The familiar problems of skepticism necessarily entangled in empiricist epistemology can only be avoided with recourse to a certain knowledge that precedes the vicissitudes of experience. This, the search for a priori truth that might anchor human existence, is among others the theme that is perhaps the most important in Kant’s enterprise. In short, the key was thought by Kant to have been found in the concepts of space and time. His solution is not without serious difficulties. Out of these difficulties arises the specific question: What, precisely, is the intended philosophical status of these concepts, particularly space? The problem, it will be argued here, becomes a conflict between two general approaches to the question. We find that we are torn between one reading that hopes to rescue Kant at the cost of fatally deflating him, and a second reading that creates incoherence only by over-investing in Kant’s vocabulary.

To Kant, a priori truth comes to us in the concepts of space and time. These concepts are unique for it is only their presupposition that makes experience possible. The focus here will be set only on the former. Objects outside of a subject can only be represented in space; there is simply no way to conceive of an object as represented in a non-spatial fashion. Space, furthermore, is not a concept that is learned through experience; it is impossible to conceive of space as being “discovered” in the course of human adventures; it is, after all, impossible to imagine experience at any point to be “outside” of space. Here the a priori nature of space is thought by Kant to be sufficiently proven.¹

It is necessary also to demonstrate that space is intuition. Kant argues that space is not a discursive concept that can be discriminally applied when appropriate and withheld from our recognition at other points. Space consists in everything.
Additionally, there cannot be a number of divisible “spaces” because even this notion requires one to imagine gaps of non-spatial vacuity between the “walls” of specific spaces, which is impossible to conceive. The conception of multiple spaces demands no less than other objects a broader space in which the multiple spaces are found. Finally, the argument is advanced that empirical concepts are necessarily limited and invoked to signify certain ideas at the exclusion of others. Empirical concepts inherently imply selective exclusion, whereas space is entirely all-inclusive. If we wished to call it an empirical concept we would be forced to say that everything ever known falls under its signification and we would therefore remove from it the limiting and exclusionary nature of empirical concepts. Thus, in addition to being a priori, space is an intuition.

It is equally important to Kant’s project that space does not hold for things-in-themselves. Kant argues that space is empirically real, i.e. it is always present insofar as objects in the world can be represented to human sensibility. At the same time, however, it cannot be said to exist as a thing-in-itself or in things-in-themselves; it is transcendentally ideal, i.e. “nothing at all.”

It is easily seen why Kant’s success in defeating empiricist skepticism and relativism must turn on the character he intended to attribute to the concept of space. If space were an object in the world like any other, it would immediately lose its privilege as the key to a priori truth; for then our understanding of the concept of space would be no less contaminated and contingent than the other fleeting appearances in experience. If space were a thing-in-itself or a property of things-in-themselves, our knowledge of the very concept would suffer from all of the same epistemological riddles which plague the empiricist framework. We realize, then, that in order for Kant to get where he wishes to
go, things-in-themselves must be spaceless. And it is at this point that the major
difficulty begins to surface.

It has been argued that Kant’s thing-in-itself is not to be understood as something
that actually exists. This is to say that it is purely an abstraction invoked to signify the
impossible notion of a pure and unmediated communion between object and subject. The
thing-in-itself is an object experienced without subjectivity, i.e. without a subject.
Experience without a subject, of course, is impossible. On this account, then, the thing-
in-itself is a concept that essentially has negative signification: it is that which cannot be
experienced so long as we experience. It is necessary, before moving on, to fully
understand the implications of this account. For if this is what Kant means when he
speaks of things-in-themselves, what we must first recognize is how little else can be
coherently said regarding these impossible things-in-themselves. Ultimately—and this is
the problem—one can say nothing about them. One cannot say anything about them,
because the term has no referent. The term has purely negative signification that serves
only as a marker of the impossible. The thing-in-itself is not a thing at all; it is not even a
positive concept that represents things about which we could speak. In short, this
interpretation offers an account in which there is nothing within the signification of the
term on which a predicate could hope to latch.

This interpretation certainly fails to help Kant; indeed it sets him back a great
deal. If this interpretation captures Kant’s intention, then Kant is unable to make the
necessary move to the non-spatiality of the thing-in-itself. He is prevented from doing so
because this interpretation offers a thing-in-itself that Kant simply cannot describe as
non-spatial (or as anything else) without transgressing the supposed character of the term.
If the thing-in-itself serves only to mark an impossible experience, what could it mean to call it non-spatial? To call it non-spatial is to presuppose it is something that could possess an identity or at least take on a predicate.

At the point things-in-themselves are required to be non-spatial in order for Kant to proceed, it seems that the concept of the thing-in-itself is forced into what one might, for now, call an ontological character—even if this character turns out to be largely unintelligible. To attribute non-spatiality to the thing-in-itself is, after all, to comment on its character as though it were a thing of which one had knowledge. Essentially, even the slightest description of the thing-in-itself is a move toward an ontological conception of it. To say anything of the thing-in-itself is to presuppose it as something that can possess a character.

In the best-case scenario, it could be argued that non-spatiality does not necessarily imply a concrete and specific physical existence. At best, this makes “ontological” an awkward choice of label. But the fact would remain that to call the thing-in-itself non-spatial would, paradoxically, be attaching to it a positive albeit limited identity. It would be claiming knowledge of its character as a thing or at least as a concept, and would thus step out of the strictly negative and abstract status assigned to it in the first interpretation.

It appears, then, that at any point between these two competing interpretations, Kant fails. He fails, that is, to achieve a coherent conception of the non-spatial thing-in-itself. Sliding toward the first interpretation relieves Kant of having to defend that “reality is supersensible and that we can have no knowledge of it.” However, it can only do so by simultaneously hollowing-out the concept of the thing-in-itself to such a
degree that it becomes hopelessly sterile. Most significantly, the element of non-spatiality is removed from the table. To move away from this sterility by reinvesting the hollowed-out thing-in-itself with the character of non-spatiality is no less self-defeating. For the property of non-spatiality is purchased at too high a cost: at worst it presupposes an existing character in the world, and at the very best it at least presupposes a limited knowledge of the thing-in-itself. At any rate, for Kant to claim the non-spatiality of the thing-in-itself he must invest far more into the concept than coherence will allow.

2 Ibid, pp. 69-70.
3 Ibid, pp. 72.
4 Strawson, *Bounds of Sense*, pp. 16.