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Artículos

Kant and Baumgarten on positing. Kant's notion of positing as a response to that of Baumgarten

LORENZO SALA¹

Abstract

In the literature on Kant's philosophy, it is almost universally ignored that Baumgarten used the notion of positing in a *technical* sense before Kant. In this article, I try to fill this gap in the literature by providing an analysis of Kant's notion of positing in relation to Baumgarten's one. I first show how Kant's differentiation of relative and absolute positing is not simply an alternative to Baumgarten's notion of existence, but is instead an alternative to his (usually ignored) notion of positing; I then develop a positive account of Kant's notion of positing.

Keywords: Kant, Baumgarten, positing, existence, *Schulphilosophie*

Kant y Baumgarten sobre la postulación. La noción de Kant de postular como respuesta a la de Baumgarten

Resumen

En la literatura sobre la filosofía de Kant se ignora casi universalmente que Baumgarten, antes de Kant, usó la noción de postulación en un sentido técnico. En este artículo trato de llenar este vacío en la literatura proporcionando un análisis de la noción de postulación de Kant en relación con la de Baumgarten. Primero muestro cómo la diferenciación de Kant entre postulación relativa y absoluta no es simplemente una alternativa a la noción de existencia de Baumgarten, sino que es una alternativa a su noción (generalmente ignorada) de postulación. Luego desarrollo una explicación positiva de la noción de postulación de Kant.

Palabras clave: Kant, Baumgarten, postulación, existencia, *Schulphilosophie*

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1. Introduction

Strikingly enough, there is almost no study that considers Kant's notion of positing (*Position, setzen*) as a stand-alone topic, to the extent that, until recently, none of the major Kant dictionaries had an entry for it.² The notion is usually just mentioned in passing in works on Kant's idea of existence, and not much more is generally said about it than that Kant conceives existence as "the absolute positing of a thing"³ and opposes this to predication as an alternative to the rationalists' (especially Baumgarten's) notion of existence. Moreover, the fact that the notion of *positing* was already present in Baumgarten's philosophy and played an important role in it is completely ignored.

In this paper I want to fill the aforementioned gap in the literature by providing an analysis of Kant's notion of positing. In order to do this, I will start by considering the ontological framework from which Kant critically departs (i.e. that contained in Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*) and then show how Kant's notion of absolute positing is not simply an alternative to Baumgarten's notion of existence, but is instead the result of a reformulation of the latter's notion of positing.

In order to do this, I will consider Kant's proposed understanding of existence as absolute positing but, contrary to the usual approach in the literature, I will try to explain the notion of positing in itself rather than considering it only inasmuch as it serves to explain Kant's notion of existence. Whereas no positive account of the notion of positing is usually given—not much more is usually said about it than that it is Kant's way of not treating existence as a predicate—I will develop a positive account of the notion of positing based on the role it plays in Kant's theory of existence.

² See for example Eisler (1930), Holzhey (2005), Thorpe (2015), Caygill (1995). The only exception to this trend is the new and rich Willaschek (2015), where we find a brief entry for *Setzen*. However, also in this case, the notion of positing is considered only inasmuch as it concerns the issue of existence and not as something important by itself.

³ *The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God (BDG)* 119; 2:73. Throughout I will refer to Kant's works besides the first Critique by providing the *Akademie Ausgabe* (Kant 1902–) volume number and pagination. For the first *Critique*, I will cite by A and B edition pagination. Unless otherwise stated, I have followed the translations in Kant (1991–).

2. Baumgarten's conception of positing and its ontological meaning

The fact that Baumgarten also used positing in a technical sense is not the only reason to develop an account of Kant's notion of positing in relation to that of Baumgarten. Baumgarten is indeed Kant's main reference in those passages where he most extensively treats the notion of positing, that is, in *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* and in the *Transcendental Dialectic* of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (in the context of the critique of the ontological argument for the existence of God). Although Baumgarten is not explicitly mentioned in the *KrV*, the argument it presents strongly resembles that of *BDG*, where Kant explicitly mentions Baumgarten as his main reference for his criticism (see *BDG* 121, 2:76).

Kant lectured for almost forty years on Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*, so Baumgarten was evidently one of the authors Kant was most familiar with.⁴ Moreover, there is also a theoretical reason to focus on Baumgarten: although his notion of positing is elaborated in an ontological framework that has its roots in Wolff's philosophy, it is only in Baumgarten's work that this notion becomes fully central.⁵

Baumgarten's treatment of the notion of existence is to be found in his *Metaphysica*. Here, in the first part of the book (*Ontology*), existence is introduced in the section dedicated to the concept of *Ens*, specifically the third section of the first chapter (dedicated to the 'universal internal predicates of a being' [*Predicata entis interna universalia*]). It is usually with reference to this section that the analyses of Kant's criticism of Baumgarten are developed.⁶ Consequently, almost nobody takes into account a principle—to be found in another section—whose name strikingly recalls Kant's alternative proposal to Baumgarten's notion of existence i.e. the '*principium positionis*',

⁴ On Kant's lectures, see Stark (1995). On Kant as a student see Kuehn (2001: 61-99).

⁵ As we will see, it is in Baumgarten's work that we find a *principium positionis*, a principle which was absent in Wolff's metaphysics: in fact, in Wolff's *Ontologia* the two fundamental principles are the *Principium contradictionis* (§27; 1730:15) and a *Principium rationis sufficientis* (§56, 1730: 39), and no *Principium positionis* is mentioned. The same holds for Wolff's *Deutsche Metaphysik*, where the fundamental principles are correspondingly, the *Grund des Widerspruchs* (§10; 1751: 6) and the *Satz des zureichenden Grundes* (§30; 1751: 16). Although it would be interesting to develop an analysis of the notion of positing before Baumgarten, this goes beyond the scope of the present inquiry. For an overall presentation of Baumgarten's philosophy see Schwaiger (2011).

⁶ A good example of this is Kannisto (2016).

with the result that an important part of the story of Kant's alternative proposal is lost.⁷

Another reason why the *principium positionis* has never been considered in the works on absolute positing might be that this principle seems to be nothing but what is commonly called the principle of identity—which seems quite an empty principle—and also because ‘principle of identity’ is indeed its second name (‘principle of position *or of identity*’). Nevertheless, this principle is not quite as simple as it appears at first sight. The principle says:

Every possible A is A, or, *anything that is, is*, or, every subject is its own predicate. If you deny this, then some possible A is not-A, (§10), and hence A and not-A, or nothing (§7), which is impossible (§9). *This proposition is called the principle of position, or, of identity.*⁸

⁷ Examples of authors ignoring this principle are numerous e.g. Henrich (1960: 62-67), Proops (2015), Stang (2016), Kannisto (2016). An exception to this is Claudio La Rocca's brilliant *Esistenza e Giudizio* (La Rocca 1999: 77), where however, given the aims of the work, the author does not develop a detailed analysis of this principle and its significance.

⁸ Baumgarten (1757) §11. Throughout I will refer to this text simply as *Metaphysica* followed by the paragraph number. Unless otherwise stated, I have followed the translations in Baumgarten (2013). Here I have departed significantly from the otherwise excellent translation by Fugate and Hymers: they translate the Latin ‘quicquid est, illud est’ as ‘a thing is whatever it is’. This translation seems erroneous to me, in that ‘ille’ is a demonstrative pronoun, and refers to ‘quicquid’ (which is an indefinite relative pronoun, and not a demonstrative one), so that, if one follows the grammar, the halves of the sentence say, respectively, “anything that is” (*quicquid est*) and “that is” (*illud est*), which could be made clearer by formalising it to $\forall x B(x) \rightarrow B(x)$, where “B” stands for “to be”. Given however that ‘anything that is, that is’ would not be a correct sentence in English—and, probably, this is what lead the translators into error—the best way to render the Latin probably is “anything that is, is”: although in this way no English word is provided to translate *illud*, this is a necessary evil, in that it seems the most faithful and grammatically correct for rendering the fact – expressed by the demonstrative “illud” that the “is” refers to what is referred through “anything”.

I have departed also from the translation by Ameriks and Naragon (1997), which reads “whatever is, is that” (1997: 565, n. 37), in that it opts for interpreting that ‘illud’ has the nominal predicate of ‘est’. Now, although, differently than the previous considered one, this translation is not incorrect from a grammatical point of view—it is indeed possible to take ‘illud’ as the nominal predicate of ‘est’ (as Ameriks and Naragon do)—there are nonetheless two reasons for proposing the here proposed translation. First, according to the *ordo verborum*, ‘illud’ should be taken as the subject of ‘est’. Moreover, in order to express what Ameriks and Naragon’s translation seems to express, it would probably have been better to use ‘ipsum’ instead of ‘illud’: where ‘illud’ is a deictic, ‘ipsum’ has precisely the role of expressing the *sameness*, and so would have probably been better in order to say that anything is the very one thing it is. Note that one could object that, although more literal from a grammatical point of view, my reading implies that Baumgarten considers two propositions which are not equivalent as two equivalent formulations of the same principle, but this is *precisely* the point: as I will show, it is particularly telling that Baumgarten takes these two propositions to be equivalent, in that it clearly shows what understanding of being underlies his thought.

Now, for the modern reader it might be striking that for Baumgarten ‘every subject is its own predicate’ is equivalent with ‘anything that is, is’ [*quicquid est, illud est*]—so much that it has led the English translator into error (see note 8)—but this is precisely the point: Baumgarten took them to be equivalent, while to differentiate between them is the basis of Kant’s alternative proposal.

To better understand this principle, it is useful to consider how Baumgarten argues for it and where he does so, i.e. in the section on the notion of ‘possible’, which is the first section of the chapter on the *universal internal predicates of being* [*entis*]. This section, the first of the whole *Ontology*, starts by presenting ‘nothing’ as that which violates the ‘principle of contradiction’, and proceeds by introducing ‘something’, the minimum form of being, as that which does not violate it. In both cases, *being* something (or nothing) depends on *predication*. ‘Nothing’ is whatever is a ‘subject of contradictory predicates’, and ‘something’ is whatever is not ‘nothing’, i.e. that which ‘is not both A and not-A’. For anything, to be something or not to be something is a matter of the predicates that it possesses.

It is on the grounds of this conception of something and nothing that the *principium positionis seu identitatis* is introduced and defended, and is therefore to be understood: according to Baumgarten, if one does not posit A of A, or if one denies that ‘*quicquid est, illud est*’, then ‘some possible A is not-A’, and therefore something contradictory (and so not something but nothing).

It is important to notice that the reason why ‘*quicquid est, illud est*’ is precisely the same why of any A one has to posit A: if of something ‘that is’ one does not posit that it is, then, according to Baumgarten, the thing in question would be the *subject of contradictory predicates*; a being, a thing that is, cannot *not* be, for the same reason that A cannot be not-A, because then it would be what is *not*.⁹ This is extremely important, because it shows us that ‘being’, however conceived in this particular case, is understood as

⁹ In the following I will use the term “being” to talk about what is at stake in ‘*quicquid est, illud est*’, so that, for example, I will talk about ‘*quicquid est*’ in terms of ‘a thing that is’. I have made this choice in order to keep the meaning of the sentence as indeterminate as possible, not only in conformity with my previous observation about the translation (on this, see note 8), but also because this indeterminateness plays perfectly into my hands: what is important for my thesis is not the precise meaning of ‘*quicquid est, illud est*’ but, as we will see in the following, that however ‘to be’ is interpreted here (meaning that “anything that is, is the very one thing it is” or anything else), is something that concerns *what* the thing in question is.

something that concerns *what* the thing is, that is, as a property like any other, something like that which is usually expressed through predicates. Being or not being will be the same sort of business as being white or not being white: it is something that concerns *what* a thing is.

The fact that ‘to be’ in ‘*quicquid est, illud est*’, whatever its meaning, is something that concerns *what* the thing in question is, is just one of various consequences of the conception of being from which Baumgarten starts, that is, of how he conceives being in general. Indeed, from the very beginning, the fundamental form of being, the minimum one, is taken to be ‘to be something’, i.e. ‘to be possible’, which in turn amounts to ‘to be A’ (or ‘non-A’) or anything else that does not involve contradiction (hence the equating of ‘something’ and ‘possible’). Now, if non-contradiction is the negative criterion, or what limits the field of being, then being, i.e. to *be* is, on the positive side, a matter of *predication*: to *be* is always something’s being A (or non-A), something’s being *what* it is, so that it always concerns *what* something is.

It is clear that, consequently, any question about the being of something will find its ultimate answer in *what* the thing in question is. Although one example of this is Baumgarten’s theory of existence—as I will show, the question of whether a thing exists or not has its ultimate answer in *what* the thing is, i.e. in its determinations—the consequences of this ontological stance are much more far-reaching: for instance, the controversial *principium identitatis indiscernibilium*.¹⁰ In this principle, the question about the numerical identity (or diversity) of two things is simply treated according to this general conception of being, so that it is brought back to what the things are: because the ultimate answer of any question about the being of something is to be found in its determinations, in what the thing is, Baumgarten has to affirm that if two things are numerically distinct they cannot have the same determinations. Otherwise, as all there is about something is *what* it is (i.e.

¹⁰ See *Metaphysica* §269: ‘The total identity of singular beings is NUMERICAL IDENTITY. It is impossible for two singular beings outside of one another to be utterly or totally the same. For, since two beings would be posited, many beings would also be posited. Hence they would be partially the same and partially different (§74). Therefore, they would not be totally the same (§267). Those singular beings that are totally the same are the same in number, and are not partially the same and partially different (§267). Hence, they are neither many, nor are they two (§74). This proposition is called the principle (of identity) of indiscernibles in the broad sense, or of denied total identity’.

the determinations), if *what* two things are were to coincide, they would also be (numerically) the same thing; not two, but one.

This is extremely important for understanding the notion of positing. Indeed, as everything about the being of something comes down to *what* the thing in question is, it is clear that whatever one posits about something (e.g. even what Kant would call the positing of the thing itself), positing will ultimately have just one form: any positing will ultimately be the positing of *what* the thing in question is. Based on this picture, it is now possible to turn to Kant's criticism of Baumgarten's notion of existence and his alternative to it.

3. Kant's critique of Baumgarten

The notion of positing is usually just briefly touched upon in scholarship on Kant's conception of existence, and, for the most part, it is only mentioned to maintain that his theory of positing, with its distinction between relative and absolute positing, is Kant's way of getting rid of Baumgarten's understanding of existence as a reality. Both of the following points have been ignored, at least to the best of my knowledge: that Baumgarten also talks about positing, and that what is at stake in Kant's alternative proposal is the notion of positing itself, and not just the notion of existence. In this section, I will consider Kant's criticism of Baumgarten's notion of existence in light of the notion of positing that grounds it, in order to obtain a better understanding of Kant's alternative proposal on existence.

Two *loci* of Kant's critique of Baumgarten's notion of existence are the most significant, and in both cases, they concern Baumgarten's *a priori* argument for demonstrating the existence of God: one is to be found in the writing of 1763, and the other in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Although Kant's thought underwent a deep transformation in the eighteen years between these writings, the key point in the arguments remains the same: affirming that something exists is not to talk about its determinations but to 'posit' the thing itself.

Baumgarten's notion of existence can be found in the third section of the first part of his *Ontology*, the section dedicated to the concept of *Ens*. Existence is treated in the course of classifying various determinations

(*Determinatio*) and not (surprisingly, given the result of the previous section) defined in terms of it. So, in §55 one reads:

EXISTENCE (act, cf. §210, actuality) is the collection [the totality] of affections [*affectionum*] that are compossible in something; i.e. the complement of essence or of internal possibility, insofar as essence is considered only as a collection of determinations (§40) (Metaphysica §55).

As Kant correctly reports, existence for Baumgarten is the ‘*complementum possibilitatis*’. Now, what is interesting for us is that, for Baumgarten, this is not the transposition of the vague idea that existing is more than being possible, but is a technical and literal description of what existence is for him: *existence is a (sub)set of the determinations of a thing*, and the same holds also for that possibility (i.e. essence) which existence ‘complements’. Essence and existence are for him two subsets into which the (inner) determinations of a thing are divided, and they are accordingly introduced in the course of the classification of the various forms of determinations that a thing can have.¹¹ If *essence* is the set of the *essentialia*, i.e. of those determinations which cannot be derived from any other determinations (in Baumgarten’s terminology, the ‘unqualified ground of the rest of the internal determinations’), *existence* is the set of all *affections*, i.e. of those determinations of a thing that are grounded by some other determination and that are *compossible* in it: existence includes all the possible affections of a thing, so that for any possible affection, existence does not leave undecided whether the thing in question has it or not.¹² For example, Baumgarten would probably say that ‘being an animal’ pertains to the essential properties of man, while both ‘being mortal’ and ‘182 cm tall’ are affections (the first grounded sufficiently in the essence, the second not).

Although this picture of Baumgarten’s notion of existence is less rich and articulated than Baumgarten’s own account, for the sake of the present

¹¹ Baumgarten’s classification of the various kinds of determinations is quite complex and certainly not free from problems. Here, I will consider this classification only inasmuch as it is needed for the question at hand. Consequently, I will focus only on the so-called inner determinations of a thing (a term that Baumgarten deploys for indicating all the determinations of a thing apart from relations) and I will use the term ‘determination’ and its derivatives without always specifying that I am talking about internal determinations.

¹² The ‘com-’ in ‘compossible’ means that the affections must be ‘possible together’, that is that the set of the affections cannot contain any determination that would make it contradictory.

inquiry it is unnecessary to go into further detail. What is important for us is that, for Baumgarten, this notion of existence is the criterion for affirming that something exists (in Baumgarten's terminology: that it is *actuale*), so that to exist is for a thing to be 'determined with regard to all the affections that are compossible in it'¹³ and is therefore (in line with the results of the previous section) a matter of the determinations that a thing has. Secondly, it is also important that it is precisely this that Kant has in mind when criticising Baumgarten. This can clearly be seen from *BDG*. Here Kant writes:

Baumgarten introduces the concept of thoroughgoing internal determination, and maintains that it is this that is more in existence than in mere possibility, for it completes that which is left indeterminate by the predicates inhering in or issuing from the essence (*BDG* 121; 2:76).

Although 'thoroughgoing internal determination' is not a term Baumgarten uses (in that he omits 'internal'), Kant's summary correctly grasps the relationship between essence and existence. As Baumgarten expressly states,¹⁴ not only do essence and existence together indeed constitute the totality of the internal determinations of a thing (and represent therefore its 'thoroughgoing internal determination'), but existence also *completes* essence in that it contains all those internal determinations that essence does not contain—existence is in fact, technically speaking, the complementary set of essence in the set of the internal determinations.

It is particularly important that Kant refers to this idea because, in the standard interpretation of it, the fundamental point of Kant's criticism of the ontological argument seems to amount to the famous remark that '*being* is obviously not a real predicate' (*KrV*, A626/B598),¹⁵ with a great loss for the understanding of both Kant's negative thesis and the scope and meaning of his alternative proposal. Indeed to stop at this famous remark would not only mean giving a partial picture of Kant's argument, but also to miss what is

¹³ See *Metaphysica* §54: 'Aside from essence (§53), something possible is either determined with regard to all the affections that are also compossible in it, or not (§34, 10). The former is an ACTUAL BEING, while the latter is called a PRIVATIVE (merely possible) NON-BEING (nothing, cf. §7)'.

¹⁴ See *Metaphysica* § 56: 'Every internal determination of something possible pertains either to its essence, or to its existence'.

¹⁵ Examples of this largely universal tendency can be found both in the works with a wider scope (e.g. in Allison [2004: 413-417]), and in those that focus more specifically on Kant's doctrine of existence (e.g. Stang [2016] or, even more strongly, Kannisto [2016]).

really at stake in it and its novelty: what Kant contends is not only that existence is *not* a determination, but, more fundamentally, *that existence is not a matter of determinations*.¹⁶ This difference is fundamental: not only because the key point of Baumgarten's demonstration of God's existence is not that existence is a determination, but that whether something exists or not *is a matter of the determinations a thing has*, but, also because Kant argues against this (more than the fact that existence is a determination). Indeed, as will soon be shown, the fact that existence is not a real predicate is but one of the *many* consequences implied by the idea that existence (being or not) is not a matter of the determinations a thing has.¹⁷

This can clearly be seen both from *BDG* and the *KrV*. Although an incisive and famous example of this idea can be found in the *Critique of Pure Reason*—the famous “a hundred actual dollars do not contain the least bit more than a hundred possible ones” (*KrV*, A599/B627)—what this expresses is already clearly formulated in *BDG*. There one reads:

a distinction must be drawn between what is posited and how it is posited. As far as the former is concerned: no more is posited in a real thing than is posited in a merely possible thing, for all the determinations and predicates of the real thing are also to be found in the mere possibility of that same thing (*BDG* 120-121; 2:75).

Now, as the determinations of a possible thing are the same as those of an existing thing, the difference between an existing and a non-existing

¹⁶ Indeed, even if Baumgarten had *not* considered existence as a reality, this would be irrelevant for the question at hand: his proof of God's existence does not rest on the fact that existence is a reality, but only on the particular definition of existence we have explained, that is, on the definition of existence as a particular *set* of determinations (on this, see the next note). So, contrarily to what is commonly held, it is *not* correct to individuate the core of Baumgarten's theory of existence (or of Kant's criticism of it) in the fact that existence is (or is not) a determination: what is important is whether or not if something exists can be determined *on the grounds* of its determinations.

¹⁷ Baumgarten's argument for demonstrating the existence of God can be thus summarised: given the concept of God as the most perfect being (§§803, 811), God's essence contains every single reality and no negation (§§806, 807). Therefore, all the compossible internal determinations of God are posited with His possibility, so that His possibility already contains all His internal determinations (§§807, 810). Therefore, if God is possible, God is actual. But God is possible in that He contains only positive determinations, and therefore it cannot be the case that it contains both a reality and its negation (which would imply a contradiction and therefore the impossibility of God) (§809). Therefore, God is actual (§811). As one can clearly see, this demonstration could work independently from the fact that existence is a determination or not: what is important is that being actual (i.e. to exist) *depends* on the determinations that a thing has, and precisely on the fact that a certain set of determinations (that of all the compossible affections) is to be found within the determinations of a thing.

thing clearly cannot be found *in the determinations of a thing*. If this clearly implies that existence cannot be a determination, the point it brings forth is much more far reaching: not only the difference between a possible and an existing thing is not in one of the predicates (existence cannot be a determination of a thing), but, more broadly, existence *cannot depend on the predicates* of a thing; the fact *that a thing is* is therefore irreducible to *what the thing is*.

This, however, has a fundamental implication: to posit something as existing is a form of positing which, contrary to what Baumgarten held about positing in general, does not concern *what* the thing is. In this way, two fundamental aspects of Kant's criticism of Baumgarten emerge: first, that this criticism does not simply concern Baumgarten's notion of existence, but more broadly the ontological paradigm in which it is grounded;¹⁸ secondly, that this criticism also immediately amounts to an alternative proposal about existence and being in general, and therefore calls for a renewed conception of positing, which shall now be considered.

4. Kant's alternative to Baumgarten

As I have shown, Kant's criticism of Baumgarten's notion of existence does not simply amount to the idea that existence is not a real predicate but, more broadly, it amounts to the idea that to exist or not has *nothing* to do with the determinations that a thing has.¹⁹ If, for Baumgarten, to affirm that something exists is ultimately to say something about its determinations, Kant, by denying this, breaks with not only a theory of existence, but with a general idea of being and positing—that which I sketched in section 2.²⁰ Indeed, by denying that existence has anything to do with the determinations of a thing, Kant simultaneously denies that everything about a thing ultimately comes

¹⁸ This has been considered and explained widely in the literature. Examples of works considering and developing interpretations of this 'change of paradigm' range from Heidegger (1927) to Henrich (1960), to more recent works like that of Stang (2016).

¹⁹ One could object that there is an exception to this. Indeed, it could seem that, as what involves contradiction cannot exist, at least in some cases we can know the non-existence of some object through its concept. However, this is not entirely correct: in Kantian terms, it would be more proper to say that that which involves contradiction cannot be the concept of any object at all because it violates the 'principle of contradiction', which is a law of *general* logic and therefore disregards the objects totally.

²⁰ As I have observed above, interpreters have widely noticed that Kant's criticism of Baumgarten has a broader ontological meaning (for references see note 18): consequently, I will refrain from going into much detail about this 'paradigm turn', but will instead focus on the alternative meaning of positing it is bound with.

down to *what* the thing is, to its determinations, so that, as a consequence, he departs not only from Baumgarten's theory of existence but, more fundamentally, with a whole way of understanding what it means to be. Kant's criticism of Baumgarten's notion of existence therefore has a broader meaning and outcome than what appears at first sight: it is not simply a criticism of a particular aspect of a theory, but represents the rejection of an entire ontological paradigm.

On these grounds, the reason why Kant's criticism *immediately* results in an alternative notion of *positing* becomes obvious: if to say that something exists does not have anything to do with the determinations of a thing (i.e. if being does not always concern *what* a thing is) positing will correspondingly cease to always amount to positing *what* something is. As a consequence, another form of positing, different to positing the determinations of a thing, will become necessary—specifically, the kind of positing that the positing of existence is.²¹ It is precisely on these grounds that one has to understand Kant's introduction of the famous distinction of *BDG* between 'absolute positing' and 'relative positing'. Indeed, it is because there is no longer only one form of positing/one meaning of being (i.e. predication) that the attribution of a determination to a thing becomes just *one kind* of positing, and a classification of the kinds of positing becomes necessary: it is because positing is shown to be not only about the relation between subject and predicate that it is necessary to consider this form of positing as just one kind of positing among others.

This perfectly matches Kant's way of introducing the aforementioned distinction in *BDG*: He concludes the first paragraph—where he argues against the idea that existence is a matter of the determinations of a thing—by affirming that 'what is being said here can only be judged adequately in

²¹ I therefore disagree with Kannisto (see Kannisto 2016) on the relationship between Kant's criticism of Baumgarten and the positive thesis on existence he presents. Kannisto maintains that Kant's criticism of Baumgarten depends on his alternative proposal, but this is proven wrong by the way in which Kant argues. Indeed, he does not criticise Baumgarten's view of existence on the grounds of his own theory of absolute positing, but, both in *BDG* and in the *KrV*, he criticises it with arguments that do not rest on his alternative thesis: whilst in *BDG* the two main arguments against Baumgarten are the fact that his idea of existence implies that what is merely possible violates the principle of the excluded middle (see *BDG* 121-122; 2:76) and the (quasi Leibnizian) argument that God has a complete concept also of the worlds He does not create (see *BDG* 117-118; 2:72), in the *KrV* the main criticism is that, according to Baumgarten's theory, what is merely possible could not be real, because if being had to do with the determinations, a possible thing and the same but actual thing would be two different things (see A600/B628). Therefore, contrarily to what Kannisto affirms (2016: 297) Kant's way of criticising Baumgarten does *not* rest on his alternative theory of existence.

the light of what follows' and then immediately introduces his famous distinction:

Something can be thought as posited merely relatively, or, to express the matter better, one can think merely the relation (*respectus logicus*) of something *as a characteristic mark of a thing*. In this case, being, that is to say, the positing of this relation, is nothing other than the copula in a judgement. If what is considered is not merely this relation but the *thing posited in and for itself*, then this being is the same as existence (*BDG* 119; 2:73, altered translation, my italics).

On the basis of his previous observations, it is clear to Kant that positing a determination and affirming that something exists (positing something as existing) must be two fundamentally different acts: whilst in the first case what is posited is a *mark*, a determination, in the second case one does not add any determination to the thing, but what one posits is *the thing itself*.

Now, although Kant does not further develop this distinction, his examples seem to go in the direction of his later treatment of it in the *KrV*: relative positing seems to concern the *concept* of a thing, its representation, where absolute positing concerns what corresponds to a concept, i.e. the object. In Kant's words "if I say: 'God is omnipotent' all that is being thought is the logical relation between God and omnipotence, for the latter is a characteristic mark of the former" (*BDG* 119; 2:74), and this proposition "must remain true even for someone who does not acknowledge the existence of God, provided that he understands how I construe *the concept* of God" (*BDG* 120; 2:75). Relative positing seems to be, fundamentally, the positing of a certain relation between determinations, the affirmation or negation of a determination of some concept, completely independently from whether something actually corresponds to the concept or not. Thus, not only whether something exists or not cannot be determined on the basis of its predicates, but predication too is independent from the existence of an object corresponding to the concepts at play in it.

For absolute positing too, the examples seem to point in the direction of how the positing of the thing itself works in the *KrV*. As Kant writes: "one does not examine the concept of the subject in order to demonstrate the correctness of the proposition about the existence of such a thing. [...] one

examines the source of one's cognition of the object. One says: "I have seen it" or "I have heard about it from those who have seen it" (BDG 118; 2:72-73). As the existence of a thing is completely independent from the determinations it can have and cannot therefore be known from its concept, it is clear that absolute positing must be grounded in something outside the concept, that is, by perception.

Now, although *BDG* surely is the source of Kant's most famous treatment of positing and already contains the core of the later theory from the *KrV*, it is still worth considering Kant's account of it in the *KrV*, as in 1763 he still had not developed the whole systematic framework through which his theory of positing is inserted in the later work. I suggest this not so much because in the later work (and in the language of its theoretical framework) Kant explicitly states what I have argued above on the grounds of his examples but, more crucially, because it is useful for better understanding the connection between absolute positing and perception.²²

In the *KrV*, after reiterating his criticism of the ontological argument by highlighting the problems that come from treating existential statements as the positing of a determination, Kant again proposes the distinction between positing the thing itself and positing a predicate. This time, however, his analysis is inserted in the systematic framework of the critical philosophy, and is enriched not only through the intuition-concept dichotomy, but also through the distinction between synthetic and analytic judgements.²³ As in other occasions, Kant recurs to the synthetic-analytic distinction as a means for investigating a problem and asks:

Is the proposition, *This or that thing* (which I have conceded to you as possible, whatever it may be) *exists* - is this proposition, I say, an analytic or a synthetic proposition? If it is the former, then with existence you add nothing to your thought

²² One could contend that the distinction from the *KrV* is not the same distinction that is to be found in *BDG*, as in the first Kant does not use the terms 'absolute positing' and 'relative positing'. However, this seems to be wrong, as in the *KrV* Kant explains the distinction between positing a determination of a thing and positing the thing itself with a terminology that strikingly resembles that of 1763: first he writes that "the little word "is" is not a predicate in it, but only that which posits the predicate *in relation* to the subject" (*KrV*, A599/B627) and then that, when I posit the thing itself, "I think this object as given *absolutely*" (*KrV*, A599/B627, my italics). In *Reflection* 6276 (which Adickes dates between 1785 and 1788), Kant still uses the older terminology for the same distinction, which seems to confirm that terminological difference does not pose any significant problem. In the following, I will therefore use the terminology from *BDG* and that from the *KrV* indifferently.

²³ On Kant's notion of intuition in relation to Baumgarten, see Schwaiger (2011: 43-56).

of the thing; but then either the thought that is in you must be the thing itself, or else you have presupposed an existence as belonging to possibility, and then inferred that existence on this pretext from its inner possibility, which is nothing but a miserable tautology. [...] If you concede, on the contrary, as in all fairness you must, that *every existential proposition is synthetic*, then how would you assert that the predicate of existence may not be cancelled without contradiction? (*KrV*, A597-598/B625-626, last italics my own).

With the previous considerations in mind, Kant's argument looks quite straightforward: as existence has nothing to do with a concept or its marks, it clearly cannot be attributed to an object by virtue of its concept, so that (as they will never be grounded in the concepts of the subject) judgements about existence will never be analytic, but always *synthetic*.

Now, even if the fact that judgements about the existence of a thing cannot be grounded in the concept of the object was something that had already been clearly expressed in 1763—so that, if this distinction had already been available, they would have already been classified as synthetic—to recur to this distinction gives us some further insight on the need for perception as the ground of judgements about existence. If in *BDG* this need seemed to be simply asserted through the examples, it is now grounded in the distinction between synthetic and analytic judgements itself.

If, as in every synthetic judgement, one needs something other than the concept in the subject position on which to ground one's judgement—in Kant's words "I must have in addition to the concept of the subject something else" (*KrV*, A8/B11)—this something other than the concept will be the criterion for positing the thing itself, and yet, as "there are only two stems of human cognition" (*KrV*, A15/B29), it clearly follows that the ground of judgements about existence will have to be found in the second stem, i.e. intuition.

This not only gives an account (or at least, a first approximation to an account) of why it is perception that, as its only possible ground, has to be the ultimate criterion for the positing *of a thing*, but also teaches us something else about absolute positing.²⁴ Indeed, it shows how, although taken by itself

²⁴ As existence is a category, the criteria for its application are of course specified in the corresponding principle of the pure understanding. This tells us that it is a particular subset of intuitions (i.e. perceptions) which, given certain other conditions (the analogies of experience), can be taken as showing the existence of something (see *KrV*, A225/B272). Now, whilst going into further detail would

the positing of a thing would not be limited to sensible things, given the nature of our cognitive faculty—and so of what can ground the positing of a thing—this kind of positing will always be limited to objects of experience.²⁵ Now, if it is important to show how the positing of a thing is always the positing of a thing on the grounds of perceptions (because this shows how, for us, absolute positing is limited to a certain set of objects, that is, phenomena), it is even more important to show this because it indicates what the positing of a thing ultimately amounts to for us. Indeed, as the positing of a thing always depends on a perception of it (or at least on some perception implying its existence), absolute positing will ultimately amount to acknowledging a thing as empirically *given*.²⁶

From all of this, it is clear that Kant's statement, "the concept of positing or setting is perfectly simple: it is identical with the concept of being in general" (*BDG* 119; 2:74), should *not* pose an insurmountable limit for an analysis of his notion of positing. On the contrary, from my analysis, positing has turned out to be an incredibly pervasive activity, in that it is what one does every time one has to think how things *are*, and which therefore is at the very heart of every judgement. Every time one affirms anything about something, be it a predication or anything else, an act of positing is involved: when what one does is thinking *what* a thing is (or can be), one determines its concept through an act of predication, and what one does is an act of *relative* positing, i.e. the affirmation of a certain relation between determinations. On the other hand, whenever one takes something as existing, another act of positing is involved: one does not posit a certain relation between conceptual determinations but the *thing itself* (by taking it *to be given*).

take us too far from the goal of the present inquiry, it is worth remarking that, for Kant, existence is not simply to be equated with perception, but is instead always known thanks to the contribution of the analogies of experience, which serve us as the criterion to know first, if a perception actually is a perception of a thing or not (e.g. whether a thing we see is an hallucination or not), and, secondly, to know the existence of objects we do not perceive directly (e.g., I think that there is somebody outside the door because I hear the bell ringing and I therefore think that someone must have rung it).

²⁵ This is explicitly remarked by Kant at *KrV* A601/B629: "whatever and however much our concept of an object may contain, we have to go out beyond it in order to provide it with existence. With objects of sense this happens through the connection with some perception of mine in accordance with empirical laws; but for objects of pure thinking there is no means whatever for cognising their existence".

²⁶ This is captured by Kant's considerations about the 'peculiarity' of the modal categories, that is, that "as a determination of the object they do not augment the concept to which they are ascribed in the least, but rather only express the relation to the faculty of cognition" (*KrV*, A219/B266): absolute positing does not concern the determinations of a thing, *what* it is, but its relation with us, that is, whether the thing in question is, can or must be *given in experience*.

The conditions for positing, that in which positing must be grounded, will clearly be the same conditions as those for judgements in which positing finds expression. Accordingly, relative positing will be grounded either in the concept of the subject (in the case of analytic judgements) or in something else (in the case of synthetic judgements), where the positing of the thing itself will always require some perception (whether the direct perception of the object that is posited or some other perception that, in accordance with the analogies of experience, makes the existence of the object in question apparent). Therefore, the positing of a thing will be what one does when he perceives something and thinks of his perception as the perception of an existent object. These two acts enjoy a certain independence from one another. The positing of the thing itself seems to be *completely independent* from relative positing: not only inasmuch as it is never a matter of the concept of a thing, of its determinations, and can therefore never be grounded in an act of relative positing, but also in that a thing can be posited independently from any particular determination of it and so independently of any act of relative positing. Similarly, relative positing also enjoys a certain independence from the positing of the thing, in that—at least in some cases²⁷—it can occur independently of whether anything corresponds to the concepts involved in it.²⁸

²⁷ This independence is clear from the aforementioned passage from *BDG*: “The proposition “God is omnipotent” must remain true even for someone who does not acknowledge the existence of God, provided that he understands how I construe the concept of God” (*BDG* 120; 2:74). Here the positing of the relation between God and omnipotence clearly does not require the existence of God. However, in those cases where relative positing is not grounded in the concept of the subject, things are different. In these cases, in order to posit this relation, we need to resort to the objects we refer to through the concept we use as subject, so that the positing of this relation between determinations depends on the positing of the object we refer to through the concept we use as subject.

²⁸ The example I am here referring to is that from *BDG* (120; 2:74): “If I say: ‘God is an existent thing’ it looks as if I am expressing the relation of a predicate to a subject. But there is an impropriety in this expression. Strictly speaking, the matter ought to be formulated like this: “Something existent is God”. In other words, those predicates that belong to an existent thing which, taken together, we designate by means of the expression “God”. These predicates are posited relative to the subject, whereas the thing itself, together with all its predicates, is posited absolutely”. This seems to suggest that absolute positing is an act that can occur independently from any particular act of relative positing, in that it seems to say that when we posit a thing we posit it merely as a something, and that what its determinations are is a matter separated from this positing. However, to decide whether absolute positing actually is completely independent from relative positing would require a much more detailed analysis of Kant’s notion of cognition, which clearly cannot be provided here.

5. Conclusion

From the previous analysis, one can see that Kant's conception of positing is not, as is usually thought, merely an alternative to Baumgarten's notion of existence, but an alternative to the latter's notion of positing, a notion which has been shown to be already present and important in Baumgarten's philosophy. Kant's doctrine of positing has turned out to represent not simply a change in the way of conceiving of existence but, more generally, a radical change in the way of conceiving of being. By separating the issue of the predicates of a thing from the issue of its existence—the 'what a thing is' from the 'that a thing is'—Kant no longer takes the questions about the being of things to be ultimately reducible to questions about what things are, i.e. to their determinations.

Kant's doctrine of positing has emerged as the direct consequence of this break. If Baumgarten conceives of positing as always affirming (about a thing) *what* it is, Kant, by separating existence from the determinations of a thing, needs to develop an alternative and wider notion of positing, which also includes whatever is not a matter of a thing's determinations but still concerns its being. So, whilst relative positing, as the positing of a relation between determinations, takes the role of what, for Baumgarten, was positing *tout court*, absolute positing (or, the positing of the thing itself) accounts for this new role that positing must have.

On these grounds, it has been possible to give a positive account of the concept of positing, as an activity involved in every act of thinking about the being of things (i.e. how things are). Relative positing is the affirmation of a certain relation between determinations, which one deploys when determining a concept, while the positing of a thing, absolute positing, is thinking of something as given, which, for us, always amounts to thinking of a perception *as* a perception of the object in question (or as a perception otherwise making the object's existence apparent).

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