

The Nature of Transcendental Arguments

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Abstract

The paper aims to cast light on the kind of proof involved in central transcendental arguments. It is suggested that some of the difficulty associated with such arguments may result from the tendency to construe them simply as articulating relations between concepts or propositional contents. A different construal, connected with phenomenological description, is outlined, as a way of bringing out the force of these arguments. It is suggested that it can be fruitful to think in terms of this construal in understanding some of Kant's transcendental proofs. The recommended construal also helps to understand the nature of the link between transcendental arguments and transcendental idealism.

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The concern in what follows is with what we should understand transcendental arguments to be. At issue is the *kind* of proof that is involved in central transcendental arguments. I do not mean to suggest that only one answer to the question should be possible, or that for any answer to count as adequate it should fit everything that might reasonably be identified as a transcendental argument. Transcendental arguments have been around for too long to expect anything quite so tidy. The aim is rather to identify an answer that fits core transcendental arguments: the sort of answer that might have constituted a neater fit had the notion of a transcendental argument not enjoyed such a long and unfocussed history since Kant.

1 The Conceptual Construal of Transcendental Arguments

There is common agreement, at least in general terms, about what transcendental arguments purport to do: they start from premisses that are so rudimentary and indisputable that the interlocutor, and specifically the sceptic, cannot fail to accept them, then by a series of valid moves they yield a conclusion that is precisely of the sort that the sceptic did

question. Thus the sceptic must concede that the sceptical possibility turns out to be incompatible with other commitments that the sceptic cannot but hold.

How transcendental arguments do this is less clear. A thumbnail sketch might tell us that they reveal presuppositional relations. Many of those who talk about presuppositions here also talk of necessary conditions. The question is, what is meant by ‘a necessary condition’, or ‘presupposition’, the use of which is so common in discussions of Kant’s transcendental progress in particular?

Frequently, these relations are thought to hold between concepts, or propositions. To some extent this construal may derive from some of Kant’s own formulations. Because of his transcendental idealism, he allows himself to use terms like ‘representation’ (*Vorstellung*) in two ways,¹ and insensitivity to this can make it seem that Kant is talking only of presuppositions between empirical representations; specifically, between an individual’s propositional contents. The tendency towards seeing transcendental arguments as concerned with relations between broadly linguistic representations was further encouraged in the not too distant past by the linguistic turn and – more specifically – by the predominance of conceptual schemes.² There are various problems with this. But for present purposes the significant drawback to concentration on conceptual schemes in approaching transcendental arguments is that it reinforces the view that transcendental arguments are concerned with *conceptual structures*, hived off from objects of experience, rather than with the *experienced objects* themselves (however conceptual that experience might be). There has thus been a fairly ubiquitous trend to construe transcendental arguments as involving relations of presupposition specifically of a conceptual nature.³

I hope to bring out that the retreat from experienced objects to concepts in fact results in missing the key to understanding transcendental arguments.⁴ Indeed, the idea is that once their nature is properly grasped, the modern practice of referring to them as transcendental *arguments* might be thought to be misleading.

2 The Problem

We ought to be clear about the tension between the two explanations – roughly, of *what* transcendental arguments do, and of *how* they do it – that emerges if the relation of presupposition or necessary condition in play is understood in terms of *logical entailment* or *deductive inference*. Such construals cannot capture the kind of genuine increase in knowledge claimed to be involved in transcendental arguments. Unless the sceptic is of no interest whatsoever, the conclusion of the transcendental argument is a substantial statement, one that says more than the premiss(es): the move from premisses to conclusion is, we might say, *synthetic*. But a deductive

inference from premisses to conclusion could not in itself be responsible for the addition of substantive content along the way. Making implicit logical entailment explicit may, to put it in Kant's terms, increase our explicative knowledge, but we are looking for expansive or ampliative knowledge.⁵ There must then be some point at which the process of simple deductive inference is disrupted, and a synthetic or ampliative move is made.

This ampliative step could be presented either as a move from one line of the argument to the next, or as a move of hypothetical form internal to a given line. We can take these as notational variants for one and the same move. For simplicity, I will stick to the latter form in what follows.

The tension arises when we ask how the truth of the proposition expressing the ampliative move is established. It would seem *prima facie* that it cannot be established empirically (a posteriori). The starting propositions of effective transcendental arguments are certainly contingent – for example, that I have different experiences, that I experience change, or that I am self-conscious. These are clearly contingent and empirically established, but they are so basic that they cannot be reasonably denied. The question is, what is the nature of the less obvious moves that come later, en route to the substantive conclusion? If a proposition expressive of such a move is to be genuinely informative or expansive in relation to the premisses, then its truth must be established in some way other than by logical entailment from preceding steps. But if it is merely an empirically verified statement, it is not clear how it would be immune from doubt. What transcendental arguments require of such propositions is that they be *genuinely informative*, and yet not be *contingent*.

The question is, then, what kind of truths comprise these central steps in a transcendental argument, given that they cannot be based either on meanings alone or on contingent observation. This question is just Kant's guiding question about how synthetic a priori judgements are possible. It is clear that whatever else they do, transcendental arguments are supposed to deliver just such knowledge.

3 The General Shape of Transcendental Arguments

This is the point that we have reached: it would seem that in every successful transcendental argument there must be at least one genuinely ampliative or synthetic step, which given its significance cannot simply be assumed (on pain of the argument being question-begging against the sceptic), and which – since it says more than any of the given premisses – cannot be established deductively in the course of the argument. Yet it must be established a priori if it is to be assured immunity to doubt.

Let one line expressive of such a step be the move from q to r in the following schema:

$$\begin{array}{l}
 p \\
 p \rightarrow q \\
 q \rightarrow r \\
 r \rightarrow s
 \end{array}$$

(Where p is a premiss the sceptic cannot fail to accept, and s is a proposition the sceptic typically doubts. For simplicity the schema depicts the transcendental argument as an extended *modus ponens* argument form, but obviously it need not take precisely that form.)

A brief look at some examples of transcendental arguments will reveal the kinds of moves that are in question. We can find such propositions as:

If experience of succession is to be possible, there must be something that is invariant.

If experience of change is to be possible, the empirical world must abide by causality.

If experience of items as distinct from me and from one another is to be possible, they must be located in a unified spatio-temporal world.

If self-awareness is to arise, I must recognize others as themselves persons who (can) recognize me.

...

The moves in question can be represented by material implication; and if those conditionals can be taken as true, the arguments in which they figure would be valid. But that leaves open the question of how they are established to be true. What kind of move could be involved here in each case, such as would render these crucial propositions *synthetic* and yet such that their truth can be established a priori?

The suggestion I want to explore accepts that, within the confines of the valid deductive argument, the propositions in question must be regarded as assumed. These propositions cannot be established to be true as long as they are considered simply as articulating conceptual relations or relations between propositional contents (although what is established can be

described at that level). Confinement to the grasp of the bare conceptual or propositional content will capture what is being said, but not the a priori ground for its being true. Securing the latter requires shifting from the conceptual level to something like the phenomenological level, the level of experience. Only so can the grounds for the truth of the transcendental claim be grasped. At that level we stand to secure an a priori grasp of the primary ampliative move, a move that the material implication at the propositional level merely shadows.

But saying only that the central move must be understood phenomenologically rather than conceptually will not further the discussion. It threatens to be a mere return to a posteriori grounding. We need to be clear what that descent from the merely conceptual level amounts to.⁶

4 Situated Thoughts

The ampliative step involved is often gestured towards by talk of identifying ‘conditions of possibility’: it can be said that in the above schema r is a condition of the possibility of q . But mere talk of conditions of possibility is too vague. It could be taken to mean no more than semantic conditions for the possibility of a given concept making sense, which would simply take us back towards the notion of conceptual presupposition. We get closer to a relevant notion, I think, in Allison’s talk of an *epistemic condition* – a condition for the possibility of knowledge, or of experience. However, Allison does not develop this notion in connection with a discussion of transcendental arguments, and does not say much about it: ‘Even though this notion is central to Kant’s whole transcendental enterprise, the fact that he never explicitly deals with it makes it difficult, if not impossible, to define in any precise way.’⁷ Allison says that an epistemic condition is one ‘that is necessary for the representation of an object or an objective state of affairs.’⁸ And it is supposed to be distinct from a *psychological* condition, and from an *ontological* condition.⁹ The idea is that there is a set of epistemic conditions of the possibility of human experience of things – the categories and the forms of space and time constitute this set – and these conditions determine the way in which any objectual experience we may have will be structured.

There is in fact a question about just how distinct epistemic conditions can be from psychological conditions. Relative paucity of detail aside, what Allison says in passing about epistemic conditions – e.g. that they are ‘conditions that determine what can count as an object for the human mind’¹⁰ – seems consistent with (although it does not entail) the view that they originate in a substantive body of cognitive structures essential to the human mind. Merely insisting on the non-contingency of this cognitive equipment would not help to distinguish epistemic from psychological conditions. And it may be better to insist only that for something to count as an epistemic condition it should be so construed as not to rest on any

specific cognitive apparatus to which alternatives are comprehensible. What we need then is to secure a handle on the notion of an epistemic condition that does not draw its legitimacy from any particular doctrine of cognitive or psychological structures.¹¹

To set out the relevant method of proof of the synthetic transitions in question, and to understand better the notion of an epistemic condition, it will help to introduce the notion of a *situated thought*. In saying of a thought that it is *situated*, I mean that it is construed as being the thought that one would have *from a particular point* within a framework, the content of which is informed by it being grasped as if from that perspective. It is not bare propositional content considered as if from nowhere, but is rather informed by being phenomenologically embedded and directed. In saying that what is so situated is a *thought*, I mean to distinguish it from mere phenomenological or perceptual experience. It is distinguished in two ways that are important here. The first is as follows. Any experience must be internally structured, or articulated, on pain of it not qualifying as an experience at all: without that articulation, sufficient to distinguish one type of experience from another, there would not be anything it is like for the experiencing subject to undergo it.¹² But saying that experience must be articulated is not the same as saying that it must be linguistically articulated, or indeed linguistically articulable by the subject in question; it is not even to say that that articulation is fully cognitive. Part of the point of talking of a *situated thought* is precisely to focus on that articulation, and to make it cognitively salient in a way that it might not be in a brute experience. Second, a *situated thought* differs from the corresponding experience in that the *situated thought* does not require that the subject actually be situated – only that he approximates in thought to what would be delivered up to him if he were so situated. We might put this by saying that the *situated thought* is phenomenologically informed without itself being a phenomenological experience.

In this respect the *situated thought* can be considered to fall between, on the one hand, the bare propositional content and, on the other, an experience the content of which is expressed by that propositional articulation. It falls short of actually being an *experience*; it is rather a matter of representing *in thought* a *situated construal* of a propositional content: considering what it would be like to be so situated as to have an experience of that content. Importantly, establishing the validity of a transcendental proof requires only that we have the *situated thought*, not that we actually have an experience that instantiates the *situated thought*.¹³ For transcendental proof it is enough that we make the move in thought from the purely propositional articulation to phenomenological description; there is no need for an actual descent to the level of *situated experience*.

Although this is a thin characterization of the notion of a *situated thought*, I hope that enough has been said for it to be possible to put the notion to work here. The idea is that while the bare propositional understanding of *q*

will leave us forced to regard the ampliative transition, say from q to r , as something that can only be premised in the course of the argument, the situated thought of the content expressed by q would suffice to licence a priori the ampliative move in question.

5 An Example of Situated Thought

It will help if we take an example of a situated thought. We can envisage a subject situated in front of a tree in the garden, and being perceptually related to it, sufficient to have the thought that there is a tree in the garden. The bare propositional content of the thought is: [There is a tree in the garden]. The situated thought involves appropriating in thought that subject's perspective onto the perceptual scene that corresponds to the bare propositional content: thinking ourselves into what is involved for the subject in his being positioned as he is in grasping the perceptual content. The situated thought in this case allows the envisaged subject not only to grasp that there is a tree in the garden, with all that that proposition implies (e.g. that there is at least one tree in the world, etc.), but also to know without any further observation that there is a tree *in front of me*, or that there is a tree *between me and the horizon*.

The question is, what licenses this move from *There is a tree in the garden* ($= q$) to *There is a tree in front of me* ($= r$)? It is clearly not a valid deductive inference from one proposition to another. Moreover, even if my knowledge of q is based on perception, and that perception is my own, and I know that it is, it still would not license me to infer from q to r . I might, for example, be in a laboratory vehicle, receiving pictures on a screen from a camera that I know is in the garden, but not know that the vehicle I am in has also moved into the garden, just below the operative camera. Now, what has been lost in this latter scenario is precisely the situatedness of the thought that q . If we restore that connection, so that the thought is grasped *from my point of view and informed by it*, then the mere having of the thought licenses the move to 'There is a tree in front of me'. The move from the one proposition to the other is synthetic: there is more in the thought that there is a tree in front of me than there is in the thought that there is a tree in the garden. Yet the move from the one to the other can be made a priori, in the sense that no further observational input is required. What validates the move is something other than a conceptual relation between propositions. It is not the content of the thought expressed by q , but what the situated thinker brings to the thinking of it, that stands to carry that thinker from the truth of the one thought to the truth of the other.¹⁴ (Here it is relevant that the situatedness of the thought *There is a tree in the garden* cannot be incorporated as part of the propositional content of the thought. I will return to this later.)

Now, this example seems trivial, and its simplicity helps to bring out what is meant by talk of a thought being situated.¹⁵ But the connection

between situated thought and transcendental proof is immediately brought out by this further example: Take the content expressed by 'MS does not exist now'. As a mere thought content, unsituated, it is not very interesting. It says merely that MS does not exist; and of course he may not. But as a situated thought by MS, the thought may be informed by the fact that the thinker himself is MS, that it is MS himself thinking it. So situated, the otherwise innocuous proposition constitutes the *cogito* proof. Indeed, the *cogito* seems to be a prime example of a proof that trades on situated thought. Of course, the *cogito* is more usually expressed in terms of the first-person pronoun, say in the form 'I do not exist.' But the situatedness of the thought is still in play: it is only to the thinker whose thought is informed by the fact that he himself, at the moment of thought, is also the subject of the thought, that the thought 'I do not exist' is presented as self-refuting in a way that comprises the *cogito* proof.¹⁶ The same goes for the more usual form of the *cogito*, 'I think, (therefore) I exist.' If it is construed merely as an argument from one proposition, the understanding of which is unsituated, to another, we miss, or are at a loss to explain, the force of the argument. What drives the proof, what licenses the 'therefore', is only the situated thought, the act of thinking the first proposition, which brings the thinker ineluctably to the conclusion, while he is so thinking, that he must exist.

A central feature of situated thought, noted above, should be underlined here. A thought that is not situated may be considered as pure propositional or conceptual content. The content may be considered as if from no point of view. In a situated thought, that is not the case. In situated thought the content of the thought is informed by the way the subject is epistemically positioned in relation to the facts that make the bare proposition true. This means that the content of a situated thought is not merely propositional. Thus in the examples above it is not the purely propositional content [There is a tree in the garden], but the cognition generated by the actual or envisaged experience of the tree in the garden, that is the situated thought; it is not the propositional content [I am thinking], but the cognition generated by the actual or envisaged experience of my thinking, that is the situated thought in question. This brings out the sense in which situated thought forces a shift from the purely propositional or semantic level to the level of pure phenomenological description.

Now the claim here is that the link between the *cogito* and situated thought is characteristic of transcendental proof: that central transcendental arguments typically trade on situated thoughts to make good their synthetic a priori claims. We have said that in most transcendental arguments there will be at least one central proposition that shadows a synthetic move – the idea is that the truth of that proposition can be established a priori as required only if it is understood to involve situated thought.