

## Lecture 1: What is a transcendental argument?

- Transcendental arguments are a kind of response to scepticism
- They claim that some of the sceptic's own presuppositions can only be true if the sceptic is wrong.
- Most philosophers nowadays claim they are a kind of argument that possibly work against the sceptic
- So we're going to outline what kind of argument they are.

### Transcendental arguments are responses to scepticism

#### I. Transcendental arguments against external-world scepticism.

*Strawson's argument that objects continue to exist unperceived:*

1. We think of the world as containing particulars that are numerically the same as particulars we perceived earlier.
2. That would be impossible, unless there were "satisfiable and commonly satisfied criteria" for the reidentification of particulars (Strawson, 1959, 35)
- C. Some objects continue to exist unperceived.

*Putnam's argument that I am not a brain in a vat:*

1. My word 'brain' refers to brains.
2. That would be impossible if I were a brain in a vat.
- C. I'm not a brain in a vat

#### II. Transcendental arguments against scepticism about causation.

*The second analogy: Kant's argument against Hume's causal scepticism:*

1. I have experiences of objective successions.
2. That would be impossible, unless there were some causal relations.
- C. There are some causal relations.

NB. We will phrase this particular argument differently in later lectures.

If these supposed to be examples of a kind of argument that can't possibly work against the sceptic (Stroud), we better get clear on what makes that kind of argument distinctive?

### What makes transcendental arguments distinctive?

#### I. It's not their form.

1. p.
2. It would be impossible that p, unless q.
- C. q.

Any argument can have formulated like this:

1. Cats are mammals.
2. That would be impossible, unless cats gave birth to live young.
- C. Cats give birth to live young.

II. It's not their form, together with the fact that they are directed against the sceptic.

*Moore's argument for the existence of the external world:*

1. I have hands.
2. That would be impossible, unless there was an external world.
- C. There is an external world.

This doesn't seem convincing against the sceptic – the first premise seems to just assume that the sceptic is wrong.

III. What *does* make transcendental arguments distinctive – the sceptic must accept the first premise.

The first premises of transcendental arguments are not like the first premise of Moore's argument – they are either:

- a) immune to doubt.
- b) premises the sceptic accepts.
- c) premises the sceptic has to accept if he is to be able to state his scepticism.

A transcendental argument is defined as such *dialectically*, i.e. in relation to the presuppositions of who they are arguing against. They have:

- a) a first premise the sceptic doesn't or can't doubt.
- b) a conclusion that sceptical hypothesis does not obtain.

This explains why they are appealing – to show that the sceptic's own presuppositions undermine his scepticism would be quite an anti-sceptical coup.

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 such doubts make sense.  
(Strawson, 1959, 35)

IV. Why 'transcendental'?

For Kant, 'Transcendental' = 'pertaining to the conditions for the possibility of experience'.

And premises about experience are premises the sceptic doesn't or can't doubt.

And that is why other transcendental arguments feature premises about language or thought – these also have anti-sceptical invulnerability.

### **Transcendental arguments have very general conclusions**

Transcendental arguments don't give us knowledge of particular facts – they give us very general conclusions about what the world is like:

Strawson: some objects continue to exist unperceived.

Putnam: I'm not a brain in a vat.

Kant: there are some causal relations.

But the sceptic can just rephrase his scepticism about particular matters of fact. And so can the very general conclusions of transcendental arguments have anti-sceptical force?

Depends what the sceptic is doing with his scepticism:

- a) arguing for our ignorance – *Useless*.
- b) arguing against realism, and for anti-realism – *Useful*.

### But wasn't Kant an Idealist?

Idealism – the world is constituted by our experience of it or thought about it.

- e.g. Berkeley – esse est percipi

Transcendental idealism – in order for us to be able to perceive an objective world, we have to accept that some metaphysical concepts are projected onto the world by our minds.

- e.g. For Kant, substance and causation.

And Kant thought his transcendental arguments could work against the sceptic because he was a transcendental idealist.

A puzzle:

- a) transcendental arguments are only effective against a sceptic who uses scepticism to argue for anti-realism.
- b) Kant thought transcendental arguments involved a commitment to a kind of idealism (and idealism is a form of anti-realism).

Two very central questions in these lectures

- a) Do transcendental arguments involve a commitment to anti-realism?  
(Stroud argues that they do)
- b) Does a commitment to anti-realism mean that transcendental arguments can't have anti-sceptical force?  
(I'll argue that it doesn't.)

*Reading:*

Strawson, P. F. *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. London: Methuen, 1952. pp. 31-38.

Putnam, H. *Reason, Truth, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. Chapter 1, "Brains in a vat".

Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood. 1999. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1781. pp. 304-316, "The second analogy".

*For next time:*

Stroud, B. "Transcendental Arguments." *The Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 9 (1968): 241–256.