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Mark C. Timmons

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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KANT'S SUBJECTIVIST THEORY OF SPACE

MARK C. TIMMONS

Department of Philosophy
University of Nebraska—Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588

In his 1780 *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, Kant rejects those objectivist views of space according to which space belongs to the order of things in themselves, either as itself a thing in itself (Newton), or reducible to properties of things in themselves (Leibniz), and argues for a subjectivist alternative. What this subjectivist view comes to is unclear. This paper provides an analysis of a few key passages from the *Kritik* in an attempt to reconstruct Kant's doctrine of space.

† † †

In the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant argues for a subjectivist theory of space, and while the philosophical considerations that (he thinks) necessitate such a view are made reasonably clear, what this subjectivist account comes to is unclear. Much of the unclarity is due to such expressions as "form of appearance," "subjective condition of sensibility," "outer intuition," and so on, which are constantly used by Kant to characterize his view. Hence, in this essay I intend to investigate, in some detail, the meanings of certain key terms and expressions, a correct understanding of which is indispensable for interpreting Kant's doctrine of space. This project will provide, I hope, the necessary groundwork for any future study of Kant's theory of space.

A clear statement of what I shall refer to as the *Transcendental Aesthetic* doctrine of space (T.A. doctrine) reads:

- (1) Space is nothing but the form of all appearances of outer sense. It is the subjective condition of sensibility, under which alone, outer intuition is possible for us (A26, B42).

First in the order of clarification is an examination of the relationship between the expressions "form of all appearances" and "form of intuition." In the *Kritik*, Kant uses them interchangeably. This is because here the logical doctrine of intuition is connected with the metaphysical doctrine of sensibility. The logical sense of intuition serves to distinguish this notion from that of concept. Both are modes of knowledge: by intuition a representing creature is put into an imme-

mediate relation to an object, this representation being single; while through concepts, the subject is mediately related to objects by the representation of features common to several objects falling under the concept. The point is that intuition as contrasted with conception depends somehow upon an immediate presence of an object to consciousness. In human beings that faculty of intuitive awareness is sensibility. Our intuition, then, is sensible and depends for its operation upon sensory stimulation from independently existing objects. The result of this sort of intuition (empirical intuition) is what Kant calls "appearance," the datum of possible experience (A 119). "Appearance," defined as "the undetermined object of an empirical intuition" (B34 A20), is a composite of matter (sensation) and form (space and time). An appearance, then, is that mode of consciousness in human beings through which we are put into an immediate relation to objects. This sort of connection between intuition generally and sensibility enables Kant to use "form of intuition" (meaning empirical intuition) and "form of appearance" interchangeably.

Returning now to the above quoted passage, consider first the phrase "form of all appearances of outer sense." What can it mean to say that space is the *form* of anything? A clue to an understanding of this can be gained by considering Kant's talk of the forms of judgment.

Kant defines judgments as functions of unity among mediate representations, i.e., concepts. A concept for Kant is a principle of unity by which we can represent a number of immediate representations (intuitions) under one representation. That is, for Kant, a concept is a rule, the use of which enables us to represent a number of representations immediately given to us in intuition. Now all thought is judgmental, by which we relate or connect different concepts together according to certain patterns. Each pattern of connection represents a possible logical form for thought, which, taken collectively, exhaustively represents the logical structure for all thinking whatsoever. What this comes to is this: for any syntactically coherent utterance or thought, e.g., "all bodies

are heavy,” we can abstract from its content (i.e., the predicates and individual constants) and consider its form in isolation, which in this case is “all---are. . . .” Now the structural features of any thought may be separated into quantity, quality, relation, and modality. The judgment in question is universal, affirmative, categorical, and assertoric, corresponding respectively to these general structural features. Further, these features represent the most generic features of judgment *qua* judgment. The point is that to judge at all is to combine or relate concepts in certain patterns such that unless one’s judgment exemplifies one of the forms, one simply has not offered a meaningful judgment. For Kant, then, the (logical) forms of thought or judgment are the limits or permissible ways in which one can meaningfully judge.

Applying this to the notion “form of sensible appearance,” it follows that insofar as space is a *form*, it represents some sort of structure to which all sense content must conform if intuition is to take place at all. We might say, then, that space represents patterns of connection holding between the elements of intuitive awareness.

Clearly, though, more is involved here. Given this much, Kant’s view is compatible with those of both his empiricist and rationalist predecessors. Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz, for instance, all hold that space is a fundamental feature of experience in the sense explained above, i.e., that the possibility of knowledge of objects presupposes space. What makes Kant’s view unique and interesting is the further claim that space, in some special sense, represents the elementary, *a priori* structure of outer appearance. Kant says that this form or structure is that which “so determines the manifold of appearances that it allows of being ordered” (B34, A20). To understand this phrase, let us turn to the second sentence of the quotation.

The phrases “form of sensible appearance” and “subjective condition of sensibility” seem to be used synonymously in A26, B42. Consider the latter phrase. What does it mean to say that space is a necessary or universally-valid condition of sensibility? Generally, to say that something X is a necessary condition for something else Y is to make the counterfactual assertion that if X were to be removed or not to occur, then Y would not occur. Using this admittedly rough analysis of “necessary condition,” we might say that if space, which has its seat in the mind, were to be removed, no representation of objects would be possible. (Presumably this would cover *both* immediate and mediate representations.)

But again, this is quite compatible with opposing objectivist theories. Newton, who held that space is an immaterial, independently-existing entity in which all things are placed, would no doubt argue that without space, human perceptual awareness of objects would be impossible.

This brings us finally to the distinguishing feature of

Kant’s doctrine: space, as a necessary condition of sensibility, is *subjective in origin*. That is, space—the structure of all intuitive representation in us—has its source in the human mind as a feature of our faculty of sensibility. Thus, from the foregoing we can say that, for Kant, space just is a *necessary subjective condition of sensibility*, understanding the underscored phrase in the way explained above.

Still, matters are not as clear as they might be, for what sense does it make to say that *space* is a *condition* of sensible awareness? Again, let us assume that talking of X’s being a necessary condition for Y can be “unpacked” counterfactually. But the question here concerns what sort of “thing” this necessary condition of sensibility is. Or better (though not necessarily more perspicuous), what is the *nature* of this subjective condition called space? It seems quite peculiar to identify space with a necessary condition of some sort.

Consider, for a moment, talk of necessary conditions. Such talk typically arises in connection with talk of causation. In most accounts, the relata of the causal relation are events or activities. Thus, in the context of Kant’s doctrine, I suggest that to talk of space as a necessary condition, space must be looked upon as an originally given mental activity; or better since it is part of our mental makeup and “exists” antecedent to any actual experience, space is a mental *capacity*. Just as a necessary condition for a piece of glass to shatter upon impact is that it must have a certain sort of capacity, i.e., to break upon impact, so also we must possess the capacity of being able to represent spatially if we are to have intuitions. More precisely, space, on this account, is to be understood as a mental disposition, a disposition manifested as a *manner* of arranging or combining the sensible data (sensations) given through outer sense.

This, I suggest, is the most plausible way of reading those passages in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* in which space is identified as “the subjective condition under which we can have outer intuition.” Indeed, the foregoing should shed some light on Kant’s definition of “form of appearance” (“that in which alone the sensation can be posited and ordered . . .”)-the ordering and positing being a capacity of the mind, which in the case of outer sensation is called space.

No doubt, further clarification and defense are needed in behalf of this interpretation. To this end, consider a number of passages that suggest this view. Speaking generally, Kant says:

- (2) In every being the constituent elements of it (essentials) are the matter and the *mode* in which they are combined . . . (B222).
- (3) Space itself, however, is nothing but an inner *mode* of representation in which certain perceptions are connected with one another (B43).

(4) . . . the form of this intuition can lie *a priori* in our faculty of representation, without being anything more than the *mode* in which the subject is affected (B130).

(5) The merely subjective state of the representing subject, insofar as the manifold is given in a special manner (for its intuiting and synthetic unity), is called “sensibility”; and this *manner* of intuition, given *a priori*, is the sensible form of intuition (Letter to Beck, 20 January, 1792).

(My emphasis throughout.)

I think the best way of understanding this talk of mode and manner is in terms of mental capacity or disposition, as explained above.

In order to strengthen this interpretation of the doctrine, I turn to Kant’s account of the synthesis of apprehension expounded in both A and B deductions of the categories. My claim will be that space (and time) function as that *manner* or way in which the imagination connects appearances in its apprehension of the empirical content of intuition. That is, space (and time) represent the peculiar manner in which the data of empirical intuition are taken up and put together by the imagination. Of course, to clarify this we need to explain Kant’s notion of the synthesis of apprehension.

Recall that sensations for Kant are the raw data of empirical intuition, i.e., the mental effects due to the affection of our senses by independently existing objects. As such, sensations have no extensive magnitude, i.e., are nonspatial in character.

Apprehension by means merely of sensation occupies only an instant, if, that is, I do not take into account the succession of different sensations. As sensation is that element in the [field of appearance] the apprehension of which does not involve a succession synthesis proceeding from the parts to the whole representation, it has no extensive magnitude (B209).

This passage is important and may be explained as follows. Considered in isolation, apart from the successive synthesis of apprehension, sensations as such are non-extended magnitudes—they are intrinsically nonspatial in character. They are, that is, mere mental affections arising in us in a particular manner. If we consider sensations individually, our apprehension of each of them would not involve successive synthesis and *hence* not be spatially extended. It is the successive synthesis of apprehension of sensations that results in the appearances—i.e., sensations plus form. Space, it seems, is a manner of connecting sensations to generate appearances.

Appearances, then, are the result of the synthesis of

apprehension. To substantiate this claim, consider the following remarks.

(7) The appearances, insofar as they are objects of consciousness, simply in virtue of being representations, are not in any way distinct from their apprehension, that is, from their reception in the synthesis of imagination; and we must therefore agree that the manifold of appearances is always generated in the mind successively (A190).

(8) The *appearances* are, in their apprehension themselves, nothing but an empirical synthesis in space and time, and are given only within this synthesis (A499).

The following seems to emerge from (6) and (7): appearances are initially “given” only through a certain synthesizing activity of the imagination. Appearances are thus the result of an activity of the imagination. It is the successive combining of sensation, which takes place in a certain *manner*, that results in appearances—the data of all knowledge. Space lies at the basis of this synthesis.

This way of looking at things is further substantiated by remarks in the B deduction of the categories.

(9) First of all, I may draw attention to the fact that by *synthesis of apprehension* I understand that combination of the manifold in an empirical intuition, whereby perception, that is, empirical consciousness of the intuition (as appearances), is possible (B160).

(10) In the representation of space and time we have *a priori* forms of outer and inner sensible intuition; and to these the synthesis of apprehension of the manifold of appearance must always conform, because in no other way can the synthesis take place at all (B160).

(11) When, for instance, by apprehension of the manifold of a house, I take the empirical intuition of it into a perception, the necessary unity of space and of outer sensible intuition in general lies at the basis of my apprehension (B162).

In (9), Kant in effect is saying that synthesis of apprehension is a combination of the manifold in an empirical intuition, i.e., a combination of sensations which result in appearance. In (10) and (11), Kant is saying that space (and time) lie at the basis of this synthesis, i.e., as the manner in which sensations are combined.

To sum up: We began with the phrase “form of intuition,” the explication of which led to an analysis of what Kant means in claiming that space is a subjective condition

of sensible intuition. We found that, originally, space is a mental capacity, which on the occasion of sensible stimulation is the manner or mode in which the imagination combines appearances in what Kant calls the synthesis of apprehension.

Some brief clarifying comments are in order. One may be inclined to ask what precisely is this manner or mode of imagination identified with space. To characterize space as some sort of imaginative capacity for combination of sensation is mysterious.

All that can be said here is that sensations are combined by the activity of the imagination in a *spatial manner*. One of the fundamental tenets of Kant's doctrine of space, first expounded in the 1768 essay "Concerning the Ultimate Foundation of the Differentiation in Space," is that spatial relations are *sui generis*, i.e., not reducible to any other set of relations or properties of objects. Thus, all that can be said about this manner of combination is that it is spatial in character.

It might be objected that, insofar as I have made space a capacity of the imagination, I have made the imagination a part of sensibility. But, as Kant says, sensibility is a receptive, i.e., passive faculty of knowledge; hence, the imagination, which functions to combine or synthesize mental data, is a feature of the understanding.

Without pursuing matters too far, it is clear that the doctrine of imagination in Kant is obscure. It simply is not clear whether the imagination properly belongs to sensibility or the understanding, or has its feet in both. (I incline toward the latter view.) In Kant's *Anthropology*, which in part is Kant's psychological theory, it is interesting to note that imagination is in fact classified as a power of the faculty of sensibility.

A connected problem may be stated as follows: Kant seems to hold that space and time, as forms of all sensible intuition, comprise a receptive capacity, i.e., a capacity to be affected in certain ways. In my view, it seems that space is no mere receptive form but an active source of knowledge, seated in the imagination. Now if we consider the active/passive division Kant makes between the two fundamental sources of knowledge, it seems that the distinction is really between spontaneous mental activity and receptive non-activity. Presumably, the central idea here is that there are two sources of knowledge: from one source we receive data upon which the other operates. The result is experience. Now, insofar as the objection above makes any sense at all, it is claimed that in my interpretation, space acts upon the data of experience, whereas Kant explicitly says that space is a manner of being affected.

My response is that it is the imagination which is active in combining the data of the senses, while space merely represents the manner in which this combination takes place.

Space, in my view, then, need not be understood as an active capacity itself.

There are two final points that should be made in connection with my interpretation. There are a number of places in which Kant holds that space and time are produced or generated by a synthesis of the productive imagination. Here we must be careful to avoid being misled by an ambiguity in Kant's use of "space." Space, as form of intuition and understood as a mental capacity, is not generated. I do not think such a claim would even make sense. On the other hand, Kant holds that a combination of appearances is represented as extended objects in space. The space in which things are located can be said to be produced as a result of the synthetic activity of the imagination. "Space" in the latter sense is called "empirical space" (see *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*), the blueprint for which has its source in the imagination.

Note that talk of the production of space is quite consistent with the T.A. doctrine of space according to which space is *originally given* as a single unified and infinite manifold. Space, that is, does not consist of (spatial) parts that combine to form one, all-embracing space. Rather, space is an innate capacity of unification and, as such, each so-called empirical space produced represents one determinate result of this activity. To speak of empirical spaces, i.e., "different" spaces, presupposes some way of differentiating them. But obviously, since it makes no sense to talk of space as some object of awareness, empirical space (insofar as this phrase has meaning) simply denotes a certain position holding among the objects represented. Thus, to speak of different spaces as part of one all-embracing space is really elliptical for talk about situations of objects relative to one another, the possibility of which presupposes that they are represented in a unified manner—a spatial manner.

In the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant says that space is *given*, i.e., it is an intuition that "must be found in us prior to any perception of an object" (B41). This seems to suggest that space lies in us as an innate representation. In *On a Discovery According to which Any New Critique of Pure Reason Has Been Made Superfluous by an Earlier One* (1790), Kant denies this:

The Critique admits absolutely no divinely implanted or innate representation. It regards them all, whether they belong to intuition or not as *acquired* (Allison, 1973).

The problem here is with the words "given" and "intuition," which have misled some commentators. Kant claims that the objects of intuition are given to us as sensations. This, of course, does not mean that they are in any way innate. Sensations result from the affection of unknown things in themselves upon the senses. The use of the term "given" is presumably to emphasize that sensations are not the result of

any mental activity. Certainly space is not “given” in this sense. If Kant is correct in 1790 about this doctrine of the *Kritik*, then space is not given in the sense of being an innate intuition.

The meaning of “space as given” is made clear in Kant’s 1790 response to Eberhard:

There must, however, be a ground in the subject which makes it possible for these representations to originate in this and no other manner, and which enables them to be related to objects which are not given. The ground at least is innate (Allison, 1973).

The ground, of course, is the mental capacity to relate sensible items spatially. That which is generated, i.e., empirical space, when considered apart from empirical data, is space as a pure, homogeneous manifold which is *originally* acquired. But this original acquisition, i.e., space as a pure homogeneous manifold, leads us to Kant’s doctrine of formal intuition, a topic requiring separate and detailed treatment.

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