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The sceptical idealist . . . who . . . challenges the ground of our assertion and denounces as insufficiently justified our conviction of the existence of matter, which we thought to base on immediate perception, is a benefactor of human reason in so far as he compels us, even in the smallest advances of ordinary experience, to keep on the watch, lest we consider as a well-earned possession what we perhaps obtain only illegitimately.

(Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A377–8)

Is our confidence justified?—What people accept as a justification—is shewn by how they think and live.

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 325)

Introduction

'ALL the advantages of theft over honest toil'. That is how, several years ago, someone once characterized transcendental arguments to me, reflecting a widespread conviction that there is something vaguely disreputable or even dishonest about them. This suspicion is fuelled by many sources: difficulties in giving a full definition of what a transcendental argument is and how it differs from other arguments; disappointed hopes regarding what they can really achieve; doubts about their respectability from a naturalistic perspective; a conviction that their apparent goal of refuting scepticism is one that they seem to achieve too easily; or a feeling that, when looked at in any detail, they often rest on dogmatic and unsubstantiated claims that beg too many questions to really satisfy anyone who is not already committed to them.

It is my hope that many of these understandable concerns will be addressed in what follows. But it is important to see that it would be wrong to exaggerate them. It may be hard to give a brief and satisfactory definition of a transcendental argument: but examples of them are easy to recognize and are generally agreed upon without any difficulty. It may be that transcendental arguments should be viewed less optimistically than in the 1960s and 1970s, when P. F. Strawson's powerful reading and reconstruction of Kant made them suddenly in vogue; but whilst much of the theorizing *about* transcendental arguments has come to an end, they still continue to be used, most recently and prominently by Hilary Putnam, Donald Davidson, and John Searle. It may be that someone committed to a strongly naturalistic programme in philosophy will be suspicious of transcendental arguments; but such suspicions are not worth much if they are merely programmatic and hardly cast doubt on transcendental arguments alone. It may be that the claim to have refuted scepticism using transcendental arguments is premature and too easy; but it could also be said that the proponent of transcendental

arguments takes the problem more seriously and deeply than do many of those who have offered other responses to this issue. And finally, it may be that transcendental arguments are often just sketched but hard to spell out in detail; but the same might be remarked of most philosophical claims and positions. What is more, we should perhaps be cautious in thinking we can just dismiss transcendental arguments on these grounds without further ado, for it is possible (as someone else once observed to me) that, without arguments of this form, philosophy can be nothing more than a meta-discipline, as its distinctive conclusions and methodology would be lost.¹ In this way, I believe, those of us who have what Strawson has called 'a tenderness for transcendental arguments' have nothing in particular to apologize for.²

As far as I know, this is the only monograph in English to have been published on the topic of transcendental arguments (although, of course, they have been widely discussed in papers and articles).³ I have tried to bear this fact in mind when writing the book, assuming that as a result some may come to it in order to find a way into the issues and to understand the central uses of these arguments in Kant, Strawson, Davidson, Putnam, and others. I have therefore attempted to put points as clearly as possible; to signpost debates and different approaches; and to avoid presuming too much background knowledge on the part of the reader. This book is not,

¹ Cf. the remark by Hector-Neri Castañeda, that 'every philosophical claim is to the effect that something or other is necessary or impossible, or a priori or empirical, and often the necessity in question is not formal logical necessity' (Hector-Neri Castañeda, 'Consciousness and Behaviour: Their Basic Connections', in Hector-Neri Castañeda (ed.), *Intentionality, Minds and Perception* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), 121–58, p. 122).

² P. F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London: Methuen, 1985), 21.

³ The only works in English I know of which come close are R. J. Benton, *Kant's Second Critique and the Problem of Transcendental Arguments* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1977), and Humphrey Palmer, *Presupposition and Transcendental Inference* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), though the former is largely interpretative in focus, and the latter is more concerned with 'presumptive circularity' in general, where transcendental arguments are taken to involve such circularity. The only non-English monograph I have come across is Marcel Piquet's *Transzendente Argumente: Kant, Strawson und die sinnkritische Aporetik der Detranszendentalisierung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991); there is also an extensive discussion in Reinhold Aschenberg's *Sprachanalyse und Transzendentalphilosophie* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982). A full bibliography of writings on transcendental arguments (compiled by Isabel Cabrera) can be found in Robert Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 307–21.

however, an 'objective' overview of the literature or an introduction to it: rather, it offers a partisan contribution to the debate, in trying to show where others have gone wrong and to point to a solution to the difficulties surrounding transcendental arguments in their relation to scepticism.

The aim of this book is therefore to provide an account of what transcendental arguments are, to examine what epistemological and metaphysical commitments they involve, and to critically assess their philosophical value. The aim of this introduction is to characterize in general terms the approach that will be adopted in what follows.

0.1 TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS AND SCEPTICISM

As the title of this book suggests, I will be focusing exclusively on ways in which transcendental arguments are used in the context of scepticism, and as a result I will be dealing solely with their epistemological applications. I do not dispute that a broader use of transcendental arguments is possible, in metaphysics, political philosophy, or ethics, for example; but for both historical and philosophical reasons I think we have most to learn from such arguments in epistemology.

The historical case is straightforward. While examples of transcendental arguments can perhaps be found in the philosophical literature prior to Kant, it is clearly Kant who made such arguments into a primary methodological device in constructing his philosophical system, for which epistemological issues were central. And since Kant, those who have used and revived such arguments in modern philosophy have also been concerned to do so in a way that addresses largely epistemological questions. It is only more recently, perhaps since the difficulties of using transcendental arguments in this way have emerged, that the assumption has been questioned that 'the point of transcendental argument in general is an anti-skeptical point';⁴ but, it is only once the relation between transcendental arguments and epistemology has been thought through that the rationale for this apostasy can be grasped.

⁴ Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism*, 10; cf. also p. 21.

The philosophical case for focusing on transcendental arguments in relation to scepticism may appear equally straightforward. Transcendental arguments, after all, are widely supposed to offer some sort of *refutation* of scepticism, making the connection obvious. However, while this promise will immediately attract some, it will also repel many, either because they are philosophically knowing enough to realize in advance that any such refutation is unlikely to succeed, or because they are philosophically sophisticated enough to think that no such refutation is ever really required, for this is to take scepticism more seriously than it deserves. Now, in subsequent chapters, my aim in part will be to show that such misgivings are misplaced, first because the sceptical position which transcendental arguments can be used to address does not *have* to be the seemingly impregnable fortress of Cartesian doubt, and secondly because such non-Cartesian varieties of scepticism have implications that make them harder to ignore and dismiss out of hand.⁵ In presenting the sceptical target in this way, therefore, it will perhaps be less easy to claim that transcendental arguments merely encourage us to engage further in a hopeless and philosophically empty quest.

None the less, where I am happy to concede something to these concerns is in allowing that, where sceptical worries exist, we have more to learn by trying to understand where they come from, and what appears to give them life, than by simply trying to address them head on, and overturn them. I therefore accept that (in Thompson Clarke's words) the sceptic's target is 'the product of a large piece of philosophizing about empirical knowledge done before he comes on stage',⁶ and that therefore the most fruitful way of dealing with him may not be to set out to refute him, by answering him in his own terms, but rather to question those terms themselves. In the light

⁵ In using the label 'Cartesian' here, I do not mean to be talking about the position of Descartes himself, but about a particular conception of scepticism (as requiring certainty or the impossibility of doubt) that has come to be labelled in this way, even though Descartes's own handling of sceptical issues is considerably more nuanced than this implies. Because I do not think Descartes's actual position corresponds to the 'textbook' position, I will switch from talking of 'Cartesian scepticism' to talking of 'epistemic scepticism', once the latter terminology is properly introduced (in Ch. 1).

⁶ Thompson Clarke, 'The Legacy of Skepticism', *Journal of Philosophy*, 69 (1972), 754-69, p. 754. Cf. also John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 113: 'The aim here is not to answer sceptical questions, but to begin to see how it might be intellectually respectable to ignore them, to treat them as unreal, in the way that common sense has always wanted to.'

of this view of the anti-sceptical project, however, can transcendental arguments be given a role, if the aim now is not to answer scepticism, but to show how and why it should be set aside, together with the philosophical outlook that has nurtured it?

I believe they can, and that in fact transcendental arguments have always had this diagnostic element as part of their response to the sceptical challenge: namely, of demonstrating the artificiality of the constraints within which the sceptic is working, and which he has inherited from the epistemological tradition of which he is part. In overturning scepticism, therefore, a transcendental argument properly conceived is not meant to establish some truth that otherwise we would not be sure of, but (more negatively) to undercut the 'large piece of philosophizing' on which the sceptical position is built, but which the sceptic leaves unquestioned. It is in thereby turning the game played by scepticism against itself (to paraphrase Kant⁷) that transcendental arguments make their real contribution to our *understanding* of scepticism, by showing that the sceptic relies on certain philosophical assumptions to get his doubt going; these assumptions are then shown to involve a conception that is too impoverished to make a coherent beginning, but which, when enriched, leads the sceptical problem to disappear. Although they do indeed engage with scepticism, and although they do indeed take sceptical problems seriously, proponents of transcendental arguments may none the less allow that this project is valueless, unless it scrutinizes and rejects the philosophical picture that made such engagement seem necessary at all.

Taken in this way, it can then be seen why it is no mere historical accident that Kant was the first to employ transcendental arguments against scepticism. For, in his crucial encounter with Hume, Kant (rightly or wrongly) took himself to be dealing with a sceptic, and one whom he took (again, rightly or wrongly) to have arrived at that scepticism as the logical conclusion of the theories of his empiricist predecessors. Kant therefore saw that to refute

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), B276. References to the *Critique* will be given in the standard form, relating to the pagination of the A (first) and B (second) editions. References to works of Kant other than the *Critique of Pure Reason* will be to volume and page number of the Akademie edition (*Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Deutsche [formerly Königliche Preussische] Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–)), together with a reference to a standard English translation (where available).

Humean scepticism it was more effective to undermine the empiricist presuppositions on which this scepticism relied, than simply to show that Hume's sceptical conclusions were false. Faced by a kind of 'living' scepticism in this way, Kant's arguments therefore take on a kind of diagnostic and dialectically sophisticated character that is missing in many 'textbook' refutations of scepticism, and even in many 'textbook' presentations of transcendental arguments themselves.

0.2 THE NATURE OF TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS

As standardly presented, transcendental arguments are usually said to be distinctive in involving a certain sort of claim, namely that 'For Y to be possible, X must be the case', where Y is some indisputable fact about us and our mental life (e.g. that we have experiences, use language, make certain judgements, have certain concepts, perform certain actions, etc.), but where it is left open at this stage exactly what is substituted for X . Thus, whether and how far a transcendental claim is to be used to address sceptical issues, and what sorts of sceptical issues these are, is not determined by the nature of the claim *as such*, but by what one substitutes for X . What conclusions one can get to in making a claim of this form, and what one needs to do to substantiate it, are therefore closely related: the stronger the former, the more demanding the latter. The question as regards scepticism therefore becomes: can one find adequate grounds on which to substantiate a transcendental claim that is itself strong enough to do any real anti-sceptical work? As we shall see in what follows, this is not so easy to determine as is sometimes assumed, as there are different kinds of sceptical target, and different strategies against them may require distinct kinds of transcendental claim. On this general definition of a transcendental claim, therefore, it is not *intrinsically* anti-sceptical, as one could use it to show that there is something that is a necessary condition for experience etc. without thereby establishing anything that can really be used against the sceptic; on the other hand, nothing in the definition rules out the possibility that such a claim can be defended in such a way as to show that scepticism (of some sort) is mistaken.