

On the inefficiency of Lambert's and Mendelssohn's objections against the inaugural dissertation's theory of time**

ABSTRACT

Kant's theory of the ideality of time suffered attacks since it was first conceived in the *Inaugural Dissertation*. Johann Heinrich Lambert and Moses Mendelssohn, two of Kant's most frequent correspondents, were the first to object to that doctrine. In this paper I intend to show that these objections are not successful against the theory of 1770. To achieve that aim, I will firstly explain the structure of the objections, secondly I will show that Kant attacks some epistemological consequences of the postures assumed by these objections and, finally, I will demonstrate how the argument put forward in the first subsection of § 14 of the *Inaugural Dissertation* is the foundation to reject the objectors' assumptions. Additionally, in the last part, I will show that such objections would make sense if the 1770's theory of time was founded on a theory of forms as *temporarily presupposed* in the course of experience. However, I will also show that such an interpretation would transgress both the principle of charity and the literality of certain excerpts of the text.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant; *Inaugural Dissertation*; ideality of time; Johann Heinrich Lambert; Moses Mendelssohn.

RESUMO

A tese kantiana da idealidade do tempo sofreu ataques desde que foi primeiramente concebida na *Dissertação de 1770*. Johann Heinrich Lambert

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e Moses Mendelssohn, dois dos mais frequentes correspondentes de Kant, foram os primeiros a objetar contra aquela tese. No presente trabalho eu pretendo mostrar que essas objeções não surtem efeito nem mesmo contra a teoria de 1770. Para isso, primeiro exporei a estrutura das objeções, em seguida mostrarei que Kant ataca textualmente algumas consequências epistemológicas das posturas pressupostas por essas objeções e, por último, demonstrarei como o argumento exposto no primeiro subitem do §14 da *Dissertação de 1770* é o fundamento para contrapor os pressupostos dos objetores. Adicionalmente, na última parte, eu mostrarei que tais objeções fariam sentido se a teoria do tempo de 1770 fosse fundada em uma teoria das formas enquanto *temporalmente pressupostas* no curso da experiência. Contudo, mostrarei também que interpretar de tal maneira viola tanto o princípio de caridade quanto a literalidade de certas porções do texto.

Palavras-chave: Immanuel Kant; *Dissertação de 1770*; idealidade do tempo; Johann Heinrich Lambert; Moses Mendelssohn.

Introduction¹

In 1770, as a part of his *On the form and principles of the sensible and the intelligible world*, Immanuel Kant develops a theory of time. One of the most controversial doctrines of this theory is that time is ideal and subjective and, therefore, it is not real or objective. To reach this conclusion, Kant makes use of some expositions that clarify the relationship between time, succession and simultaneity and he confronts the results of these expositions with other alternatives to his theory of time.

Also in 1770, Kant receives letters from two of his most frequent correspondents, namely, Johann Heinrich Lambert and Moses Mendelssohn and the two postulate two famous objections to Kant's doctrine of the ideality of time. Lambert objects that there are real changes and that, consequently, time must also be real. Mendelssohn objects that succession is a determination of finite spirits and that those spirits are not only subjects, but also objects represented by other finite spirits and that, therefore, time must determine at least one real thing.

It is a fairly common view among interpreters that Kant does not consider the seriousness of the objections. Two good examples of this attitude are Kemp

¹ As usual, references to Kant's works and correspondence will be to *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften, Akademie Ausgabe* (Ak volume: pages). The only exception will be the use of the standard "A" and "B" in the case of references to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Smith (1923, p. 122-114) and Kitcher (1993, p. 140-141). Even Paton (1936, p. 182), who maintains the inefficiency of the objections, affirms that Kant did not succeed in understanding it. Falkenstein says that despite the objections being effective against the *Inaugural Dissertation's* doctrine of time, Kant would have altered his theory in order to overcome the objections at least in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (FALKENSTEIN, 1991, p. 227-228 and 239-240). I, on my part, will argue that in 1770 Kant already had elements not to fall in the apparent inevitability of Lambert's and Mendelssohn's objections.

My first argument in this respect is textual and the second one is a drifting of consequences from the textual argument: firstly I will show that Kant literally expresses his rejection of the leibnizian reductionist/relativist theory of time, theory which is equivalent to the ones maintained by Lambert and Mendelssohn. My second argument consists in pointing out that Kant's justification for such a rejection is epistemological. To reach my aim, I will first present the nature of the objections. Secondly, I will point out the excerpts in which Kant explicitly rejects Lambert's and Mendelssohn's proposals. Thirdly and finally, (i) I will indicate how Kant refutes the epistemological consequences of those proposals and (ii) - against Falkenstein - I will show that the Prussian philosopher did not hold an imposition thesis in the *Inaugural Dissertation*.

Lambert's and Mendelssohn's objections

Kant published the dissertation *On the form and principles of the sensible and the intelligible world*² in August 1770. At the time of the publication, he sent a copy to each of his most frequent correspondents. The dissertation reached the hands of the mathematician Lambert and of the philosopher Mendelssohn.

Less than two months later, Lambert sent a letter to Kant in order to express his views with respect to the *Inaugural Dissertation*. A considerable part of the letter's text is addressed to expose Lambert's considerations about Kant's doctrine of time. Lambert says he agrees with every step and with all of the conclusions of Kant's argument on time, except one. The mathematician accepts the thesis according to which time is a necessary condition of sensible apprehension, he accepts the thesis that time is a pure intuition, he regards as true the negative results according to which time is neither a substance nor a relation, but he does not accept the ideality of time (LAMBERT, 1999, p. 106-107).

Lambert offers one argument for the thesis that time cannot be exclusively ideal and the argument has two steps. The first step establishes a connection between time and change - relationship that is usually established by the

² From now on simply *Inaugural Dissertation*.

reductionist theories of time³. In his words "If changes [*Veränderungen*] are real, then time is real, whatever it may be. If time is unreal, then no change can be real" (LAMBERT, 1999, p. 107). That is, if we find just a single case of actual change then time must also be real. The second step is to show that there is one case of real change. Again in Lambert's words "even an idealist must grant that changes really exist and occur in his representations, for example, in their beginning and ending" (LAMBERT, 1999, p. 107). That is to say, at least in the acts of passing to exist and ceasing to exist of our representations there is change; at least in this case we can't deny that there is real alteration. If there is real change and if there is an inseparable connection between change and time, then time must be real.

Two months later, Kant received another very similar objection. Mendelssohn's criticism also takes a dual path. Firstly, Mendelssohn indicates that "Succession [*Succession*] is after all at least a necessary condition of the representations that finite minds have." (MENDELSSOHN, 1999, p. 110). This means that finite minds – i.e. the subjects - are determined by succession. At this point he seems to be calling attention to the same point already brought up by Lambert: we pass through our representations, we do not merely order them in time. Secondly, he points out that the finite subjects are not merely subjects that represent, but are also objects of representations of other minds. Now the other minds also order their representations in time. Thus, the subject - that is, a real object of the representations of other minds - must be determined temporally and thus time must be something real.

There seems to be a common ground between the two objections. Lambert and Mendelssohn share a premise when they conclude that time is not entirely ideal. This premise is that the subjects do not merely order their representations in time, but they also pass through their representations; they start to have and stop to have this or that representation.

The textual argument

To better understand how Kant develops his theory of time in 1770 is necessary to understand the argumentative way he takes in §14 of the *Inaugural Dissertation*. That section is divided by the philosopher in seven subsections. In the first of these subsections Kant seeks to prove the independence of time relatively to the senses. In the second, he argues that time is a singular representation and therefore intuitive. The third subsection is devoted to summarize the results of the previous two subsections: since time is both an intuitive and pure representation then time must be a pure intuition. The fourth

³ This is pointed out, for example, by Michael J. Futch (2008, p. 6-7).

subsection aims to prove that time is a continuous magnitude and that it is the principle of the laws of the continuum. The fifth and sixth subsections aim to derive conclusions from the previous expositions: the fifth section derives the negative consequences while the sixth derives the positive consequences. In the seventh subsection Kant summarizes all the exposition situating it in the general plan of the *Inaugural Dissertation* (KANT, 1992, p. 398-402).

To understand in what sense Kant already had the essential elements to answer Lambert and Mendelssohn it is important to consider initially the line of argumentation in the fifth subsection of the §14. After having demonstrated that time is *a priori*, intuitive and a continuous quantity, Kant does a survey of its negative conclusions regarding the nature of time. In that section, he basically takes the results of previous expositions and contrasts with four ontological contemporary alternatives in order to deny them all. These alternatives are (i) that time is either a substance or an accident; (ii) that time is a relation; (iii) that time is a real and existing flux and; (iv) - this is the most important alternative for us here - that time is "something real abstracted from the succession of internal states" (KANT, 1992, p. 401).

The argument to refute the thesis that time would be a substance or an accident is the recognition that in order to coordinate substances and accidents it is necessary simultaneity and succession. However, both simultaneity and succession, says Kant, are only possible by means of the concept of time. Thus, time can be neither a substance nor an accident, because it is a precondition for their coordination.

The second argument is intended to refute the thesis that time is a relation and it follows the same path of the first one. As relations are presented to the senses, these relations have neither a content of succession nor a content of simultaneity. In contrast, relations, insofar as they are presented to the senses, contain only positions which should be determined in time. To determine positions in time is precisely what allows the identification of a successive or simultaneous relation. Therefore, time cannot be a relation, but must be a precondition for the perception of relations.

Kant considers the thesis that time is a real existing and continuous flux which is basically the position taken by Clarke in his *Correspondence* with Leibniz. The problem is that the Prussian philosopher offers no argument against that thesis. He says only that such position is "a most absurd fabrication" (Ak II, p. 401).

Finally, at the end of the subsection 5, Kant offers two arguments against the position that time is "something real abstracted from the succession of internal states" (Ak II, p. 401), a position which he credits to Leibniz. The main argument is that such position incurs in a vicious circle. I have pointed out that, in the refutations of the other theses, Kant considers time as a necessary condition for the apprehension of succession. If this Leibniz's position defines

time as being abstracted from succession, then this position is simply inconsistent with what has been previously demonstrated. Hence, Kant adds in a second argument that the thesis according to which time is something real abstracted from the succession of internal states would cause the movement to determine time and not time to determine the laws of motion – this last point is a kind of prefiguration of what Kant would call “Transcendental Exposition of the concept of time” in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KANT, 1918, A 32 = B 48-49).

This last position that Kant hopes to have refuted seems to be exactly the position advocated by Lambert and Mendelssohn. According to them, time is something real. Also according to them, the reality of time can be seen at least in the succession which determines finite spirits; it can be seen because of the reality of changes in the rise and in the cease of our representations. Kant's main argument against them, eminently epistemological, would then be the one exposed above: time cannot be conditioned by succession because it is a prerequisite for the perception of succession. If we perceive two events as being successive this is due to the fact that we have a notion of time that conditions that perception.

Succession and apriority of time

Now we should address a second issue. As I said before, Kant's basic argument against the reductionist view of time is that time cannot be abstracted from succession because it is prerequisite for it. However, this cannot be a mere statement; there must be some reason why Kant states that time is independent from successive appearances. Otherwise, Kant would have no way to answer Lambert and Mendelssohn, but worse, he would not even have a way to propose his own theory of time as an alternative theory to Leibniz's.

Kant, as I advanced, offers such an argument, and that argument is the one offered in the first subsection of the §14 of the *Inaugural Dissertation*. In that part of the text, Kant's aim is to demonstrate the precedence of the representation of time relatively to the senses (KANT, 1992, p. 398-399). The proof is achieved by an analysis of our perception. All that we perceive is ordered as successive or simultaneous. Either two objects appear to me as coexisting in the same time span and are, therefore, simultaneous or these two objects appear to me as non-coexisting in the same time span and are, therefore, successive. The only way to perceive these objects as coexistent or as non-coexistent in the same time span is being in possession of a notion of time that must at least be unitary, one-dimensional and progressive. Otherwise, there would be no point in talking about simultaneity or succession since, on the one hand, the lapses would not be part of the same temporal unit and, on the other hand, there would be no way to identify precedence or sequence of two intuitions. Thus, Kant

concludes that for us to perceive something as successive or as simultaneous we must have an independent notion of time and since everything that appears to us is ordered as successive or simultaneous then time does not originate from the senses.

From this it is possible to understand the foundation for the solution of Mendelssohn's and Lambert's objections. Firstly, the perception of succession is conditioned by the notion of time. This applies to the perception of physical objects as well as to the perception of internal states (Ak II, p. 397). Mendelssohn argues that succession is a necessary condition of the representations of finite minds, i.e., that the representations of finite minds succeed each other. Kant does not deny that we are aware of our representations as succeeding each other. However, the Prussian philosopher would argue that we can only perceive our inner states as succeeding each other - and, indeed, any type of succession - because we are in possession of a representation of time that determines the totality of our experience – and, in a very particular way, the experiences of succession and simultaneity.

Falkenstein (1991, p. 228) states that Mendelssohn's objection undermines the *Inaugural Dissertation's* theory of time. He argues that in the 1770's text, Kant held a theory of time according to which we first receive the matter of sensible representations to then apply the form (time and space), but in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, instructed by the objections of his correspondents, the Prussian philosopher would have changed his position. The criticism of Falkenstein would make perfect sense if the 1770's theory of time was in fact a kind of imposition thesis⁴. The biggest problem is that the *Inaugural Dissertation*, even more than the *Critique of Pure Reason*, seems to hold something very distinct. Firstly, in the *Dissertation* Kant explicitly denies the naive innatism which is a possible form of the imposition thesis⁵.

Finally, the question arises for everyone, as though of its own accord, whether each of the two concepts [time and space] is *innate* or *acquired*. The latter view, indeed, already seems to have been refuted by what has been demonstrated. **The former view, however, ought not to be that rashly admitted**, for it paves the way for a philosophy of the lazy [...] **But each of the concepts [time and space] has, without any doubt, been acquired** [...] (KANT, 1992, p. 406, **emphasis added**).

Secondly, Kant explicitly states that the form is not completely disconnected from reality as would be in the imposition thesis.

⁴ In Falkenstein's definition, according to the imposition thesis "[space and time] are imposed by the mind on the objects of knowledge, as if nothing apart from our mental representations exhibited spatio-temporal properties; rather our minds are so constituted that we inject spatio-temporal form into our mental representations" (FALKENSTEIN, 1991, p. 227).

⁵ Namely, the form of imposition thesis sustained by Kemp Smith (1923, p. 89-91).

Moreover, just as the sensation which constitutes the *matter* of a sensible representation is, indeed, evidence for the presence of something sensible, though in respect of its quality it is dependent upon the nature of the subject in so far as the latter is capable of modification by the object in question, **so also the form of the same representation is undoubtedly evidence of a certain reference or relation in what is sensed [...]** (Ibid Ak II: p. 393, **emphasis added**).

Finally and ultimately, the excerpts that led Kemp Smith to defend his version of the imposition thesis are not present in the *Inaugural Dissertation*. Good examples of these excerpts in the *Critique of Pure Reason* would be "its form must lie ready for the sensations *a priori* in the mind" (KANT, 1918, A 20 = B 34) and "Space is represented as an infinite given magnitude" (KANT, A 25 = B 39).

Since there are reasons to argue that Kant's position in 1770 concerning the ideality of time was not a kind of imposition thesis, then there is no reason to affirm the efficiency of Lambert's and Mendelssohn's objections. Such objections point to the fact that there is something in reality that somehow implies the diversity of temporal characteristics in the sensible objects and in particular in the internal intuitions (KANT, 1992, Ak II, p. 393). As I just defended, Kant was ready to accept this since 1770.

Conclusion

It seemed that Kant took the objections of Lambert and Mendelssohn very seriously. Besides having responded them on two different occasions, the philosopher of Königsberg has even claimed that Lambert's objection is "the most serious objection that can be raised against the system" (KANT, 1999, Ak X, p. 134). Therefore one would expect that they have somehow influenced the mature doctrine of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that if there was any influence it was not related to the core of Kant's theory of form and matter.

Both objections derive their strength from the recognition that our representations from the internal sense succeed each other; from the recognition that they change. Such recognition would do great damage if the objections were attacking a theory in which time is a prior representation that at the moment of each perception applies to the matter given and provides it with its temporal features. This is because what Lambert and Mendelsohn are pointing out is that there is something in us and, therefore, in real things, which makes the representation B succeed the representation A and not the other way around; that there is something in a real thing that causes the representation X to be extinguished and the representation Y to be risen.

As I intend to have shown, Kant does not advocate such a theory in the *Inaugural Dissertation*. In addition to the fact that this theory would be inconsistent and in addition to the fact that the excerpts that lead Kemp Smith to defend an imposition thesis are not present in the text of 1770, in the *Inaugural Dissertation* Kant recognizes the acquisition of the notion of time and the relationship of the forms of the sensible world with something real. Thus, to maintain that the objections of Lambert and Mendelssohn made Kant change his theory violates the principle of charity as well as the literality of the text.

Finally, if we interpret the *Dissertation's* theory of time as an analysis of our experience and accept that time is an acquired notion that, while being the form of the sensible world, should be related to what is felt, then we are able to understand why Kant defends the ideality of time and that such view is not inconsistent with what Lambert and Mendelssohn pointed out in their objections. Time is independent of the succession and simultaneity. All that we perceive, even internally, is subject to time as a form. However, there is something in reality that contributes in some way to the temporal differences of particular events. We actually perceive our representations as succeeding each other; we actually perceive representations as emerging and ceasing to exist. Nevertheless, that we perceive these representations as successive, and hence as part of the same temporal frame and as subject to certain laws, is only possible by means of a notion of time that ought to be independent from succession (and simultaneity).

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