

Lecture 4: Transcendental idealism and transcendental arguments

Stroud's worry:

- Transcendental arguments can't establish a *necessary* link between thought or experience and how the world is without a commitment to idealism.
- If transcendental arguments are committed to idealism, they are useless against the sceptic.

Establishing a concept's legitimacy

I. What make a concept a legitimate one?

Answer: that we are *entitled* to go on using it, applying it to things in the world, and not revising our statements and beliefs involving it.

- Illegitimate concepts: witches, possession, star signs.

II. How can we show a concept to be legitimate?

We could show that it applies to things in the world.

- Consider the psychiatric concept of schizophrenia.
- Whether or not schizophrenia is a legitimate concept depends on whether it applies to people in the world in the way in which psychiatric concept claims it does.

III. Not all legitimate concepts can be shown to apply to things in the mind-independent external world.

Consider concepts of something being tasty, pleasant, or lovely.

What about concepts that purport to apply to the external world – e.g. metaphysical concepts like causation? – Hume is a sceptic about the *legitimacy* of causal concepts.

Perhaps we can't show that these concepts apply to the mind-independent external world in the same way as we could succeed or fail in showing that the concept of schizophrenia applied, but is there still a way of showing these concepts to be legitimate?

- The transcendental idealist says 'Yes'.
- Transcendental idealism is the claim that we can show a certain concept C to be legitimate if we can show it to be part of the necessary framework for the representation of a mind-independent external world.
- But that legitimacy comes at a price – we can only claim that such a concept legitimately applies to a world *for us*, i.e. the kind of world we can and do represent.

Establishing the legitimacy of a concept in this way shouldn't look fishy:

- Consider logical concepts and logical truths.
- The validity of introduction and elimination rules for logical constants.
- Aristotle's description of someone who holds that there can be true contradictions: "an exponent of this view can neither speak nor mean anything" (Aristotle, *Meta.* 1008b 9-10)

The Second Analogy

I. A response to Hume's scepticism about causation.

Kant agrees with Hume that:

- a) Experience doesn't give us reason to think there are *necessary* relations between causes and effects (e.g. between the brick hitting the window and the window breaking) – all we ever see is one event *followed* by another (Kant 1781/87, A91/B124).
- b) There's no contradiction in imagining a particular cause not having the effect it in fact has (e.g. imagining the brick hitting the window but the window not breaking).

But Kant thinks we can still answer Hume's causal scepticism – by showing that the assumption that there are causal relations is part of the necessary framework for representing the empirical world (in particular for representing objective successions through time).

II. The underlying concern with representing objects.

Our experiences purport to represent objects that are independent of our experience of them – *but* we can only know those objects through experience.

We have representations in us, of which we can also become conscious. But let this consciousness reach as far and be exact and precise as one wants, still there always remain only representations ... Now how do we posit an object for these representations, or ascribe to their subjective reality ... some sort of objective reality? (Kant 1781/87, A197/242)

How are we supposed to get the concept of objectivity?

The problem is to account for our having the concept of objectivity—of a truth that is independent of our will and our attitudes. Where can we have acquired such a concept? We cannot occupy a position outside our own minds; there is no vantage point from which to compare our beliefs with what we take our beliefs to be about. (Davidson 1995, 7)

III. The movie-film account of the raw materials of experience.

“The apprehension of the manifold of appearance is always successive” (Kant 1781/87, A189/B234)

- The raw materials of experience over time are just like a movie film – just a series of still images.
- Therefore, in order for experience to represent objects over time, we need to combine parts of the still images together in order to represent an object over time – “we can represent nothing as combined in the object without having previously combined it ourselves” (Kant 1781/87, B130)

Hume accepts both of these – and Hume believes the combination is down to association and habit (see Hume 1739-40, Bk. I, Pt. IV, Sect. II)

Here Kant disagrees – mere association *cannot* get you representation of objects.

In accordance with [the laws of association] I could only say “If I carry a body, I feel a pressure of weight,” but not “It, the body, is heavy,” which would be to say that these two representations are combined in the object, i.e. regardless of any difference in the condition of the subject, and not merely found together in perception (however often as that might be repeated). (Kant 1781/87, B142)

IV. The same issue applied to the distinction between objective and subjective succession in time

Association doesn't get you subjective and objective succession in time – Hume not yet in the position to state his scepticism – what would allow us to make that distinction – if we thought of one way of combining raw materials of experience as *irreversible* in the way in which other ways of the combining are not.

And that Kant claims, that is just to think that there is a connection between the two events that is *necessary* – that the latter event does not merely follow the prior event, the latter event is determined by the latter event.

An initial objection, and a clarification about idealism

I. That's not what we mean by causation?

But isn't causation a *real* relation between things out there in the world?

Kant we are to some degree mistaken:

- Causation – in the sense that it involves a *necessary* relation between perceived events is not the kind of thing we can discover looking through a microscope empirically – Hume's shown that to be wrong.
- But the assumption that there are some necessary relations between an earlier event 'A', and a later event 'B', is an assumption that it necessary for our experience to represent a world that includes objective successions in time.
- So we can agree with Hume is that all we ever *see* is 'A, followed by B'.
- But disagree that gives us reason to doubt that things like A are ever *necessarily* followed by things like B
- Because the assumption that some things like A are necessarily followed by some things like B is necessary for experience to represent 'A, followed by B'.

II. Only a conclusion about the world *for us*.

[T]he pure concepts of the understanding have no significance at all if they depart from objects of experience and want to be referred to things in themselves ... They serve as it were only to spell out appearances, so that they can be read as experience; the principles that arise from their relation to the sensible world serve our understanding for use in experience only ... (Kant 1783, 4:312-3)

Does this argument have anti-sceptical force?

- Conclusion: it's legitimate to apply the concept of causation to the world *for us*.
- But if we've only shown that it applies to a world *for us*, how have we answered the sceptic?

I. Response 1: It's different from some varieties of idealism which don't have anti-sceptical force.

It's different from other idealisms/anti-realisms:

- It's different from the view that that what we think of as necessary causal relations are just regularities.

- Thinking that the validity of intro./elim. rules are a necessary precondition for representation is very different from thinking that they are just psychologically inevitable transitions in thought.

And there's plenty of room for going wrong about the particular causal relations

Although we learn many laws through experience, these are only particular determinations of yet higher laws, the highest of which (under which all others stand) come from the understanding itself *a priori*, and are not borrowed from experience, but rather must provide the appearances with their lawfulness and by that very means make experience possible. (Kant 1781/87, A126)

The right causal relations are those that track subject-independent movements/changes, e.g. this is how Copernicus's causal claims were superior to the causal claims of Ptolemaic astrologers.

II. Response 2: The world *for us* is good enough.

Remember Kant accepted Hume's claim that experience gives us no reason to think there are necessary causal relations between any event A and any later event B.

If we are in this position, then showing causation to be part of the necessary framework for representing a mind-independent external world surely is enough to show that causation is a legitimate concept, i.e. one we are entitled to go on using as we normally do.

Compare the example of logical concepts again

- Say we accept that we can't know the validity of intro./elim. rules from experience.
- If we show that the assumption of their validity is required to represent anything, what more do we need to show?

Is the admission that we don't know whether the world as it is in itself – i.e. the world from God's point of view – includes causal relations sceptically worrying?

I'm not sure it is.

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