

Idealism in a Nutshell

The significance or vacuity of the statement, “Everything has just doubled in size,” attracted considerable attention last century from philosophically-minded scientists and philosophers. Presenting his influential conventionalism in geometry, Poincaré insisted on the *emptiness* of a hypothesis that all objects have doubled in size overnight. Such universal expansion could have meaning, he asserted, “only for those who reason as if space were absolute ... it would be better to say that space being relative, *nothing at all has happened*” (Poincaré 1906). Schlick, Reichenbach and Grünbaum would concur, presenting the universal doubling hypothesis as illustrating the intrinsic metrical amorphousness of continuous manifolds. Congruence standards for a continuous manifold must be stipulated via so-called coordinative definitions, they argued, and in the case of physical space such definitions import broader dynamical considerations. The logical empiricists traced this insight, as they saw it, to Bernhard Riemann’s observation in his celebrated Inaugural Lecture that the metric for a continuous manifold, “must be brought in from elsewhere [*anders woher hinzukommen muß*].” For physical space, Riemann added prophetically, we must factor in influences of “binding forces” on chosen congruence standards (Riemann 1867 [1854]).

In light of the universal expansion thought experiment’s place in twentieth century philosophy and physics, it is striking to find Kant invoking a universal *contraction* in space and time to support his famous doctrine of transcendental idealism. In one of a series of passages completely neglected in the extensive scholarship on his philosophy, Kant writes: “The proof that the things in space and time are mere appearances can also be grounded on the fact that the whole world could be contained in a nutshell and the entirety of elapsed time in a second without the least difference being met with” (*Nachlass* Ak. 21:197). The meaning of this provocative claim is unclear. The consideration raised bears no obvious relation to familiar if still heavily contested idealist arguments at the heart of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant’s “also” in the passage above might be taken to suggest an idealist argument distinct from any of published works. In this paper I ask: What is the meaning of Kant’s Nutshell Argument for Idealism?