CHAPTER 2

Kant on Imagination and the Intuition of Time

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1. Imagination as an Ingredient of Intuition

In the Transcendental Aesthetic of the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant famously claims that our representations of space and time are a priori intuitions. They are a priori, Kant argues, because they could not have been generated on the basis of empirical intuitions of particular spatial or temporal properties and because they represent something that is ontologically prior to what the latter represent.¹ They are intuitions because they are singular representations and contain an infinity of determinations in them, features that no concept graspable by a finite mind could possess.² Kant continues by claiming that the only possible explanation of these features of our representations of space and time is that they result from what he calls “forms of our intuitions” and that they do not represent things, features of things, or relations among things that exist independently of us.³

At that point in the first Critique, the reader might get the impression that Kant’s appeal to space and time as forms of intuition is meant to be a complete explanation of how our representations of space and time are possible. She might also think that representing space and time is a mental state that is exclusively generated by the faculty of intuition, i.e., without any contribution of the understanding. The strength of these impressions dissipates later on in the first Critique, however, when Kant introduces a further requirement on our ability to represent space and time. Although also present in the first edition of the first Critique,⁴ it is most famously formulated in the following passage from Section 26 of the B-edition:

... space and time are represented a priori not merely as forms of sensible intuition, but also as intuitions themselves (which contain a manifold), and

⁴ Cf. A 98–102, A 120, A 124.
thus with the determination of the *unity* of this manifold in them (see the Transcendental Aesthetic).* Thus even *unity of the synthesis* of the manifold, outside or within us, hence also a *combination* with which everything that is to be represented as determined in space or time must agree, is already given *a priori*, along with (not in) these intuitions. (B 160–1)

In a famous footnote to this passage, Kant explains that in the *Aesthetic* he had ascribed the unity of the intuition of space to sensibility in order to make clear that this unity is not generated by the use of concepts (B 160–1 fn.). He then adds, however, that this does not exclude the assumption that this unity “presupposes a synthesis which does not belong to the senses” (ibid.), i.e., a synthesis that is not provided by the faculty of intuition alone. Through this synthetic activity, which is a result of the understanding determining sensibility, “space and time are first given as objects of intuition” (ibid.), in a representational state that Kant refers to as “formal intuition” (ibid.).

A little earlier, Kant had already introduced the kind of synthetic activity to which he is here referring. He describes this “synthesis of sensible intuition, which is possible and necessary *a priori*” as “figurative” (*synthesis speciosa*) and calls it “the transcendental synthesis of the imagination” (B 151). The imagination, at least in its transcendental or “productive” variant (B 152, A 118), is introduced by Kant as a faculty that somehow results from a cooperation of sensibility and understanding. It belongs on the side of sensibility insofar as the representations it generates are always intuitions (B 151). But since these intuitions are not generated by sensibility alone, which is a purely passive faculty, but are rather spontaneously produced, the imagination is a guise of the spontaneity of the understanding. Kant sometimes calls it “the effect of the understanding on sensibility” (B 151; cf. also 153–4).6

A couple of pages later Kant provides a more concrete model of how the spontaneous activity of the imagination generates *a priori* intuitions of space and time. He again claims that the senses alone contain “the mere form of intuition, but without combination of the manifold in it, and thus ... do not yet contain any *determinate* intuition at all, which is

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5 In taking these remarks at face value, i.e., as claiming that pure intuition involves a synthetic activity of the understanding, I side with interpreters such as Waxman (1991), Longuenesse (1998), Valaris (2008), Gomes (2014), Schmitz (2015), and Indregard (2017). In Section 6, I will briefly comment on a recent criticism of this view.

6 In another footnote to section 26, he reserves the term “understanding” for the more narrowly conceived spontaneous activity of generating and combining concepts and says that “it is one and the same spontaneity that, there under the name of imagination and here under the name of understanding, brings combination into the manifold of intuition” (B 162 fn.).
possible only through the consciousness of the determination of the manifold through the transcendental act of the imagination (synthetic influence of the understanding on the inner sense), which I have named the figurative synthesis” (B 154). And he then adds the following phenomenological description of cases of acts of the transcendental imagination:

We can always perceive this in ourselves. We cannot think of a line without drawing it in thought, we cannot think of a circle without describing it, we cannot represent the three dimensions of space at all without placing three lines perpendicular to each other from the same point [aus dem selben Punkte zu setzen], and we cannot even represent time without, in drawing a straight line (which is to be the external figurative representation of time), attending merely to the act of the synthesis of the manifold through which we successively determine inner sense, and thereby attending to the succession of this determination in inner sense. (B 154)

The highlighted verbs – “drawing,” “describing,” “placing” – denote acts of the imagination. Kant calls these acts “motion[s], as act[s] of the subject” and distinguishes them from motion “as determination of an object” (B 155). He explains this distinction as follows:

Motion of an object in space does not belong in a pure science, thus also not in geometry; for that something is movable cannot be cognized a priori but only through experience. But motion, as description of a space, is a pure act of the successive synthesis of the manifold in outer intuition in general through productive imagination, and belongs not only to geometry but even to transcendental philosophy. (B 155 fn.)

So the paradigm cases of acts of the transcendental imagination seem to be the movements of points by which we construct the three-dimensional Euclidian space and the geometrical figures within it. Kant’s contrast between these movements of the imagination and physical motions makes

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7 I depart from the Guyer/Wood translation here that translates “aus dem selben Punkte” as “at the same point.” The awkward sounding German original makes clear that Kant does not think about putting the three lines together that meet at the same point but drawing the three lines all starting from the same point. Gerold Prauss has recently claimed that there is a problem with this construction of space by drawing three lines starting from one point because the lines are only drawn into one direction whereas the space they are supposed to construct is also extended in the opposite direction (Prauss 2015, 117). This objection rests on a confusion: If we draw the three lines on a piece of paper there certainly is a distinction between drawing them in one direction or drawing them in the opposite direction. This is because the piece of paper provides a frame of reference according to which this distinction can be made. However, if the three lines are drawn in empty space, there is no such distinction. The drawing of the line is just the growing of the distance between its two endpoints (see Kant’s remarks about the relativity of movement in the Phoronomy chapter of the Metaphysical Foundations, AA IV 480–4).
clear that the former should not be understood as movements performed when doing compass-and-straightedge constructions (for these would be physical motions themselves) but rather their mental analogues. Transcendental synthesis of the productive imagination is an activity in our mind by which we become aware of the a priori forms space and time and their determinations. It is this awareness that he later calls “formal intuition” (B 160 fn.), and that he had called “pure intuition” in the Transcendental Aesthetic.

When people discuss Kant’s remarks about the role of the imagination for pure intuition, they typically focus on the case of the a priori intuition of space. I will depart from this norm in what follows and will instead concentrate on the role of the imagination for the intuition of time. More specifically I want to ask why Kant thought that we have to draw a straight line in the imagination in order to represent time and how exactly drawing this line makes this intuition possible. I will discuss the first of these two questions in the next section. I will begin by focusing on Kant’s general reasons for taking a synthetic activity to be a necessary ingredient of intuition. I will then try to explain why the synthetic activity has to be productive and performed by the imagination. The second how-exactly question, the topic of Section 3, addresses a possible obstacle with drawing a line to represent time. The question is how drawing a line allows us to represent time as something that has a direction. Although this might seem unproblematic at first sight, it is in fact not easy to explain once we assume that drawing a line is also our means of representing one of the three dimensions of space. I will suggest an interpretation of why Kant thought that not drawing a line on its own, but rather drawing it while attending to our own activity allows us to represent time. In Section 4, I will explain how the proposed interpretation can do justice to Kant’s claim that time is a form of inner sense. Section 5 concludes with a short remark on recent criticism of the view that a synthesizing activity plays any role for the intuition of space and time.

2. Pure Intuition and Productive Imagination

We have seen that Kant’s reason for assuming a transcendental synthesis of the imagination as a necessary precondition of our intuition of space and time is that, if the latter are not merely considered as forms of intuition but also as objects of intuition, they are represented “with the determination of the unity of th[e] manifold in them” (B 160). For Kant, representing a manifold as a unity amounts to representing the manifold as such,
i.e., as a manifold. Representing a manifold without representing it *as such* would mean to represent several items without distinguishing them from each other and being aware of their plurality. If the plurality is mereological, as in the case with spatiotemporal complexes, this would either mean representing parts, one after the other, without representing them as parts of a whole or representing a whole, which *de facto* consists of parts, without any awareness of its parts. A Kantian example of the first kind of case is someone who lives through a certain period of time but permanently forgets the moments she has already experienced (A 99). One of his examples of the second kind of case is our perception of the Milky Way, i.e., a whole that consists of a huge manifold of parts of which we are not aware.\(^8\) It is important to note that Kant does not exclude that in the latter case we *somehow* represent the parts of the perceived whole. In fact, he explicitly assumes that this is what we do in the case of our perception of the Milky Way, which he takes to contain representations of all the single stars of which it consists.\(^9\) However, these representations are unconscious and hence do not allow us to be aware of the parts of the Milky Way, where being aware of them would mean to be able to perceptually discriminate them.\(^10\)

Even if we accept that there is a further condition on presenting not just parts and wholes but parts *as* parts of wholes and wholes *as* consisting of parts, it is still not clear why this further condition should consist in a process that Kant calls “synthesis of the manifold of sensible intuition.”\(^11\) The most detailed answer to the question of why the further condition consists in an act of “synthesis,” i.e., of combination, is given in the A-edition of the *Critique*. Kant starts from the assumption that the process of becoming aware of parts as parts is itself extended in time. We have to attend to each of the parts “one after the other” so to speak, “for *as contained in one moment* no representation can ever be anything other than absolute unity. Now in order for this manifold to turn into a unity of intuition (as, say, in the representation of space), it is necessary first to run through and then take together this manifoldness” (A 99). Kant continues to argue that attending to one part after the other alone is not enough to generate an awareness of the manifold of these parts as such:

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\(^8\) Cf. *Logic* AA XXIX 879 and *Lectures on Metaphysics Mongrovius* AA XXIX 879. \(^9\) Ibid. \(^10\) Here, I follow the interpretation of Grüne (2009), ch. 1.3.2. For the role of discriminational abilities for Kant’s conception of consciousness, cf. also Wunderlich 2005. \(^11\) B 130, B 151, B 161, A 99–100.
Now it is obvious that if I draw a line in thought, or think of the time from one noon to the next . . . I must necessarily first grasp one of these manifold representations after another in my thoughts. But if I were always to lose the preceding representations (the first parts of the line, the preceding parts of time . . .) from my thoughts and not reproduce them when I proceed to the following ones, then no whole representation . . . not even the purest and most fundamental representations of space and time, could ever arise. (A 102)

The need for a reproduction of previously intuited parts of a line makes intelligible why Kant thought that it is the imagination that has to play the essential role of synthesizing a sensible manifold. Kant defines the imagination as the “faculty of representing an object in intuition even without its presence” (B 151, cf. also VII 167). Reproducing previously drawn segments of a line is an exercise of this faculty insofar as it allows us to intuit parts of the line that are no longer immediately present. However, this reproductive function is not the only one that the imagination has for cognition. In the Anthropology, Kant writes:

The power of imagination (facultas imaginandi), as a faculty of intuition without the presence of the object, is either productive, that is, a faculty of the original presentation of the object (exhibitio originaria) . . . or reproductive, a faculty of the derivative presentation of the object (exhibitio derivativa), which brings back to the mind an empirical intuition that it had previously . . . Pure intuitions of space and time belong to the productive faculty. (AA VII 167)

So, in the case of pure intuition, the imagination must also be productive, i.e., it has to produce the manifold that is to be synthesized by drawing lines. But why does it have to have this function?

In order to illustrate this question, I will introduce the following presentational convention: I will use images of lines without an arrow in order to represent the content of an act of the imagination in which the respective line is present to the mind “at one blow,” so to speak. Lines with arrows, on the other hand, will be used to represent the content of acts of

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12 I depart from Guyer/Wood here, who translate “Vermögen, einen Gegenstand auch ohne dessen Gegenwart in der Anschauung vorzustellen” as “faculty of representing an object even without its presence in intuition.” This translation would only be viable if Kant had put the emphasis on the whole phrase “ohne dessen Gegenwart in der Anschauung.” The German text makes clear that the imagination is a faculty to present something in intuition. The Guyer/Wood translation also fits much less smoothly with the sentence that immediately follows: “Since all of our intuition is sensible, the imagination, on account of the subjective condition under which alone it can give a corresponding intuition to the concepts of understanding, belongs to sensibility” (B 151).

13 For this distinction, see also A 118 and B 152.
the imagination by which a line is produced by continuously moving a point. A better way to represent the latter would be to add a little movie clip in which we can see a line being drawn by the movement of a point, and the reader should imagine what she would see in such a clip, whenever she sees an arrow in the following.

We can now specify our problem in the following way: Why does Kant think that we can only represent lines, circles, and the three dimensions of space by means of acts of the imagination with content of the following kind B rather than of kind A?

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I will discuss four possible answers to this question.

**Answer 1:** The imagination has to have content of kind B because only in this case is it “productive,” i.e., brings about the manifold of which its *representatum* consists. And it must be productive in this sense, because in the case of pure intuition, what we intuit is not already there to be perceived by us as in the case of empirical intuition.

I think that the second part of answer 1 addresses precisely Kant’s reason for assuming that the transcendental imagination relevant for pure intuition has to be productive. The lines drawn in empty space are not already there for us to be discovered, but are rather produced by us. However, this insight is not sufficient to show that the “production” in imagination could not take place “at one blow,” i.e., by producing contents of kind A.

**Answer 2:** Only contents of kind B guarantee that we are aware of the imagined figures as being extended, or as having parts. For, according to
Kant’s theory of sensible synthesis, being aware of them as such involves attending to their manifold parts one after the other.

Again, I think that this answer addresses Kant’s own main reason, in addition to that given in answer 1, for favoring the B-contents: Even if we were able to grasp A-contents “at one blow” we would then, in a second step, have to grasp the respective B-contents in order to be aware of the respective manifold of the A-contents as such. So, grasping A-contents seems superfluous. However, phenomenologically speaking, there seems a clear sense in which there are A-contents, i.e., in which the lines and circles can be phenomenally present to us “at one blow.” Even if we agreed that, in some sense, this does not suffice for being aware of them “as being extended,” or “as consisting of parts,” we could still wonder why we always need to be aware of these figures as having these features. Does it not suffice to be aware of the line as straight, of the circle as round, or of the three dimensions of space as being three and as being rectangular to each other? And could these cases of “being aware of as such-and-such” not also be guaranteed by the A-contents?

Answer 3: Only contents of kind B guarantee that the imagined figures really have the features that we imagine them as having (e.g., that they are straight or round). For, assume that you imagine content 2A – a circle in one blow. What guarantees that you have really imagined a circle and not, say, an ellipse that is very similar to a circle? Content 2B is better off in this respect because its production can be guided by a rule for the drawing of the line, namely that of drawing a line by letting a point rotate with a fixed distance around another point. This rule guarantees that all segments of the line have the same distance to a common center and hence constitute a circle.

Although this answer is interesting in many respects, evaluating it would lead us to deep philosophical questions about success conditions of acts of pure imagination and the authority of this faculty. It is also unclear whether it would help in all three cases for, in the case of compass-and-straightedge constructions on the paper, the straightness of the constructed line is guaranteed by that of the straightedge, and it is not clear how something analogous could be the case for constructions in the imagination without having to presuppose 1A-lines as being straight. Hence, I will not pursue this path any further.

Answer 4: Content of type B is superior to content of type A because only by means of the former can we represent infinitely extended magnitudes. Take the three lines represented in row 3. Clearly, they are not meant to represent the three dimensions of the space that is enclosed within the lines as they are actually drawn (or imagined, “at one blow”).
They are meant to represent the three dimensions of the whole unlimited space. But how could content 3.A represent this? Content 3.B, on the other hand, seems more appropriate to do so. For if we draw the three lines that represent the three dimensions, this drawing of a line, even if this line is only finitely long, could be performed with an awareness that it could always be continued in its actual direction.

Again, I will not pursue this idea any further here, because it would lead us into a discussion about the question of how we can represent something infinite by imagining something finite. A further problem about answer 4 is that it does not explain why drawing lines is essential for representing finite extended magnitudes, such as lines between two points, or circles.

The fact that none of the answers proposed so far are fully satisfactory need not worry us as far as the purposes of this chapter are concerned. The reason is that in the case of the intuitive representation of time there is a further feature of the representatum that makes it easy to explain why only acts of the imagination with contents of type B are suited to represent it. The feature is that, unlike lines, circles, and the dimensions of space, time has a direction, it runs from the past to the future: “different times are not simultaneous, but successive (just as different spaces are not successive but simultaneous)” (A 31/B 47; cf. also A 33/B 49–50). Now, it seems plausible that nothing in content 1.A could represent the direction of time. Content 1.B, on the other hand, has a direction itself (from the left to the right) and hence seems to be better suited to represent a “flow” of time from the past to the future. In the next section, I will try to explain how exactly this is possible.

Due to the limitation of space I will skip a detailed discussion of Kant’s reasons for assuming that we cannot represent time but by a spatial analog (cf. A 33/B 49–50 and B 156). I think that the best explanation can be found in a passage from the General Note on the System of Principles, where Kant says that we can only “grasp the inner alteration through the drawing of [a] line (motion) . . . the real ground of which is that all alteration presupposes something that persists in intuition, even in order merely to be perceived as alteration, but there is no persistent intuition to be found in inner sense” (B 292; for the latter claim see also A 350, A 107). I think the deeper philosophical rationale behind this passage is the following: We can only represent succession if we represent something changing as changing. And we can only intuit something changing as changing if we intuit something permanent in a change. But that means that we need to be able to intuit two features at the same time in order to be aware that one of them is changing while the other persists. However, this is only possible if the content of our intuition is spatial, for only in the case of spatially extended magnitudes do their parts exist simultaneously. In the case of the drawing of a line, it is not enough to intuit the moving point in empty space, because by doing so we would not be aware of the change of its position. However, when we create a line by drawing it (i.e., while imagining content 1.B) we do not only intuit its moving tip but also always simultaneously intuit the previously drawn line segment. What we imagine is a continuously growing line, and hence we are intuiting one feature that persists – the line – and one that alters – its length. This intuition of something permanent in a change is what allows us to be aware of a change as change and hence to represent succession in intuition (for this explanation, cf. Rosefeldt 2000, 66 fn. 110).
3. Intuiting Time as Having a Direction

So, let us assume that Kant is right when he claims that we can only represent time as having a direction, i.e., as having succeeding parts, if we draw a line rather than bring it to mind at one blow. This immediately gives rise to a new problem. For, drawing a line is not only our way of representing time but also our way of representing one of the dimensions of space, i.e., something whose parts do not succeed one another but exist simultaneously. So, drawing a line cannot, in itself, be sufficient to represent time. Indeed, Kant does not claim that it is. In the previous quote from B 154 he writes that “we cannot even represent time without, in drawing a straight line . . . attending merely to the act of the synthesis of the manifold through which we successively determine inner sense, and thereby attending to the succession of this determination in inner sense” (B 154; my emphasis). So, what allows us to represent time is not the drawing of a line, but rather the attending to the act of figurative synthesis that we perform while drawing a line.

I will represent the content of our mind when we perform an act of the imagination of the second kind by an arrow accompanied by a picture of an eye (as a little tribute to Fichte).\(^{15}\)

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So, we can formulate Kant’s answer to our question in the following way: Although content 1.B and 1.C both involve the drawing of a line in imagination, by grasping the first content we represent something whose parts exist simultaneously, whereas by grasping the second content we represent something whose parts exist successively. Hence it is only by grasping content 1.C that we represent time.

But why exactly is the drawing of a line in itself insufficient for representing time? And why does Kant assume that it is the “attending to the act of the synthesis of the manifold through which we successively determine inner sense” that allows us to represent the succession of the

\(^{15}\) See Fichte’s remarks about the I as an activity into which an eye is inserted in his *Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* from 1801 (Fichte 1983, 150, 167).
apprehended parts? Kant does not give any further explanation at this point, but I think that we can reconstruct a plausible answer to these questions based on other textual resources. The main idea of my reconstruction is this: Attending to our own act of synthesis is a form of attending to our own causal efficacy, and it is exactly this awareness of a causal order that allows us to represent a succession as such. In order to make this idea plausible, I want to point to a structural similarity between our present problem and the one that Kant discusses at length in another section of the first Critique.

In the Second Analogy of Experience, Kant famously asks how, in cases of empirical intuition, we can distinguish between the experience of a manifold of features that exist simultaneously, such as the different parts of a house, and those that exist successively, such as the different stages of a movement of a ship on a river. The difficulty arises because in both cases our representational vehicle – the empirical perception of the different features – consists of a succession of representational states:

The apprehension of the manifold of appearances is always successive. The representations of the parts succeed one another. ... Thus, e.g., the apprehension of the manifold in the appearance of a house that stands before me is successive. Now the question is whether the manifold of this house itself is also successive, which certainly no one will concede. (A 190/B 235)

Now, although in the Second Analogy, Kant is concerned with the case of empirical intuitions and their role for objective experience, the problem he deals with is structurally similar to that of the distinction between representing a dimension of space, i.e., a simultaneous manifold, and representing time, i.e., a successive manifold. Again, the difficulty arises because in both cases the representational vehicle – the drawing of a line in imagination – involves a succession of representational states that each represents parts of the represented manifold. Hence, by way of analogy to the last quotation, we could say: “The production of the manifold of a dimension of space is always successive. The representations of the parts succeed one another. Now the question is whether the manifold of this dimension itself is also successive, which certainly no one will concede.” And just as we can ask, “what must be added to the succession of our empirical intuition to make it the experience of an objective temporal succession such as that of the different stages of the movement of a ship?” So too, we can ask, “What must be added to the drawing of a line to make it the representation of something whose parts really exist successively, such as time?”
Now, I cannot discuss all the details of Kant’s answer to the first of these questions and of the interpretational debate about it. I will just sketch what I think is the general idea of his answer in order to show that it can also be applied to the case of the pure intuition of time. The first step of the answer consists in the insight that the difference between the successive apprehension of states that exist simultaneously and the successive apprehension of states that exist successively can be spelled out by means of a certain counterfactual distinction: Only in the former case could the states have been apprehended in an order different from the one in which they were actually apprehended.\(^\text{16}\) The second step of Kant’s explanation is an argument to the effect that the difference of the counterfactual profile of the two kinds of cases has to be grounded in facts about the world that we perceive and that the only kinds of facts that a transcendental idealist about time can accept to play this role are facts about the causal relations among the perceived states. It is only because the prior states of the movement of the ship cause the later ones that we could not have perceived them in a different temporal order.\(^\text{17}\)

I think that these two steps can be applied to the distinction between representing one dimension of space by drawing a line and representing time by drawing a line. As an analog to the first step we can notice that these two cases also differ in their counterfactual profile: Since the different parts of the line understood as a spatial dimension exist simultaneously, they could have been brought to our mind in a different order. For example, exactly the same line could have been produced by drawing the line from the right to the left instead of drawing it from the left to the right. However, if the drawing of a line is supposed to represent time, then its successively produced parts must be understood as segments that could not have been produced in a different order.

Now, when we come to an analog of the second step, we cannot assume that the mentioned counterfactual differences are grounded in a difference between the causal relations among the different line segments in the two cases. The reason is, of course, that we are in the realm of pure intuition, and the segments of a line drawn by the imagination do not have any causal powers. I think that it is exactly this reason why Kant thought that attending to the segments of the line and their succession alone does not suffice to represent time. There is, however, a substitute for the causal connection among the parts of the drawn line. When we draw the line, our drawing of the line is a causal process: We produce the drawn segments of

the line, so there is a causal influence from us on the drawn line. And there is also a causal order among the stages of the process of drawing the line because we do not produce the segments of the line all at once but rather one after the other. So, we could say that although the different parts of the drawn line could have been brought to our awareness in an order different from the actual one, the process of drawing the line could not have come to our awareness in a different order because as a process its parts exist successively. And this counterfactual feature of the drawing of the line is grounded in our own causal influence. So, we have to attend to our own drawing of the line in order to represent the succession of its parts and hence in order to let the drawn line represent time as something that has a direction, i.e., whose parts exist successively.

When we look back to the aforementioned passage from B 154 having this explanation in mind, we can see that this is exactly what Kant is arguing. And we now also understand why he adds that “the synthesis of the manifold in space, if we abstract from this manifold in space and attend solely to the action in accordance with which we determine the form of inner sense, first produces the concept of succession at all. The understanding does not find some sort of combination of the manifold already in inner sense, but produces it, by affecting inner sense” (B 155).

4. Imagination, Time, and Inner Sense

The interpretation given so far assigns to the activity of the understanding, and our awareness of it, a central role for our awareness of the temporality of the world of experience. One might be worried how this is compatible with the fact that, for Kant, time is a form of sensibility, not of the understanding, and one might wonder how what I have said so far relates to Kant’s remarks about time as especially the form of inner sense in the Transcendental Aesthetic. In the following, I will say a few words to address these worries. I will argue that my interpretation of section 24–6 of the B-Deduction, in fact, corresponds very smoothly to what I think is the most plausible interpretation of Kant’s account of time as the form of inner sense. This interpretation is given by Schmitz (2015), the core steps of which I will follow here.

Schmitz starts by criticizing a wrong model of understanding Kant’s remarks about space and time as forms of outer and inner sense. According to this model, outer sense provides us with representations of things as having spatial features, whereas inner sense provides us with higher-order representations of these first-order representations and represents them as
having a temporal order. There are two problems with this model. The first is that, since the higher-order representations of inner sense are sensible representations, they would have to entail sensations distinct from the ones provided by outer sense. However, Kant never talks about this second form of sensations, but, on the contrary, claims that it is the things outside of us “from which we after all get the whole matter for our cognitions, even for our inner sense” (B XXXIX fn.; cf. Schmitz 2015, 1045). The second problem with the model is that it implies that only inner objects such as representations can stand in a temporal order. However, Kant claims that not only inner objects but rather “all appearances in general, i.e., all objects of the senses, are in time, and necessarily stand in relations of time” (A 34/B 51; cf. Schmitz 2015, 1046).

Schmitz suggests the following alternative model of reading Kant’s remarks:  

Kant’s talk about outer and inner sense reflects the fact that our passive faculty of sensibility is receptive to affection both from the outside and from the inside. When the mind is affected from the outside by numerically distinct objects, this results in representations whose content is constituted by certain sensations as their matter and space as their form. Affection from the inside, on the other hand, consists in the causal impact of the activity of the understanding that affects sensibility by synthesizing the manifold provided by outer sense. This affection does not result in meta-representations with an entirely new content but rather adds temporal features to the old content. The resulting representations represent spatial objects as having temporal features, for example, outer appearances – or, as in the case of pure intuition, points in empty space – as moving with respect to each other. Although Kant does not explain the nature and function of this affection of sensibility “from the inside” before he comes to the second part of the Transcendental Deduction, it is clear from what he writes in the Aesthetic, at least in the B-edition of the first Critique, that he took inner sense to be passive for precisely the reason that it is affected by the activity of the mind. In B 67–8, he speaks of time as “the form of intuition, which, since it does not represent anything except insofar as something is posited in the mind, can be nothing other than the way in which the mind is affected by its own activity, namely this positing of its representation, thus the way it is affected through itself, i.e., it is an inner sense as far as regards its form” (B 67–8).  

18 For the following, see Schmitz 2015, 1050–2.

19 Ralf Bader has recently offered an alternative solution to the mentioned problems. It is similar to that of Schmitz in that it assumes a kind of awareness that has time as its form but is not
According to Schmitz’ interpretation, the primary reason why, for Kant, time is the form of inner sense is that it is the form that is added to representational content when sensibility is affected by an inner causal force, namely the synthesizing activity of the understanding. We can supplement this explanation by a more traditional understanding of inner sense, as the sense by which we are empirically aware of our own mental states, if we take into account that for Kant there is an intimate and even inextricable connection between the activity of sensible synthesis that adds temporal content to our experience and our awareness of our own mental states. This connection is reflected by the fact that in sections 24 and 25 Kant immediately combines his discussion of the transcendental synthesis of the imagination with a discussion about the possibility and limits of self-knowledge. Not only do the remarks about the imagination and its “movements” in constructing space occur in a section that starts with Kant’s announcement that he would now address the paradox of how it can be that through inner sense we only know ourselves as appearances;\(^2\)\(^0\) Kant also refers to “acts of attention” as paradigmatic examples for cases in which the understanding, under the guise of the transcendental imagination, affects inner sense.\(^2\)\(^1\)

Although this combination of the synthetic activity of the transcendental imagination and our mode of self-knowledge might be perplexing for the reader at first sight, it makes perfect sense given our reconstruction of temporal awareness in Section 4. For, it is not the synthesis performed by the imagination alone that adds temporal content to our intuitions, but rather this synthesis combined with an awareness of this synthetic activity. By grasping a content such as \(t,C\), we are aware of our own successive synthetic activity and thereby are aware of the different stages of the movement of the point (or the growing of the line) as succeeding each other. As Kant writes, it is “attending merely to the act of the synthesis of the manifold through which we successively determine the inner sense, and thereby attending to the succession of this determination in inner

directed toward our own mental states but rather to the outer objects that are the content of these representational states (Bader 2017, 126–8). However, Bader claims that this awareness only results in representing the contents “as existing NOW,” and that we need higher-order representations of our own representations in order to represent a temporal succession (ibid, 132–3). I find it very hard to detect a distinction between these two modes of temporality in the Kantian text. Moreover, since Bader does not discuss Kant’s account of the affection of inner sense by the transcendental imagination in section 24 at all, it is very hard to see how far his proposal is meant to be an interpretation of the original Kantian theory or rather a friendly reconstruction of some elements of it. Bader also does not mention Schmitz’s proposal and why he thinks that it is insufficient.

\(^2\)\(^0\) B 152–3.

\(^2\)\(^1\) B 156–7 fn.; for an interesting interpretation of the consequences of this passage, see Merrit and Valaris (2017).
sense” (B 154; my emphasis). Doing the one by doing the other is possible because being aware of the synthetic activity does not merely consist in an awareness of a pure, “naked,” activity. It consists of being aware of this activity as being directed toward a certain content. We are aware, for example, of our own synthesizing of the different parts of a line to one continuously growing line. The self-conscious activity of synthesizing a sensible manifold makes possible two things at once: It provides us with an awareness of the synthesized temporal manifold as such, and it enables an awareness of our own activity of synthesizing exactly this manifold and hence also of our own representing it.

One attractive feature of this interpretation of inner sense is that it allows Kant to have an account of empirical self-awareness without being committed to a meta-representational model of self-knowledge and all of its problems. For example, it seems phenomenologically adequate that our awareness of the temporal succession of the representations we have of the different stages of the movement of a point in the drawing of a line does not consist in an intuition of these representations by means of any further representation, but is rather inextricably connected with an awareness of the content of these representations, i.e., with an awareness of the succession of the different stages of the movement of the point itself. The interpretation also makes intelligible why, in sections 24 and 25, Kant is so eager to point out that his remarks about our awareness of the activity of our understanding do not contradict his claim that we know ourselves only as we appear to ourselves, but rather support that claim. Since our awareness of this activity is inextricably intertwined with an awareness of the mental content that is its product, and since this content is partly constituted by time as a subjective form of intuition, we are not aware of the activity as it is in itself, but rather only as it appears to us in our awareness of it. Noumenal self-knowledge is impossible, because “I do not have yet another self-intuition, which would give the determining in me, of the spontaneity of which alone I am conscious, even before the act of determination” (B 157–8 fn., my emphasis). This means that, because I am not aware of my activity before its involvement in the process of synthesizing a sensible manifold (and this is not independent of the temporalized product of this process), I cannot be aware of my activity as it is in itself. This also explains why the synthetic activity of the transcendental subject – which, in itself, is not temporal – is described by Kant in temporal terms. It is described by him in the way in which it appears to us.

22 See, for example, the sections on the Synthesis of Apprehension, Reproduction and Recognition in the A-edition (A 98–110).
5. Conclusion

I have proposed an interpretation of Kant’s remarks about the transcendental imagination that assigns to this faculty an essential role for our grasp of the temporality of the world of appearance. The assumption that Kant took the synthesis of the imagination to be a necessary ingredient of the pure intuition of space and time has provoked an intense debate recently. Critics of this assumption\(^\text{23}\) point to the fact that it seems in tension with Kant’s general distinction between sensibility and the understanding. Moreover, Kant assigns two features to space and time that, prima facie, seem incompatible with the assumption that their intuition presupposes synthesis, namely, their infinity and their representational and ontological priority over their parts.\(^\text{24}\) With respect to the intuition of time, the problem can be put into the form of the following two questions: (i) How can drawing a line allow us to represent not just finite segments of time, but time itself, which is infinite, given the fact that we can always only draw finite segments of the line? (ii) How can synthesizing the parts of a line be a precondition of the intuition of time if any finite part of a line is a limitation of infinite space, and any finite part of time a limitation of infinite time?

A number of proposals have been made for how these two very good and legitimate questions can be answered in a way that does justice to Kant’s remarks about the role of synthesis of the intuition of space and time.\(^\text{25}\) Due to space constraints, I will refrain from adding to this discussion here and will save my own answer to these two questions for another occasion. What I want to point out, however, is that the results of our discussion should make us aware that a strongly non-conceptualist solution to the problem is not an option. By a strongly non-conceptualist solution, I mean the view that we can solve the problem by simply denying that any kind of synthesis is a necessary ingredient of the pure intuition of space and time. I will not discuss the question of whether this is a viable view for our intuition of space. Maybe there is an exegetically acceptable way of reading Kant’s remarks about the synthesis of the imagination as just pertaining to our intuition of finite segments of space or as formulating a precondition not for the intuition of space but rather only for an intellectually more demanding cognitive state. And maybe it is also phenomenologically plausible that infinite space can be given to us in intuition.


\(^{24}\) Cf. McLear 2014.

\(^{25}\) See, for example, Grün 2014, Indregard 2017, Williams 2017.
“at one blow,” i.e., without any synthesis of its parts. However, it seems clear that the strategy fails for the case of the pure intuition of time. The reason is that the synthetic activity of the imagination plays two roles for the intuition of time, that of synthesizing parts to a whole and, via the awareness we have of this activity, that of presenting to us the parts as succeeding parts. Even if we could convince ourselves that the synthesizing activity does not need to play the first role for an intuition of infinite time, but only for limited segments of it, it is, however, clear that the second role must also be constitutive for the intuition of infinite time. Whatever it means to have a pure intuition of infinite time, it has to be different from the pure intuition of infinite space or of that of one infinite spatial dimension. This is even more evident if we think, like Kant, that we cannot represent time but by means of a spatial analog. For, as we have seen, this requires us to clarify how time is also different from the analog by which it is represented. Now, time differs from space and its dimensions in that the parts of the former are successive and that of the latter simultaneous. Hence, in order for the intuition of the former to differ from that of the latter, its content has to be able to display succession in some way. However, we have seen that Kant thought that the only way to be aware of succession, be it that of finitely many or infinitely many parts, is by being aware of our activity of successively producing a content in the imagination. Hence, without this activity, there could be no awareness of a specifically temporal manifold whatsoever.

The wider lesson of the last remark is that we should not establish our own preferred interpretation of Kant’s account of intuition by means of examples of spatial intuition alone and then wave our hands about its applicability to the intuition of time. Whatever Kant’s account of pure intuition is, it is meant to work both for the case of space and for that of time. And it seems exegetically unavoidable, and maybe also phenomenologically plausible, that to intuit time cannot just mean being presented with something. It involves being active and letting our imagination create content rather than just receiving and grasping it.