

Kant and Spinoza on the Transcendental Ideality of Space

In this essay, I will explain Kant's fourth argument from the *General Remarks* section of the *Transcendental Aesthetic* that space is transcendently ideal; explain how Spinoza might object to Kant's argument; then explain, and dismiss, a Kantian counterargument, showing that Spinoza's objection is conclusive.

A Brief Exposition of Kantian Terminology

It is necessary to explain some Kantian terms before explaining his argument. Kant thinks that space is transcendently ideal (Gardner 89). If something is transcendently ideal, it is not a thing in itself, rather, it is merely a product of human cognition. Kant thinks that space is an *a priori* intuition, or an intuition that comes before experience, that shapes all our intuitions, or sense data, about the outer world, which we passively receive from our faculty of sensibility¹. Spinoza, on the other hand, holds the opposite position. He thinks that space is transcendently real, or that space is a thing in itself and exists outside of human cognition. If something is a thing in itself, all other things must exist according to it, so Spinoza thinks that everything, not just our intuitions, must exist spatially².

Kant's Fourth Argument for the Transcendental Ideality of Space

Kant's argument takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, in which he shows that if space is transcendently real, God cannot be conceived coherently, or conceived without contradiction (Gardner 102). While Kant does not explicitly say this, he assumes that God can be coherently

¹ Kant also accords time the status of an *a priori* intuition. In fact, Kant, in the argument this paper addresses, also claims that time is also transcendently ideal. I have restricted this paper's scope to the discussion of space.

² Spinoza does not use Kantian terms like 'things in themselves' or 'intuitions'. I am interpreting him in Kantian terms to put both thinkers in dialogue with one another.

conceived, and that if space is not transcendently real, it must be transcendently ideal (Kant B72-B73). While both assumptions seem true, whether Kant is ultimately justified in holding them is beyond the scope of this paper.

If Space is Transcendentally Real, God Cannot be Coherently Conceived

- P1. God is conceived as omniscient.
- P2. If space is transcendently real, God is spatial.
- P3. If God is spatial, God cannot be conceived as omniscient.
- P4. Therefore, if space is transcendently real, God cannot be coherently conceived.

(P1) Kant's first premise is uncontroversial: God is almost always conceived of as omniscient. Spinoza, despite having a radically different conception of God than Kant's, would agree that God is omniscient. Therefore, given that this premise is widely held—even by Kant's opponent in this paper—further elaboration on it is unnecessary.

(P2) This premise follows from Kant's understanding of things in themselves. Again, if space is a thing in itself, all other things must be spatial. Because God is a thing, if space is a thing in itself, God must be a spatial thing (B71).

(P3) Kant thinks that conceiving of God as spatial and as not having sensible intuitions leads to a contradiction, as it would be impossible for God to have self-knowledge (B72). Sensible intuitions, for Kant, are unoriginal intuitions that are unique to finite rational beings. For example, when we have the sensible intuition of a chair, our intuition of the chair does not bring it into being, rather, we are interpreting something that exists externally to us. God, on the other hand, has intellectual intuitions, or original intuitions (B72). When God has an intuition of a chair, that chair comes into being. Crucially, Kant also thinks that spatial intuitions are unique to sensible intuitions, whether or not space is transcendently real or ideal (B71). God, as only endowed with intellectual intuitions, cannot have spatial intuitions. A spatial God who cannot

have sensible—and therefore spatial—intuitions cannot have self-knowledge. It would be absurd to say that a God that cannot have self-knowledge is omniscient. Therefore, God cannot be conceived as omniscient if God is spatially conditioned.

(P4) It follows, then, that if space is transcendentally real, God cannot be coherently conceived. Further, it follows from this premise and from Kant's assumptions that God can be coherently conceived, and that if space is not transcendentally real it is transcendentally ideal, that space is transcendentally ideal, concluding his argument (B72).

A Spinozist Objection to Kant's Fourth Argument

Spinoza would object to P3 of Kant's fourth argument by arguing that Kant wrongly assumes that the only form of transcendental realism is one where God is conditioned by space³. For Spinoza, God is a thing in itself, and space is an attribute of God. By attribute, Spinoza means a way of conceiving of God's essence (Spinoza 1D6). This means that it would be wrong to say that God is subject to exist according to space, as much as God is space itself. However, merely showing that Kant did not consider every form of transcendental realism about space is insufficient to disprove his larger argument. To completely disprove Kant's fourth argument, Spinoza would argue that his own position does not run into the same problems about God being unable to be omniscient if space is transcendentally real. First, I will explain why Spinoza thinks that space is an attribute of God, and then, why Spinoza's God is omniscient.

Space is an Attribute of God

P1. Extension is an attribute of God.

P2. Extension is equivalent to space.

³ Kant was familiar with Spinoza's transcendental realism (Marshall 517). However, because the Kantian argument discussed in this paper does not address Spinoza's position, this fact is irrelevant to Spinoza's objection.

P3. Therefore, space is an attribute of God.

(P1) Particular extended things are modes of God that express God's essence (1p25c).

Since modes are conceived through something other than themselves (1D5), and all extended modes are conceived through extension, extension is an attribute of God and God is an extended thing (2P2).

(P2) Spinoza's justification for the claim that space can be equated with extension follows from his claim that vacuums, or areas of empty space, are impossible (1P15s4). While Spinoza does not clearly explain why he thinks that vacuums are impossible, the impossibility of vacuums follows from his prior claims that extended things are either attributes or modes of God (1P14c2), and that God is infinite (D6), so because extension is infinite, there cannot be an area that lacks extension. It follows from the impossibility of vacuums that there is no abstract space in which extension is contained, but rather, that extension is itself spatial, or any judgements made about space are ultimately judgements about extension.

(P3) As previously established, extension is one way of conceiving of God's essence, so because extension is equivalent to space, God is spatial, and space transcendentally real.

God is Omniscient

P1. An infinite number of thoughts follow from God.

P2. If something is in God's power, it necessarily exists.

P3. All thoughts are conceived in and through God.

P4. Therefore, God is omniscient.

(P1) Spinoza justifies this claim in the same way that he justifies his earlier claim that extension is a property of God, except he replaces extended modes with thoughts and individual

minds (2P1). In the same way that infinite modes follow from God, infinite thoughts follow from God.

(P2) God's power is equivalent to God's essence (1P34). Because God's essence is necessary, whatever is in God's power must also necessarily exist (1P35).

(P3) Everything that exists, exists in God (1P15). A further justification of this claim is beyond the scope of this paper, but briefly, because God is an infinite being, there cannot be an outside to God, and therefore, everything that exists is in God. It follows, then, that every thought and individual mind that exists is a part of, and is conceived through, God.

(P4) God, therefore, is both an amalgamation of every mind and thought that exists and is an efficient cause of them as they are necessarily thought through God (2P3). It is appropriate, then, to call Spinoza's God omniscient.

Addressing a Kantian Objection

In sum, Spinoza has objected to Kant's fourth argument by showing that it is possible for God to be conceived of as omniscient even if space is transcendentally real, refuting Kant's claim that God can only be coherently conceived if space is transcendentally ideal. However, a Kantian might think that Spinoza's objection fails because Spinoza seems to think that God can have sensible intuitions, which is impossible in Kant's framework. Kant thinks that God cannot have sensible intuitions, or intuitions about space, whether or not space is transcendentally real or ideal (Kant B71). Spinoza seems to think that God has sensible intuitions, given that space is an attribute of God, and God is omniscient, meaning that God must have intuitions about space. Spinoza's God, according to Kant, should not be considered a God, and therefore, Spinoza's objection fails.

It is wrong to say that Spinoza's God has sensible intuitions. If we put aside Kant's claim that spatial intuitions are necessarily sensible ones and solely think of sensible intuitions as unoriginal intuitions, Spinoza's God only has intellectual intuitions. For Spinoza, God is the efficient cause of all that exists, meaning that everything that exists can be taken as an intellectual intuition of God. While individual people are modes of God, and they can be said to have sensible intuitions, concluding from this that God has sensible intuitions is incorrect in the same way that saying that God is finite because finite beings exist within God is incorrect. Essentially, God can only be conceived of as having sensible intuitions if we mistakenly conceive of God as something other than an infinite being. It would, therefore, be wrong to say that God, if properly conceived, has sensible intuitions.

Returning to Kant's claim that spatial intuitions are necessarily sensible, there is both good reason to object to this claim, and to think that Spinoza's God does not have spatial intuitions in the way that Kant's framework disallows. For Kant, God cannot have spatial intuitions if space is transcendentally real because he thinks that space, if transcendentally real, is prior to God, and therefore, if God had spatial intuitions, they would be unoriginal. Similarly, God cannot have spatial intuitions if space is transcendentally ideal because space is created by human cognition, meaning that God could not have an original intuition of space. Therefore, Kant justifies his claim that spatial intuitions are necessarily sensible by the further claim that God cannot have original intuitions of space, which Spinoza disproves. Further, for Spinoza, God does not have intuitions of space, but rather, intuits space. For Kant, space is an *a priori* intuition to which all other intuitions must conform. Spinoza, on the other hand, thinks that all things can be understood through God's attribute of space, or extension, rather than space being something

to which all intuitions must conform. God, according to Spinoza, therefore, does not have sensible intuitions, and Kant's argument is refuted.

Works Cited

Gardner, Sebastian. *Kant and the "Critique of Pure Reason."* Routledge, 2007.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Marshall, Colin. "Kant and Spinoza." *A Companion to Spinoza*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2021, pp. 517–26, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119538349.ch48>.

Spinoza, Benedictus De. *Ethics*. Translated by E. M. Curley, Penguin Books, 2005.