

## Prompt 2: What is Space?

Kant defines space as an *a priori* intuition that is built into the subjective constitution of our mind: its origin is non-empirical and its content is non-conceptual; however, his arguments hardly rule out possibility of naturalistic explanations of our experience of space.

At the onset of the Metaphysical exposition, Kant describes features of our sensible experience in a self-evident manner: space is an “outer sense” with which we determine objects “outside us” and their shape, magnitude and relation to one another (174). Having stated that objects external to us are spatially determinate, Kant proceeds to pose the question: “Now what are space and time?” (174). In the rhetorical questions that follow, Kant presents three possible definitions of space, the first two he rejects and the last one he defends as his own. As Charles Parsons articulates in “The Transcendental Aesthetic,” “the issue between what are now called absolutist and relationist conceptions of space and time, represented paradigmatically by Newton and Leibniz” forms “the background of all [Kant’s] thinking about space” (67). Indeed, Kant first outlines the view held by Newton, that space and time are “actual entities,” which exist independently of the body (174). On such a view, space would be an absolute reference point for the objects that exist within it, and one represents objects as spatially determinate by situating them with respect to this absolute space. Secondly, Kant mentions the Leibnizian view of space as “determinations or relations of things” (174). On such a view, the existence of space depends on actual objects that are themselves non-spatial, and one represents them spatially by situating these objects in relation to one another. Lastly, Kant mentions the view that he seeks to defend himself: space is “a form of intuition” and a feature of the “subjective constitution of our minds,” independent of which space does not exist (174). On this view, one represents objects spatially by situating them with respect to oneself.

To defend his own view, Kant proceeds to provide four arguments, completing his Metaphysical exposition on space. The first and second arguments seek to show that the origin of the representation of space is *a priori* while the third and fourth arguments aim to show that space is an intuition.

In the first argument, Kant begins with the conclusion that space is “not an empirical concept”—that is, space is not *a posteriori*, as drawn from outer experiences (174). The premises are as such: because certain sensations can be related to things outside me (“in another place in space from that in which I find myself”) and “next to one another,” it necessarily follows that I am able to represent things—including myself—as spatially distinct from one another. Subsequently, it follows that this outer experience of referring my sensations to things spatially distinct from myself is only possible through situating myself and such things in space, and organizing my representations of spatial locations and differences in relation to my representation of the space they occupy. Kant claims that, as such, the empirical representation of spatial relations among outer objects is parasitic on there being some prior spatial framework with positions. Therefore, the representation of space is *a priori*.

One might wonder if the representation of space and outer experience are simultaneous or mutually determining. In the second argument, Kant rules that out. Kant claims that space is a “necessary” representation, that is, it “grounds” all outer intuitions (175). The primary premise for such a proposition is because one can “never represent that there is no space” though one can think space absent of objects (175). Here Kant shows the logical precedence of the representation of space over the representation of spatial relations, which is what Lisa Shabel calls an argument via “asymmetry” (99): while the representation of spatial things is dependent on the representation of space, the representation of space is not itself derived from the things that

appear to us as spatial—instead, space is “the **condition** of the possibility of appearances” (175; emphasis added).

Kant’s third and fourth arguments are concerned with showing that space is an intuition, not a concept. He begins his third argument by stating what space is not: it is neither “discursive” nor a “general concept of relations of things in general” (175). His main premise is that one can only represent a singular and unique space. From this it follows that all concepts of space are grounded by an *a priori* intuition of space. How does Kant explain this premise? Kant claims that when one speaks of many spaces, one is really speaking of parts of the single all-encompassing space. Furthermore, these parts together cannot compose the whole of space; instead, it is the single all-encompassing space that yields to divisibility into determinable parts. Here, Kant’s argument moves from the “singularity of the represented space to the intuitivity of our representation thereof” (Shabel 100). He sets intuition, which relates immediately to objects and is singular, in contrast to concept, which is mediate and general. Therefore, only an intuition is suited to represent the singularity of space. All concepts of space, such as a finite, particular region, “rests merely on limitations” of the original whole—a representation given in *a priori* intuition (175).

In the fourth argument, Kant delineates another crucial difference between concept and intuition as he attempts to show that space is the latter. He begins with the premise that space is represented as “an infinite given magnitude” (175). With the word ‘given,’ Kant seems to be claiming the immediacy of the representation of space, present in our mind in an analogous manner to perception (Parsons 70). Kant continues by setting forth the logic that a potentially infinite number of possible representations can only be contained **under** a general representation (a concept); unlike a concept, the representation of space contains an infinite number of

“simultaneous” representations “**within** itself” (175). Hence, the original representation of space is an intuition comprehending all things within itself, rather than an abstract common notion containing them under itself. Ultimately, then, Kant regards infinitude and singularity to be features of our capacity to represent spatial things.

An objection that could be raised against Kant’s arguments by an empiricist or a naturalist is the possibility that our experience is spatial because we have evolved in a physical, spatiotemporal world. Though such a view would agree with Kant that space is built into the subjective constitution of our minds, it would object to Kant’s argument that our mind is outside the empirical world, arguing instead that our mind’s constitution and operations are heavily dependent on what happens to our body. On this view, the origins of our representation of space—a structural feature of our mind—would then be ultimately empirical. Such an explanation would see our inability to represent that there is no space as a biological fact of a human being. To push it further, it would in fact be possible that some change in the empirical world, beyond the imagination of contemporary science, could result in us experiencing the world and ourselves as in multiple spaces instead of one.

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### Works Cited

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