritik*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999, Allen Wood, “The Antinomies of Pure Reason,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s* Critique of Pure Reason, (ed.) Paul Guyer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 245-65, and Marcus Willaschek, *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics: The Dialectic of Pure Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. However, though all of these scholars state what they take a condition to be, none provides detailed argument for any of the particular kinds of conditions to which Kant is committed.

[3] See Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, chapter 3 (Kant, Fichte, and Short Arguments to Idealism).

[4] See Karl Ameriks, *Interpreting Kant’s Critiques*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, chapter 3 (Kantian Idealism Today).

[5] See, e.g., *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, (eds.) Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[6] For discussion of Kant's notion of cognition, see Eric Watkins and Marcus Willaschek, "Kant's Account of Cognition," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55 (2017): 83-112.

[7] In his *Letters to a German Princess*, Euler reports the view of his Wolffian opponents as follows: "Bodies, say they, must have their sufficient reason somewhere, but if they were divisible to infinity, such reason could not take place, and hence they conclude, with an air altogether philosophical, *that as every thing must have its sufficient reason, it is absolutely necessary that all bodies should be composed of monads*—which was to be demonstrated. This, I must admit, is a demonstration not to be resisted" (translated in Eric Watkins, *Kant's* Critique of Pure Reason: *Background Source Materials*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 225). However, Euler's own position is markedly different, for he exhorts Princess Friedericke Charlotte as follows: "With all your might resist this assertion: every compound being is made up of simple beings".

[8] The ontological argument does not start with experience in the way in which these arguments do. This makes it unsurprising that Kant's famous discussion of the ontological argument pursues a different line of reasoning.

[9] Kant discusses both simples and freedom in the context of his discussion of the world as a totality. Despite their obvious differences, Kant thinks that they are both examples of something that is (in some respect) unconditioned.

[10] Even if we cannot experience these features in a direct way, one might think that there are many indirect routes that would lead to these features. Whether

such indirect routes can lead to cognition of these features is a separate question.

[11] It has been insufficiently noted that Kant's version of determinism focuses primarily on events, which he understands as changes of state.

[12] Although, the thinking relation is not obviously transitive in the same way as the relations of causation and composition are, it still bears enough of a family resemblance to them to qualify as a conditioning relation.

[13] See my "Kant on Real Conditions," in: *Proceedings of the 12. International Kant Congress Nature and Freedom*, (eds.) Violette L. Waibel & Margit Ruffing, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 1133-40.

[14] See, e.g., A346/B404-5, but also A 353.

[15] How reason can be right to demand complete explanation in the face of transcendental illusion and the contradictions that naturally and inevitably arise for it is a complex and delicate question. An adequate answer would extend well beyond the scope of this paper.

[16] Karen Bennett, *Making Things Up*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

[17] Schaffer has highlighted this issue with his work on priority monism. (See, e.g., "Monism: The Priority of the Whole," *The Philosophical Review 119* (2010): 31-76.)

[18] See, e.g., Jessica Wilson, "No Work for a Theory of Grounding," *Inquiry 57* (2010): 535-79.

[19] Joe Stratmann has suggested (in an unpublished paper) that grounding is typically asynchronic, whereas causation is diachronic, and that this difference helps to explain why contemporary figures do not think of causation as an instance of grounding.

[20] For detailed analysis of Kant's notion of mutual interaction, see my *Kant and the Metaphysics of Causality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, esp. chapter 4).

[21] See Alyssa Ney "Grounding in the Philosophy of Mind: A Defense," in *Scientific Composition and Metaphysical Grounding*, (eds.) K. Aizawa and C. Gillett, London: Palgrave, 2016.

[22] See my "Kant on Real Conditions".

[23] Having a clear account of what a real condition is for Kant would also allow one to attain a clearer sense of what he means to be asserting when he claims that the categories or space and time are *conditions* of the possibility of experience. Are they simply necessary conditions, real conditions, or perhaps some other kind of condition, which one might call a transcendental condition?

[24] "Monism: The priority of the Whole", p. 37.

[25] "Monism: The priority of the Whole", p. 37.

[26] This assumes that it is at least possible to cognize a relation without cognizing both its relata.

[27] To his credit, Audi recognizes that some cases require regimentation. See "Grounding: Toward a Theory of the *In-Virtue-Of Relation*" *The Journal of Philosophy* 109 (2012): 685-711.

[28] I thank Lucy Allais, Stefanie Grüne, Tobias Rosefeldt, Joseph Stratmann, Clinton Tolley, Marcus Willaschek and audience members at a conference in Goethe University Frankfurt in June 2016 for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I also thank two referees for *Synthese* for their constructive suggestions.