Metaphysics // Fall 2022

Handout 18

Transcendental arguments: Stroud

Remark 1. Enumeration (1)–(6) follows Stroud's numbers in 245–247.

Strawson's argument outlined. Let's see how we can schematize the argument for greater perspicuity. In broad terms, we infer a certain claim about material objects from a necessary claim about a possibility of our experience (or: possibility of our conceptual scheme). There is, of course, no question that ' necessary ' is not a logical or metaphysical necessity (despite Shoemaker repeatedly talking in terms of ' logical ' possibility and necessity). More plausibly—e.g., in page 246—it is best understood as conceptual necessity. So we might have this ($\Box P$ = ' Necessarily, P ', $\Diamond P$ = ' Possibly, P '):

(18-1)
- (i) P [ass.]
- (ii) $\Box(\Diamond P \to Q)$ [ass.]
- (iii) $\Diamond P \to Q$ [(ii), **T**]
- (iv) $\Diamond P$ [(i), **T**]
- (v) $\therefore Q$. [(iii), (iv), MP]

In words, the central premiss (ii) says that, as a matter of necessity, a necessary condition of the possibility of our experience P is Q (objects exist unperceived). However, there is a complication. Given the premisses, we can also derive in **S5**, at least, a much a stronger result:

(18-2)
- (i) P [ass.]
- (ii) $\Box(\Diamond P \to Q)$ [ass.]
- (iii) $\Box(P \to \Box Q)$ [(ii), **S5**]
- (iv) $P \to \Box Q$ [(iii), **T**]
- (v) $\therefore \Box Q$. [(i), (iv), MP]

We are able to prove not only that objects exist unperceived, but that they do so necessarily. Is this right? Well, what exactly are we supposed to prove? That objects exist unperceived as a matter of fact, or that they do so as a matter of a conceptual necessity, as being an intrinsic part of our conceptual scheme? It seems the latter. Indeed, Stroud quotes Pears approvingly that the conclusion of the argument is a necessary claim. And Strawson 252
himself in page 29 said as much. So our previous version (18-1) must be wrong.

Yet there is a further complication. If we have $\ulcorner \Diamond P \urcorner$ in the conditional premiss, we seem to be saying: '...our experience is conceptually possible... ' This is *not* what we are supposed to say. The premiss is about *having* the experience. Indeed, look at the formulations of the verification principle and the factual premiss (5) in 246–247. There ' possibly ' stands for the Diodorean modality ' at some time ': ' possible to know ' = ' sometimes we know '. Thus the possibility operator in the conditional premiss drops out: we say that, as a matter of a conceptual truth, Q is a necessary condition of *actually* having the experience P (at some time or other). Similarly, for Shoemaker's claim about the ' possibility of knowing anything about the world ': we 251
assume that we *do* know something about the world. Then the argument is formally trivial, but the conclusion is only factual:

(18-3)
- (i) P [ass.]
- (ii) $\Box(P \to Q)$ [ass.]
- (iii) $P \to Q$ [(ii), **T**]
- (iv) $\therefore Q$. [(i), (iii), MP]

The remedy is to look at (1). Stroud doesn't make it explicit that it is also a conceptual claim, not just a factual 245
one. Hence:

(18-4)
- (i) $\Box P$ [ass.]
- (ii) $\Box(P \to Q)$ [ass.]
- (iii) $\Box P \to \Box Q$ [(ii), **K**]
- (iv) $\therefore \Box Q$. [(i), (iii), MP]

So on either interpretation of ' possibly ' we can get a necessary claim in the conclusion. But it is the last version (18-4) that seems to me the most adequate representation of the transcendental argument that is plausible in its own right and relies on a very basic notion of necessity (**K** as opposed to **S5**).

Remark 2. Many presentations of the transcendental argument, even by eminent scholars (beginning with Stroud himself), are either too loose, or involve downright inaccurate derivations, like (18-3) above. Beware!

The weakness of Strawson's argument. Stroud's objection is this. We need the factual premiss (5) to make Strawson's argument sound. But this means that (6) *alone* is not a necessary condition of (1)—that is, (6) is not the proposition Q in (18-4). So the sceptic never meant to deny (6). He is not claiming that objects do *not* exist unperceived. He only claims that we never have good grounds for this assertion. 247

If Strawson's argument works, this can only be when it contains the verification principle: 247

(VP) If the notion of objective particulars is meaningful, then we sometimes know certain conditions to be fulfilled (whose fulfillment logically implies either that objects continue to exist unperceived or that they do not).

The sceptic, after all, purports to talk meaningfully about objective particulars. But his talk is possible (=intelligible) only when there are occasions on which conditions for the existence of those particulars are fulfilled.

So, to summarise Stroud's manoeuvre, instead of examining conditions of knowledge, we should examine and challenge conditions of meaningfulness of the sceptic's assertions. This is done with (VP). 251

Now comes the next step. We can, indeed, identify a class of statements that can't be truthfully asserted, either by one particular individual, or by a group, or even by any individual. Examples include: 253

(18-5) a. DeGaulle can't speak English. (by DeGaulle)
b. All Cretans are liars. (by Cretans)
c. There is no language. (by all)
d. I am not here. (by all)
e. The statement (18-5e) is false. (by all)

If we now look at the statements that can't be denied by any one, there is among them a privileged class Π of statements with the following curious feature: 253

(18-6) For every $S \in \Pi$, every speaker x: x asserts $S \Rightarrow S$ is true, x asserts $\sim S \Rightarrow S$ is true, x ' says anything at all ' $\Rightarrow S$ is true.

The formulation of (18-6) allows us to say that necessary truths belong in Π: their truth is entailed by anything you wish, by definition. Yet we may isolate at least one case where a member of Π is not necessary:

(18-7) There is language.

When I assert (18-5c), the fact of my assertion entails (18-7). So, then, even though the statement (18-7) is not necessary, it seems to be a member of Π.

The nature of Π. It is not clear, from Stroud's discussion, what the existence of Π is supposed to teach us. Indeed, it's not clear what the criteria of membership there are. One suggestion is that it is just the fact of logical entailment. Even if I say, ' Snow is white ', the truth of ' 2 + 2 = 4 ' is entailed in virtue of its logical properties (it being a necessary truth). But we must distinguish between saying: entailed by the statement ' Snow is white ' and entailed by the fact of its assertion. For necessary statements this doesn't matter: both entailments hold. It matters for the special case of ' There is language ':

(18-8) a. $[\![$Snow is white$]\!] \nRightarrow [\![$There is language$]\!]$.
b. $[\![$Jones asserts ' Snow is white '$]\!] \Rightarrow [\![$There is language$]\!]$.

Evidently we are interested in the second kind of entailment. But, I think, there is a difficulty here. The first kind of entailment delineates classes of semantic presupposition. In general, we ask what a given statement semantically entails. Thus, e.g., ' Snow is white ' semantically presupposes ' Snow is coloured. ' Evidently, we are interested in the second class of entailment. There we ask what an assertion (generally, utterance) of the given statement *pragmatically* presupposes. Yet there the question is no longer one of entailment. It is rather the question of what is required for a proper, intelligible assertion of the given proposition. For example:

(18-9) a. My dog is spoiled. (Presupposition: I have a dog)
b. The King of France is tall. (Presupposition: France is a monarchy)
c. Jones graduated in June. (Presupposition: Jones was a student sometime before June)

Importantly, it is not easy to locate a presupposition for a given statement that would have this role for absolutely *every* occasion. You may describe average or reasonable conditions under which one statement would presuppose the other. But one can't (easily) rule out some perverse, fantastic, yet intelligible occasions where this won't be so. Well, the class Π presumably contains the statements required for a proper assertion of every proposition, on every occasion (compare the remark ' says anything at all '). That's a tall order. Besides, not every necessary truth, at least, will be in Π. It's not even clear that logical truths, let alone mathematical or metaphysical truths, will be in Π. For example, the following are not nonsense, or at least not pragmatically trivial ones:

(18-10) a. Hilbert was a great man, but the law of excluded middle ($\ulcorner P \vee {\sim}P \urcorner$) is false.
b. As I understand Brouwer, the law of of excluded middle is false.
c. As I have shown you, the law of excluded middle is false.

To return to the Humean sceptic, consider:

($\mathfrak{S}$) There are material objects.

$\mathfrak{S}$ is not a necessary statement. But since (18-7) is in Π, this gives us the presumption that $\mathfrak{S}$ may be in Π, too. Now, the sceptic claims that $\mathfrak{S}$ can never be justified. Crucially, as we found out, he is not claiming that $\mathfrak{S}$ is *false*. So he may himself be compelled by nature to utter $\mathfrak{S}$ or something in the vicinity like 'My desk is a material object.' But if $\mathfrak{S}$ is in Π, then the very assertion of $\mathfrak{S}$, or indeed its denial, will entail the truth of $\mathfrak{S}$. 254

There are several issues to address here. (I) Generally, we must show that the sceptic's claim indeed belongs 255
in Π—that is, that we have correctly reconstructed the sceptical challenge. (To be filled in…) (II) On the assumption that the sceptic's claim is indeed in Π, what is the significance of it? If $\mathfrak{S}$ is a universal pragmatic presupposition, is this enough to rebut the sceptic? After all, we might not have moved an inch. The sceptic admits that we have no realistic way to deny $\mathfrak{S}$, but have no rational grounds to justify. We have shown, in a different way, that $\mathfrak{S}$ is irresistible, but haven't given any grounds to justify it either. (III) Stroud's own lesson is
this. By employing the verification principle, we linked meaning to assertibility, and assertibility to verification. 255
In effect, then, we have adopted the verification theory of meaning propounded by Wittgenstein and logical 256
positivists (and in a somewhat different form, as we saw, by Dummett's anti-realist). And this surely will be bad news for proponents of the transcendental argument who never meant to tie their argument to that particular theory of meaning.

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