

The Transcendental Aesthetic (1): *A Priori* Intuitions

The place of the transcendental aesthetic in Kant's work is that it is where he deals with the nature of sensibility. It is the means by which objects are given to us. Sensibility is the original relation of cognition to objects. All thoughts or concepts involve an indirect relation to objects and hence ultimately, to have sense, have to be connected to "intuition". Sensations can be understood in two ways: in terms either of their matter or their form. The matter of sensation is the "thick" experience of it (touch, sight, sound, etc) whilst the form of sensation is that in it which enables us to experience it at all. Kant wants us to turn to the latter as it is what he will term the *a priori* element of sensation. This necessary form of sensation is not itself sensational if by sensational we mean arising from the senses. That which is constitutively independent of the senses in terms of its origin is what Kant means by "pure". Hence Kant will be suggesting that there is a manner of sensibility, which enables us to describe the pure nature of intuition.

The pure intuitions are what the transcendental aesthetic is intended to describe. The content of pure intuition is the form of all empirical intuition. What is this, according to Kant? He argues that there are two such: space and time. The arguments in favour of his conclusion that space and time are pure intuitions are divided into two components, termed metaphysical and transcendental expositions. The metaphysical expositions demonstrate that space and time are *a priori* intuitions whilst the

transcendental expositions are intended to show that only on the assumption that space and time are *a priori* intuitions are the characteristics of certain bodies of knowledge possible.

When Kant sets out the argument in favour of the view of that space is an *a priori* intuition he mentions by contrast the positions of Newton and Leibniz (B37), the former of whom held that space and time are absolutely real, and the latter of whom argues that they are mere relations of things but that nonetheless these relations would belong to things regardless of whether the things in question were intuited. Hence Kant's view is an alternative view to both these positions but the way in which it is intended to be an alternative to them is something we will leave for discussion until next week.

The arguments showing that space is an *a priori* intuition are four. The first argument is what I would term the "externality argument". This states that space is not a concept derived from experience because to experience something as external to me I already have the representation of space and thus no type of experience could give this notion as all types of experience that might be assumed to render it available already presuppose it. The first argument concerning time has the same structure stating that no representation from experience could give the notion of time as any experience of succession or coexistence already presupposes it. These arguments are negative in scope: they basically state that there is nothing of a kind with the notions of space and time and since this is so there could be nothing from which they are derived. Hence the conclusion that space and

time are *a priori* is here merely a consequence of the demonstration that there is no experience akin to them that does not presuppose them but Kant has not here provided a positive argument in favour of the *a priori* status of space and time.

The second argument is, by contrast, set out as a type of positive argument to the conclusion. This turns on the conditions of representation. Space cannot be taken away from representation as we would have no representation of anything without it (the same is asserted of time). This argument intends to show that space is *a priori* in the sense of being a *necessary* element of cognition. The indication that we can conceive of empty or pure space seems to cut against this (as here Kant indicates we can give space without anything filling it) but need not if we present space here as an empty gap between things rather than a pure space in general. This is a positive proof since it indicates that space and time possess one of the characteristics of the *a priori* directly whilst the first proof derived the other characteristic of the *a priori* from a negative demonstration. Norman Kemp Smith suggests a weakness of this proof however in that it is only valid if no other account that is based on the nature of cognition itself can be given and such could be given such as Hume's view that association is the process that generates the indissoluble connections Kant affirms exist between representations and the forms of pure intuitions. However, in response to Kemp Smith two points can be made in Kant's defence. The first is that Humean association does not account for the necessity of space and time, a quality shown in the first argument to belong to them. The second is that the

argument from association precisely fails to demonstrate how a connection such as that asserted between representation in general and space and time could exist.

The third and fourth arguments are intended to show that space and time are not concepts but intuitions (until this point Kant has used the term “concept” to describe them which both indicates that occasionally he uses it as a general term for any element of cognition and secondly indicates he has not yet shown that space and time are not concepts). The third arguments are again essentially the same as Kant sets out an argument that space and time are unitary and that to speak of diverse spaces and times is only to refer to parts of the one space or time. Furthermore, the notion of the whole is not generated out of the parts but are only representable through the whole. Essentially these arguments spell out the differences between direct and indirect relation to an object. Here the intuitional nature of space and time is argued from the individual nature of these cognitions. Concepts by contrast do not present individuals but ways of cutting up generalities and hence only refer indirectly to individuals. This amounts to the view that since concepts are ways of presenting class or generic notions and space and time are not such that they cannot be concepts. This is hence a negative argument. The positive argument that Kant concludes with is based on the assumption that space and time are given to us being infinite in nature. What Kant means by this is that all the parts of space and time coexist *ad infinitum* or that space for instance belongs to everything and hence space is an infinite given datum and its infinity is an internal characteristic of it. The

characteristic of infinity is *within* the representation of space and time, not merely something thought *under* or through a generality such as a concept gives us (concept “dog” being that under which all the types of dogs are given). Hence it is again by contrast with the characteristics of concepts that we reach our conclusion but on this occasion this contrast is positively stated in terms of what belongs to a certain type of representation as unique to it.

After giving these arguments Kant presents the “transcendental” expositions of space and time. What he intends to show here is that certain types of bodies of knowledge would not be possible for us unless we accepted his basic contention that space and time are *a priori* intuitions. The transcendental exposition of space concerns the body of knowledge we have about space in the science of geometry. His first point concerning geometry is that the knowledge it conveys is not merely analytic and the simplest reason for assuming that this is right is to take a statement from geometry. The example Kant gave in the introduction to the *Critique* is that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. This statement is clearly not an analytic one as straightness has no definitional relation to quantity. Hence in suggesting that the straightness of the line is an indicator of a quantitative characteristic we are adding something to the notion of quantity, not simply deriving the quality in question from the sense of quantity. If then we discover something here concerning quantity that is not part of its notion then we must be using, to discover this, something non-conceptual as if we were working with concepts alone we would not be able

to do more than state synonymous connections between terms. But the only other element of cognition we have discovered apart from concepts is intuitions so the sense that there are truths here that are synthetic must indicate that in geometry we are using intuitions to discover something about the nature of space. However, not only is it the case that geometrical statements rely on intuition, but, suggests Kant, they are also *a priori*. The reason he makes this latter claim is that geometrical statements are ones that are not thought by us to only hold contingently. Thus the body of truths we call geometry is a body of synthetic *a priori* truths and for such to be the case whilst describing space to us indicates a further ground for thinking that space itself is an *a priori* intuition.

The transcendental exposition of time is simpler as all Kant does here is point out to recognize alteration or motion requires not merely space but also time and that without time also being given there could be no science of motion. Thus time is a necessary condition for any such science and is hence *a priori* but that since the understanding of motion is also something that is generally synthetic that time must also be an intuition.