

STRAWSON'S ANSWERS (?) TO SKEPTICAL CHALLENGES

Rich Lusk
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Thesis statement: This paper analyzes two attempts by P. F. Strawson to refute skepticism, first by transcendental argumentation and second by naturalism.

Introduction

Answering skepticism has proven to be a difficult challenge throughout the history of philosophy. While skepticism has given many a philosopher many a headache, the task of attempting to answer skepticism has actually been very beneficial to the development of epistemology. Skepticism forces us to give an account for knowledge claims we might otherwise take for granted, and thus increases our epistemological self-consciousness.

What exactly is skepticism? In P. F. Strawson's work *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*,¹ he defines skepticism

as a matter of doubt rather than denial. The skeptic is, strictly, not one who denies the validity of certain types of belief, but one who questions, if only initially and for methodological reasons, the adequacy of our grounds for holding them. He puts forward his doubts by way of a challenge -- sometimes to himself -- to show that the doubts are unjustified, that the beliefs put in question are justified.²

Some forms of skepticism are more vicious than others; as Strawson points out sometimes a philosopher plays the part of the skeptic just to test the strength of his theory of knowledge. But besides this methodological skepticism, there are a few hard core skeptics who sincerely doubt our knowledge claims, and these must be reckoned with. We will return to this matter of the definition of skepticism towards the end of this paper.

Strawson has attempted various refutations of skepticism in his philosophical career. The purpose of this paper will be to examine two methodological challenges he has put forward to defeat, or at least diffuse, the skeptic's doubts. First, we will examine a transcendental argument against skepticism in his 1959 work, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*.³ This will require us to look into the history and nature of transcendental argumentation in some detail, as well as some serious criticisms against Strawson by Barry Stroud. Then we will turn to a later work of Strawson and examine a refutation of skepticism based on Hume's naturalism found in *Skepticism and Naturalism*. Finally, we will seek to discover whether or not Strawson has really done justice to the skeptic's challenge. Has Strawson silenced the skeptic or just watered down his doubt? Is there some more effective way of answering the skeptic?

Background: Transcendental Arguments

Before looking at Strawson's use of transcendental argumentation, we must perform a methodological and historical analysis of transcendental arguments in general. While arguments that might be labeled transcendental have been quite controversial and have been quite rare in the history of philosophy, they have found a wide variety of uses by philosophers of almost all sorts. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, we find a sort of transcendental argument for logic. Wittgenstein's arguments against the possibility of a

¹P.F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

²Ibid., 2.

³Strawson, P. F., *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959).

private language may be considered a kind of transcendental argument against solipsism and for the possibility of knowledge. Ryle argues transcendently against the fallibilist who says any one of our assertions might be false by using what he calls “polar concepts.” Ryle claims that just as counterfeit coins presuppose the existence of genuine coins, so our idea of error presupposes the concept of being right, and therefore we must know we are right at least some of the time. The most famous advocate of a transcendental program is of course Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proposed to engage in transcendental analysis, and in so doing, answer the skepticism that had plagued both Continental rationalism and British empiricism. Kant considered transcendental knowledge that “which is occupied not so much with objects as with our mode of cognition of objects, so far as is possible *a priori*.”⁴ In other words, transcendental arguments are generally concerned with conceptual schemes,⁵ rather than the objects of knowledge themselves. The transcendental method distinguishes facts of knowledge from the justification of knowledge. Before looking at specific uses of transcendental arguments, let us survey a few basic features of any transcendental project.

The Form of Transcendental Arguments

The most distinctive characteristic of transcendental arguments is their form. They must be carefully distinguished from other types of proof, such as inductive and deductive proofs. A transcendental argument takes any “given” of human experience and asks, “Under what conditions is such experience possible? What must be true in order for

⁴Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated Norman Kemp Smith (German original, 1781; English translation, 1929; reprint, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), A11-12.

⁵A “conceptual scheme” may be defined (passively) as the schema of categories used to interpret experiences or (actively) as the conceptual resources we bring to bear on our experiences, thus molding what we experience. A transcendental argument will attempt to show that a certain conceptual scheme is necessary to the intelligibility of human experience and will argue that other conceptual schemes are inadequate to make sense out of our experience. “A helpful illustration of what we mean by conceptual adequacy or inadequacy is afforded by the offbeat movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. Imagine taking a product of Western culture -- say, a Coke bottle -- and literally dropping it into the midst of an aboriginal culture that has had no experience with soda pop, glass bottles, etc. Will the natives ‘understand’ the Coke bottle from their encounter with it? Yes and no. Certainly they will understand some things about it, and yet, because they apply a limited range of experience and mental categories to it, their initial conclusions will be ‘conceptually inadequate’ (somewhat humorously, no doubt). This surely does not indicate that the Coke bottle is absurd or irrational, or that any attempt to understand it must be freighted with contradictory sentences. However, until the experiences of the natives and their ways of living and thinking are broadened, they will continue to apply to this unfamiliar object concepts with which they are familiar and whose appropriate range of use is limited.” Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburgh, New Jersey: P & R publishing, 1998), 233n172. Transcendental arguments attempt to show the richness our conceptual scheme must possess and give it justification.

such an experience to be meaningful?" Such arguments may be called "indirect proofs" or "presuppositional proofs." The form of a transcendental argument is as follows (taking x to be some aspect of human experience, that is, the "given"):

For x to be the case, y also has to be the case, because y is the precondition of x.

Since x is the case, y is necessarily the case.

The skeptic does not want not to give up x, so his doubting of y is refuted.

Perhaps an illustration of this form of argumentation would be helpful at this juncture. Take the concept of chess as our x. What are the necessary preconditions of chess? What other concepts are required by our concept of the game of chess? Among the many we could mention, let us take the concept of game. In order to have the concept of chess, we must have the concept of game. But we do have the concept of chess. Therefore, we conclude that we must have the concept of game. If we took away the concept of game, we would most certainly lose the concept of chess. Thus the concept of game is transcendental⁶ to the concept of chess. We must have the concept of game in order for the concept of chess to even be possible.⁷

A key point in a transcendental argument is showing y is a precondition of x. This is often done by a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Because the skeptic accepts x, but doubts y, negate y and follow this negation to its logical conclusion. It will lead to the negation of x, which even the skeptic does not want to give up. Thus, he must accept y (or the absurdity of giving up y and x together).

Obviously transcendental arguments are quite different from inductive and deductive arguments. An inductive approach begins with observed particulars and seeks to draw generalizations and inferences that are probable. But negating particular instances weakens or even destroys an inductive argument. In a deductive demonstration, one begins with general premises and applies them to particular cases. If one of the premises is negated the conclusion no longer follows. A transcendental argument is unique in that it begins with *any* fact of human experience and proceeds to inquire into the preconditions of that fact. In other words, we ask what other beliefs or conditions must be true in order for the original experience to be intelligible to us. What makes some forms of transcendental argumentation devastatingly powerful is that if we go back to the beginning of our argument and *deny* the fact or experience we began with, the transcendental analysis (if sound in the first place) will still reach the same conclusion.⁸ This not true of inductive or deductive arguments. In other words a transcendental argument proves y from x or from the negation of x.⁹ Thus, y is a transcendental; that is,

⁶I am using this term in the Kantian sense, of course, which will be explained more fully below.

⁷Note that this argument is not really a transcendental argument. Its form is transcendental, but its content is not because its scope is too narrow.

⁸In other words, the transcendental argument answers the skeptic by showing he cannot even raise his doubt without relying upon the very concept he wishes to doubt.

⁹A "transcendental" argument has this special 'logical feature' about it, that it can draw its conclusion from the affirmation of some position (or premise) as well as from the denial of that position (or premise). This exhibits the 'necessity' of what the transcendental argument proves. This is not, then, the same as deductive necessity, since the denial of a crucial premise in a deductive argument would render the argument invalid." Bahnsen, *ibid.*, 481n31. This feature of transcendental argumentation is critical

it is an inescapable precondition of intelligible experience.

Because transcendental arguments are sometimes not seen as clearly unique, perhaps it would be helpful to compare the method of Descartes (a rationalist), the method of Locke (an empiricist), and the transcendental method of Kant. Descartes sought to build up his philosophy from “clear and distinct ideas,” connecting concepts with one another by rational argument. Locke sought to connect ideas with one another by inductive generalizations. But Kant’s approach was altogether different. He did not seek to connect ideas in a deductive manner or simply draw generalizations from experience in an inductive fashion. Rather, he asked about something distinct from both deduction and induction, namely the conditions under which each was possible. This is not just a matter of rhetoric; Kant is doing something radically different from his rationalist and empiricist predecessors. Kant’s method allows him to start from any aspect of experience (not just a supposedly self-evident idea, as with Descartes) and show that certain underlying beliefs are absolutely necessary to make experience what it is (unlike the empiricist’s approach, which must settle for probability, or lapse into skepticism about the external world, the self, causation, etc.).

Transcendental arguments seek to establish their conclusions inescapably. Perhaps an illustration from skepticism will demonstrate this powerful feature of transcendental argumentation. Suppose the skeptic doubts the existence of other minds. A transcendental response to the skeptic will attempt to demonstrate that the skeptic depends on the concept of other minds even as he doubts it. A transcendental argument seeks to establish its conclusion from the impossibility of the contrary, in this case showing it is impossible to actually be consistent in one’s doubt of the existence of other minds. In order to doubt the existence of other minds, one must rely upon the concept of other minds since one can only speak of “my experience” if one can speak of the experiences of others. Self-consciousness presupposes other-consciousness. Thus the skeptic’s doubt is self-defeating. He cannot help but presuppose the very thing he wishes to call into question.¹⁰

The Matter of Transcendental Arguments

Transcendental arguments not only have a specific form, they also have a specific content. If one wants to know how many socks are in my dresser drawer, or who won World War II, one will not employ a transcendental argument. Kant claimed transcendental arguments must conclude in “principles,” not “theorems.”¹¹ As Barry

to refuting skepticism. If the skeptic accepts *x*, but doubts *y*, we show *x* presupposes *y*, and so the skeptic forced to accept *y* as well. But even if he then chooses to deny *x*, out of desperation perhaps, we can show that in order for him to coherently state his denial of *x* he must still presuppose *y*. This particular feature of transcendental arguments is not always readily apparent and is frequently hard to grasp. For examples from the meaningfulness of human language, see Barry Stroud, “Transcendental Arguments,” *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968), 253.

¹⁰This is a very compressed form of an argument given by Strawson in *Individuals*.

¹¹ “Through concepts of understanding pure reason does, indeed, establish secure principles, not however directly from concepts alone, but always only indirectly through relation of these concepts to something altogether contingent, namely, *possible*

Stroud explains, “For Kant proofs that such-and-such is a necessary condition of thought or experience in general, therefore, have a special feature not shared by other proofs that one thing is a necessary condition of another, and because they have this feature, they can answer ‘the question of justification’”¹² In other words, transcendental arguments always conclude in the justification of some principle of our thought or experience.¹³ These “principles” that form the conclusions of transcendental arguments are also referred to by Kant as “transcendentals,” meaning categories that function to organize human experience and serve as the necessary preconditions of the intelligibility of that experience. Transcendentals do not derive from experience but are necessary to make sense of our experience.

Scope of Transcendental Arguments

One of the greatest areas of debate concerning contemporary transcendental arguments is the scope of such arguments. How much should one try to prove transcendently? Can transcendental arguments be used only to counter local skeptical challenges? Or can they put an end to global skepticism once and for all? Do transcendental arguments merely show us our conceptual scheme, or can they be used ontologically to establish objective existence?

Transcendental arguments have been used in all of these ways. Strawson used transcendental argumentation to answer specific skeptical challenges -- such as the existence of other minds. When Strawson uses a transcendental argument to establish an external world, it is only the concept of an external world he seeks to demonstrate (as we will see more fully below). Kant, on the other hand, was far more ambitious, hoping to not merely refute skepticism, but put something positive in its place. According to Kant, the conclusion of a transcendental argument “has the peculiar character that it makes possible the very experience which is its own ground of proof, and that in this experience

experience. When such experience (that is, something as an object of possible experiences) is presupposed, these principles are indeed apodeictically certain; but in themselves, directly, they can never be known *a priori*. Thus no one can acquire insight into the proposition that everything which happens has its cause, merely from the concepts involved. It is not, therefore, a dogma, although from another point of view, namely from that of the sole field of its possible employment, that is, experience, it can be proved with complete apodeictic certainty. But though it needs proof, it should be entitled a *principle*, not a *theorem*, because it has the peculiar character that it makes possible the very experience which is its own ground of proof, and that in this experience it must always itself be presupposed.” Kant, *ibid.*, A 737.

¹²Stroud, *ibid.* 252.

¹³“What Kant explicitly intended (A84=B116ff) is that the conclusion of a transcendental deduction state, not a matter of fact, but a matter of right...The conclusion of a transcendental deduction is thus to be a normative conclusion...Rights or permissions are always rights or permissions to do something. What is the doing, the piece of conduct, to which a successful transcendental deduction entitles us? Kant’s answer is that a transcendental deduction, if successful, establishes or secures or legitimizes our right to employ certain concepts.” Jay F. Rosenberg, “Transcendental Arguments Revisited,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 25 (1975), 612.

it must always itself be presupposed.”¹⁴

It is hard to say just how broad an argument must be in order to qualify as a transcendental argument. Perhaps a helpful rule of thumb is to consider an argument to be transcendental if it seeks to establish some belief that is critical to our conceptual scheme. If the loss of some concept would render our experience unintelligible -- that is, if it is part of our “conceptual core” -- it may be the conclusion of a transcendental argument. Kant offered two criteria that should be given careful consideration: “Necessity and strict universality are...sure criteria of *a priori* knowledge.”¹⁵ The goal of a truly transcendental method is to give us concepts that are of unrestricted universality and unqualified necessity.

Circularity of Transcendental Arguments

Another interesting feature of transcendental argumentation is that transcendental arguments are basically circular. However, in the nature of the case, circularity is not a flaw in a transcendental argument, but is simply proof that the belief in question really is inescapable. Transcendentals must be presupposed even as we argue about them. In this unique case, circularity is just another way of describing consistency.¹⁶

Of course, it should go without saying that not all transcendental arguments are valid. The mere claim that a belief or idea is transcendental, and therefore must be inescapably presupposed in all our experience and reasoning, does not make it so. In fact as we will see, many transcendental arguments fail. While the form of argumentation itself is obviously powerful, that does mean any and every transcendental argument is sound.

Types of Transcendental Arguments

One point of debate concerning modern transcendental arguments is whether or not there are various types of transcendental arguments. It seems at least three types of arguments can be labeled transcendental: Kantian, conceptual, and ontological.¹⁷ Kantian transcendental arguments attempt to show what categories the mind imposes on experience in order to construct knowledge. Kantian transcendental arguments not only seek to refute skepticism, but establish a worldview in terms of which rationality and experience make sense. Conceptual transcendental arguments are similar, but usually only argue for some particular concept, such as the concept of an external world. In such an argument, the philosopher seeks to show that the skeptic

¹⁴Ibid., A 737.

¹⁵Kant, *ibid.*, B4.

¹⁶“The ‘circularity’ of a transcendental argument is not at all the same as the fallacious ‘circularity’ of an argument in which the conclusion is a restatement (in one form or another) of one of its premises. Rather it is the circularity involved in a coherent theory (where all the parts are consistent with or assume each other) and which is required when one reasons about a precondition for reasoning.” Bahnsen, *ibid.*, 518n122.

¹⁷The conceptual and ontological types of transcendental argumentation, of course, have some degree of similarity to Kant’s transcendental method. Thus, they belong to the same “family” of arguments even though they have some important differences.

could not even raise his doubt unless he knew it to be unfounded; i.e. he could have no use for the concepts in terms of which he expresses his doubt unless he were able to know to be true at least some of the propositions belonging to the class all members of which fall within the scope of the skeptical doubt.¹⁸

Ontological transcendental arguments argue that the world must be a certain way in order to account for the intelligibility of our experience. For example, an ontological transcendental argument will argue that an external world must actually exist, rather than that we must simply have the concept of an external world. An external world is a necessary precondition of some aspect of our experience.

Transcendental Knowledge

What kind of knowledge is transcendental knowledge? Transcendental claims are claims that cannot be doubted, at least consistently. Transcendentals are known with certainty because they are the presuppositions of all thinking -- even skeptical thinking. Beliefs that are genuinely transcendental cannot be false. They are ultimately indubitable and absolutely secure. Transcendental knowledge is ascertainable apart from specific empirical experience -- it is not experience that generates the categories, but the categories that make experience possible.¹⁹

For Kant, the transcendental method made synthetic *a priori* judgments possible.²⁰ That is, the transcendental program brings together the categories (the *a priori*) and experience. Kant says: "All experience contains, besides the intuition of the senses by which something is given, a concept also of the object, which is given in intuition as a phenomenon. Such concepts of objects in general therefore must form conditions *a priori* of all knowledge produced by experience, and the objective validity of the categories, as being such concepts *a priori*, rests on this very fact that by them alone, so far as the form of thought is concerned, experience becomes possible."²¹ It is the Kantian project to show that the category structure (or built-in conceptual scheme) in our minds is transcendently necessary to make understanding and experience possible.

Kant in Context

Because Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is considered the master of the transcendental method, no analysis of this method can overlook his work. But in order to understand why Kant was driven to attempt a transcendental project, it is important to investigate the development of philosophy on the European continent and in Great Britain, leading up to Kant.

Continental Rationalism

Beginning with Rene Descartes, epistemology took center stage in philosophy.

¹⁸Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism*, 9.

¹⁹Kant, *ibid.*, B 167.

²⁰That is, Kant's transcendental deduction entitles us to these synthetic *a priori* judgments.

²¹*Ibid.*, A 93.

Men such as Descartes (1596-1650), Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) all sought to construct a rationalistic philosophy based on self-evident truths. Starting with “clear and distinct ideas,” these men hoped to engage in “arm chair philosophy,” deducing conclusions about reality from unquestionable *a priori* principles. Rationalists had an unflinching confidence in man’s intellectual ability to solve any problem and comprehensively describe the universe.

The Cartesian program was based on a method of radical doubt. Descartes interacted with extreme skepticism, in the hope of finding an indubitable point of reference. The result was the “Cogito”: I think, therefore I am. Rather than looking outside himself, Descartes began with himself as a thinking thing. While putting aside the difficulties with Descartes’ “Cogito” for now, it is enough for us to note that Descartes deduced from his starting point that there are two kinds of substances, mind and body. Metaphysically, Cartesian rationalism ended in a dualism. Having separated mind and body, Descartes found it almost impossible to bring them back into a coherent relationship. Any unity Descartes claimed to have would appear quite superficial.

Spinoza also wanted to begin his approach with “clear and distinct ideas.” He defined a “substance” as that which exists independently of other things because it is that which unites things. Thus, Spinoza deduced that there could only be one substance, which may be called “god” or “nature,” depending on one’s perspective. Only one ultimate substance exists because if there were two (or more), they would condition one another. Spinoza did not have to worry about unity because everything is already part of one substance, a sort of pantheistic whole. The metaphysical outcome of Spinoza’s philosophy was thus monism.

Leibniz used Spinoza’s definition of “substance” as something independent, but drew a radically different conclusion. Leibniz reasoned that in reality, there must be a plurality of independent things that have no relation to one another. These individual, independent bits of substance were called “monads.” The monads were unified by a “grand monad,” i.e., God, in what Leibniz called the theory of pre-established harmony. Metaphysically, the rationalism of Leibniz had produced an odd type of atomism.

While the above analysis is quite simplistic and far from complete, it is enough to demonstrate that Continental rationalism was a failure. Starting from supposedly self-evident truths, three great philosophers ended up with three very different pictures of the world: dualism, monism, and atomism. Clearly, something had gone wrong. If man has innate, *a priori* ideas that are indubitable, why was there such diversity of philosophical opinion? How could truths that were supposedly self-evident and self-establishing cause such disagreement? How could such divergent metaphysical claims be resolved? Could it be that clarity and distinctness were really quite subjective? Instead of answering skepticism, Continental rationalism aggravated it. With this background in view, it is somewhat easy to understand the reaction against the rationalism and metaphysics of the Continental philosophers by the eighteenth century British. Men such as John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685-1753), and David Hume (1711-1776) wanted to move away from the abstruse and speculative philosophy -- the “dream philosophy,” as it was known -- of the continent. Thus they turned to empiricism.

The British Empiricists

The “Age of Reason” had ended in subjectivism and skepticism, failing to find a

reliable method of knowing and even disagreeing over the nature of reasoning itself. As Hume put it, "If reasoning be considered in an abstract view, it furnishes invincible arguments against itself." Perhaps the empiricists could rescue human knowledge.

For the empiricists, the mind's ideas are traced back to particular sensations. Locke believed man's mind was a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate passively receiving impressions. But for Locke the underlying "substance" that was supposed to unite the various properties one sensed became inexplicable ("a-something-I-know-not-what").

Berkeley then turned to idealism, doing away with substance altogether. Berkeley viewed a material world as the weak link in Locke's philosophy, and so he dispensed with it, claiming our sense impressions came directly from God. Existence depends upon perception and so what is not perceived does not exist. But Berkeley's idealism also slipped into skepticism: How can we answer the skeptic's challenge about other minds since we do not perceive them? How can there be any room for abstract ideas? Can Berkeley give a coherent account of science once he has denied an external world?

With Hume, empiricism came of age. Undoubtedly the most consistent of the British empiricists, Hume was willing to follow his empiricism all the way to skepticism, facing the grim conclusion that none of the key concepts of classical reasoning and metaphysics (substance, space, time, the self, causation, and so on) could not be legitimized. Hume divided the field of knowledge into two sectors: relations of ideas (purely logical and mathematical truths that are either demonstratively or intuitively certain) and matters of fact (the source of our perceptions). Hume shows that we have no rational basis to reason from cause to effect; such inductive reasoning is an arbitrary matter of habit or custom. Thus science loses its rational foundation. We cannot know the external world or rely on the uniformity of nature. Moreover, because we have no continual perception of the self, there is no "I" to connect our various incoming experiences. We cannot even know ourselves (our ongoing identity) through time.

Notice what has happened to the empiricists. Locke believed there was an external world, but it was unknowable. Berkeley did away with material substance altogether. Hume went one step further and lost the self that supposedly united perceptions. As with Continental rationalism, so with British empiricism: both ended in subjectivism and skepticism. On the basis of rationalism, one has order, but it is an empty order, rather than the ordering of empirical facts. On the basis of empiricism, one has facts, but they are chaotic, brute facts, with no systematic relation between them.

Into this situation of despair stepped Immanuel Kant. Kant had felt the sting of skepticism. He opened the preface of the first edition of his masterwork, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, stating, "Human reason has this peculiar fate that...it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer."²² Kant considered it "a scandal to philosophy and to human reason in general that the existence of things outside us...must be accepted merely on faith, and that if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof."²³ Kant knew the programs of rationalism and empiricism were inadequate to answer the skeptic, but thought a different kind of program -- a transcendental program -- could fare quite well.

²²Kant, *ibid.*, A vii

²³*Ibid.*, B xl

The Transcendental Program of Kant

Immanuel Kant tells us he was “awakened from his dogmatic slumbers” by the skepticism of David Hume. Once awakened, he sent philosophy in a new direction with his “Copernican Revolution” in the way we should view our mind and reasoning. Kant’s stated goal was to “save science,” as well as “make room for faith” of a mystical and moralistic sort.

Kant’s revolution was in our picture of knowing (if I may put it that way). Plato had pictured the knowing process as that of recollection. Aristotle challenged this with the picture of abstraction. Lock’s picture was that of experience being written on a *tabula rasa*. The Kantian picture was altogether different from each of these. Kant pictured man as knowing by active mental formation. Man’s mind actively plays a role in constructing his knowledge. With the empiricists, Kant thought nothing could be known apart from the input of sense experience. Along with Locke and others, he denied all innate ideas (knowledge apart from experience). However, Kant sided with rationalists in that the mind was not a passive blank slate. Kant claimed the mind imposes on experience the perceptible categories of time and space and the conceptual categories of quantity, quality, relation (including causality), and modality. All experience is ordered and organized by these categories. As Kant put it, “Concepts without percepts are empty and percepts without concepts are blind.”²⁴ Kant combined empirical and rational methods into a new synthesis. It was very unlike earlier philosophers, who looked to reason for logical and mathematical knowledge and to experience for scientific knowledge; for Kant the mind and experience were to cooperate in all learning. The categories of man’s mind would structure his experience in a rational way. The very concepts that for Hume failed to be legitimate would for Kant become *a priori* categories, legitimized by transcendental argumentation.

How did Kant arrive at these mental categories? He said they were transcendently necessary in order for our experience to be what it is: “Now I maintain that the categories of which we are speaking are nothing but the conditions of thought which make experience possible.”²⁵ Kant combined rationalism and empiricism, but

²⁴ Gordon Clark gives a helpful illustration of Kant’s discovery that experience is molded by the categories: “Once upon a time a housewife made a batch of jelly and stored it on the pantry shelves for the winter. One jelly glass, brighter than the others, sat through the months reflecting on its experience. It noted that one winter its contents had been bright red in color, soupy in consistence, and had the taste of cherry. Another winter its experience was dark blue, rubbery, and tasted like grape. Its object on another occasion had been orange and bitter. Then a most remarkable discovery jolted this Kantian jelly glass out of its dogmatic slumber and empirical dreams. Although red, blue, yellow, sweet, and bitter came and went, the objects were always the same shape. How could this be? The change in experience could be accounted for by foreign material being poured into it; but the only permanent factor to account for the identity of shape must be the jelly glass itself.” Obviously, the jelly is the content of our experience which is poured into the jar of Kantian categories that shape our experience. Taken from *Thales to Dewey* (Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1989).

²⁵Kant, *ibid.*, A 112.

ultimately went behind them both, asking what preconditions must obtain for each method of knowing to be able to make its contribution. The categories are what they are because they are considered to be the presuppositions of the meaningfulness of any experience whatsoever. Thus, Kant calls the understanding “the lawgiver of nature.”²⁶ It is man’s mind that supplies the regularity and order and principle of causation that is necessary for science and rationality.

Evaluating Kant

Kant hoped to show that his transcendental proofs refuted skepticism. He saw his conclusions as unique because they were synthetic, yet *a priori* and were supposed to provide the necessary preconditions to all thought and experience.

How does Kant’s transcendental project fare? Has Kant really refuted the skeptic and given us firm ground on which to stand? First of all, it should be noted that he has had to sacrifice knowledge of the world as it really is. Because our experience is always filtered through the categories, we do not know “things in themselves;” we only know them as they appear. The skeptic can still raise his challenge concerning the external world. Secondly, it is not at all clear that Kant has rescued science from Hume’s skepticism. Hume said our attribution of causation to particular events was a habit of mind rather a rationally justified procedure. Kant has merely turned Hume’s habit of mind into a category of mind. This appears to be nothing more than a philosophical sleight of hand (albeit a brilliant one); it is not solid answer to Humean skepticism. Causation is still subjective and thus, science has not been saved but psychologized. Thirdly, Kant’s separation of the noumenal and phenomenal realms may appear to salvage human personality and freedom, but at quite a price. Since Kant’s two realms (the noumenal and phenomenal) contradict one another -- that is, neither can be interpreted in terms of the principles of the other -- Kant has not given us a coherent worldview. He has failed to give an overall unity to our experience and thus make it intelligible. Finally, the skeptic can still challenge the necessity, universality, and origin of Kant’s categories. How do we know some other set of categories may make even better sense of our experience? Why should Kant’s scheme be the only possible one? Moreover, how does Kant know everyone’s mind functions in terms of these categories, especially if we live in a chance universe? Where did the categories come from? If they evolved, will they continue to evolve? If so, does not their changing character bring into question their transcendental necessity?²⁷ Kant is to be commended for his methodology (seeking the preconditions of intelligibility), but condemned as a failure in the end (he has not refuted skepticism).

Contemporary Transcendental Arguments

In the last fifty years, there has been quite a resurgence of interest in transcendental arguments. Generally, contemporary transcendental arguments are not as bold or far reaching as Kant’s. Frequently they are used to argue for a particular concept or conceptual scheme, rather than some ontological claim. Most modern transcendental

²⁶Ibid., A 126.

²⁷For an interesting look at this question, see Rosenberg 618ff.

arguments are very limited in scope, rather than arguing for a total worldview, as Kant did. They are used to answer some specific, or local, skeptical challenge.

One of the key players in the renaissance of transcendental argumentation has been P. F. Strawson. In his works *Individuals* and *The Bounds of Sense*, Strawson sought to answer skeptical challenges transcendently, by showing the skeptic presupposes the very concepts he wants to doubt. Strawson uses transcendental arguments to answer individual skeptical doubts (so these are not truly Kantian transcendental arguments in that they are narrower in scope). Let us see how Strawson's transcendental argumentation fares by looking at one example.

Strawson's Use of Transcendental Argumentation

In the opening chapter of his book *Individuals*, Strawson seeks to refute the skeptic who challenges the identity of material objects through time.²⁸ Picking up where Strawson begins to really develop his argument, we find him claiming that, "We operate with the scheme of a single, unified spatio-temporal system."²⁹ Two things need to be noted immediately. First of all, it is not entirely clear who the "we" is. We must assume the "we" is all of humanity, *including the skeptic*. In other words, the argument begins with a premise any skeptic would presumably accept.

Secondly, it is not entirely clear how we are to understand Strawson's argument. Is he only claiming that we must have the *concept* of a unified spatio-temporal world, or is he making an ontological claim that this is how the world actually is? Earlier in his book, after stating that we think of the world as containing particular things, he says this: "These are remarks about the way we think of the world, about our conceptual scheme. A more recognizably philosophical, though no clearer, way of expressing them would be to say that our ontology comprises objective particulars."³⁰ It seems Strawson is running two things together here that need to be kept separate: our conceptual scheme and ontology. Obviously, our conceptual scheme cannot determine the way the world really is (though we might hope to show it corresponds to the world very closely). Is Strawson going to give a conceptual or ontological transcendental argument to the skeptic? It's not entirely clear, but I think Strawson probably intends a conceptual argument. He focuses on conceptual schemes rather than ontology through virtually his whole argument. When he does speak of ontology, he speaks of *our* ontology (our ontological concepts or scheme?) rather than the world's ontology. He seems to have used the phrase "our ontology" as synonymous with "conceptual scheme." Moreover, when Strawson later compares ontological and conceptual versions of transcendental argumentation, he calls the conceptual version "more attractive."³¹

According to Strawson, "There is no doubt that we have the idea of a single

²⁸For comparison, one may want to study Kant's transcendental answer to idealism. Stroud summarizes on page 256: "Kant thought that he could argue from the necessary conditions of thought and experience to the falsity of 'problematic idealism' and so to the actual existence of the external world of material objects, and not merely to the fact that we believe there is such a world, or that as far as we can tell there is."

²⁹Strawson, *Individuals*, 31.

³⁰Ibid., 15.

³¹*Skepticism and Naturalism*, 9.

spatio-temporal system of material things...There is no doubt at all that this *is* our conceptual scheme”³² Strawson’s unified spatio-temporal system implies that we view the world and our experiences on a continuum, with all material objects in the same space (or dimension). This is how common sense views reality. But we can imagine the skeptic challenging our naive belief in the identity of material objects through time. For example, the skeptic might say, “How do you know the alarm clock by your bed is the same object in the morning as it was the night before? After all, you were not observing it all night while you were sleeping!”³³

The heart of Strawson’s argument is subtle: “Now I say a *condition* of our having this conceptual scheme is the unquestioning acceptance of particular-identity in at least some cases of non-continuous observation.”³⁴ In other words, the necessary precondition of this conceptual scheme (the belief that all objects are on a spatio-temporal continuum) is identifying material objects as continuous through time. Note the transcendental form of this argument:

For x (x is our concept of “a single spatio-temporal system of material things”) to be the case, y (y is the “unquestioning acceptance of particular-identity in at least some cases of non-continuous observation”) would have to be the case.

X is the case (Strawson has said we undoubtedly have this conceptual scheme).

Therefore y is the case (we identify material objects as continuing through time).

In other words, a precondition of the conceptual scheme that all of us have, including the skeptic, is belief in continuing identity apart from observation. But this is the very belief the skeptic wanted to challenge!

Strawson assumes the opposite of y for the sake of the argument (to show even the skeptic cannot escape reidentification of material objects):

Let us suppose for a moment that we were *never* willing to ascribe particularity in such cases.³⁵ Then we should, as it were, have the idea of a new, a different, spatial system for each new continuous stretch of observation.³⁶

This is Strawson’s *reductio* for y. By assuming the negation of y, the skeptic contradicts his own conceptual scheme, x. Thus the skeptical position is reduced to absurdity and y is transcendently established. This is a case in which the skeptic’s doubt actually assumes belief in the very thing he doubts: If we never accepted the identity of unperceived objects through time, we would have a new spatio-temporal system every

³²*Individuals*, 35. Strawson is a little sloppy in the second sentence in this quote. He should say this is *a part* of our conceptual scheme. His main point here is critical: even the skeptic cannot doubt his conceptual scheme includes this spatio-temporal unity.

³³The skeptic is not asking, “How do you know someone did not come in at night and switch your alarm clock with another?” Rather, the challenge is, “How do you believe in the identity of material objects over time, even when we are not perceiving them? Do objects continue to exist unperceived?”

³⁴*Ibid.* Strawson’s point is that if we have this conceptual scheme of spatio-temporal unity, *at least some of the time* we will reidentify objects as though they had continuous existence through time. If we say we have a conceptual scheme that includes spatio-temporal unity, but never reidentify anything, we are fooling ourselves.

³⁵In other words, suppose we never reidentified particulars if our observation was interrupted. Every time we saw an object it would be totally different, totally new.

³⁶*Ibid.*

time we made an observation.

Each new system would be wholly independent of every other. There would be no question of *doubt* about the identity of an item in one system with an item in another. For such doubt makes sense only if the two systems are not independent, if they are parts, in some way related, of a single system which includes them both.³⁷

Strawson explains the dilemma the skeptic is in:

He pretends to accept a conceptual scheme, but at the same time quietly rejects one of the conditions of its employment. Thus his doubts are unreal, not simply because they are logically irresolvable doubts, but because they amount to the rejection of the whole conceptual scheme within which alone his doubts make sense.³⁸

If the skeptic follows his doubt to its logical conclusion, he would not have the concept of a single spatio-temporal system. He could never reidentify something. The negation of y leads to the negation of x. But x is true, so the negation of y is false! One must presuppose y to even question it. The skeptic's doubt is reduced to non-sense.

Strawson has attempted to use transcendental argumentation to silence the skeptic, in this case one who doubts the identity of unperceived objects over time. How has he done so? *Not* by proving that objects *do* have identity over time, even when unperceived. His argument (in my opinion) proves nothing about the ontology of the world. Rather he has shown there is *no basis* for doubting the identity of unperceived objects over time. We must view the world through this conceptual scheme, we must believe in identity over time. Again, Strawson has not proven unperceived objects continue to exist, but shown that to doubt this is absurd because our conceptual scheme will not allow it. The argument shows not that y is a fact but that we must believe it.³⁹

Stroud's Critique of Strawson

In a 1968 article, Barry Stroud challenged Strawson's appeal to transcendental argumentation as a way of refuting skepticism.⁴⁰ Stroud seeks to show that transcendental arguments are not really unique and actually depend on a verificationist principle. In the end, Stroud considers transcendental arguments to be useless in

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹What if the skeptic, out of desperation, decides to give up x so he can relinquish belief in y? In this case, we need to ask the skeptic to provide us with a new conceptual scheme. If we shouldn't look at the world through the scheme of x, what scheme should we use? As Strawson says: "So naturally enough, the alternative to doubt which he offers us is the suggestion that we do not really, or should not really, have the conceptual scheme that we do have; that we do not really, or should not really, mean what we think we mean, what we do mean. But this alternative is absurd. For the whole process of reasoning only starts because the scheme is as it is; and we cannot change it even if we would. Finally, we may, if we choose, see the skeptic as offering for contemplation the sketch of an alternative scheme; and this is to see him as a revisionary metaphysician with whom we do not need to follow." Ibid., 35-6.

⁴⁰Stroud, *ibid.*, 241-256.

silencing the skeptic.

How does Stroud argue against Strawson? Stroud seeks to recast Strawson's transcendental argument in deductive form, with three premises [(1)-(3)] and a conclusion (6):

(1) We think of the world as containing objective particulars in a single spatiotemporal system.

(2) If we think of the world as containing objective particulars in a single spatiotemporal system, then we are able to identify and reidentify particulars.

(3) If we can reidentify particulars, then we have satisfiable criteria on the basis of which we can make reidentification.

(6) Objects continue to exist unperceived⁴¹

Interestingly, Stroud takes Strawson's argument as an ontological, rather than merely a conceptual, argument. Stroud says that if

the skeptic doubts or denies (6) and if the truth of what the skeptic doubts or denies is to be a necessary condition of those doubts making sense, then Strawson would have to show that (6), a statement about the way things are, follows from (1), a statement about how we think of the world, or what makes sense to us.

How could such an inference ever be justified?⁴²

If Strawson had been making an ontological (or existential) argument then Stroud's criticism would be devastating. Strawson would be guilty of an obvious *non sequitur*. As Stroud says, "It does not follow from (1)-(3) alone that objects continue to exist unperceived."⁴³ Strawson would never be able to get from his conceptual scheme to the real world and thus the skeptic would win.

But it seems to me Stroud has made a straw man out of Strawson. Strawson nowhere claims that objects actually continue to exist unperceived, only that it is absurd to doubt that they do given our conceptual scheme. Strawson seems to deliberately avoid making metaphysical claims for his argument. In other words, (6) is not Strawson's conclusion at all. His argument does not aim at establishing the existence of an external world, but establishing our belief in such as inescapable. In Strawson's formulation, the skeptic may have indeed doubted the ontological identity of unperceived material objects, but Strawson showed that the skeptic's own conceptual scheme will not allow him to doubt that he must see the world as though there were particular-identity in at least some cases of noncontinuous observation.

While Stroud may have missed the precise thrust of Strawson's argument, he does reveal a weakness in Strawson's program. Perhaps the skeptic's conceptual scheme forces him to see the world in such a way that doubting the existence of the identity of unperceived objects is absurd. But the skeptic can take his skepticism in another direction and ask whether or not the ontological situation matches our conceptual scheme.

How do we know our conceptual scheme corresponds to the world? How do we know our ontology matches the ontology of the world? Most likely, Strawson, like Kant, would be willing to concede that we do not know the world as it is in itself, but as it appears to us through our conceptual scheme. In closing the door on one kind of

⁴¹Ibid. 245-6. Stroud says that (6) is "sometimes" Strawson's conclusion. I am not exactly sure what Stroud means by this.

⁴²Ibid., 246.

⁴³Ibid., 246.

skepticism, Strawson has opened the door to another variety of skepticism that is perhaps just as destructive, if not more so. The skeptic may concede we must *believe* external bodies exist, but this falls far short of actually establishing that they do indeed exist.⁴⁴

Let us continue with Stroud's reconstruction of Strawson's argument. Stroud says The most that has been explicitly established [from (1)-(3)] is that if the skeptic's statement makes sense then we must have satisfiable criteria on the basis of which we can reidentify a presently observed object as numerically the same as observed earlier, before a discontinuity in our perception of it. And this does not imply that objects continue to exist unperceived if it is possible for all reidentification statements to be false even though they are asserted on the basis of the best criteria we ever have for reidentification. Only if this is not possible will Strawson's argument be successful.⁴⁵

Stroud then suggests an additional premise "that would explicitly rule out this alleged possibility":⁴⁶

(4) If we know that the best criteria we have for the reidentification of particulars have been satisfied, then we know that objects continue to exist unperceived.

In other words, Strawson must have some way of verifying our reidentification of an object in order to refute the skeptic. As Stroud points out, "We could not make sense of the notion of unperceived continued existence without having criteria of reidentification, and if we have such criteria then we can sometimes know whether objects continue to exist unperceived."⁴⁷

This creates a twofold problem for Strawson's argument as reconstructed by Stroud. First of all, if the Strawson's argument against skepticism requires having reliable criteria for reidentification, then the transcendental argument becomes superfluous. Why appeal to a transcendental argument when we could refute the skeptic directly, with our reidentification criteria? As Stroud says, (1)-(4) really amount to a verificationist principle. "The verificationist principle that the argument rests on is this: if the notion of objective particulars makes sense to us, then we can sometimes know certain conditions to be fulfilled, the fulfillment of which logically implies either that objects continue to exist unperceived or that they do not. The skeptic says that we can never justify our acceptance of the proposition that objects continue to exist unperceived, but now there is a direct and conclusive answer to him. Without this [verificationist] principle Strawson's argument would have no force; but with this principle the skeptic is directly and conclusively refuted, and there is no further need to go through an indirect or transcendental argument to expose his mistakes."⁴⁸

Secondly, if Stroud is correct that Strawson must include a verificationist

⁴⁴See Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism*, 9. The closest Strawson comes to answering this problem in *Individuals* is in chapter 2 when he argues that our experience must be of bodies in space. Kant, on the other hand, did attempt to refute idealism and establish the certainty of an external world using what could be called an ontological transcendental argument (see footnote 28).

⁴⁵Ibid. Note that Strawson's argument said nothing about criteria for reidentification. He only says we will reidentify, not that we will have criteria for doing so.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., 246-7.

⁴⁸Ibid., 247.

principle in his argument, he has a whole host of new difficulties. A verificationist principle would seem to be Strawson's only hope for tying his conceptual scheme to the real world, for bridging the gap between our minds and the world. However, the verificationist principle itself is questionable and is susceptible to skeptical challenge. The skeptic can easily ask, "How can the verificationist principle itself be verified? Can the verificationist principle pass its own test? Why should it be accepted?"

There is a third problem at this point as well: (6) still does not follow from (1)-(4). So Stroud proposes adding to the verificationist principle of (1)-(4) yet another premise to get us to (6):

(5) We sometimes know that the best criteria we have for the reidentification of particulars have been satisfied.

The problem with (5) should be obvious: it begs the question and therefore the skeptic will never allow it! He will not let us smuggle in this additional factual premise, and thus he blocks any road we might try to take from our conceptual scheme to the way things are in the world.

While Stroud has many helpful criticisms of Strawson's argument (or at least an ontological version of Strawson's argument), it is not clear to me that Stroud sees the real thrust of transcendental argumentation. Stroud says that the skeptic can always sidestep the force of a transcendental argument:

We could always give up our present ways of thinking and speaking (of which they [the 'conditional necessities' used in transcendental argumentation] are the necessary conditions) and adopt others (of which they are not). Transcendental arguments must yield more than 'conditional necessities' in this sense -- they must make these skeptical and conventionalist replies impossible.⁴⁹

Stroud makes it sound as if the skeptic could effortlessly throw off one conceptual scheme (our way of thinking and speaking) and replace it with another. But this is easier said than done. For the sake of the argument, suppose the skeptic does convert to a new scheme. What would be the features of this new conceptual scheme? Would it be subject to other types of skeptical doubt? If so what is the advantage of embracing it? The strength of Strawson's anti-skeptical argument was pointing out that the skeptical doubt

⁴⁹Ibid., 252. I think Stroud repeats this error on 255, when he says, "The skeptic can always very plausibly insist that it is enough to make language possible if we believe *S* [*S* here stands for a necessary condition of there being some meaningful language] is true, or if it looks for all the world as if it is, but that *S* needn't actually be true. Our having this belief would enable us to give sense to what we say, but some additional justification would still have to be given for our claim to *know* that *S* is true." Actually no additional justification would be necessary if transcendental arguments prove their conclusions from the impossibility of the contrary. If so, the alternative to the truth of *S* is not merely skepticism, but nihilism, in which case the skeptic's objection is absurd and meaningless.

The skeptic's doubts only have meaning if *S* is indeed known to be the case.

Transcendental arguments ask the skeptic, "What are you standing on philosophically when you doubt?" In this case, the skeptic cannot help but stand on *S* even as he calls it into question; he is being internally inconsistent and self-contradictory when he denies *S*.

This type of critique is a good one for certain attempts at transcendental argumentation, and may even help us discern truly transcendental agreements from pretenders, but this criticism does not hold for all transcendental arguments.

arose within a particular conceptual scheme and therefore it presupposes that scheme even as it challenges that scheme. Stroud does not seem to see this clearly at all times. He forgets that the transcendental method of argumentation takes some given of experience (which the skeptic himself relies upon). The transcendental reasoner takes that aspect of human experience and shows the skeptic he must also accept the conditional necessity that underlies it. It is in this framework that transcendental arguments seek to make both skeptical and conventionalist replies impossible.

Despite my own criticisms of Stroud, I believe Stroud has raised some powerful criticisms of Strawson. Stroud concludes by questioning whether transcendental arguments are helpful in any sense. He has two major criticisms. First, he believes transcendental arguments at most could prove that “we must *believe* that there are material objects and other minds if we are able to speak meaningfully at all.”⁵⁰ If the goal was to prove that external bodies exist, Strawson has not accomplished it. Even if Strawson has shown the skeptic shares a conceptual scheme with the non-skeptic, he has not proved that conceptual scheme is the only possible or correct one, nor has he proven this particular scheme matches the world. Secondly, Stroud thinks that if the a transcendental argument does prove something about the real world, it must invoke a verificationist principle. Thus it does not answer the skeptic (who will question the verificationist principle) and the transcendental argument itself becomes superfluous (since the skeptic could be answered directly if our verificationist principle were established). Stroud ends his article noting that transcendental arguments do refute a radical conventionalism, but not the radical skeptic.⁵¹ If Strawson’s transcendental argument has failed to overthrow skeptical doubt, we must ask if there is another, better way of silencing the skeptic.⁵²

Strawson’s Non-Transcendental Answer to Skepticism: Naturalism

In the opening chapter of *Naturalism and Skepticism*, Strawson revisits the problem of external bodies, only this time instead of looking to a transcendental method,

⁵⁰Ibid., 256. Stroud is apparently assuming that ontological transcendental arguments cannot be successful. But defeating Strawson is not the same as defeating all transcendental arguments that could be proposed.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²One should not think I am being too hard on Strawson here. In his later work, *Skepticism and Naturalism*, Strawson reflects on Stroud’s criticisms of his arguments, and while not conceding defeat, certainly does appear to accept the criticisms as basically valid, at least to a point. On page 21, Strawson writes, “So, even if we have a tenderness for transcendental arguments, we shall be happy to accept the criticism of Stroud and others that either such arguments rely on an unacceptably simple verificationism or the most they can establish is a certain sort of interdependence of conceptual capacities and beliefs: e.g., as I put it earlier, that in order for the intelligible formulation of skeptical doubts to be possible or, more generally, in order for self-conscious thought and experience to be possible, we must take it, or *believe*, that we have knowledge of external physical objects or other minds.” Strawson then shifts to his naturalist answer -- the naturalist will not be bothered by the failure of transcendental arguments, but will be interested in any conceptual connections they point to for their own sake.

he looks to Hume's naturalism. The argument is not as ambitious as the transcendental project. Instead of decisively refuting the skeptic, the naturalist settles for showing that his doubts are idle, they are powerless against the force of nature to impose on us certain beliefs. According to Strawson, Hume

points out that all arguments in *support* of the skeptical position are totally inefficacious; and, by the same token, all arguments *against* it are totally idle. His point is really the very simple one that, whatever arguments may be produced on one side or other of the question, we simply *cannot help* believing in the existence of body...Hume regularly expresses his point by reference to Nature, which leaves us no option in these matters but "by absolute and uncontrollable necessity" determines us "to judge as well as to breathe and feel"...Even the professed skeptic "*must assent* to the principle concerning the existence of body, though he cannot pretend by any argument of philosophy to maintain its veracity"; for "nature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteemed it an affair of too great importance to be entrusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations." Hence " 'tis vain to ask whether there be body or not? That is a point which we must take for granted in all our reasonings."⁵³

Thus, for all Hume's skepticism, he still does not want to give up what may be called common sense beliefs, even if he cannot give a philosophically cogent reason for holding them. Strawson even says it as if there are two Humes -- Hume the skeptic and Hume the naturalist. Hume the naturalist says we must take for granted the existence of body in all our reasonings; Hume the skeptic refuses to take it for granted because it is not rationally justified.

Strawson sees Hume's naturalism as something of a refuge from Hume's skepticism.⁵⁴ In other word, naturalism neutralizes skepticism, even if it does not defeat it. Nature is more powerful than the skeptic's doubts. But has Strawson really found an answer to skepticism in Hume? When Hume the skeptic battles Hume the naturalist, who wins?

There are several difficulties with this Humean/Strawsonian resort to naturalism. First, however true it is that nature forces certain basic beliefs on us, this does not make these beliefs true. Nor does it mean that these beliefs imposed on us by nature *should* be believed. What *is* the case can never dictate what *ought* to be the case. Secondly, it should be obvious that nature is not as powerful as Hume and Strawson would have us believe. After all, the skeptic does not feel nature's force to be irresistible. He can and does resist these beliefs that nature supposedly imposes on us. To tell the skeptic, "You ought not to fight your natural disposition to believe in external objects" is arbitrary and does not answer skeptical doubt at all. If anything, it is what we could call a "dogma of naturalism." Thirdly, when Hume and Strawson tell us we *must* believe there is an external world, we must ask, "What kind of necessity is this?" Surely it is not epistemological or logical necessity. After all, Hume was the one who showed us there is no rational basis for even believing in an enduring self, much less an external world! It cannot be moral necessity, for who or what would impose this kind of moral obligation on us? Who is to say it is immoral to doubt the existence of body? Can it be metaphysical necessity? No, because it is not as though there is some physical

⁵³Ibid., 11.

⁵⁴Ibid., 12.

impossibility in doubting the existence of body. It is not at all clear why we *must* believe in body -- or in this brand of naturalism, for that matter.

Conclusion

The Victory (?) of Skepticism

What conclusions can we draw about skepticism, naturalism, and the transcendental method? The skeptic has turned out to be quite pesky. While the transcendental method is very appealing, and transcendental arguments make great promises of power, Strawson's transcendental argument has been tried and found wanting. It was unable to defeat the skeptic. What about naturalism? We found Humean naturalism to fare no better. Not only does it fail to defeat the skeptic, it fails to even neutralize skeptical doubts.

Much could be said about Strawson's failure to beat skepticism. However, in closing our account of Strawson, we will make just one observation about his methodology. It seems one reason Strawson was not able to counter the skeptic's doubt is because he has greatly underestimated the challenge of skepticism from the outset. For Strawson, skepticism seems to be something of a philosopher's game, but not something to be taken with great seriousness. I again quote from his definition of skepticism, already given at the beginning of this paper, this time italicizing the soft spots in his definition:

[Skepticism] *is a matter of doubt rather than denial*. The skeptic is strictly, not one who denies the validity of certain types of belief, but one who questions, *if only initially and for methodological reasons*, the adequacy of our grounds for holding them. He puts forward his doubts by way of a challenge -- sometimes a challenge to himself -- to show that the doubts are unjustified, that the beliefs put in question are justified.

Strawson has taken the teeth out of the skeptic before letting him attack. Skepticism is not just a methodology used by non-skeptics to develop their own philosophy, but can also be a serious challenge offered to anyone propounding a philosophy. Skepticism is only an *initial* challenge if it is answered; otherwise it persists.

Additionally, contrary to Strawson, skepticism is not mere doubt. It is the view that we lack knowledge, that knowledge claims are not or cannot be justified.⁵⁵ Thus refuting skepticism will include providing warrant for our knowledge claims.⁵⁶ The earlier Strawson offered transcendental arguments, hoping to silence the skeptic. But his transcendental arguments did not actually justify our knowledge; rather, they showed we use particular conceptual schemes that may or may not match up to the way the world really is. The later Strawson gave up on refuting the skeptic and sought to merely neutralize skeptical doubts. But note Strawson's definition of skepticism requires one to actually justify knowledge and show the skeptic's doubts do not cohere. Answering the

⁵⁵Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa, editors, *A Companion to Epistemology* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 457.

⁵⁶Strawson acknowledges this in his definition of skepticism, but then later admits he is merely seeking to neutralize the skeptic, i.e., follow Hume in showing that while we may lack justification ourselves, the skeptic's doubts are "idle" and "powerless" too.

skeptic by appealing to the force of nature does not actually justify our knowledge claims at all and does not really overthrow skeptical doubt. To overcome this challenge is more difficult than Strawson has admitted and therefore his answers to skepticism fall short.

A Transcendent Transcendental

Skepticism has proven to be quite resilient. But perhaps there is another, radically different, way of attacking skepticism. Consider again the transcendental method. The transcendental arguments looked at previously locate the preconditions of intelligibility in the mind of man. But what if we look outside ourselves for the transcendentals?

Cornelius Van Til, noted Christian philosopher and apologist, has done just that. Surveying the failure of philosophy to escape subjectivism and skepticism all through its history, Van Til points to the Christian God as the answer. Only this God can save man's philosophy from futility. According to Van Til, "Without God, man is completely lost in every respect, epistemologically as well as morally and religiously."⁵⁷

Van Til's method is unmistakably transcendental. In effect, he has turned the program of Kant inside out.⁵⁸ For Kant, the transcendentals were immanent, that is, inherent in man. But Van Til offers a transcendent transcendental. He claims the God of Christian theism (and thus the major attendant doctrines of the trinity, creation, man's fall into sin, redemption in Christ, etc., as well) give the necessary preconditions of intelligible human experience. Van Til takes his starting point in God's written revelation, the Bible:

Scripture presents itself as being the only light in terms of which the truth about facts and their relations can be discovered. Perhaps the relationship of the sun to our earth and the objects that constitute it, may make this clear. We do not use candles or electric light in order to discover whether the light and energy of the sun exist. The reverse is the case. We have light in candles and electric light bulbs because of the light and energy of the sun. So we cannot subject the authoritative pronouncements of Scripture about reality to the scrutiny of reason because it is reason itself that learns its proper function from Scripture...All of the objections brought against such a position spring, in the last analysis, from the assumption that the human person is ultimate and as such should properly act as judge of all claims to authority that are made by any one. But if man is not autonomous, if he rather is what Scripture says he is, namely, a creature of God and a sinner before his face, then man should subordinate his reason to the

⁵⁷Cornelius Van Til, *Survey Christian Epistemology* (Philadelphia: P & R, 1969), 205.

⁵⁸Van Til was very self-conscious about the formal similarity between his methodology and Kant's, but wanted to clearly distance himself from Kant as well: "Again, we may speak of our method as being transcendental, but if we do, we should once more observe that our meaning of that word is different from the Kantian, or modern, meaning. Kantian thought does not really find its final reference point in God. Modern thought in general does not really interpret reality in eternal categories. It seeks to interpret reality by a combination of eternal and temporal categories...It is only the Christian who really interprets reality in exclusively eternal categories because only he believes in God as self-sufficient and not dependent on temporal reality." *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, (Philadelphia: P & R, 1947), 9.

Scriptures and seek in the light of it to interpret his experience...One cannot prove the usefulness of the light of the sun for the purposes of seeing by turning to the darkness of a cave. The darkness of the cave must itself be lit up by the shining of the sun. When the cave is thus lit up each of the objects that are in it "proves" the existence and character of the sun by receiving their light and intelligibility from it.⁵⁹

For Van Til, the fact of God and his revelation in Scripture is the light in which man must look at his experience if it is to be intelligible. Logic and science derive their meaning and foundational principles from God and his Word. "The law of contradiction cannot be thought of as operating anywhere except against the background of the nature of God."⁶⁰ In other words, logic has its foundation in God; logic finds its universality, applicability, and immutability in the rationality of God. Otherwise, the laws of logic are mere conventions that have sprung from chance and that therefore have lost their absoluteness and authority. Similarly, scientific law depends on the presupposition of the Christian God: "It is the existence of the God of Christian theism and the conception of his counsel as controlling all things in the universe [that] is the only presupposition which can account for the uniformity of nature which the scientist needs."⁶¹ "Thus it is Christianity that furnishes the basis of the structure of science."⁶² Christian doctrine forms the foundation of science; without this notion of providence, there is no answer to Hume's skepticism concerning causality, and science hangs in mid-air. Again, Van Til:

[On non-Christian] assumptions all things are meaningless. Science would be impossible; knowledge of anything in any field would be impossible. No fact could be distinguished from any other fact. No law could be said to be law with respect to facts...Thus every fact -- not *some* facts -- every fact *clearly* and not probably proves the truth of Christian theism. If Christian theism is not true then nothing is true.⁶³

Facts and laws, universals and particulars, can only be brought together in the Christian worldview. Christianity, and Christianity alone, gives us the necessary preconditions for making sense of human experience.⁶⁴ Van Til summarizes his method and argument:

The method of reasoning by presupposition may be said to be indirect rather than direct. The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to "facts" and "laws" whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties to the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference point required to make "facts" and "laws" intelligible.

⁵⁹Cornelius van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, (Philadelphia: P & R, 1955), 124-126.

⁶⁰*Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 11.

⁶¹*Defense of the Faith*, 120.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 195.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 266-67.

⁶⁴This is not to say that Van Til claims that we can have exhaustive knowledge of reality or God. In fact, the opposite is true -- man will never know all there is to know about any fact because he is finite. However, Van Til is able to give a basis to man's knowledge of himself, the world, and God by making it dependent upon the All-Knowing God. By relying upon God's revelation of himself we may know truly without knowing exhaustively.

The question is as to what the “facts” and “laws” really are. Are they what the non-Christian methodology assumes they are? Are they what the Christian theistic methodology presupposes they are?

The answer to this question cannot be finally settled by any direct discussion of “facts.” It must, in the last analysis, be settled indirectly. The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument’s sake, in order to show him that on such a position the “facts” are not facts and the “laws” are not laws. He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument’s sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do “facts” and “laws” appear intelligible.

To admit one’s own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. The starting point, method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another...

It is not as though the [Christian] apologist should not interest himself in the nature of the non-Christian’s method. On the contrary he should make a critical analysis of it. He should, as it were, join his “friend” in the use of it. But he should do so self-consciously with the purpose of showing that its most consistent application not merely leads away from Christian theism but in leading away from Christian theism leads to the destruction of reason and science as well.

An illustration may indicate more clearly what is meant. Suppose we think of a man made of water, in an infinitely extended and bottomless ocean of water. Desiring to get out of water, he makes a ladder of water. He sets this ladder upon the water and against the water and then attempts to climb out of the water. So hopeless and senseless a picture must be drawn of the natural [i.e., non-Christian] man’s methodology, based as it is upon the assumption that time or chance is ultimate. On his assumption his own rationality is a product of chance. On his assumption even the laws of logic which he employs are products of chance. The rationality and purpose that he may be searching for are still bound to be products of chance. So then the Christian apologist, whose position requires him to hold that Christian theism is really true and as such must be taken as the presupposition which alone makes the acquisition of knowledge in any field intelligible, must join his “friend” in his hopeless gyrations so as to point out to him that his efforts are always in vain.

It will then appear that Christian theism, which was first rejected because of its supposed authoritarian character, is the only position which gives human reason a field for successful operation and a method of true progress in knowledge.⁶⁵

If it is only in terms of Christianity that human experience is meaningful and intelligible, can unbelievers engage in science and logic? After all, Van Til tells us “Christian theism’s fundamental contention is just this, that nothing whatsoever can be known unless God can be and is known.”⁶⁶ However, for Van Til unbelievers certainly can have true knowledge, at least in some sense of the word. But Van Til is concerned to show that they can have this “knowledge after a fashion” (as he called it) only because

⁶⁵*Defense of the Faith*, 117-119.

⁶⁶*Survey Christian Epistemology*, 116.

Christianity is indeed true. In other words, non-Christians achieve success in various academic fields in spite of their rejection of God, not because of it. To some extent they intellectually “borrow capital” (again, Van Til’s language) from the Christian worldview, though they would never acknowledge this dependence. As Van Til put it, “Antitheism presupposes theism.”⁶⁷ Even as the unbeliever rejects God, he is depending upon him, much as one might foolishly argue against the existence of air, all the while breathing it.

Van Til’s method, then, presents an all or nothing transcendental challenge. “In all this it will remain our purpose to seek to reduce the non-theistic position, in whatever form it appears, to an absurdity. In our preaching we say those who do not accept Christ are lost. Our reasoning can do no less.”⁶⁸ “Our argument, then, is that those who...stop short of maintaining the fundamental conceptions of [Christianity] reduce experience to absurdity.”⁶⁹ Van Til has not only turned the methodology of Kant on its head, he has turned the skeptic’s challenge on his head. Van Til is the *real* skeptic -- skeptical of any attempt to make sense of human experience apart from God! In conclusion:

Thus there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism. Even non-Christians presuppose its truth while they verbally reject it. They need to presuppose the truth of Christian theism in order to account for their own accomplishments...⁷⁰

Christianity is the only reasonable position for men to hold. It is not merely as reasonable as other positions, or a bit more reasonable as other positions; it alone is the natural and reasonable position for man to take...Christianity alone does not crucify reason itself. Without it reason would operate in a total vacuum...

The best, the only, the absolutely certain proof of the truth of Christianity is that unless its truth be presupposed there is no proof of anything. Christianity is proved as being the very foundation of proof itself.⁷¹

And in establishing the Christian worldview, Van Til has refuted skepticism.

⁶⁷Ibid., xii.

⁶⁸*Survey of Christian Epistemology*, xi.

⁶⁹Ibid., 221.

⁷⁰*Defense of the Faith*, 120.

⁷¹Ibid., 396.