

The Philosophical Quarterly

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KANT'S TRANSCENDENTAL STRATEGY

BY JOHN J. CALLANAN

The interpretation of transcendental arguments remains a contentious issue for contemporary epistemology. It is usually agreed that they originated in Kant's theoretical philosophy and were intended to have some kind of anti-sceptical efficacy. I argue that the sceptic with whom Kant was concerned has been consistently misidentified. The actual sceptic was Hume, questioning whether the faculty of reason can justify any of our judgements whatsoever. His challenge is a sceptical argument regarding rule-following which engenders a vicious regress. Once this sceptical threat is properly identified, the prospects of transcendental arguments must be re-evaluated.

I. THE STATUS OF TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS

At present there appears to be little consensus regarding the status of transcendental arguments.¹ More often than not, a transcendental argument is characterized in terms of the anti-sceptical function it is intended to perform:

... that there is ... a world of material objects ... is a matter of contingent fact, and the sceptic challenges us to show how we know it. According to him, any justification for our belief will have to come from within experience, and so no adequate justification can ever be given. Transcendental arguments are supposed to demonstrate the impossibility or illegitimacy of this sceptical challenge by proving that certain concepts are necessary for thought or experience.²

Over this much at least the commentators appear to be in agreement: transcendental arguments are supposed to reveal some necessary conditions of thought, experience or language, and in so doing to achieve some kind of

¹ Recent discussions can be found in R. Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), and *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). The body of literature on transcendental arguments is extensive, and I shall make reference to those works that might be considered representative in the analytic tradition.

² B. Stroud, 'Transcendental Arguments', *Journal of Philosophy*, 65 (1968), pp. 241–56, repr. in R.C.S. Walker (ed.), *Kant on Pure Reason* (Oxford UP, 1982), pp. 117–31, at p. 118.

anti-sceptical result.³ Transcendental arguments seem to offer knowledge by way of inferences based upon our possession of uncontroversial beliefs, etc. They set out conditions which must obtain if these familiar aspects of our conscious experience are to be possible. In this way, transcendental arguments appear to start from familiar Cartesian assumptions concerning our direct acquaintance with our conscious mental states, and then proceed to extend our knowledge to knowledge of the constitution and features of an external world.

What is to be understood by 'transcendental' is therefore crucial. Since Strawson's work, the notion has been taken to indicate something like 'the manner in which necessary conditions of experience can be discovered'.⁴ On this understanding, there appears to be no obstacle to the claim that Kant's transcendental idealism is made up of two distinct components. First, there is the 'transcendental' component, which is the strategy of uncovering the necessary conditions of experience. Secondly, there is the 'idealist' component, which involves Kant's claims that 'knowledge' can extend only as far as appearances and not to things in themselves.

The potential of transcendental arguments as a method of epistemic justification has been debated for half a century. Two moves have been central to the debate. The first was made by P.F. Strawson, who proposed that transcendental arguments had a possible employment outside Kant's transcendental idealism.⁵ The second move was made by Barry Stroud, who responded with the claim that it is only on the basis of a suppressed premise involving recourse to Kant's idealism that transcendental arguments award us a legitimate claim to knowledge of the structure of the world.

Stroud presented transcendental arguments as enthymemes: their validity rests on the basis of an assumed yet hidden premise. Any would-be transcendental arguer is thus faced with a dilemma: either a transcendental argument abandons its suppressed premise, in which case it fails to make any anti-sceptical gains; or it includes the suppressed premise, in which case the transcendental argument is rendered superfluous, since the suppressed

³ For an analysis which attempts to downplay the role of scepticism in Kant's employment of transcendental arguments, see K. Ameriks, 'Kant's Transcendental Deduction as a Regressive Argument', *Kant-Studien*, 69 (1978), pp. 273–87.

⁴ However, as David Bell has commented, the issue can never be so simple, as 'the concept *transcendental* is typically employed [by recent commentators] in isolation from the complex web of connections and contrasts in which it stands to such other concepts as *immanent*, *transcendent*, *empirical*, *naturalistic*, *dogmatic*, and so forth': D. Bell, 'Transcendental Arguments and Non-Naturalistic Anti-Realism', in Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments*, pp. 189–210, at p. 194.

⁵ The *locus classicus* for the revival of transcendental arguments is Strawson's *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959). Strawson reformulated his views more modestly in his *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London: Methuen, 1985), conceding Stroud's main point against the prospects of such arguments.

premise itself provides a sufficient basis for directly securing knowledge of the world.⁶

On Stroud's analysis, it is the suppressed premise which guarantees that we can bridge the appearance/reality divide and infer from our subjective conscious states objective claims about the world. Without this premise, Stroud argues, the appearance/reality divide remains uncrossed, and the most that can be achieved is that the necessary conditions of belief themselves attain the status of 'necessary beliefs'. Yet the sceptical question why we should think that our necessary beliefs about the world are *true* returns at this point. As Ross Harrison puts it, the problem is that 'the sceptic's doubt is whether what we think corresponds to how things really are, and this does not seem to be cured by proving that we really do think it, or even that we have to think it'.⁷

The focus of this paper is not on any one particular transcendental argument, but rather on Kant's employment of transcendental arguments in general, or, as I shall refer to it, his *transcendental strategy*. Specifically, I shall discuss the supposed identity of Kant's sceptical opponent in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁸ I shall claim that his sceptical opponent has been consistently misidentified in the majority of the relevant secondary literature, and especially in regard to the topic of transcendental arguments.⁹

Kant's sceptical opponent has been identified as the Cartesian sceptic, that is, the sceptic who calls into question the possibility of our knowledge of objects in an external spatio-temporal world.¹⁰ I shall suggest instead that the target of Kant's transcendental strategy was the *Humean* sceptic. It might be thought that as the philosopher who roused Kant from his 'dogmatic slumbers', Hume is in fact the more recognized sceptical opponent, at least with respect to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The standard characterization of this arousal is that Hume demonstrated that certain core metaphysical concepts cannot be traced back to sense-experience and must therefore be

⁶ See Stroud, 'Transcendental Arguments', p. 122.

⁷ R. Harrison, review of Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects*, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 10 (2002), pp. 135–9, at p. 137. I have taken Stroud's criticism as foremost in the consideration of the problems for such arguments. This is not to say there are not others, of course. I have deliberately ignored S. Körner's so-called 'uniqueness objection', in 'The Impossibility of Transcendental Deductions', *The Monist*, 61 (1967), pp. 317–31; nor shall I address questions regarding the modality of the inferences involved in transcendental arguments: see T.E. Wilkerson, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

⁸ All references to the first *Critique* are from the Norman Kemp Smith translation (New York: St Martin's Press, 1965).

⁹ Kant's attitude towards scepticism is multi-faceted and complex and a complete analysis of this topic would be beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ See, e.g., A. Brueckner, 'Transcendental Arguments II', *Noûs*, 18 (1984), pp. 197–225; H. Vahid, 'The Nature and Significance of Transcendental Arguments', *Kant-Studien*, 93 (2002), pp. 273–90.

held to originate in the subject. The result of this analysis is that these concepts are shown to be in a sense illegitimate and illusory, since they cannot be justified by reference to experience alone. It is thought that this Humean conclusion spurred Kant to re-evaluate the role of the necessary conditions of human knowledge and experience, a re-evaluation that resulted in the formation of his so-called 'Copernican turn' (see Bxvii).

However, I question this caricature of the Humean threat. Humean scepticism does not just involve the familiar questioning of the validity of our concepts of causation or body, or of our inductive practices. It is scepticism with regard to *rational justification*: specifically, Hume argues that the 'source' or 'ground' of the validity of our judgements and beliefs cannot be identified with any activity of the faculty of reason, and concludes that the activity of judgement itself must ultimately be considered a non-rationally grounded practice.

It was in order to frame a response to *this* sceptical challenge that Kant developed his transcendental strategy. The task was not to give an account of our knowledge of the external world; it was to give an account of knowledge in the face of a sceptical threat to the possibility of providing any judgement with an adequate rational justification. Understanding that Kant thought he could respond to this Humean scepticism is, I shall argue, the key to understanding his transcendental strategy.

Furthermore, not only does Kant recognize the threat in this manner, he broadly accepts it. He argues that despite the *correctness* of Hume's conclusions regarding the justificatory power of reason alone, one can nevertheless employ (transcendental) arguments resulting in judgements which contain a rational component, thereby securing knowledge. Kant's transcendental strategy, therefore, is to claim that even granting the conclusions of Hume's scepticism with regard to rational justification, we need not accept its consequences for the possibility of knowledge.

In §II I survey the status of transcendental arguments in the contemporary literature, and I attempt to isolate key features that allow us to identify an argument as 'transcendental'. In §III, I present an account of Hume's scepticism with regard to rational justification. In §IV, I examine some of the evidence concerning Kant's conception of the sceptical threat approached in the first *Critique*. I suggest here that there is a good case to be made that it is upon Hume's scepticism with regard to rational justification that Kant focuses. Finally, in §V I shall reconstruct Kant's transcendental strategy and discuss its relevance to the supposed anti-sceptical potential of transcendental arguments.

II. TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS: AN OVERVIEW

What are transcendental arguments? We can perhaps identify some broad family resemblances that all transcendental arguments appear to share. In this section I shall attempt to identify three criteria which it is often assumed that a transcendental argument in general must meet: these are the *formal criterion*, the *objectivity criterion* and the *anti-sceptical criterion*.

A brief perusal of the literature makes it evident that there is no entirely standard definition of transcendental arguments available. Stern suggests the following:

As standardly presented, transcendental arguments are usually said to be distinctive in involving a certain type 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 .¹¹

In his discussion of ‘transcendental arguments in general’, Ralph Walker suggests that transcendental arguments can be put in the following form:

We have experience (of kind **K**)
It is analytic that the truth of p is a necessary condition for experience (of kind **K**)
Therefore p .¹²

Transcendental arguments can be rendered in terms of a major premise asserting that some uncontroversial aspect of experience is the case, a minor premise asserting that there is some controversial claim which is held to be a necessary condition of this uncontroversial aspect, and the conclusion that the controversial aspect of experience must therefore also be the case.

So one aspect of contemporary transcendental arguments is that they satisfy some kind of *formal criterion*: there is a categorical premise which the sceptic presumably would find indisputable, and then a hypothetical premise which demands that if the indisputable claim of the categorical premise is accepted, then a further stronger claim, one that tells us something about how our experience is constituted, must also be accepted.¹³ At first, then,

¹¹ Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism*, p. 6.

¹² R.C.S. Walker, *Kant* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 21.

¹³ The strength of the ‘must’ here is the source of contemporary debate about transcendental arguments. See, e.g., Harrison, ‘Transcendental Arguments and Idealism’; Q. Cassam, ‘Transcendental Arguments, Transcendental Synthesis and Transcendental Idealism’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 37 (1987), pp. 355–78.

one might agree with Graham Bird that while there appears to be clarity over this aspect of transcendental arguments, 'the unmysterious *form* of the arguments is, of course, not matched by a similar lack of mystery over their validity'.¹⁴

However, upon closer inspection, it is obvious that even this seemingly straightforward matter is not as clear as some commentators suggest. Stern argues that transcendental arguments can be recognized on the basis of a shared distinctive form:

The first, and perhaps most definitive, feature is that these arguments involve a claim of a distinctive form: namely, that one thing (x) is a necessary condition for the possibility of something else (y), so that (it is said) the latter cannot obtain without the former. In suggesting that x is a condition for y in this way, this claim is supposed to be metaphysical and *a priori*, and not merely natural and *a posteriori*: that is, if y cannot obtain without x , this is not just because certain natural laws governing the actual world and discoverable by the empirical sciences make this impossible (in the way that, for example, life cannot exist without oxygen), but because certain metaphysical constraints that can be established by reflection make x a condition for y in every possible world (for example, existence is a condition for thought, as the former is metaphysically required in order to do or be anything at all).¹⁵

Anyone familiar with Kant's transcendental idealism will notice something odd in applying this characterization to transcendental arguments in general. Stern's characterization is that upon reflection we observe a necessary connection between some uncontroversial thing y and some controversial thing x that is its condition. The implication seems to be that reflection allows us to see more of what is involved in the concept x . However, Kant's transcendental arguments do not work like this. They are supposed to involve the insight that upon reflection, to endorse y involves something else the endorsement of which validates the adoption of x as y 's necessary condition. Were we able to infer straight from the concept ' y ' to the concept ' x ' as y 's necessary condition, then there would be no need for a transcendental argument at all.

Kant frequently makes reference to the tripartite structure of knowledge and judgement in the first *Critique* (e.g., A79/B104, A138/B177, A155/B194). Stern acknowledges something like this, although he suggests that demanding the third thing is 'perhaps not definitive':

One such feature concerns the nature of the subject-matter (y), the conditions of which are being set out. As originally presented by Kant, that subject-matter is taken to be experience (which for Kant includes our beliefs, judgements, and concepts, as

¹⁴ G. Bird, 'Kant's Transcendental Arguments', in E. Schaper and W. Vossenkuhl (eds), *Reading Kant* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 21–39, at pp. 34–5.

¹⁵ Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects*, Introduction, p. 3.

well as intuitions), and the search for necessary conditions is then related to this as a starting-point, so that (as Kant put it), 'in transcendental knowledge ... our guide is the possibility of experience'.¹⁶

In trying to evaluate the methodology of transcendental arguments in general it is surely necessary to examine Kant's formulation of them. But it is clear from the outset that there is a difference between the barest formulation of them and the formulation which Kant gives. Kant notoriously does not provide any discussion of transcendental argumentation in general (although there is a discussion of the notion of 'transcendental proof': see A782/B810–A794/B822). In the above formulation, there are two elements, and a process of reflection which shows the adoption of one to involve the adoption of the other as its necessary condition. In Kant's formulation there are three elements involved: the two elements already mentioned, and a third that provides a mediating notion which allows us to relate these two elements.

I suggest that this demand is in fact 'definitive' of Kantian transcendental arguments. Stern seems to suggest that the mediating notion is simply 'experience', and that when we consider the endorsement of *y* in experience we can reflect and see that the endorsement of the *a priori* necessary condition *x* is required. This however, would be to oversimplify Kant's position vastly. As Stern mentions, 'experience' for Kant is a heavily loaded term, involving reference to concepts, intuitions, their combination by the act of synthesis in a judgement, and so on. But Stern goes on to state (p. 4) that this requirement of Kant's highlights only the 'dialectical advantages to beginning with something that even the sceptic will grant us as a starting-point (such as subjective experience)'.

When Kant talks of the 'possibility of experience', it is misleading to suppose that we can interpret his transcendental strategy as involving some anaemic interpretation of 'subjective experience'. Rather, when Kant speaks of the 'possibility of experience' he almost always has something like the following in mind (A156/B195–6):

The possibility of experience is, then, what gives objective reality to all our *a priori* modes of knowledge. Experience, however, rests on the synthetic unity of appearances, that is, on a synthesis according to concepts of an object of appearances in general. Apart from such synthesis it would not be knowledge, but a rhapsody of perceptions that would not fit into any context according to rules of a completely interconnected (possible) consciousness, and so would not conform to the transcendental and necessary unity of apperception.

Clearly, this interpretation of the 'possibility of experience' would involve a

¹⁶ Stern, p. 3. The quotation from Kant is at A783/B811.

lot more critical unpacking than the suggestion that Kant intends his strategy to move merely from the basis of 'subjective experience'.

It is certainly not immediately clear, then, that there is any continuity between Kant's transcendental strategy and contemporary transcendental arguments so far as form is concerned. A second criterion we might identify is that transcendental arguments appear to involve a transition from psychological descriptions to demands upon reality itself (without committing oneself to any particular theory of the 'reality' in question). As Mark Sacks puts it,

Transcendental arguments standardly attempt to argue from some undeniable facts about experience, or the psychological realm, to conclusions about how the world beyond that merely psychological domain must be. Such arguments attempt – as we might put it – to cross the appearance–reality gap: to cover the distance between our beliefs and the world they are about, or between how things seem to us and how they really are.¹⁷

The method, then, by which contemporary transcendental arguments respond to the global sceptic is by this inference from the 'psychological' realm to the 'external' realm. Since the description of the external realm must be objective and rule-governed, in contrast presumably with our descriptions of inner states, transcendental arguments provide warrant for the transition from the descriptions of inner states to the rule-governed description of reality. I shall call this feature of transcendental arguments the *objectivity criterion*.

However, if the nature of the 'objectivity' in question is not suitably elucidated, it is clear that appeals to objectivity are no more informative about the nature of transcendental arguments than are appeals to their formal structure. A core feature of Kant's transcendental idealism is the claim that despite the abandonment of the project of acquiring knowledge of things in themselves, there is still available a sufficiently robust notion of objectivity that can be applied to appearances. However, few contemporary transcendental arguers would endorse these specifically transcendental idealist themes. If these would-be transcendental arguers intend to eschew transcendental idealism, they need to articulate the nature of the objectivity claimed.

It is perhaps their *target* that more clearly distinguishes Kantian transcendental arguments from the contemporary usage. Stroud takes the Transcendental Deduction and the Refutation of Idealism as paradigm

¹⁷ M. Sacks, 'Transcendental Arguments and the Inference to Reality: a Reply to Stern', in Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects*, pp. 67–82, at p. 67; see also C. Hookway, 'Modest Transcendental Arguments and Sceptical Doubts: a Reply to Stroud', also in Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments*, pp. 173–88, at p. 173.

examples of transcendental arguments in that they purport to lay to rest the ‘scandal of philosophy’ that is the lack of proof of existence of the external world (Bxxxix, fn. *a*). Stroud thus identifies the target of transcendental argumentation, and states that ‘we can therefore get some understanding of Kant’s question of justification by looking at the challenge presented by the epistemological sceptic’:

Doubts about whether some ordinary hypothesis is true can often be settled by following the ordinary, well known ways of establishing matters of so-called empirical fact. But the sceptic maintains that the whole structure of practices and beliefs on the basis of which empirical hypotheses are ordinarily ‘supported’ has not itself been shown to be reliable ... that there is such a world of material objects at all is a matter of contingent fact, and the sceptic challenges us to show how we know it. According to him, any justification for our belief will have to come from within experience, and so no adequate justification can ever be given.¹⁸

Stroud suggests that it is the sceptical challenge so construed that Kant attempts to meet with transcendental arguments. As I shall argue, there is reason to believe that Kant does not in fact have the Cartesian sceptic in mind as his opponent. For now, though, I conclude that a further criterion of transcendental arguments in general is their goal of overcoming some form of scepticism. I shall call this characteristic the *anti-sceptical criterion*.

It is how this anti-sceptical criterion is construed that determines the interpretation of transcendental arguments in general. The interpretations given regarding the formal strength and objective import of transcendental arguments are intimately tied to the identification of their sceptical target. These three criteria combine to form the core of the method and aim of contemporary transcendental arguments: first, they engage the Cartesian sceptic by fastening onto what the sceptic cannot deny, i.e., the reality of our thoughts and psychological processes; then they argue that on the basis of an accurate understanding of the necessary conditions of possessing such thoughts, beliefs, etc., one can infer the validity of our belief in the existence of the external world of objects, etc.

However, I shall argue that this sceptical challenge (which recalls the traditional *génie malin* of Descartes) is not in fact the primary target of Kant’s transcendental strategy. The unresolved challenge of the Cartesian sceptic may have been a ‘scandal to philosophy’ (Bxxxix, fn. *a*), but it was nevertheless *Hume’s* writings that awoke Kant from his ‘dogmatic slumber’.¹⁹ It was Hume who set Kant on the path of his transcendental strategy; that this

¹⁸ Stroud, ‘Transcendental Arguments’, p. 117–18; see also Stroud, ‘Kant and Scepticism’, in M. Burnyeat (ed.), *The Sceptical Tradition* (Univ. of California Press, 1983), pp. 413–34.

¹⁹ B. Logan (ed.), *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics in Focus* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 33.

afforded Kant the manner in which he could reinterpret problems about the existence of the external world was a benefit of this strategy, but was not its central goal.

There are a couple of clear points of divergence between the Cartesian sceptic's argument and the Humean sceptical argument. Although the form is similar, different conclusions are reached. The Cartesian sceptic claims that we are not justified in holding our belief in the existence of the external world. The Humean sceptic, on the other hand, claims that not one of our judgements or beliefs can be justified by reason alone. While it is not by any means novel to argue that Humean scepticism in part inspired Kant's Critical project, more often than not the Humean threat is presented as limited to Hume's notorious scepticism regarding core metaphysical concepts, and his causal anti-realism in particular.²⁰ On my interpretation, Kant's transcendental arguments are designed to address the claim that no rational justification of judgement is available to human beings, a claim obviously broader than particular doubts about certain metaphysical concepts.

III. HUME'S SCEPTICISM WITH REGARD TO REASON

Hume's project in *A Treatise of Human Nature* contains some unmistakably anti-rationalist themes. His sceptical naturalism might be thought of as being diametrically opposed to the Cartesian recourse to the authority of reason to guarantee our judgements regarding nature. In fact, in the *Treatise* Hume endorses an empirical psychology, whereby 'we must endeavour to render all our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes'.²¹

Hume's theory of the mind involves the familiar division of judgements into relations of ideas and matters of fact. Only the first of these groups, he claims (p. 70, see also p. 463), 'can be the objects of knowledge and certainty'. The qualities he seems to require in order to identify relations of ideas are that they contain both certainty and exactness, and that these characteristics 'will strike the eye, or rather the mind; and seldom [require] a second examination' (p. 70). For example, geometry does not possess these characteristics: although it excels 'the loose judgements of the senses and imagination', it 'never attains a perfect precision and exactness' (pp. 70–1).

²⁰ See, e.g., S. Gardner, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 21–2; P.F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 18–19; H.E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: an Interpretation and Defense* (Yale UP, 2004), pp. 26–7; P. Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge UP, 1998), p. 237.

²¹ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. xxi.

In algebra and arithmetic, on the other hand, exactness is retained, and ‘we can carry on a chain of reasoning to any degree of intricacy’. The characteristic that distinguishes the perfect certainty of mathematics is, Hume says (p. 71), that

We are possess of a precise standard, by which we can judge of the equality and proportion of numbers; and according as they correspond or not to that standard, we determine their relations, without any possibility of error.

He attributes certainty, then, to relations of ideas solely because of the manner in which the faculty of reason (or ‘the understanding’) apprehends them. What Hume claims in the passage above is the ability of human cognition to have a clear and distinct (and therefore certain and infallible) introspection of its own workings. The certainty with which the proposition that two plus two is equal to four is grasped is immediate and intuitive, requiring only an understanding of the meanings of the terms involved in that proposition. Accordingly, the certainty of a philosophical relation could be understood as the certainty that accompanies analytic necessity.²²

Hume’s scepticism with respect to the justification of metaphysical concepts such as causation and substance, not to mention his inductive scepticism, are well known. What is perhaps less well known is that his scepticism extended beyond consideration of induction and core metaphysical concepts to, in addition, the possibility of rational justification of any judgement or belief whatsoever, *including* those judgements concerning ‘relations of ideas’. This aspect of his scepticism is set out in *Treatise* I iv 1, ‘Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason’.²³

For Hume, although the objects of the mind can be grasped with a clear and distinct clarity, this introspective ability cannot serve to ground our judgements or beliefs. For, as he puts it (p. 180), although in regard to reason’s introspective capability ‘the rules [of logical thought] are certain and infallible ... when we apply them, our fallible and uncertain faculties are very apt to depart from them, and fall into error’. His argument in this section hinges on the distinction between grasping or apprehending a rule or law of thought, and making a judgement in accordance with those rules. Although the validity of the former is guaranteed by our clear and distinct rational introspection, the reliability of the activity of judgement is

²² See H.W. Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 92–6.

²³ Discussion of the ever-increasing literature on this topic would take me beyond the scope of this paper, but see, e.g., R. Fogelin, *Hume’s Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985); I. Hacking, ‘Hume’s Species of Probability’, *Philosophical Studies*, 33 (1978), pp. 21–37; R. Imlay, ‘Hume’s “Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason”’: a Study in Contrasting Themes’, *Hume Studies*, 7 (1981), pp. 121–36; F. Wilson, ‘Hume’s Sceptical Argument against Reason’, *Hume Studies*, 9 (1983), pp. 91–129; B. Winters, ‘Hume on Reason’, *Hume Studies*, 5 (1979), pp. 20–35.

hampered by our faulty memory, in particular, and our tendency to err, in general.

Hume's argument consists of two stages. First, he claims that 'all knowledge degenerates into probability'. When making judgements regarding relations of ideas (such as simple mathematical operations) everyone has at some stage made some errors in their employment of them. Hume (p. 181) uses the example of a mathematician performing a long chain of simple mathematical operations. If asked at the end of performing several hundred such operations whether he is certain of his results, the mathematician concedes that he may have committed an error at some point along the chain. Unless the mathematician can guarantee that his employment of the rules of thought has been as faultless as the rules themselves, then he must concede the fallibility of his employment of even these rules. In this scenario, Hume claims, we can at best only confer a very high probability on judgements concerning relations of ideas.

The second stage of the argument claims that 'all probability diminishes into nothing'. Here (pp. 181–2) Hume argues that once we have conceded that even our knowledge-claims must be reduced to probability-claims, the only way of checking the reliability of these claims is by means of a further judgement, itself a probability-claim; and when this checking occurs, the probability of the original judgement is diminished. According to Hume, this activity is carried on until the original confidence in our original judgement is 'reduc'd to nothing'. The argument is generally recognized as fallacious, since it presumes that the checking of a probability judgement by a second probability judgement must result in a reduction of the original value, and this is not the case.²⁴

However, irrespective of the prospects for Hume's individual sceptical arguments, the core of his challenge to rational justification can easily be extrapolated. No matter how reliable the faculty of reason itself may be, the *activity of judgement* is an inherently fallible activity, and even our seemingly most certain judgements require further justification. However, the activity of rational justification is itself an inherently non-terminating process, and any attempted justification by provision of reasons is doomed to an infinite regress. For Hume, then, all judgement, *no matter what its content*, is ultimately incapable of rational justification. While reason may still play a role in determining all our particular judgements, Hume argues that reason could not *fundamentally* or *completely* determine judgement in general. That he uses a

²⁴ Hume mistakenly thinks that the second probability value must be multiplied by the first rather than added to it: see Hacking, 'Hume's Species of Probability'. However, for interesting defences against this argument, see M. Lynch, 'Hume and the Limits of Reason', *Hume Studies*, 22 (1996), pp. 89–104.

mathematical operation as an example surely implies that he regards even the propositions of mathematics as vulnerable to this scepticism.

For Hume, while the apprehension of the rules of reason is clear, distinct and certain, the process by which we employ those rules in judgement is not. Once he introduces his distinction between grasping or apprehending a rule on the one hand and applying or employing a rule in judgement on the other, he presents the question whether we can ever know that the employment of that clear and distinct rule of reason has been performed adequately or correctly. The only recourse is to a process of checking, which itself presumably is a rational process involving its own rules, and so on *ad infinitum*. The requirement of checking the application of a rule of reason thereby opens up the threat of a non-terminating chain of rational justification.

Hume's response to his own challenge is (p. 24) that there is a 'magical faculty of the soul' that compels us to give assent to some judgements in order to avoid the infinite regress of rational justification. This faculty is identified by Hume as the *imagination*, which operates independently of our rational inferences and forces us to make judgements when reason itself fails to satisfy its own demand for a complete justification. For Hume, explanations come to an end exactly at the point where imagination acts as the source or ground of our beliefs and determines us 'to judge as well as to breathe and to feel'.²⁵

Hume argues that the judgements which issue from the faculty of imagination (in combination with habit and custom) provide us with reliable guides to action. His view differs from Descartes' not in denying that our higher cognitive faculties can provide reliable guides, but only in denying that it is the faculty of reason that holds this responsibility. Thus there are three core features of Hume's account of the ground and nature of human judgement: first, the ground is *non-rational*; secondly, in so far as it is a non-rational ground, it is also an *inexplicable* feature of human thought; thirdly, in so far as beliefs and judgements issue from this ground without any rationally determinable origin, they emerge *spontaneously*.

There is one final important point to be made. Hume's sceptical attack differs from the Cartesian's in at least one significant respect. Hume's scepticism is not directly targeted at our inability to cross the appearance/reality divide; rather, he directs his arguments towards our inability to secure anything valid upon which to ground the *activity of judgement*. In configuring this sceptical strategy amongst Hume's other sceptical attacks, it is clear that he intended both his inductive scepticism and scepticism with regard to rational justification in general to hold independently of his other

²⁵ *Treatise*, p. 183. See also S. Everson, 'The Difference between Thinking and Feeling', *Mind*, 97 (1988), pp. 401–13.

sceptical attacks. For example, he explicitly states (pp. 90–1) that even if we could secure some objective evidence of a causal connection between particular objects, we would still have no basis on which to infer that the causal connection would hold between objects of that very type in the future. In a sense, then, Hume's inductive scepticism is the more far-reaching, since although we might be able to justify a certain type of account of causation (i.e., causal regularities), securing this would not dissolve the problem of induction.

This of course has important ramifications for any consideration of the sceptical challenge with which Kant was concerned. For Hume, the familiar worries regarding causation and substance can be seen as subordinate to his more general sceptical attacks against reason. The thrust of Hume's inductive scepticism is purely anti-rationalist: it denies that any inference from the observed to the unobserved can receive an adequate rational justification. Similarly, I have shown that Hume's anti-rationalist attack extends also to judgements concerning even the clearest and most distinct of concepts.

Were one to overcome the Cartesian sceptic's challenge in any particular instance, and form a true judgement about any particular aspect of external reality, there would remain a significant sense in which the deep sceptical threat would not be overcome. While the appearance/reality divide may have been crossed at one point, there is no rational assurance that the crossing is confirmable or repeatable, or even that the feature of reality apprehended will continue to exist in roughly the same form in the future. In short, the defeat of the Cartesian sceptic provides no grounds upon which to base any confidence in the *stability* of human judgement.

IV. KANT'S RESPONSE TO HUME

There is evidence to suggest that Kant was familiar with the sceptical challenge as I have characterized it. We know that Kant was familiar with at least *Treatise* I iv 7 ('Conclusion of this Book') – it appeared in translation in the *Königsberger Zeitung* in 1771.²⁶ Hume's attack on the justificatory potential of reason is clear: he concludes that the 'memory, senses and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination' (p. 265).

Could Kant have been under the impression that Hume's attack was merely on the rational security of specific metaphysical concepts such as

²⁶ See M. Kuehn, 'Kant's Conception of "Hume's Problem"', in Logan (ed.), *Kant's Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics in Focus*, pp. 156–77. My discussion here is heavily indebted to Kuehn's analysis.

cause, rather than an attack on the possibility of rational justification *per se*? In the same section Hume refers back to the argument of I iv 1, commenting (pp. 267–8) that there he has shown ‘that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life’. We know also that Kant had discussions of Hume’s *Treatise* in depth with his friends Hamann and Kraus, both of whom were familiar with the entirety of the work.²⁷ It seems very plausible that Kant must have been familiar with the challenge Hume presented not just in terms of justifying concepts such as *cause*, but also in terms of the possibility of rational justification in general.

In 1772, the year after coming into contact with Hume’s attack in the *Königsberger Zeitung*, Kant wrote his famous letter to Marcus Herz. Here he claims to have discovered the ‘key to the whole secret of hitherto still obscure metaphysics’. The ‘key’ for Kant takes the form of a question: ‘what is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call “representation” to the object?’²⁸ Commentators have, I think rightly, viewed Kant’s asking this question as a significant step towards the Copernican viewpoint adopted in the *Critique of Pure Reason* nine years later.²⁹ Yet the commentators have in general failed to link Kant’s encountering the *Treatise* with the formulation of the question to Herz only seven months later. The proximity of the two events lends support to the familiar claim in the *Prolegomena* (p. 33) that it was Hume who roused Kant from his ‘dogmatic slumber’. Yet what was the nature of this arousal? The standard interpretation is that Hume delimited the scope of metaphysical enquiry by demonstrating that most of its core concepts were incapable of philosophical justification. Yet it seems absurd to say that Kant might have been convinced by this sceptical attack without having been convinced of its grounds – that is, without having been persuaded of the threat of the attack on rational justification in general. In fact there is evidence to suggest that Kant viewed Hume’s threat in just this way:

The question was not whether the concept of cause was right, useful, and even indispensable for our knowledge of nature, for this Hume had never doubted; but whether that concept could be thought by reason *a priori*, and consequently whether it possessed an inner truth, independent of all experience, implying a wider application than merely to objects of experience. This was Hume’s problem. It was a question concerning the *origin*, not concerning the *indispensable need* of the concept (*ibid.*)

²⁷ See Kuehn, pp. 175–6, n. 42.

²⁸ See *Letter to Herz*, in A. Zweig (ed.), *The Essential Kant* (New York: Mentor, 1970), p. 33.

²⁹ E.g., N. Kemp Smith, *A Commentary to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Humanity Books, 1999); L.W. Beck, ‘Lambert and Hume in Kant’s Development from 1769 to 1772’, in his *Essays on Kant and Hume* (Yale UP, 1978), pp. 101–10.

For Kant, Hume's challenge was not that the concept *cause* was unjustified – it *is* justified, at least on the basis of its 'indispensable need'. Similarly, it is not just that the concept *cause* originated in the subject, for both Hume and Kant view this as an unproblematic assumption. Rather, the question is which *faculty of thought* it is that actually accounts for the concept. As Kant himself says, the question is whether the concept *cause* can be justified by 'reason *a priori*, and consequently whether it possesses an inner truth'.

There are two further points to be made here. First, it is clear that Kant *entirely accepted* Hume's sceptical attack on reason's ability to ground judgement. He states (*Prolegomena*, p. 31) that Hume 'demonstrated irrefutably that it was perfectly impossible for reason to think *a priori* and by means of concepts a combination involving necessity'. Kant's conception of Hume's threat is that it is a threat to the justification of the *application* of rational concepts to experience in judgement. Secondly, it is clear that Kant believed Hume's sceptical threat applied to *any* judgement concerning nature. Kant himself states (*ibid.*) that although it was Hume's consideration of the concept of causation that initially stimulated his own enquiries, he considered the challenge in its generalized form:

I therefore first tried whether Hume's objection could not be put into a general form, and soon found that the concept of the connexion of cause and effect was by no means the only idea by which the understanding thinks the connexion of things *a priori* but rather that metaphysics consists altogether of such connexions.

When Kant claimed to have discovered the 'key' that would result in his development of transcendental idealism, it was as a result of encountering scepticism which questioned the ability of reason to justify judgement in general. This scepticism may first have been considered in regard to a single metaphysical concept such as *cause*; however, the nature of that sceptical attack was the doubt it cast upon our ability of rational justification.

V. KANT'S TRANSCENDENTAL STRATEGY

There is no doubt that the Kantian resolution of the Humean problem was achieved by first adopting the Copernican viewpoint, that is, by insisting that the validity of the 'universal laws of nature' could only be guaranteed by assuming that they are realized 'not by deriving them from experience, but by deriving experience from them' (*Prolegomena*, p. 77). How this assumption is shown to hold validly for experience is by transcendental argumentation, whereby it is shown that the assumption of the validity of

certain principles of the understanding is a necessary condition of judgement and coherent experience.

However, the matter is not as straightforward as this. At the beginning of the Transcendental Deduction (B127), Kant states that

David Hume recognized that, in order to be able to do this [deduce the pure concepts of the understanding], it was necessary that these concepts should have an *a priori* origin. But since he could not explain how it can be possible that the understanding must think concepts, which are not in themselves connected in the understanding, as being necessarily connected in the object, and since it never occurred to him that the understanding might itself, perhaps, through these concepts, be the author of the experience in which its objects are found, he was constrained to derive them from experience, namely, from a subjective necessity (that is, from *custom*), which arises from repeated association in experience, and which comes mistakenly to be regarded as objective.

From this passage it might seem that for Kant, all that is required for a successful refutation of Hume's challenge is to affirm that the concepts that we wish to justify are in fact part of our cognitive constitution, and thus, by virtue of Kant's Copernican turn, part of the constitution of experience.

However, this will not do. It is clearly open to Hume to object that any justification that proceeds from mere *possession* of innate concepts is vulnerable to sceptical attack. The challenge as Hume posed it is to give an account of the *employment* of these concepts which does not rely upon rational grounds as their source of justification. In this light, Kant's account cannot rely solely on the identification of those concepts as part of our cognitive capacities as a reason for their validity.

Although for Kant the Categories are necessary for judgement about the world, he does not suggest that it is these rational concepts that act as the *ground* of our judgements about the world – it is not the fact that we are so constituted to make judgements in accordance with certain *a priori* concepts that *entitles* us to assume that our judgements reveal the true character of nature. Hume's entire sceptical argument was designed to show the impossibility of such an account.

In fact, in the Transcendental Deduction (B167–8) Kant specifically rejects any such explanatory theory which purports to offer human beings' rational constitution as adequate justification for rational judgement. He argues (B167) that such a theory would require 'a kind of *preformation-system* of pure reason' whereby our cognitive constitution 'matches up' to an objective reality simply by virtue of being 'implanted in us from the first moment of our existence', and (B168) that endorsement of such a theory is 'exactly what the sceptic most desires', since any claim can offer at best 'subjective necessity'.

The task for Kant, and the key to his transcendental strategy, is to rescue 'for the pure concepts of the understanding their *a priori* origin' (*Prolegomena*, p. 77), while conceding the inability of the faculty of reason in general to justify our judgement fundamentally. I hold that Kant accepted that this sceptical attack was for the most part valid, and that his resolution of the threat proceeds by virtue of other aspects of his transcendental strategy.

There is good reason to suggest that Kant had this conception of Hume's challenge in mind when considering the possible ground of judgement in general, as for instance in the following well known passage from the *Transcendental Analytic*:

If understanding in general is to be viewed as the faculty of rules, judgement will be the faculty of subsuming under rules; that is, of distinguishing whether something does or does not stand under a given rule (*casus datae legis*).... If it is sought to give general instruction how we are to subsume under these rules, that is, to distinguish whether something does or does not come under them, that could only be by means of another rule. This in turn, for the very reason that it is a rule, again demands guidance from judgement. And thus it appears that, though understanding is capable of being instructed, and of being equipped with rules, judgement is a peculiar talent which can be practised only, and cannot be taught.³⁰

In this passage Kant's Critical philosophy revisits several Humean themes. First, Kant appears to distinguish between grasping a rule clearly and distinctly, and grasping the correct conditions for its employment, that is, determining what does and does not fall under the rule. Secondly, he argues that the distinction between the rule and the conditions of its employment engenders an infinite regress, arguing that the determination of a rule's conditions for employment requires a further rule, which itself demands the elaboration of conditions for *its* employment, and so on *ad infinitum*. Thirdly, Kant concludes that the rules of the understanding themselves cannot serve as the ground of judgement – if they could, then they would serve as a rational basis of judgement which could be 'learnt'. Fourthly, he concludes that the role of the understanding can only be understood in relation to the practice or *activity* of judgement.

Kant takes Hume's arguments as conclusive against any attempt to ground rationally the relation between a representation and its object in judgement. Kant's conception of the problem of justification is thoroughly Humean, and his proposed resolution of the problem is equally so. Hume's challenge was based on the distinction between grasping a rule and employing that rule in a judgement. Whereas the former activity is guaranteed

³⁰ A132–3/B172. David Bell refers to this passage also in order to draw some comparisons between Kant's theory of judgement and those of Frege and Wittgenstein: D. Bell, 'The Art of Judgement', *Mind*, 96 (1987), pp. 221–44.

by the clear and distinct introspection of reason, the latter activity is another matter entirely.

Not only does Kant accept Hume's sceptical conclusions regarding the rational justification of judgement, he accepts the core element of Hume's recommendation for the resolution of the sceptical *impasse*. He accepts that it must be a *non-rational* faculty of thought that serves as the ground of our activity of judgement. As he takes pains to note in the first *Critique* (A120, fn. a), 'Psychologists have hitherto failed to realize that imagination is a necessary ingredient in perception itself'. It is the *imagination* that serves as the ground of the relation between a representation and its object, for Kant, and the activity of serving as this ground he entitles the transcendental synthesis of the imagination:

Synthesis in general, as we shall hereafter see, is the mere result of the power of imagination, a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious. To bring this synthesis to concepts is a function which belongs to the understanding, and it is through this function of the understanding that we first obtain knowledge properly so called (A78/B104).

The first notable feature is that the transcendental synthesis of the imagination is characterized in much the same way as Hume's magical faculty of the soul. (See also A141/B180–1, where Kant characterizes the employment of the imagination in regard to the schematism of the concepts of the understanding as 'an art so concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze'.) For Kant, however, knowledge *can* be justified, because although the ground of judgement is non-rational in nature, the activity of judgement must itself be made in conformity with the logical forms of thought, logical forms which are themselves clearly and distinctly apprehended.³¹ Thus Kant thought that although Hume was right to conclude that reason cannot serve as the ground of our judgement, he was wrong to conclude that on account of this, objective knowledge was impossible.

One might wonder why, if Kant subscribed to this account of rational introspection and imagination as the non-rational ground of judgement in the way I have outlined above, he thought he had any further requirement of a transcendental strategy. Could he not have argued directly for his conclusions on the basis of just these two claims? I argue that he could not,

³¹ See also the second edition version of the Transcendental Deduction, where Kant continues to contrast the rational element provided by the understanding with the non-rational synthesis provided by the imagination (e.g., B130–1).

precisely because Hume's sceptical attack focuses on the primacy of the *activity* of judgement. The sceptical ramifications of Hume's attack engage here because of his emphasis on the practice of judging – as I have already pointed out, his anti-rationalism does not extend to the faculty of reason itself but instead to its reliable employment in judgement. In order to respond to this aspect of Hume's scepticism, Kant's procedure had to be directed in just the same manner, that is, to showing that the *a priori* concepts of the understanding could be justified by reference to the activity of judgement itself. Kant's method of achieving this was to argue that the *a priori* concepts of the understanding provide the *necessary conditions* of judging in general.

Kant's transcendental strategy consists of all three of the separate elements discussed. Without the ability of rational introspection, for instance, he would lack the guarantee that the necessary conditions of judgement held universally for all possible objects, since the universality of the Categories is upheld on the basis of the clearly and distinctly introspected universality of the logical forms of thought. Without the universality having been secured at the level of general logic, no claim to universality for transcendental logic would be possible.

Secondly, the requirement of imagination as the non-rational ground of judgement in general is a vital element of Kant's account of the possibility of knowledge. While Hume had demonstrated the limitations of the faculty of reason in explanation of our ability to account for the production of beliefs and judgements about the world, he concluded that the source of these beliefs must therefore be non-rational. Kant takes over this analysis as the vital account of the source of the production of judgement in general.

Finally, Kant's actual transcendental arguments are equally essential. Hume's scepticism is directed at the fallibility of the activity of judgement rather than the fallibility of our rational faculty itself. Kant's transcendental strategy is designed to form a response at exactly this point, and claims that the categories are the necessary conditions of any activity of judgement.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the section of the *Treatise* which Kant had read in translation Hume laments (pp. 263–4) that he is

like a man, who having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escap'd shipwreck in passing a small frith, has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel, and even carries his ambition so far as to think of compassing the globe under these disadvantageous circumstances.

Kant echoes the passage in the *Prolegomena*, chastising Hume for settling on sceptical conclusions at the end of his enquiries. He says that the ‘science’ of metaphysics was suggested by Hume’s own sceptical arguments:

Yet even he did not suspect such a formal science but ran his ship ashore, for safety’s sake, landing on scepticism, there to let it lie and rot; whereas my object is to give it a pilot, who, by means of safe astronomical principles drawn from a knowledge of the globe, and provided with a complete chart and compass, may steer the ship safely, whither he listeth.³²

Kant’s transcendental strategy was based upon his attempt to recover a substantial notion of knowledge, given the conditions set by Hume: scepticism with regard to reason which does not extend to rational introspection but does extend to the activity of judgement, and an account whereby the possibility of judgement about nature is given by a non-rational faculty of thought, namely, the imagination.

However, it is clear that once this sceptical criterion is reinterpreted, the nature of Kant’s transcendental arguments also requires reinterpretation. The focus is not upon securing some kind of ‘contact with reality’ as a response to Cartesian external-world scepticism. The goal is to secure the application of reason in general, thereby rescuing the notion of rational warrant in the face of Hume’s argument against its very possibility.

This in turn reflects upon our understanding of the remaining two criteria. The objectivity criterion is elucidated in terms solely of the employment of clearly and distinctly apprehended rational concepts, whose application to reality, if secured, would immediately provide a criterion of objectivity. Similarly, the formal criterion can be understood as the process of illuminating in the minor premise the rational concept whose application is presupposed not as the ground of judgement, but rather as a necessary condition of the non-rational ground of judgements such as the one made in the major premise.

Contemporary transcendental arguments appear to remain vulnerable to the sceptic just because they fail to engage the sceptic who was their original target. Although the interpretation I have presented offers a distinct perspective with which to approach the Kantian project, the conclusions for transcendental arguments appear to remain negative. If anything, further doubts arise regarding transcendental arguments, for ‘modest’ transcendental arguments frequently assume initial premises of justified belief. Yet this entitlement to rationally justified belief is given on the supposition that the legitimate starting-point of our enquiries is broadly

³² In ‘Kant’s Conception of “Hume’s Problem”’, Manfred Kuehn points out this connection, though he acknowledges that it was Karl Groos who first made the link (p. 175, n. 42).

Cartesian, in that we are granted access to certain justified beliefs, and the task is conceived as the conversion of those rationally justified beliefs into knowledge of an external world. On this account, however, the starting-point is broadly Humean – it is the very possibility of the rational justification of any belief which is being questioned in the first place.

It remains the case, therefore, that contemporary transcendental arguments should generally be construed as enthymemes. Transcendental arguments only function upon the basis that a certain sceptical threat has already been disarmed and certain epistemological commitments have already been incurred. We are still faced with Stroud's dilemma, although now in a harsher form: either concede that transcendental arguments are ineffective in their attempts to achieve gains of even a modest variety against the sceptic (in which case their employment is rendered pointless), or else attempt to refute the sceptic independently with regard to rational justification (in which case the employment of transcendental arguments is rendered redundant).

Transcendental arguments have in general proved singularly inadequate to the task of justification in epistemology. If there is a single characteristic that summarizes this failure, it is that they consistently appear to offer the opportunity for a further sceptical response. This characteristic stems from misidentifying the sceptical opponent whom Kant's transcendental arguments were originally concerned with tackling. For Kant, transcendental arguments functioned to *resolve* the challenge of scepticism with regard to rational justification – contemporary employment of transcendental arguments must at least address that challenge.³³

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