Commentary
The Bounds of Sense *
Peter F. Strawson
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In the English-speaking philosophy of the second half of the 20th century, Peter F. Strawson’s Individuals and The Bounds of Sense mark a return to metaphysics following the attacks on it by the logical positivists. In so doing, Strawson’s two masterly books played a complex mediating role between analytical philosophy and Kantian criticism. In particular, the Strawsonian defences of the concepts of material body and person — often in association with the Wittgensteinian arguments against the possibility of a private language and for the necessary intersubjectivity of concept-application — were hailed by many analytical philosophers as new paradigms of a transcendental method of arguing against epistemological scepticism.

An insightful historical sketch of the reception of Strawson’s neo-Kantianism in analytical philosophy is in Rorty (1971). In an earlier phase of analytical philosophy, a standard reply to the sceptic envisaging the possibility that material objects or other persons merely are the content of her own consciousness (her own representations) had been the phenomenalistic, “if-you-can’t-beat-her-join-her” strategy consisting in saying that to have such-and-such representations just was to be seeing a material object or another person. But the meaning of that “was” turned out to be elusive. Furthermore, such an anti-sceptical strategy had an unpleasant air of idealism about it, though it was firmly claimed to have a “logical” as opposed to “metaphysical” nature. It’s no surprise, then, that «when, on the heels of Austin’s attack on “the ontology of the sensible manifold”, Strawson revived the distinctively Kantian anti-idealist thesis that “inner experience requires outer experience”, the shift in strategy was welcomed» (Rorty, 1971, p. 4). It seemed to be

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possible then to combine Kant’s Transcendental Deduction and Wittgenstein’s private language arguments into one single argument against the legitimacy of the sceptical challenge of justifying our belief in the external world basing on the private data of individual consciousness. Some philosophers (e.g., Harrison, 1974; Wilkerson, 1976; Stevenson, 1982) began to hope that this “analytic Kantianism”¹ would be successful where Kant had failed, namely in truly transcending classic empiricism, with all its obsession for the private contents of experience, and thus orienting analytical philosophy towards a metaphysics of experience, provable a priori by transcendental arguments.

In *The Bounds of Sense* Strawson develops his distinctly analytic interpretation, defence, and elaboration of Kant’s ideas (his “analytic Kantianism”) by trying to disentangle a genuine metaphysics of experience from the allegedly incoherent framework of transcendental psychology (the theory of synthesis)². More precisely, Strawson develops “austere” versions of six Kantian theses about objectivity, space, the unity of space and time, substance and causation (1966, p. 24). These theses can be seen as the core of the Kantian “descriptive” metaphysics, as opposed to the “revisionary” metaphysics of transcendental idealism. Thus Kant’s first Critique is reconstructed as an analysis of the concept of possible experience that hinges on the Transcendental Deduction (an analytical argument aimed to prove the “objectivity thesis”³). Such a reconstruction selectively includes themes from the Aesthetic, the Refutation of Idealism added in B, and the Analogies of experience.

In the course of years various objections have been raised against Strawson’s reconstructive project in *The Bounds of Sense*. In what follows the focus will be only on two criticisms: that the various Kantian transcendental arguments reconstructed by Strawson could only ever establish that we must

¹ The term was coined by Glock (2003).
² As Strawson himself puts it, *The Bounds of Sense* was a «somewhat a historical attempt to recruit Kant to the ranks of the analytical metaphysicians, while discarding those metaphysical elements that refused any such absorption» (Strawson, 2003).
³ The objectivity thesis – according to which «experience must include awareness of objects which are distinguishable from experiences of them in the sense that judgements about these objects are judgements about what is the case irrespective of the actual occurrence of particular subjective experiences of them» (Strawson, 1966, p. 24) – is a reconstruction of Kant’s assertion that the Transcendental Deduction aims to show how «subjektive Bedingungen des Denkens sollten objektive Gültigkeit haben» (A89/B122).
believe certain things to be the case, not that they are the case; and that Strawson wrongly dismisses transcendental idealism.

The definition of a transcendental argument (TA) is often drawn from a passage in *Individuals* (1959, p. 35) that can be paraphrased as follows: a TA is an attempt to show that the sceptic who doubts the existence of material objects and other minds is self-defeating since her doubts amount to the rejection of some of the necessary conditions of the conceptual framework within which alone such doubts make sense.

Confronting with arguments conforming to this format, some authors (Thomson, 1964; Stroud, 1968; Gram, 1974; Walker, 1978) made an objection that can be traced in Schulze’s *Aenesidemus*. The objection is that a TA can at most establish statements on what we must think or believe there is in the world, not statements on what there is. Let us suppose that Strawson succeeded in developing a TA in favor of our conception of the world as a spatiotemporal system of objects conceived as distinct from the temporal series of our experiences of them. He would prove, then, that the sceptic, as everyone else, must remain within that conceptual framework, i.e., must apply the categorial concepts of the framework, and believe the propositions in which such concepts are used; or else she would be forced to stop thinking and speaking in an intelligible way. In so doing, however, Strawson would not prove that it is true — not even that it is possible to know that it is true — that there are objects that can exist independently from the framework and have properties conforming to its categorial features. This means that the sceptic can concede the *subjective necessity* of the framework while still insisting that its *objective validity* cannot be established. But *this* — the objectivity thesis — is what a TA is supposed to prove if it must be faithful to its anti-sceptical aim. Consequently, the critics argue, Strawson (and any “transcendentalist”) will be obliged to introduce in his TA a Verification Principle — a principle to the effect that one cannot apply a concept, or have a belief, without the availability of epistemic procedures that permit one to establish if there are cases instantiating the concept, or to ascertain the belief’s truth-value; a principle that grounds the possibility of knowing that the reality (the *Ding an sich*) conforms to our categorial apparatus. But then, it could be that Oxford in the 1960s is not so far from «Vienna in the 1920s» (Stroud, 1968, p. 256).

The verificationist deadlock in which Strawson’s analytic Kantianism seems to be trapped can raise the suspicion that he has got things the wrong way
round in putting all his faith in the use of TAs and totally rejecting transcendental idealism. Let us see why.

To refute the sceptic Strawson must prove the objectivity thesis, according to which there cannot be something that conforms to the subjective conditions of experience without being at least in part experience of objects that exist independently of the cognizing subject. But — here is the point — the sceptic doubts within a metaphysical paradigm that Kant called “transcendental realism”, where what is real is supposed to be defined quite independently from our discursive cognitive structures (the pure categories) and our forms of sensible intuition (space and time). In other terms, the transcendental realist uses non-epistemic notions of object and truth: the object subsists in itself, out and independently of the cognitive relationship; truth is correspondence to the thing-in-itself, and thus implies that a sentence could be true even if it was not possible, not even in principle, to come to know that it is true. Within the paradigm of transcendental realism, then, the sceptic (the “empirical idealist” in Kant’s idiom) cannot be refuted by either transcendentalism or verificationism.

Thus, a refutation of scepticism can pass through the delegitimization of the non-epistemic notion of objectivity on which it rests. This is just what Kant tried to do with the doctrine of transcendental idealism. The Kantian object is not the transcendental realist’s object. It is an epistemic product of the use of the categories. The categorial framework which the Metaphysical Deduction has tried to establish as a necessary presupposition of all possible interpretations of experience is not a necessary subjective apparatus which is then applied to a domain of non-epistemic transcendent objects by virtue of some kind of ontological guarantee or pre-established harmony (Genova, 1984, p. 493). Kant himself warns against such a misunderstanding of his thought by defining his transcendental idealism as «ein System der Epigenesis

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4 In this formulation the reader will see the traces of how, in the early 1980s, Hilary Putnam revived the Kantian distinction between empirical realism and transcendental realism. In _Reason, Truth, and History_ (1981) he endorse the former (= _internal_ realism) and rejects the latter (= _metaphysical_ realism). According to Putnam, Kant was the first philosopher to assume an _internalist_ perspective, within which objectivity has an unbreakable bond with human cognitive activity. This perspective is not far from Michael Dummett’s antirealism. Whereas the metaphysical realist presupposes a God’s Eye point of view to survey the world as it really is, Kant (the transcendental idealist/empirical realist), Putnam (the internal realist), but also Dummett (the antirealist) hold that the only available point of view is that of a human being as a finite and natural entity. In this “secularization” of the philosopher’s point of view lies the gist of what Putnam calls “internalism”.
der reinen Vernunft» (B167). In this perspective, the object of knowledge is not something that is given irrespective of the human cognitive activity. What is given are only Vorstellungen, which must be submitted to the epistemological test as to whether or not they can be “referred to an object”, i.e., be connected with each other in certain ways, in accordance with the rules derived from the schematization of the categorial concepts of the framework. The object is here «an epigenetic product of the use of intelligence» (Genova, 1984, p. 493; see also Genova, 1974). And any other notion of object, including that of a Ding an sich, will be derived from the epistemic notion of object that is constituted by the categorial framework.

The moral is, then, that Strawson has actually got things the wrong way round in putting all his faith in the use of TAs and totally rejecting transcendental idealism. Kant’s TAs are underpinned by his transcendental idealism – otherwise they would fail. No analytic argument can defeat scepticism without first of all challenging its underlying non-epistemic notion of objectivity. One can definitely think that Kant’s transcendental idealism failed to offer a notion of objectivity that is able to supersede that of the sceptic/transcendental realist. But then, it will be necessary to devise a more plausible alternative to the non-epistemic objectivity, which Strawson does not do in The Bounds of Sense.

REFERENCES


5 For example, Stroud (1984, ch. 4) argues that Kant puts forward only a “transcendental” version of scepticism. From an empirical point of view, the world of phenomena is real and empirical idealism is false; from a transcendental point of view, the world of appearances is ideal and transcendental idealism is true.


