Workshop ERC EarlyModernCosmology

Kant on the Boundary of the World

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In his *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* (1584), Bruno evokes an old objection to the Aristotelian cosmos, when his characters discuss what would happen “if a person would stretch out his hand beyond the convex sphere of heaven.” The modern critique of the Aristotelian cosmos, as presented by Bruno, is based on a shift of perspective: humans are no longer in a cosmos in which all things, us included, have their proper place, but are in an infinite expanse of space; this shift makes possible Bruno’s thought experiment of stretching one’s hand beyond the edge of the outer sphere. In this paper I will argue that Kant’s reflections on the boundary of the world accomplish a further ‘paradigm shift.’ In the Antinomy chapter of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Kant argues that knowledge of the spatial boundary of the world is simply impossible. However, other passages in the Kritik and particularly the *Prolegomena* provide subtle reflections on the notions of boundaries (Grenzen) and limits (Schranken), in terms of our cognitive faculties. Kant shifts the problem of knowledge of the boundary of the world to the intertwined issues of the boundary of knowledge and our capacity for knowledge of boundaries. Through this example, I hope to shed light on Kant’s sophisticated engagement with classical cosmological questions.