Rorty and Transcendental Arguments

But is it adequate to answer to the scepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that “There are physical objects” is nonsense? For them after all it is not nonsense.

Wittgenstein, On Certainty

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, a transcendental argument seeks to establish as necessary for some X being the case that some Y is the case, where X is self-evident or otherwise uncontentious and Y a claim likely to contribute to our stock of non-empirical knowledge. Since the Ys in question can be doubted or are at least worthy of the effort, transcendental arguments are generally construed as anti-sceptical; and since the doubt is often levelled against a (metaphysically) richer conception of reality than the sceptic thinks is justified they can be characterized as anti-reductionist\(^1\). This association goes back to their origins insofar as their earliest systematic use is attributed to the first Critique, where versions of what we have come to call transcendental arguments are used to legitimate an account of the necessary structure of experience against what Kant took to be the reductive, anti-metaphysical implications of Humean phenomenalism. Accordingly, the sceptic who accepts some X (like ‘I speak meaningfully’ or ‘I have experience’) can be compelled rationally to accept some Y it is their calling to deny or doubt is known (like ‘there are physical objects’ or ‘there are minds other than my own’) because it can be demonstrated to them that X only if Y, or no X unless Y, or Y must be the case if X is to be possible. If successful, one might hope to demonstrate that, for example, we simply couldn’t have experience unless (we know) there are physical objects; or perhaps even that we couldn’t have the experiences we are having right now if our beliefs about the (presumed) objects of perception weren’t true.

In Rorty’s work—especially that leading up to and culminating in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature—transcendental arguments understood in this way—as ‘realist’ arguments—are regarded as the ‘last best hope’ of those who think “there is such a thing as philosophical criticism of the rest of culture” (1979:
By promising to delineate the necessary structure of mind and/or world they purport to justify a conception of philosophy “as an autonomous critical discipline” that, through its privileged access to non-empirical truths, “can say something which science cannot about the claims to objectivity and rationality to which various parts of culture are entitled” (op. cit.). Underpinning this ‘transcendental standpoint’ is the conception of the mind Rorty attempts to deconstruct in his major work: as a realm yielding up to the tutored inner gaze the privileged representations that are “automatically and intrinsically accurate” (1980: 170) and which consequently serve to legitimate—in the sense of answer Kant’s *quaestio juris*—our cognitive endeavours. For Rorty, the very authority of philosophy as a “non-empirical criticism of culture” presupposes the ‘realist’ conception of transcendental arguments, and abandoning it signifies “abandoning philosophy” *in this sense* (1979: 78).

The notion that some edifying successor to ‘transcendental’ philosophy might arise from its ashes was discarded in the 1980s. However, Rorty’s rejection of the ‘realist’ interpretation of the associated arguments proceeded initially through the promulgation of an alternative. The ‘conceptual dependence’ or ‘parasitism’ view of transcendental arguments is articulated in papers published in the 1970s and takes Strawson work (1959; 1966) as its starting point. Such ‘redescription’ became part of a general strategy of offering up pragmatic explications of concepts like reference and truth to help liberate ‘us’ from the concept of mind that makes the ‘realist’ construal possible; and from that perspective alone Rorty’s treatment of transcendental arguments illuminates the emerging metaphilosophy of neo-pragmatism. But the significance of the topic extends beyond this. In his most comprehensive piece on the topic Rorty contends that Davidson’s argument against the “dualism of scheme and world” (Davidson 1984, p. 198) amounts to “a transcendental argument to end all transcendental arguments” (Rorty 1979, p. 78). Since (on this view) it undermines the basis from which the felt need for the question of the legitimacy of thought arises, it constitutes an argument against the (very) possibility of understanding the task of philosophy on the ‘realist’ model. But this in turn introduces the prospect of a view of philosophy which, whilst recognizing the illusory nature of the traditional image, rejects
nevertheless the path of the philosophical renunciant. This is relevant to the developing outlook of those contemporary pragmatists who, taking their lead from Peirce, are more favourably disposed towards Kant’s legacy; but it includes others who, although more circumspect in their affiliations, oppose likewise Rorty’s radical revision of concepts like truth and objectivity. Since among these it is John McDowell who has most clearly identified his philosophical method with a non-realist conception of transcendental arguments we’ll examine in section 5 his suggestion that Rorty fails to keep faith with his own metaphilosophical insights and that a more consistent pragmatism needn’t pack up the legitimacy game. But first let’s look in more detail at Rorty’s revisionary account of transcendental arguments and at one well-known objection to it.

2. Verificationism and Transcendental Arguments

According to Rorty, the following conditions are sufficient for designating an argument ‘realist’:

1. A distinction is made between scheme (concept, thought, language) and content (intuition, objects of thought, ‘given’, world).

2. The internal coherence of the scheme is deemed insufficient for knowledge: further legitimation is needed which can be viewed as neither ‘empirical’ nor ‘verificationist’.

In addition to these, a realist transcendental argument requires that:

3. The legitimating knowledge that the scheme will correspond to the content is made possible by the fact that the former is better known to us than the latter, and creates it.

To understand how Rorty’s ‘redescription’ of transcendental arguments works against the realist interpretation—and in particular against the notion that philosophy can provide an answer to the quaestio juris (3)—it’s helpful to turn to a little recent history. In Anglophone philosophy, the development of the anti-sceptical and anti-reductionist potential of transcendental arguments is usually ascribed to the work of Strawson (1959; 1966), and other philosophers influenced by the later
Wittgenstein. Part I of *Individuals*, for example, aims to demonstrate that a necessary condition of the Xs required to make sense of sceptical doubt is that “in our conceptual scheme as it is... material bodies and persons... are the basic or fundamental particulars” (Strawson 1959, p. 11). Consequently, the sceptic “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... because they amount to a rejection of the whole conceptual scheme within which alone such doubts make sense” (ibid.: 35). Despite their promise, however, the idea that transcendental arguments could reveal to us how the world must be is subject to what many regard as devastating criticism by Barry Stroud. Stroud (1968) discusses two transcendental arguments from Strawson (1959), which he takes to be attempts to refute the (reductively minded) sceptic. The first of these (Cf. Strawson ibid.: ch. 1), Stroud takes to be an attempt to demonstrate that it is a necessary condition of

\[(P)\quad \text{We think of the world as containing objective particulars}\]

that one of the following hold. Either,

\[(C4)\quad \text{We believe objects continue to exist unperceived,}\]

or,

\[(C5)\quad \text{We know objects continue to exist unperceived.}\]

\[(P)\] is taken to be the premise that the sceptic accepts, and either \[(C4)\] or \[(C5)\] the necessary condition of \[(P)\] ‘making sense’ which the sceptic doubts or denies. If a transcendental argument against the sceptic is being effected, two conditions must be satisfied:

I. \[(C5)\] is a necessary condition of \[(P)\], and

II. The sceptic rejects \[(C5)\].
If only (C4) is a necessary condition of (P), then as Hamlet would say the sceptic’s withers are unwrung for she need deny neither that we do, nor even must, possess such a belief, but only that the possession of the belief is consistent with its falsity.

Strawson’s argument as Stroud reconstructs it can be formulated thus:

(P) We think of the world as containing objective particulars

only if

(C1) We can reidentify particulars

only if

(C2) We have satisfiable criteria for making re-identifications.

As Stroud notes, the argument stops here. What has been demonstrated is that (C2) must be true if (P) is true; but the truth of (C2) is consistent with the falsity of our reidentification statements even if the latter are asserted on the grounds of the best criteria we have. The only way to avoid this sceptical conclusion is if we add the following:

(P2) If we know that the best criteria have been satisfied then we know that objects continue to exist unperceived.

For Stroud, this is either what Strawson means by ‘satisfiable criteria’ or “a suppressed premise” of the argument (p. 246). Made explicit, the overall argument amounts to a statement of what Stroud calls the “the verification principle” (p. 247):

(V) If we think of the world as containing objective particulars, it must be possible for us to know whether objects continue to exist unperceived.

This does not establish that (C5) is true, but it does if we add:
(P3) We sometimes know that the best criteria we have are satisfied.

Stroud’s conclusion is that since (C5) is not a necessary condition of (P), that cannot be what the sceptic is denying when it is said that his denial involves a (‘quiet’) rejection of one of the conditions of possibility of its making sense:

On his grounds, to deny this would be just as unjustified as our asserting it—he argues only that our belief that objects continue to exist unperceived can never be justified. (p. 247)

Accordingly, (P3) is unnecessary to refute the sceptic since the verification principle alone suffices to demonstrate that a condition of possibility of the sceptic’s doubt making sense is its falsity. If, however, we ‘subtract’ the verificationism then the sceptic’s doubt makes sense from her—philosophical—perspective and we are left with the claim that all transcendental arguments achieve is (C4), which qua ordinary, vulgar belief the sceptic need never deny in the first place.

As Stroud notes—and Strawson (1985, pp. 9—10) later concedes—it’s disquieting to contemplate that how we are obliged to think about the world might constrain the way it is—that the ordo essendi is somehow fixed by the ordo cognoscendi. But this oddness arises in part because of the categorical distinction between mind and world. To state it in the terms of Rorty’s analysis, Stroud demonstrates that although the ‘realist’ framework suggested by (1) and (2) makes pressing the question of the legitimacy of our beliefs, any attempt to satisfy (3) will fall foul of the impossibility of identifying the requisite world-independent evidence—of distinguishing in thought between a putative psychological necessity like (C4) and a way the world must be (captured in C5). Stroud can maintain that Strawson’s argument needs to be extended beyond (C2) because (1) and (2) combine to make satisfaction of our best criteria (the ‘internal coherence’ of the scheme) irrelevant to truth. In the context of the realist framework, the only way to fix that mismatch is through a verificationism that ensures mind (or at least language) cleaves to the world—a verificationism which, constituting a ‘straight’ realist argument, renders the question of legitimation supernumerary.
In ‘Verificationism and Transcendental arguments’ (1971) Rorty remarks that Stroud’s paper shows something important; namely, that “no transcendental argument will be able to prove necessary existence… appearance is as good as reality for giving meaning to terms” (p. 5). This appears to concede that the sceptic is correct in insisting on the irrelevance to truth of the satisfiability of criteria and thus on the impotence of transcendental arguments. However, for Rorty the fact that they cannot disburden us of sceptically-induced ontological anxieties impugns only the realist conception of such arguments. In so doing a space opens for an alternative interpretation, according to which transcendental arguments reveal that the sceptic’s conception of the world is “parasitic on more conventional notions” (p. 4). A key assumption here is that a sceptic who (merely) draws attention to the fallibility of our knowledge claims is an unworthy opponent; unless, that is, she can motivate her doubts through an account of how things might be that differs from how they are understood ‘conventionally’11. So a transcendental argument against the Cartesian sceptic would aim to show that a language denoting purely subjective (private) states cannot be described because it is parasitic on a notion of language as a public practice (cf. 1970a, pp. 236—7). Since the sceptic fails to make good on her ‘revisionary’ suggestion, the difference between appearance and reality is dialectically irrelevant: we are left where we were to begin with.

A preliminary way to think about Rorty’s positive account of transcendental arguments, then, is to regard it as an attempt to show that arguments like Strawson’s can stop at (C2) by demonstrating that the possession of satisfiable criteria cannot be made irrelevant in the way that Stroud (on the sceptic’s behalf) implies. We can then see that the charge of verificationism made by Stroud is ill-conceived. One would assume that the verificationism in question is of the classical variety12 only if one assumed that the arguments in question were realist in nature. But since meaning and truth are not alienated from one another, transcendental arguments stand in no need of an ad hoc verificationist fix. Absent the appearance-reality distinction presupposed by the sceptic, the verificationism in question amounts to the view that “you couldn’t know about anything unless you could talk about quite a lot of different
things” (1971, p. 14), a “brand of verificationism [that] makes meaningfulness depend not upon a word-world connection, but upon connections between some bits of linguistic behaviour and others” (p. 9).

Although relatively little has been written about Rorty’s conception of transcendental arguments, Anthony Brueckner has been damning. Brueckner concedes (1983, pp. 14—15) that there is something potentially question-begging about Stroud’s assumption that it is always open to the sceptic to insist on the mind-dependent nature of the conditions for meaningfulness (C4). Despite acknowledging that Stroud “has made no strong case for the general charge that transcendental arguments collapse into verificationism” (ibid.)\(^{13}\), however, he contends that Rorty’s parasitism strategy “has no anti-skeptical force whatsoever” without the strong, classical form of verificationism and that the weaker version he promotes “adds nothing” to this strategy (p. 27). Now one might have thought that the acknowledgement of Stroud’s assumption would more favourably dispose Brueckner to Rorty’s attempt to dialectically deflate the relevance of the appearance-reality distinction, so his critique is revealing. Specifically, it draws attention to what scepticism is for Rorty, and what opposing it amounts to in relation to the desire to overcome ‘traditional’ (realist; epistemology-centred) philosophy. Before discussing Brueckner’s criticism, however, we need to say more about Rorty’s parasitism account, and about the account of conceptual connection that underpins it.

3. PARASITISM AND CONCEPTUAL DEPENDENCE

According to Rorty, all that transcendental arguments can show “is that if you have certain concepts you must have certain other concepts” (1970a, p. 231). Since the possession of a concept is, following Wittgenstein, to be equated with a piece of skilled linguistic behaviour, no attempt to elucidate the nature of the modality in question “can avoid reference to the way which people use words” (1973, p. 327). To determine that X only if Y is thus to resolve that anyone who exhibits competence in X-talk must exhibit the linguistic behaviour identified with possession of the concept Y. Against the backdrop of Quine’s attack on non-Humean accounts of ‘necessary’ or ‘essential’ connection, the dependency of X
on Y is therefore neither one of logical adequacy/criteriological nor correlational (signs or symptoms); rather, it comes down to establishing that someone “would have to be able to know about” Ys if they are to know about Xs (1973, p. 325). As Rorty acknowledges, establishing these sorts of conceptual dependencies can be a messy business. We might demonstrate that someone doesn’t know the meaning of democracy (doesn’t know what democracy is) if they don’t know what voting etc. is	extsuperscript{14}, but the sorts of dependencies that philosophers are traditionally concerned to establish require rather more work. More importantly, since they cannot invoke analytic connections (which if they existed would be trivial), these analyses are always going to be inconclusive judged according to a standard that demands certitude. For them to be other than inconclusive on this (revised) account would be for the analyst to be able to survey in advance all possible alternative ways of talking, which would be to “know in advance the range of the sceptic’s imagination” (1979: 82). Since conceivability is ill-defined, transcendental arguments cannot be general demonstrations to the effect that certain concepts are impossible to do without, but rather show that particular revisionary-sceptical alternatives are parasitic on the linguistic resources we do in fact use. They are ad hominem arguments “against a certain proposal by showing that the proposal tacitly presupposes what it purports to deny” (1979: 82)—‘reminders’ assembled by the philosopher for the ‘particular purpose’ of dealing with the reductionist-sceptic	extsuperscript{15}.

To see where the verificationism fits into this, let’s return to Brueckner. As noted, he makes two criticisms	extsuperscript{16}:

I. Rorty’s ‘conceptual connection’	extsuperscript{17} view of transcendental arguments has no anti-sceptical force unless supplemented by classical verificationism, and

II. Rorty’s supplementary (weak) verificationism adds nothing to the conceptual connection view.

The argument for (I) is straight-forwardly Stroudian. If—to take an obvious example—we point out to the Cartesian that a condition of possibility of her being able to engage in experience-talk—to know what experience is—is being able to talk about physical objects, we can rightly get her to concede that she must know what physical objects are. But knowing what physical objects are is not the same as
knowing that there are physical objects. Accordingly, all that Rorty’s conceptual dependence arguments show is that to be able to make judgements of the undisputed class (Xs. Say, about experiences) we must be able to make judgements involving the disputed class (Ys. Say, about physical objects). But none of this implies that the Y-j judgements are true—that there are any Ys. Of course, one could maintain that what it is to obey the appropriate norm for making judgements about Ys—to satisfy the best criteria—is to know that there are Ys; but that would be to adhere to the classical version of verificationism, which is alone sufficient to deal with the sceptic.

Turning to (II), recall the following:

(C1) We can reidentify particulars

only if

(C2) We have satisfiable criteria for making re-identifications.

(C1) is a specific example of the seeming right/being right distinction (we can get right or wrong the question of whether a thing is the same thing we’ve just seen), and (C2) an expression of the requisite norm. As with Stroud’s response to Strawson’s notion of ‘satisfiable criteria’ the normative practice can only do the heavy lifting against the sceptic if it legislates away the gap between meaning and world, and that amounts to classical verificationism. Anything weaker and the satisfaction of such criteria/practices is consistent with their truth-irrelevance. And as Rorty remarks, the brand of verificationism he favours is something weaker, along the lines that satisfiable criteria are to be understood in terms of there being a situation which the linguistically competent would call ‘someone having accepted a method of finding out whether some particular has been re-identified’ (cf. 1971, p. 9). The reason why Rorty in effect endorses Strawson stopping his argument at (C2), then, is because the satisfiable criteria are cashed out in terms of up-and-running linguistic practices—but not practices that need be infallible.
In criticizing this weaker form of verificationism, Brueckner recognizes (pp. 22—3) Rorty’s (1971, pp. 10—11) rejection of the classical variety. He therefore acknowledges that it cannot be intended to do any ontological work, and that its role in anti-sceptical argument “must be very different” (p. 23). Here’s Brueckner’s formalization of what he takes to be the principle underpinning Rorty’s weak verificationism:

\[(V)\] A term T is meaningful only if sentences in which it occurs bear non-trivial confirmation relations to other sentences (op. cit.)

As Brueckner rightly notes, this principle cannot warrant ontological or epistemological conclusions of the sort that would impress a sceptic. That we must count object-talk as confirmed by the sort of (fallible) linguistic practice we actually use to confirm it does not respond to the *quaestio juris* and *legitimate* that talk. It cannot show that there *must* be objects, since the aim of scepticism is to raise doubts about those practices of confirmation in the first place. If \((V)\) can’t play the role that classical verificationism played what role can it play? Brueckner’s conclusion is stark: Rorty’s verificationism plays “No role whatsoever” (p. 24) in dealing with the sceptic. Brueckner’s principle argument for this conclusion comes from Rorty himself, who maintains (1979) that the only good transcendental argument is a parasitism argument. Since a parasitism argument is just a particular demonstration of conceptual dependence, and \((V)\) does not fill the gap in such arguments, \((V)\) is otiose.

Brueckner is well aware that Rorty does not intend for \((V)\) to fill the gap in demonstrations of conceptual dependence (p. 25), but his conclusion is misleading nevertheless. To see why, consider that Rorty introduces his talk of verificationism \((V)\) in order to rebut Judith Jarvis Thomson’s (1964) criticism of Norman Malcolm’s (1954) reconstruction of the private language argument\(^{18}\). Recast in the form of a transcendental argument, we get:

(i) A sign ‘T’ is a word in a man’s language

\(\text{only if}\)
(ii) Its use is governed by a rule  
only if  

(iii) It is possible to misapply the rule  
only if  

(iv) It is possible to believe a thing ‘T’ and it not be  
only if  

(v) It is ‘logically possible’ (for someone else) to ‘find out’ that it is not a “T”  

For Thomson (v) is not a necessary condition of (iv) since it is compatible with the privacy of sensations. To get from (i) to the anti-sceptical conclusion (v) requires something like the following: (i) only if (v); and that is nothing other than classical verificationism. In response, Rorty (1971) suggests an amendment:  

(iv) It is possible to believe a thing ‘T’ and it not be  
only if either,  

(v₁) Sensations have private names (accept the being right/seeming right distinction but deny that there has to be a public criterion)  

or,  

(v₂) There is some way of confirming that it is a T that is accepted by him.  

According to Brueckner, (V₁) aims to be of use in demonstrating the impossibility of a private language because it says that ‘T’ will not refer to a sensation if the only evidence invoked for the sentence ‘T here now’ is ‘I believe that T here now’, which is not a genuine—non-trivial—confirmation relation. But (V₁) does not by itself rule-out the alternative to (v₂); namely, (v₁): “a pure-experience” language (Rorty
1971: 8, fn. 10) whereby those ‘other sentences’ to which ‘T’ bears non-trivial confirmation relations relate to other private objects. Since that elimination is an example of a parasitism argument it is just more conceptual dependence. \( (V_i) \), he concludes, simply “drops out of the picture” (p. 25, fn. 26).

Brueckner is right to conclude that, viewed from the perspective of one intent on an heroic refutation of scepticism, \( (V_r) \) does no work. But since that is not the appropriate perspective the choice of metaphor is inapt. It is rather the case that Rorty’s verificationism retreats into the background because it is built into his understanding of conceptual dependence. As he remarks (1971, p. 7), \( (V_r) \) is a corollary of the Wittgensteinian maxims about meaning being use and stage-setting being presupposed if naming is to make sense (cf. Wittgenstein 1953). We can only trace inferential/confirmary relations in the way conceptual dependence arguments require on the understanding that concept possession is a “skill at linguistic behavior—the ability to use a word” (1970a, p. 237). As he says elsewhere, anti-Cartesian arguments that turn on excavating relations of ‘conceptual dependence’ require some sort of pre-commitment to this variety of Wittgensteinian ‘verificationism’ if they are “to get off the ground” (1973, p. 326). \( (V_r) \) is no ad hoc supplement to conceptual dependence, then: it is intrinsic to it. The insistence on its acknowledgement should be regarded as an attempt to subvert Stroud’s and Thomson’s assumptions about the dialectical context in which arguments like Strawson’s should be viewed. The implication is that the lack they identify as requiring classical verificationism is just a projection of an aporia at the heart of realism. As he notes in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,

If you ask Dewey why he thinks Western culture has the slightest notion of what goodness is, or Davidson why he thinks that we ever talk about what really exists or say anything true about it, they are likely to ask you what makes you have doubts on the subject. If you reply that the burden is on them, and that they are forbidden to argue from the fact that we would never know it if the skeptic were right to the impossibility of his being right, Dewey and Davidson might both reply that they will not argue in that way. They need not invoke verificationist arguments; they need simply ask why they should worry about the skeptical alternative until they are given some concrete ground of doubt. To call this attempt to shift the burden back to the skeptic “verificationism,” or a confusion of the order of knowledge with the order of being, is like calling “verificationist” the man who says that he will not worry about whether the things he has called “red” are really red until some concrete alternative is provided.
This returns us to the heart of Brueckner’s criticism. The reason he gives for neglecting discussion of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in his essay is that Rorty “does not further develop his Kantian anti-skeptical strategy in that work” (pp. 23—24, fn. 24). Now it is clear that, amongst other things, Rorty 1980 offers an extended account of the Quinean, Sellarsian and Wittgensteinian bases of conceptual dependence arguments—of the role the socialization of norms can play in undermining the notion of privileged representations. But given that book’s contribution to “the anti-Cartesian and anti-Kantian revolution” (p. 7) it seems reasonable to ask to what extent Rorty’s anti-sceptical strategy is indeed Kantian.

To characterize Rorty’s failure as a specific sort of failure to refute Cartesian skepticism—one “in the Kantian tradition… he is following” (p. 21)—Brueckner quotes Rorty’s endorsement of Kant’s attempt to transcend foundational epistemological projects that seek “metaphysical principles which would ensure that the contents of our mind referred beyond themselves to physical objects… by showing that our very conception of what it was to be a mental content presupposed that there were physical objects” (1970a, pp. 243). He concludes: “Rorty here seems to commit himself to proving that one could not have the concept of a mental content unless there were physical objects” (op. cit.) and that this necessitates a commitment to verificationism. Given how self-evident this commitment purportedly is, it is surprising that Rorty doesn’t see it; and, indeed, that his rejection of verificationism is unequivocal. But what Brueckner fails to note is that Rorty precedes this section by drawing a parallel between Kant’s Copernican revolution and “the revolution in philosophical thought introduced by the later Wittgenstein” (1970a, p. 243). Kant’s contention that the situation the sceptic describes is unexperienceable—that it is an impossible experience—is, he notes, constrained by the requirement that possible experiences are due to the unification of intuitions by concepts. Even with the advent of the linguistic turn, the sceptic is given the wiggle room to invoke the possibility of a nonlinguistic experience. What is required is the ‘Wittgensteinian’ move to the effect that experiences are what are reported by certain assertions and the possibility of experience the possibility of certain assertions being
made. To combat the sceptic we need to show her that “we cannot imagine an assertion about anything being made by a person who was not capable of making assertions about physical objects” (op. cit.). This puts the dialectical relation with the sceptic in a different place. As Rorty concludes, once we get rid of the ‘mental eye’ view of epistemology then Strawson’s argument is sufficient against the sceptic. There’s no verificationist premise to get rid of the alternative to (C2)—the notion that our best criteria could be false—because the verificationism, *such as it is*, is built into the linguistic behaviourism. The point is to bring out the ‘mental eye’ assumptions, not formally refute the sceptic. Displacing the ‘mental eye’ view is what *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* becomes about.

4. THE ENDS OF TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS

In section 3 we noted two criticisms Brueckner makes of Rorty’s account of transcendental arguments. Concerning (II), Brueckner is right to conclude that Rorty’s verificationism adds nothing to the account of conceptual dependence; but that is because his such-as-it-is verificationism is built into that account. He is similarly right to observe that the conceptual dependence view of transcendental arguments has no anti-sceptical force against the sceptic who insists on the need for a *realist* response (I); but on that point Rorty never demurred. Principally, then, what Brueckner’s response highlights is that if one insists on seeing the sceptic’s challenge as naively motivated, one will determine that Rorty’s response is inadequate. If, however, one thinks of the sceptic as the avatar of a certain sort of realism, her attempts to motivate doubt will be regarded with deep suspicion, and the insistence that she makes manifest her ‘alternative’ account of reality deemed germane.

We get an insight into the nature of that ‘alternative’ account by reminding ourselves of why on Brueckner’s account, (Vr) fails. As he points out, although the methods of confirmation/inferential connections are embedded in the linguistic practices, there is nothing to assure us that they are sound, and so even if the sentences related to T inferentially (call them \{T\}) are known to be true we cannot infer that we have conclusive evidence for the existence of Ts. As he goes on to say, we cannot go beyond saying that “we could not fail to *count* T-sentences as being confirmed by some sentence or
another, e.g. the kind (or kinds) we actually use to confirm them. But this hardly amounts to justification of our practice with respect to T-sentences” (p. 23). Now, the obvious response to this is to ask, what would count as a justification of our practice if not this? Is there some other sort of justification that Brueckner has in mind? Well, quite possibly that enshrined in the following:

2. The internal coherence of the scheme is deemed insufficient for knowledge: further legitimation is needed which can be viewed as neither ‘empirical’ nor ‘verificationist’.

What Brueckner is drawing attention to is the claim we see in relation to Thompson and Stroud; namely, the idea that all our beliefs could be false despite our confidence that our best methods or criteria have been used or met. A transcendental argument against realism, then, is an argument to the effect that attempts to make sense of a notion of justification that would do the work of legitimation required is parasitic on what can be gleaned from the methods of confirmation/inferential relations that we use in practice. And what that means in effect is demonstrating that any attempt to make sense of a gap between truth and internal coherence cannot be made good on because our grasp of the concept of truth forbids us to hold apart truth and justification in the required way.

This is of course Davidson’s argument to the effect that most of our beliefs must be true. According to Rorty it is a transcendental argument to end all realist—and therefore all realist transcendental arguments—because it “functions as a recipe” (Rorty 1979: 100—101) for constructing particular parasitic arguments against attempts to go beyond the intuitions embodied in Tarski’s convention T. Since, for Rorty, this is “the everyday, philosophically innocuous, sense of truth” (p. 98), what Davidson gives us is not a direct argument for Tarski, but a recipe for dealing with any attempt to say more about truth by attempting to cash out the various metaphors that might be used to make sense of the scheme–content distinction. Without some sense being given to such uses of terms like ‘represent’ and ‘correspond to’, no explanatory use can be found for ‘true’ that would give content to the project of legitimation, of thoughts being true because they represent or correspond to reality. And without this
no sense can be given to the notion that philosophy has a task to perform that requires a standpoint on our beliefs in general to go beyond coherence to legitimate our thinking about the world.

Now, it’s important to note two things here. Firstly, this is an argument that suggests that the realist conception of transcendental arguments is itself parasitic on the parasitism account. Although particular transcendental arguments can only target specific proposals for making sense of the scheme-content distinction, the implication is that the work of establishing conceptual connections with its such-as-it-is verificationism is the best description of where we are. And as Rorty acknowledges (ibid., p. 77), once we recognise the extent to which transcendental arguments work in this practically-orientated way, there’s no pressing reason to see them as essentially anti-reductive or anti-sceptical. Moreover, in carrying out the business of doing transcendental philosophy in this way we operate with the ‘everyday, philosophically innocuous, sense of truth’. And that leads to a second point: Rorty does not at this stage associate the end of projects of legitimacy with the end of philosophy. Combined, then, the implication is that philosophy does have a method—one intimately related to our pre-philosophical intuitions about truth and carrying within it the resources for undermining attempts to contrive an outside view on our practices.

5. BEYOND IM/MODESTY?

In his preface, McDowell observes that he made the “first sketches” of what would become Mind and World “in an attempt to get under control” his “usual excited reaction to a reading [of]… Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” (1994: ix). Although not an affiliated pragmatist, McDowell takes the opportunity of a lengthy Afterword (Part I) on Davidson to describe Rorty’s pragmatism as “half-baked, according to standards set by his own account of what pragmatism is” (p. 155). That account is the one Rorty offers in a discussion of the relevance of Davidson’s work: “a movement which has specialized in debunking dualisms and in dissolving traditional problems created by those dualisms” (1991a: 126). Rorty’s pragmatism is half-baked, then, because his approach is rather to dismiss than to dissolve traditional problems; and for McDowell this is because he has in turn failed to debunk—or, perhaps,
even to register—the dualism that purportedly controls his thinking: of reason and nature, of an inside view and an outside view, of norms and (causal) descriptions. To be a fully-baked pragmatist on this account one must bring the inside and outside views together and thereby give oneself the “right not to worry about” philosophy’s problems (p. 155, fn. 30). And as that suggestion of legitimacy hints, a fully self-conscious version of such a pragmatism might involve borrowing from Kant, a thinker “whom Rorty finds utterly suspect” (p. 155).

McDowell’s elaborates his version of pragmatism through an appropriation of Davidson’s attack on the dualism of scheme and world that rivals Rorty’s own. The thought, in brief, is that if one rejects the idea that meaning is aligned with the scheme idea in an account that sets the endogenous dualistically against the exogenous, one can redeem the idea that “our mindedness… has a necessary structure” (p. 158). The question this raises is what we are to think about the status of those demonstrations that “any intelligible conceptual scheme has a necessary structure” (ibid.)? In Mind and World McDowell is tentative: if they are seen as reassurances that our thought “is on the right track” then they are aiming to solve rather than dissolve traditional philosophical problems. To bring about the latter, unsurprisingly enough, we have to do what the later Wittgenstein does; namely, “to discover the limits of what makes sense… [by] working out towards them and noting the extent to which one loses one’s grip” (p. 159).

The demonstrations McDowell has in mind here take the form of transcendental arguments. As we’ve seen, the conception of these according to which we aim to solve problems is the realist interpretation: delineating necessary structures of thought reassures us about thought’s bearing on the world because such structures are constitutive of the world. However, deprived of the transcendental idealism that makes possible such a conception, these immodest aspirations became subject to Stroud’s charge of verificationism. For Stroud this does not however mean that such arguments serve no purpose. Developing Strawson’s suggestion that they can still help us investigate “the connections between the major structural elements of our conceptual scheme” (1985: 22), he concludes that a modest form of transcendental argument might establish such connections if it is acknowledged that they are “now only
within our thought” (2000: 164). It’s an open question whether Stroud’s modesty is the same as Strawson’s. Where Stroud’s is set against the idea that one retreats to the modest position when one comes to acknowledge the failure to find and cross “a bridge of necessity” (p. 159) between mind and world, Strawson suggests that since the doubts that imply the need for such a bridge are idle we should just ignore them. What is clearer is that McDowell’s desiderata for transcendental arguments cannot sit easily alongside either conception of modesty. On the one hand, Strawson’s treatment of the sceptic appears to align him with Rorty’s half-baked pragmatism; on the other, Stroud’s conception makes sense only if one accepts the very dualism that Davidson is supposed to have helped us overcome. Of course, the rejection of that dualism is itself a matter for argument, so whatever McDowell’s conception of transcendental arguments is it can’t be one that presupposes the success of that argument²¹.

McDowell 2008 provides the clearest account of his understanding of transcendental arguments. Since this is by implication the way in which they should be understand from the perspective of a fully-baked pragmatism, this promises to give us an insight into where Rorty’s treatment, emblematic of his metaphilosophical stance (relating to legitimacy) goes awry. Accordingly, we have the following options:

**Stroudian Immodesty**

A transcendental argument aims to establish the large-scale features the world must have if it is to be possible for thought/experience to be as they are.

**Stroudian Modesty**

A transcendental argument aims to establish the large-scale features we must conceive the world as having if it is to be possible for thought/experience to be as they are.

**McDowellian Post-Modesty**
A transcendental argument aims to establish “how we must conceive the epistemic positions that are within our reach, if it is to be possible that our experience is as it is in having objective purport” (p. 387).

The attempt to conceive of the epistemic positions that are within our reach is a restatement of the specifically Wittgensteinian exhortation about discovering the limits of what makes sense. In discovering what does and doesn’t make sense—what we can and can’t conceive as being within our reach—we dissolve the problem about (the possibility of) objective purport, which in turn “frees us to pursue our ordinary ways of finding out how things are in the world” (op. cit.). And since we are in this sense ‘freed’ from some burdensome consideration, the Post-Modest transcendental argument of the fully-baked pragmatist serves to legitimate our ordinary ways of finding out (of verifying) in a way that the Modest account doesn’t. With that in mind, let’s turn to the details of McDowell’s transcendental demonstration.

McDowell contends that it is enough to “undermine… scepticism about perceptually acquired knowledge of the external world” (pp. 378, 382) that one formulates a transcendental argument that

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starts from the fact that perceptual experience at least purports to be of objective reality, and yields the conclusion that we must be able to make sense of the idea of perceptual experience that is actually of objective reality (p. 382)
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This gives us:

A. Experience purports to be of objective reality,

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only if
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C. We can make sense of the idea that there are experiences in which objective facts are made directly available in perception.

One response to this is that it goes too far: we can identify as a necessary condition for (A) something that falls short of (C):
B. There is a distinction between the experience of seeing that something is the case and the experience of seeming to see that something is the case.

If one is in the epistemic situation one takes oneself to be in (A) then one regards oneself as seeing that certain things are the case. Granted, to make sense of the idea that one can see things are a certain way one needs to make sense of the idea that one might be wrong or misled—a distinction is required between being right and merely seeming to be right. Indeed, that is part of what it is to be fallible. But this distinction is one the sceptic requires: one is right when one is awake and merely seems to be right when one is asleep or a brain-in-a-vat. Accordingly, what blocks the inference to (C) is the thought that one does not know which of these epistemic situations one occupies (or has no evidence favouring one over the other). It is in this context that “scepticism expresses an inability to make sense of direct perceptual access to objective facts about the environment” (p. 378). To make sense of such access, then, requires eliminating the possibility that the sceptic’s way of understanding (B) is a genuine way to make sense of the distinction it exploits. To put this in familiar McDowellian terms, the transcendental argument is to the effect that the objective purport of perceptual experience necessitates that the disjunctive conception (DC) of experience is available to us. And since the sceptic’s attempt to make sense of the distinction required in (B) turns on the intelligibility of a highest common factor (HCF) conception of experience, the intention is to impugn it.

To this end McDowell aims to diagnose in part the lure of the HCF conception by showing that it arises from a misunderstanding—in Wittgensteinian mode, a \textit{philosophically-motivated} misunderstanding—of the nature of fallibility. The thought here is that the subjective indistinguishability of veracious and nonveracious experiences appears to \textit{explain} why people can be misled and (therefore) \textit{ground} the conception according to which perceptual experience \textit{as such} fails to provide a conclusive warrant for belief—that the veracious and nonveracious are epistemically on a par. But since the fact that people can be misled is—maintains McDowell—a mere restatement of the truism about fallibility there is nothing in the innocent acknowledgement of that fact that would lead us
to infer that we do not in ordinary circumstances know that things are the way we take them to be. The disjunctive conception blocks the inference from indistinguishability to the HCF conception of experience because it gives us a theoretically innocent way of construing fallibility.

As things stand this is not of course a ‘transcendental’ move; it does not show that the HCF conception fails to make sense of the distinction in (B). The argument here is rather brief, but it goes as follows: to block the natural move to (C) the sceptic interprets the distinction in (B) in such a way that although there is a formal distinction between being right and being wrong the concept of appearance exploited to make that distinction requires that “appearances as such are mere appearances, in the sense that any experience leaves it as an open possibility that things are not as they appear” (p. 380). Since on this account there is no epistemic difference between a seeming and a seeing, we cannot see ourselves as possessing legitimately (as making sense of) a concept of experience in which the world is made directly available to us (the one we think we possess). Correlatively, the disjunctive conception of experience enshrined in (C) is to the effect that there is a difference between those cases where one has a conclusive warrant for one’s perceptual beliefs (when one sees that something is the case) and those where one lacks that warrant (when it merely seems to one that something is the case).

But—so the argument goes—we can make sense of the concept of appearance and thus articulate (B) only if we can make sense of the idea that some appearances (qua appearances) can yield more in the way of warrant for belief than others. Accordingly, the HCF conception is parasitic on the DC: in rejecting a condition of possibility of its own position making sense it undermines “its own entitlement to the very idea of appearances” (p. 381).

6. CONCLUSION

What can we conclude from this? The first point to note is that McDowell’s transcendental argument appears to be an example of Rorty’s parasitism account: it is a specific argument levelled against a particular reductive-sceptical target; namely, anyone who subscribes to the HCF conception. It is
however worth noting that while in the background to Rorty’s conception stands the such-as-it-is verificationism associated with Wittgenstein, McDowell wants to see an explanation of objective purport in terms of experiences exemplifying “forms that belong to the understanding” (p. 388). On that score at least McDowell’s putative pragmatism seems more than a little half-baked itself. But this leads to a second point. The primary reason McDowell sees for regarding Rorty has having failed to bring to a successful conclusion the debunking work of pragmatism is the latter’s insistence that “the question whether a belief achieves disquotability is… descriptive as opposed to normative” (McDowell 1994: 150). This seems to be right, and if—as Rorty concedes—Convention T enshrines ‘the everyday, philosophically innocuous, sense of truth’ then he should have accepted it²⁴. Divining the spoils in this way, we get a better appreciation of what a more fully-baked pragmatism involves with respect to the use of transcendental argumentation and what stance it should take on the traditional problems of philosophy.

Bibliography


**Endnotes**

1. The anti-reductionism comports well with their use in ethical thought, which is revealing of the fact that they don’t aim to identify mind-independent facts; though not because there are such facts, which presupposes a metaphysical mind-world distinction, but because the irrelevance of that distinction is brought thereby to the fore. See for example Korsgaard 1996.


3. Rorty 1989 presents a vision of what a post-philosophical intellectual life might be like.


5. On reference see Rorty 1976. The clearest attempt to articulate a ‘use’ view of truth is Rorty 1986, which is a good example of another aspect of ‘redescription’; namely, the appropriation of someone else’s work (in this case Davidson’s).


7. The objection is due to Tony Brueckner. Tony was originally slated to write this piece but sadly died before he could do so. Although I met him only once I am a great admirer of his work and dedicate this essay to his memory.

8. Adapted from Rorty 1979, p. 79.

9. In Strawson 1985 ‘unreal’ becomes ‘idle’ and the theoretical burden on the anti-reductionist is lightened.

10. Stroud would reject the suggestion that he adheres to any such framework, maintaining that the question of legitimacy arises from an (at least) initially innocent reflection on our epistemic practices.

11. The ‘conventional’ here relates to social-linguistic practices. For Rorty, the norms that these practices exemplify are always potentially revisable and are not therefore to be identified with the ‘logic’ of our language (and therefore a transcendental argument as traditionally understood). See the original introduction to Rorty 1992.

12. Crudely, that to make sense of X-talk you must possess criteria the satisfaction of which logically implies the existence of Xs.
Going back to Rorty’s (1)—(3): in (2) verificationism is rejected as a move in a realist argument. Insisting on mind-dependency here suggests a need for (3), but that then (on Stroud’s analysis) collapses back into verificationism (denied by (2)).

But voting and whatever else one includes in one’s ‘analysis’ aren’t on this account ‘logically adequate criteria’ for democracy, and nor are they (just) correlated with democracy.

Wittgenstein 1953: §127

The first is specifically a criticism of Rorty’s reconstruction of Strawson’s objectivity argument in Rorty 1970, but Brueckner clearly maintains the more general position that no argument based on conceptual dependence could have any anti-sceptical value. See fn. 23.

Brueckner (1983, pp. 17, 21) calls this the conceptual presupposition view.

For Rorty, the classic way of alienating meaning from truth is to insist on the possibility of a private language. By insisting on the public nature of the satisfiable criteria, Rorty is rejecting that possibility. It is for this reason that he apt to “suspect[…] that there is really only one transcendental argument… a single anti-Cartesian argument” which boils down to the private-language argument (1971, p. 14).

On this account, Macarthur’s (2015) reading of Rorty is flawed.

See McDowell 2011: 120—21 for some thoughts on the irrelevance of the label.

Cf. McDowell’s concluding paragraph at 2008: 388.

For the claim that there’s difference here of crucial importance for responding to scepticism see Pritchard 2015.

In support of this point, note that Brueckner (1993, p. 192, fn. 3) rejects the anti-sceptical bona fides of a related argument in McDowell 1986 claiming it amounts to no more than Rorty’s conceptual connection.