

The Transcendental Aesthetic (2):

Transcendental Idealism and Empirical Realism

Last time we looked at the arguments Kant gives for his general claim that space and time are *a priori* intuitions. This time we are going to view considerations he gives for what he takes to be an important consequence of this view. There are two main conclusions that Kant argues we should derive from the view argued for thus far: namely, that space and time are, in an important sense, subjective, and that they do not apply to “things-in-themselves”. In arguing for these positions Kant arrives at a first statement of two doctrines that are central to the general position of the *Critique*: transcendental idealism and empirical realism.

The first place where Kant sets out these positions is in the sections after the metaphysical and transcendental expositions of space and time entitled “conclusions from the above concepts”, where he gives two conclusions concerning space and three concerning time. The first conclusion is to the effect that space and time do not represent any property of things in themselves, an assertion that is presented here as equivalent to the claim that it would not attach to anything when abstraction was made of all subjective conditions of intuition. (A26/B42) So this first point suggests an equivalence between the non-spatiotemporality of things in themselves and the subjectivity of space and time. The reasons given for this claim are not presented in precisely the same way for space as for time but, given the parallels between the two thus far, are surely meant to be added together. So, when arguing that space doesn’t represent any property of things in

themselves, Kant adds that it also does not represent the *relation* between things-in-themselves though he fails to add this point about relations when discussing time. Since time, however, were it to be a property of things-in-themselves, would be a relational property of them, we surely can simply assume that Kant took this for granted.

In both cases Kant argues that the reason why space and time cannot be a property of things-in-themselves is that we have shown, in showing that they are *a priori* intuitions, that they cannot attach to the objects themselves since they are rather part of the subjective conditions of intuition. Two reasons are given for this claim when he considers time though only the second is mentioned in the case of space. The first reason is that if time were something that existed in a way that made it absolutely independent (like a substance) that it would be an actuality that was not an object. (A32/B49) (This claim is not made with regard to space but would surely be also correct for it.) If, on the other hand, space or time, were orders that inhered in things themselves, then they would not be *prior* to the cognition of objects. So if we think of objects as something that can be thought separately from reference to our means of cognition then we cannot include space and time in this.

Now, there is some dispute in the secondary literature on the question of whether Kant has derived the non-spatiotemporality of things in themselves from their subjectivity or whether, on the contrary, he has derived the subjectivity of space and time from the non-spatiotemporality of things in themselves. The problem with adjudicating this dispute is that the

first conclusion here is the first place in the *Critique* where Kant mentions the notion of things-in-themselves. The statement of the first conclusion does however point to an understanding of what is meant by them, which is the sense of “object” *apart from* the subjective conditions of intuition. Paul Guyer correctly points out that the first sentence of the first conclusion denies that things-in-themselves are spatial before Kant goes on to refer to the subjectivity of space. However, whilst this is the order in which Kant’s sentences go it is less clear that the order of his logical derivation is the same as the order of his sentences. The subsequent passage explicates the notion of things-in-themselves and does so only on the basis of the subjectivity of space understanding by this the fact that space has been established to be an intuition. So it appears to me that the logic of the passage is to the effect that space (and time) cannot belong to “things-in-themselves” as what is meant by “things-in-themselves” is something intrinsically non-subjective.

The second conclusion that Kant derives specifically opens with reference to subjectivity as here space is declared to be nothing but the form of all appearances of outer sense whilst time, by contrast, is only the form of inner sense. With regard to space the explanation is given that space is part of the receptivity of the subject and as such it can be understood how it is given prior to particular actual perceptions. In the discussion of time, by contrast, it is pointed out that time has nothing to do with shape or position and so it can only be represented by means of analogies. (The example that is given is of a line.) The analogies derive from space so time can only be

represented spatially but that it is represented only by means of an intuition shows further that time is also an intuition.

On the grounds that the subjectivity claim is made in the second conclusion as the main point Paul Guyer claims that it is logically derived from the non-spatiotemporality of things-in-themselves. However, as just argued, this makes no sense of the first conclusion since there we discovered that the claim that things-in-themselves are not spatio-temporal was only set out to mean that “objects” apart from subjective conditions of intuition would not include space and time in their representation. The second conclusions spell out the ways in which space and time are subjective but do not derive it from the non-spatiotemporality of things-in-themselves.

As mentioned earlier, Kant derives a third conclusion concerning time that is not paralleled in the case of space. This is to the effect that time is the formal *a priori* condition of all appearances (A34/B50). Kant here introduces a second asymmetry between time and space. The first was to the effect that time can only be represented by means of space, the second is that time is the *a priori* condition of *all* appearances whilst space is the condition only of outer appearances. The reason given at this point is that all representations, whether or not they concern outer things, belong to our inner state and this inner state stands under the formal condition of inner intuition. When representing our own states to ourselves the immediate condition of such representation is time and time is the mediate condition of

outer representation since all representation as such must be to ourselves. So all appearances are in time and stand in time-relations to each other.

Kemp Smith makes two objections to the arguments given thus far. The first is classically known as the “neglected alternative” suggestion and dates back to the first reviews of the *Critique*. This is to the effect that in concluding that space and time are subjective due to their status as *a priori* intuitions Kant does not consider the view that they could also belong to things-in-themselves. Thus the suggestion is that Kant is being dogmatic in asserting the non-spatiotemporality of things-in-themselves and that it does not follow simply from the subjectivity of our means of representing space and time. The reason for thinking that there is a problem presumably is that space and time, even granted the arguments considered last time for viewing them as *a priori* intuitions, could also exist in some other sense (and thus attach to things-in-themselves) and nothing Kant has argued in his “conclusions” demonstrates otherwise. Now, in response to this objection, the question arises not whether or not space and time could also exist in some other sense but what our means of being aware of such existence would be? Since, for Kant, we either are aware of something by means of concepts or by intuitions the charge that Kant has “neglected” an alternative is tantamount to the suggestion that space and time could, after all, be represented by us in a non-intuitive way. But no reason for thinking that this is possible has been given and without some such reason no ground exists for thinking that there is a “neglected alternative” here at all.

A second objection mentioned by Kemp Smith concerns Kant's assertion in the second conclusion that space is the form of outer senses whereas previously Kant had only spoken of space as being an *a priori* intuition and that Kant has given no further proof for also thinking of it as the form of outer sense. However this objection is spurious since in the first argument for space being *a priori* (the externality argument) Kant directly showed reasons for taking space to be the form of outer sense even though he did not yet use the expression there.

After giving the two conclusions with regards to space and the three with regard to time Kant first expounds the basic point about the subjectivity of each and relates this to the non-spatio-temporality of things in themselves before turning to a more extended treatment of time and then giving some general conclusions from the whole transcendental aesthetic. The subjectivity claim is asserted in both cases in the same way which is that without the conditions of our intuition prevailing the representation of space and/or time would represent nothing. Sensibility is the condition of possibility of the representation of space and time and we cannot regard the conditions of sensibility as equivalent to the conditions of possibility of things in general. A reason that is given in favour of this assertion now is that we have no way of being able to determine whether the intuition of other beings would be like our own.

After giving this general point Kant goes on to state that, on his view, space and time are *empirically real* but *transcendentally ideal*. In claiming that they are *empirically real* he is making the point that they are

conditions for anything, in experience, appearing to us at all and hence offer a basic criteria for the reality of objects in experience. In stating that they are *transcendentally ideal*, on the other hand, he is restricting the conditions under which we can assert the reality of space and time and denying that we have any basis for claiming them to be absolutely real (as Newton did). This is summed up in the statement: “The true correlate of sensibility, the thing in itself, is not known, and cannot be known, through these representations; and in experience no question is ever asked in regard to it.” (A30/B45)

Kant next mentions a specific objection that has been brought against the claim that time is transcendentally ideal. The objection is to the effect that alterations are real as is shown by the fact that our representations change and such alteration is only possible in time so time is real. In response Kant grants the argument but states it only shows that time is empirically real. If the change in our representations could be intuited some other way than by means of time then it would follow that we would have no essential need of reference to it. We do have such need but some other intelligence might not have such need so it whilst it is essentially needed by us we cannot show it is essentially needed as such. Empirical reality of time is thus safeguarded without transcendental ideality being denied. The basis of the objection being specifically made with regard to time and yet nothing similar being ventured with regard to space is that the problem of idealism is generally admitted to hold with regard to space (not possible, that is, to prove it) whilst time seems immediately evident to consciousness.

(Cartesian dissymmetry between outer and inner.) In response Kant denies

the claim that there exists this type of dissymmetry between time and space stating that in both cases we have to admit the reality of the representation of appearance but neither can be shown to attach to “the object in itself” even though it necessarily belongs to its appearance. (A38/B55) (Response to Newton and Leibniz follows: A39/B56-A41/B58.)

Kant then moves on to conclude the argument of the transcendental aesthetic by presenting four general observations. The first observation reiterates the point that there is a distinction between our means of intuiting things and what the things themselves are that are being intuited. The means of intuition belong to the constitution of subjects only and in support of this claim Kant refers again to the understanding of geometry as a body of synthetic *a priori* truths based on the claim that space is an *a priori* intuition (A46-7/B64-5-A49/B66). The next three conclusions are all additions to the second edition. In the first of these (that is, the second conclusion), Kant points out that all that belongs to intuition describes nothing but relations and that we could not know a thing in itself through relations only (we would presumably also need intrinsic properties of it). This applies also to inner sense which leads to the conclusion that what we can claim about our own self is limited to conditions of appearance. (B68-9)

The third conclusion is that in claiming that objects that appear to us are distinct from objects in themselves Kant is *not* claiming that the former are only illusions. The problem arises only if we assume that reality requires transcendently real objects and we seek to understand space and time this way (as Newton did). If we start from the assumption of transcendental

reality we will come to the conclusion that objects of experience are illusions but this is a good reason for not starting with that assumption. The fourth conclusion is that all finite beings, like ourselves, will be limited in their cognitive power due to our need for concepts. God, if there is such, would not be so limited and this points to the fact that the division between intuition and concept is part of finite cognition and that a different kind of cognition is at least thinkable (another ground for understanding space and time to not belong to things-in-themselves). (Closing sentences of the Aesthetic return to the question of the synthetic *a priori*: B73.)