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

The first major section of the *Critique* is the Transcendental Aesthetic. In this section Kant treats the question of what elements of sensibility are *a priori*. In addressing this he opens by referring to something called “intuition” (*Anschauung*). Two criteria are referred to that mark something as an “intuition”. Firstly, it involves “immediate” awareness (which reminds us of Descartes’ use of “intuition”) and the other that it implies singularity (i.e. there is here a form of particularity that is not subsumable under a universal). The relationship between these two criteria is much disputed amongst writers on Kant as most think that one of them must have priority over the other with the dispute concerning which it is that has that priority. In any event, Kant first refers in the *Critique* to “immediacy” mentioning it in the first line of the Aesthetic.

Apart from this point is also clear that for all finite cognizers (including humans) intuition is something sensible. When the effect of an object on the senses produces sensation then we have an *empirical* intuition. This *a posteriori* element of intuition is also termed by Kant the *matter* of intuition. By contrast, the *form* of intuition is what must apply to anything that is sensational but which will not itself be sensational. This form of intuition is the *a priori* element of sensibility. In order to uncover this *a priori* form we need to establish what belongs to all sensation without being
derived from it. This leads us to the view that there are two pure forms of sense: space and time.

Having reached this point Kant goes on to give arguments for why we should take space and time to have the status he is claiming for them. Prior to giving his arguments for the view he is committed to he first refers to the dispute between the Leibnizians and Newtonians concerning the status of space and time (A23/B37-8). Kant’s subsequently will make two separate claims about the status of space and time that must not be confused with each other. The first claim is that space and time are *a priori* intuitions and the arguments for this claim will be considered this week. A second claim will give the first clue to his general doctrines of transcendental idealism and empirical realism and we will turn to those claims next week. But the arguments for space and time being *a priori* intuitions are presented separately from those concerning transcendental idealism and empirical realism and the point of the specific arguments needs to be clearly established.

The arguments that are given for thinking of space as an *a priori* intuition are substantially the same as those for thinking of time in this way and traditionally only one of these sets of arguments tends to be considered. I will follow this rule and only look at the arguments concerning space. They are distinguished in the second edition in terms of *metaphysical* and *transcendental* expositions. The *metaphysical* expositions concern the
specific reasons for claiming that space is both *a priori* and intuitive whilst the *transcendental* exposition suggests that it is only by considering space in this way that we can justify some other form of knowledge-claim.

Space is presented as the form of outer sense (time the form of inner sense). Five distinct arguments are given for thinking of space in the way Kant suggests we should, some of which concern reasons for thinking it as *a priori*, others for thinking of it as an intuition. The five arguments concern externality, the conditions of representation, the uniqueness and unity of space, the notion of space as an “infinite given magnitude” and the transcendental exposition concerns geometry (motion in the case of time).

The externality argument is given first (A23/B38). Here Kant claims that space is not a concept derived from experience since any means of relating sensations to anything beyond me and as different from each other in terms of occurring at different points presupposes the notion of space. This is an argument for thinking of space as *a priori* in terms of being a necessary condition of representing relations.

There is a general objection to this argument to the effect that it states a tautology. Peter Strawson, for example, states this claiming that all the argument says is that we could not become aware of objects as spatially related unless we had the capacity to do so. A slightly different objection to the argument is that it does not prove that space is *a priori*, just that it is *prior to* certain other parts of knowledge. (Graham Bird mentions this
point.) In response to Strawson’s objection two separate points have been made. Firstly, it is possible to argue that what Kant is focusing on is the difference between self and objects and that this difference is brought out as requiring space so that space is necessary for it. (This would be based on the point that sensations be referred to something beyond me.) However, that the sensation is something in some sense distinct from what has the sensation does not show that we require the view that space really exists so if this is Kant’s argument then it is not a good one.

A second type of reply would be that what Kant has shown is that to have a conception of external relations (the sensation being different from who has it) we must first have a sense of external order (the sensation being different in different places) and this latter requires something that does not come from the sensation itself. This would be to the effect that to coherently relate to sensations as having patterns and distinctions requires that they be located in space. This fits the text of the argument much better and appears to be a sound argument.

In responding to Bird’s claim that the argument only establishes priority of order over relations and is not sufficient to show that the order that is given by space to sensations is something a priori it is true that we have not shown in this argument that space is universally needed for the experience of sensation to, in any given instance, be coherent. But what the argument would show is that it is necessary for sensation to be continuously
related to in a coherent manner (so only in one of the senses of *a priori* would space have been shown to be *a priori*).

The second argument, which concerns representation, is likewise one that appeals directly to conditions of representation. (A24/B38-9) Here Kant argues that we can’t represent the absence of space though we can think of space as empty of objects. The conclusion of this is that space is a condition of the possibility of objects appearing and not something that is dependent on the objects. A couple of objections have been made against this argument. One would be that the claim is only psychological and contingent and shows nothing that would make space *a priori*. Another objection would be to the claim that we can really think of space as empty of objects, that, in some sense, to really think space we need to relate it to something that is, in some sense, *in* space.

The claim that the argument has, if successful, only established a psychological and contingent result, is a less serious objection than it first appears. Should it be the case that there is a difference between being able to represent space separately from objects and *not* being able to do the reverse then this would establish a distinction that would certainly suggest a *necessary* dependence of objects *on* space. This dependence would not be psychological in the empirical sense since it would apply to any attempt by any finite cognizer to relate space and objects, not just some contingent peculiarity.
The objection that really matters then is whether Kant is right to make the distinction that he does in the argument or, put differently, concerns what the distinction he is arguing for really is. So Kemp Smith, for example, argues that the problem with this second argument is that Kant does not consider alternative accounts of the reason for the relationship between space and objects that he suggests holds. Kemp Smith gives as an alternative Hume’s view that there could be an association formed here that becomes fixed. What Kemp Smith’s objection fails to note however is that such a claim would not be sufficient to show that space is necessary for objects to be represented as an association is not a necessity. Geometry can be brought in to support Kant’s claim that space can be conceived separately from objects as with geometry we do not need to appeal to characteristics of physical things at all and yet we do conceive of space. So it is possible to think space in such a way that there are no objects in it and no sensations placed in it and this would show that space was prior to objects but if we add that no objects can be represented separately from space then this would show space was necessary for objects and hence a priori in one sense.

The first two arguments, if successful, show space to be a priori in the sense of necessary though the second would also have as its consequence that space is universally required for the experience of objects. The third argument (fourth in the first edition) aims to show that space is not a concept but a pure intuition. (A24-5/B39) Here Kant states that space is
represented as a unique unity. What makes it so is that parts of space cannot precede the sense of the whole of space. The parts can only be understood as in the whole with the sense of distinct spaces rather emerging as derivative of the whole from cutting it up into parts. This argument concerns mereology (theory of parts and wholes). Some wholes emerge from parts and are derivative of them whilst in other cases the sense of the part-whole relationship requires that the whole first be given and the parts then follow from it. In the latter case, we have, Kant is arguing, a singular whilst in the former case there emerges a universal by abstraction from particulars.

To see the point of Kant’s distinction here we can contrast the way concepts work with how he is claiming intuitions function. With a concept any instance of it can capture the sense of the whole (so for example “Fido” is sufficient for the concept of “dog” even though “dog” is more general than “Fido”). By contrast, a part of space is only an area and does not capture the sense of space as such. Rather, it is because of the sense of space as a unique whole that the specific region makes sense. To put this differently, the universal features that we have in mind in the concept “dog” are exemplified in each dog (the differences between them notwithstanding) so that the universal just summarizes them whilst space is continuously given as a unique unity and the sense of the parts is only through the general whole. Whilst the universal concept can thus arise from the particulars, the specific parts of space presuppose the whole.
The objections to this argument typically touch on only part of the claim it makes: namely, that space is a unity. Some have claimed that spaces could exist separately from each other (Anthony Quinton). Others have suggested that the argument here does not exclude alternative views of space to that it is an intuition, that there could be alternative explanations given. However, if the view that there could be separate spaces is meant to be a conceptual possibility there are two problems with it. Firstly, it requires a gap between the spaces and it is difficult to see how that can be characterized except in terms of a further space. Secondly, such a conceptual possibility, even if granted, does not show that it would be possible to experience such separation. In relation to alternative views, what is denied here is that space is a notion that could have arisen from particulars and this denial is the substance of the claim that space is an intuition as, by the criteria of singularity, it is only of intuitions that this could be true.

The fourth argument (fifth in first edition) (A25/B39-40) concerns the representation of space as an infinite given magnitude. Here Kant sharpens the contrast between concepts and intuitions. With concepts there are a number of possible different representations which are contained under the general heading that they describe. But this class-inclusion relation is quite different from having the sub-representations included within the general heading as is the case with space. Due to having the latter
relationship to its sub-representations space is an *intuition*. The reason why all the elements of space are *within* it rather than *under* it is due to the fact that all the parts of space have to coexist together as shown in the previous argument.

The second two arguments, if successful, show that space is an intuition and carry with them the sense that space is, in so being, a unique singular (a kind of universal particular). This added to the points showing it to be *a priori* lead us to the conclusion that it is an *a priori* intuition. Kant then proceeds to give a transcendental exposition, which concerns geometry. It is only carefully distinguished from the metaphysical expositions in the second edition where it is given at B40-41 (corresponding to A24). In the first edition Kant presented this argument simply as that the certain character of geometrical propositions was made possible by the *a priori* necessity of space and that if space was something we arrived at by *a posteriori* induction then our view of it would be merely perceptive and contingent.

In the second edition this argument is expanded and here Kant points to the view that geometry is a body of synthetic *a priori* truths. The condition of possibility of this must be that space is an intuition as from concepts alone we could never make discoveries (everything would be analytic). Further, the statements of geometry must be *a priori*, that is, be
comprehended prior to any empirical intuitions, just because its statements are certain which they would not be if derived from empirical intuitions.

A final argument specifically concerning the status of space as an a priori intuition is given in the Prolegomena but not repeated in the Critique. This is the argument from incongruent counterparts. The example given is that of right and left hands. They are counterparts to each other and, considered purely conceptually, appear to be the same. Yet, as is easy to see, they are incongruent. If you place a left hand in front of a mirror the image reflected of it will place it on your right side. The difference between the hand and its reflection shows that right and left are incongruent as you could not replace one with the other. But the difference between them cannot be in anything conceptual so this shows that fundamentally space is an intuition.