The Trouble with Kant

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Anthony Quinton's 'The Trouble with Kant' (*Philosophy*, Vol. 72, no. 279, January, 1997, pp. 5–18) claims to expose radical faults in Kant's epistemology which are not pointed out 'in the many commentators (he) has studied' (p. 17). The faults are, initially, that Kant is a 'wild and intellectually irresponsible arguer' (p. 5), and finally that Kant's account of *a priori* intuitions and concepts is erroneous (p. 16). Quinton suggests that his objections are new, but the truth is that they, and the supposedly Kantian views against which they are directed, have formed a frequent response in commentators from Hegel to Strawson. The 'wild and irresponsible arguer' charge is, after all, a commonplace among the 'fighting Kant tooth and nail' commentators[1], though it remains to be shown that Kant is markedly worse than other philosophers of the same period. And the central claim against which Quinton directs his assault, that we impose a spatio-temporal-categorial framework on the manifold of sensation (pp. 5 and 7), has provoked fierce and extensive hostility. Throughout his article Quinton *assumes* an interpretation of Kant's claim in which his task is to show how our minds construct a common, objective, reality from a spatio-temporal-categorial synthesis 'by applying a piece of mental apparatus … to … a manifold of sensation' (p. 5). The familiar objections to a 'coloured spectacles' interpretation of Kant's account of space and time, and Strawson's initial rejection of the 'imaginary subject of transcendental psychology' (*Bounds of Sense* (London; Methuen, 1966) p. 32) belong to the same tradition[2].

The objections raised against this project are: That is unintelligible to speak of arranging spatio-temporally items which are not spatio-temporal (pp. 6–7); that it is unintelligible to think of raw sen-

[1] Bennett's *Kant's Analytic* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. viii, originally expressed this attitude, and it has been followed by others.

[2] Strawson subsequently modified his position. See his 'Imagination and Perception' in Foster and Swanson (eds) *Experience and Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1970), and 'The Problem of Realism and the A Priori' in Parrini (ed.) *Kant and Contemporary Epistemology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994). Many commentators, such as Patricia Kitcher, *Kant's Transcendental Psychology* (Oxford University Press, 1990), and Andrew Brook, *Kant and the Mind*, (Cambridge University Press, 1994), have argued forcibly against Strawson's original view.

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sations, such as colour, as non-spatial or non-extended (p. 11); that the envisaged process of construction, even if it were intelligible, could not achieve the outcome of a common public world (p. 5); that Kant believes nevertheless that the success of the construction can be *guaranteed*, though that is false (p. 10); that the idea of arranging raw data, as in the analogy of the coloured squares, makes any subsequent order 'arbitrary' (pp. 6, 10, 12); 'the trouble with Kant is that he takes the notions of space, time, substance, and cause to be an imposition of these on a wholly passive sensory raw material, and thus to be entirely arbitrary' (p. 17). Quinton also offers an alternative account of the development of our experience as, for example, the 'irresistible' presentation of the passage of time, the recognition of collections of qualities, or (if they are the same) continuants, which mark the existence of stable and enduring solids (p. 9), the construction of theories suggested by facts we learn in ordinary perception (p. 14), and so on. I do not think that Quinton offers any evidence for his developmental/constructive story, but perhaps the idea is only to indicate that there is room for an alternative to the allegedly Kantian picture.

I cannot show in this note that Quinton's account of Kant is wholly wrong, though I believe that it is. It will be enough to show here that the account is *not* obligatory; that there are alternative accounts of Kant and good reasons to accept them. The central objection to his account will then be in the first instance that he has simply failed to consider any alternatives; and perhaps subsequently that some alternatives are better grounded than the account he assumes. In its most general form the objection is that Kant's epistemology is *not* a developmental, constructive, account which rivals Quinton's preferred account.

The evidence on which Quinton bases his reading of Kant is restricted to two passages from B 34–35. His own assessment of this evidence is that it is 'irresistible', and that 'Kant could hardly have made his adherence to the lavish theory clearer' (p. 10). That assessment implies that we have no need to consider on his behalf any other passages than the two offered.

> That in the appearance which corresponds to sensation I term its *matter*; that which allows the manifold of appearance to be ordered in certain relations I term the *form* of appearance[3]. That

[3] In (A) Kant had 'intuited' for 'ordered' in this first sentence; and in the subsequent paragraph he retains that term. This makes it plain that Kant did not deny that we intuit formal relations as well as material ones. Quinton translates the passages differently, but I have followed the Kemp Smith translation except in the first sentence where I have translated the German more literally.

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> in which alone the sensations can be posited and ordered in a certain form cannot itself be sensation; and therefore while the matter of all appearance is given to us *a posteriori* only, its form must lie ready for the sensations *a priori* in the mind, and so must allow of being considered apart from all sensation. (B 34)
>
> I term all representations *pure* (in the transcendental sense) in which there is nothing that belongs to sensation. The pure form of sensible intuitions in general, in which all the manifold is intuited in certain relations, must be found in the mind *a priori*. … Thus, if I take away from the representation of a body that which the understanding thinks in regard to it, substance, force, divisibility etc., and likewise what belongs to sensation, impenetrability, hardness, colour etc., something still remains over from this empirical intuition, namely extension and figure. These belong to pure intuition which, even without any actual object of the senses or of sensation, exists in the mind *a priori* as a mere form of sensibility. (B 34–35)

I list the following summary objections to reading these passages in Quinton's way:

1. In these passages no reference is made to 'imposing' order on raw data. The metaphors of 'imposition', and 'legislation', are used later in the *Critique* (e.g. A 114, A 125, A 127) but only then with qualifications. In the Preface (B xvi) Kant speaks of the hypothesis that objects 'conform to our knowledge' rather then the other way round. These variant images are not clear and should elicit the question: *How* can (should) we understand them?, for they involve central issues about Kant's 'Copernican hypothesis' and his term '*a priori*'. The Copernican metaphor is after all only a picturesque way of canvassing Kant's belief in substantive *a priori* knowledge. Quinton's *assumption* is that the imagery of 'imposition' describes a familiar idealist developmental and psychological construction, but that metaphor is not even present in the given passages.

2. Kant makes it clear elsewhere that his project is neither psychological nor developmental (B ix–x; B 119–120; B 124–125). If it were, then it would be appropriate to understand the term '*a priori*' as equivalent to 'innate', but again Kant makes it clear that he rejects that equivalence (B 167–168; *Entdeckung*[4], Ak. VIII, 221–222). However, even if Kant were suggesting that certain rep-

[4] The reference is to the Akademie Ausgabe of Kant's collected works. In the passage Kant writes: 'The *Critique* permits absolutely no implanted or innate representations'. Later in the same passage he allows that there may be an innate 'ground', or explanation, for our *a priori* representations, which suggests an appeal to features of the brain.

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resentations make an innate contribution to our psychological development it is hard to see, in a post-Chomsky era, why this should be simply rejected. Even Quinton's developmental account, like that of any empiricist, seems to have to accept *some* such innate contribution[5].

3. Kant's interest is evidently in what is *a posteriori* and *a priori* in our experience, and not in what is innate or learned from experience. In the passages he stipulates that 'matter' is his term for the former, and 'form' his term for the latter. He also outlines, as he does elsewhere (B 3–5; B 36), an 'abstraction' procedure in which we may distinguish the *a priori* and *a posteriori* elements in experience. That procedure does not require him to suppose that in experience the two types of element actually exist separately, as if we could literally peel off the *a posteriori* from the *a priori* items. On the contrary, as the well known passages about sense and understanding show (B 33; B 75–6), Kant's characteristic view is that the abstracted elements are literally inseparable in experience. In the passages Kant speaks of considering space and time apart from sensation conformably with this procedure. He does not say that sensations or appearances lack spatio-temporal properties or relations; on the contrary he evidently supposes that they have such features.

4. The one characterization which encourages Quinton's account is the formula '*a priori in the mind*', although even in those phrases Kant does not talk of what is literally 'imposed' by the mind. I have shown already, conformably to Kant's own provisos, that this cannot be assumed to mark a psychological developmental project. Kant thinks of the *a priori* as something that we contribute (B xviii), but also describes that contribution as made 'solely from the human standpoint', which cannot be exported to 'other thinking beings' (B 42). These accounts indicate a different project from the traditional idealist construction of the external world from sense-data. They are more sociological than psychological, and *presuppose* a common experience rather than attempt to *construct* it from individuals' private sense experiences. It would be wrong, however tempting, simply to disregard the phrase 'in the mind' even though it appears as derivative from the more fundamental *a priori* classification. But the

[5] I take it that one of the lessons of the 1960s controversy between Chomsky and behaviourists over innate language structure was that the issue did *not* concern whether there *were* innate structures but only what exactly their nature was; i.e. whether they were specifically linguistic. Lorne Falkenstein, in his recent *Kant's Intuitionism* (University of Toronto Press, 1995), regards Kants Aesthetic doctrine as a form of nativism, but he is careful to note the passages where Kant denies appeal to innate ideas.

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points made already show that 'being in the mind', or in the current terminology 'being mind-dependent', is simply unclear. If the traditional idealist conception is rejected, as it certainly should be, then what exactly does the phrase mean? Quinton's assumptions allow no room for such a question. They exclude all but one traditional idealist interpretation and so make this one phrase an insecure, and equivocal, foundation for the 'lavish' theory that Quinton builds on it.

5. It may be said that the project ascribed to Kant is not simply descriptive/explanatory of our psychological development but an attempt to *justify* our belief in a common, objective world. This is the basis for Quinton's claim that Kant thinks the success of the idealist construction can be *guaranteed*. Nothing in the passages quoted says as much. There Kant pursues the project he elsewhere calls a 'transcendental topic' (B 324), that is the correct categorization, or 'location', of concepts in experience as belonging to sense or to understanding. The procedure has more in common with Ryle's 'category discipline' than with traditional anti-scepticism in an idealist framework. In any case Kant makes it plain that there are no purely philosophical guarantees of a common, objective experience. At B 123 he famously outlines the possibility of the confusion that would result if appearances were so constituted that categories could not apply to them; and the same message is given at A 100–101 where a similar chaos is envisaged[6]. Kant typically stresses the limitations of philosophical argument, and the brute facts against which it may founder. Equally typically he assumes experience, and science (B 119–120), as given rather than as requiring philosophical justification. Just as a peripheral phrase is Quinton's insecure and ambiguous foundation for a traditional idealist story (in (4)), so in this case there is an even less secure foundation for a traditional anti-scepticism.

6. Any *arguments* in these passages are presumably taken to be 'wild and irresponsible', but it is noteworthy that with one exception the passages do not *contain* arguments or *a fortiori* wild and irresponsible ones. Most of this text is stipulation about Kant's terms 'matter', 'form' and 'pure', or a schematic and preliminary outline of his 'abstraction' procedure. The one argument occurs in the earlier passage and has the following form:

[6] These passages are sometimes read as a guarantee of an objective experience against traditional scepticism in the form of so-called 'transcendental arguments', which then fail in familiar ways e.g. by begging the question. But this assumes, what is questionable, that Kant's project attempts a direct refutation of traditional scepticism.

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> Whatever conforms to sensation in appearances is to be called 'matter'; whatever allows appearances to be ordered in certain ways is to be called 'form'.
> Whatever orders sensations in certain relations (forms) cannot itself be sensation.
> Therefore any *a priori* elements in appearances must belong to their form, and be able to be considered apart from sensations.

This seems to me to be a brief, no doubt incomplete, but interesting argument. It is, first, general and non-committal as to the existence or identification of the suggested forms. It is, second, restrictive in the sense that it refers to 'certain' relations only; there is a clear indication that Kant is not claiming that *all* such relations belong to *a priori* forms[7]. If that is so, then Quinton's diagnosis of error, which turns on a quite *general* attitude to relations, cannot be right. The argument evidently also turns on the distinction between sensation and appearance which requires careful elucidation. Here no doubt further premises about their character might usefully be made explicit, but these may be supplied from earlier claims. Kant is not here arguing that any specific items belong *a priori* to form; that identification occurs in the following paragraph. But even the following paragraph cannot be taken as a definitive argument for the *a priori* formal character of space and time, since the actual arguments for this in the later Metaphysical and Transcendental Expositions, which Quinton does not mention, would then be redundant. Kant underlines that point at B 36 when he anticipates the conclusion of those later arguments. For the most part in these passages Kant *states* his general view; it is left to the later sections to *argue* for the specific form it takes in relation to space and time.
In the light of these points Quinton's account of the passages can be shown to be open to a number of defects. He writes (p, 11):

> That is to say quite unequivocally that spatiality, extension, occupancy of space, shape, and occupancy of a definite region in space are not sensory, not part of the manifold of sensation.

Summarily, however, Kant mentions *only* extension and shape, his view is that space and time, as *a priori* intuitions, *are* sensory, that

[7] Falkenstein, *op. cit.*, also points out that there is a difference between spatial relations such as the topological and affine on one side, and location on the other. He argues that Kant's 'formal' relations belong only to the former. Such a view is consistent with the claim that we have *a priori* knowledge in Geometry of the former relations but only *a posteriori* knowledge of the location of spatial objects. Falkenstein also dismisses Quinton's idea that Kant's primary concern is with space's uniqueness rather than its singularity (op. cit., 219–220).

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they *are* presented to us in experience as part of the manifold of sensation though not derivable from that experience, and that they are *not a posteriori* sensations themselves but *a priori* (intuitions). Of these four features Quinton is wrong about the first three, and omits to mention the fourth which is, after all, the central point of the passages. Quinton's 'quite unequivocal' interpretation of these passages cannot really be so.

7. None of Quinton's objections so far are in any way original. Although Quinton does not make it clear, it seems that he regards his distinctive contribution to be the charge of 'arbitrariness' in relation to the *a priori* elements in experience. This is a puzzling objection if Kant himself is supposed to think of these elements as 'arbitrary', as Quinton says (p. 17), for plainly Kant thinks of them as necessary features of experience. If the arbitrariness arises in the idealist step from my construction to that of any others, or from mine at one time to mine at another time (p. 5), then this is open to the earlier disqualifications. But there is also a suggestion that the arbitrariness arises from the 'coloured squares' analogy which Quinton introduces. There, the suggestion is, anyone may arrange the squares in any arbitrary order they please. Quinton, however, also admits that the analogy may not be wholly apt (p. 5), so even this criticism is questionable. Is the analogy inapt? Plainly it is inapt just because Kant's 'forms' are *not* arbitrary and *cannot* be arbitrarily chosen; but there is also a more general point to be made. Typically Quinton adverts to certain procedures which we carry out in experience in order to show the falsity of Kant's claims. The coloured squares case, and the procedure for identifying causes of observed events, are of this kind. In that latter context, for example, Quinton writes (p. 15):

> It is absurd to suppose that we … pick about in our manifolds of sensation to find similar items and then impose places on them near to places imposed on others … so as to constitute a causal partnership.

Quinton's contrary suggestion is that in identifying causes in experience we already assume certain spatial, and temporal, features as given and then attend to the relevant causal factors. But Kant's account of spatio-temporal-causal priority has no need to deny that suggestion. Kant's account is not about our experiential procedures for identifying causes, but about the structure of experience in which such procedures have a contingent part. As in some earlier points the distinction between 'empirical' and transcendental' enquiries in Kant is relevant to his project. Quinton's procedures involve empirical enquiries, where Kant's project is transcendental.

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Despite the fact that Kant deploys that distinction importantly in the passage at B 35 ('in the transcendental sense') Quinton makes no comment on it.

I do not think that Quinton's 'irresistible' evidence from the two passages could be properly so described; for the most part Kant's own words demonstrate the inadequacy of Quinton's assumptions. At best the passages raise questions, which Quinton disregards in assuming his position, and this is true even of the *one* phrase, 'in the mind', on which, it seems, his case really rests. But even apart from the weight of other evidence against his view, if we are to make any progress in understanding Kant we cannot avoid asking what that phrase means, or recognizing the alternative answers that might be given to it. Quinton's worry (p. 18), that no other commentators make his objections, is needless since almost all of them form part of a familiar traditional response to Kant. My worry is that students and teachers of Kant will be unjustifiably encouraged by Quinton's views to read his assumptions into Kant's texts.

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