



## Verificationism and Transcendental Arguments

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FIRST SYMPOSIUM

*Verificationism and Transcendental  
Arguments*

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Many admirers of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and of Strawson's *Individuals* have taken the theme of both books to be an analysis of philosophical scepticism and their distinctive contribution to be a new way of criticizing the sceptic. This new way is summed up in a familiar passage from Strawson:

He [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, not simply because they are logically irresolvable doubts, but because they amount to the rejection of the whole conceptual scheme within which alone such doubts make sense.<sup>1</sup>

In an earlier period of analytic philosophy the standard reply to the sceptic had been of the phenomenalist Hume-Berkeley type. That is, the sceptic's suggestion that what were usually taken to be material objects or other persons might merely be the content of his own consciousness—his own representations—was met with the reply that to have such-and-such representations just *was* to be

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<sup>1</sup> P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London, 1959), p. 35.

seeing a material object or another person. This if-you-can't-beat-him-join-him strategy, however, always (a) got shaky when "was" was questioned (did it mean "entailed"? "confirmed"?) and (b) had an unpleasant air of idealism about it, no matter how much it was claimed to be a "logical" rather than a "metaphysical" point. So 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. Strawson's points about persons and material objects fitted together nicely with Wittgenstein's "private language argument" to suggest that the sceptics' notion of a world of pure experience—a world containing nothing but representations—did not really make sense. For one wouldn't know what a representation was (nor could a representation exist) unless there were non-representations—material objects and persons. The sceptic's conception of the world was thus revealed as *parasitic* on more conventional notions.

Recently, however, two articles have appeared which have seemed to undermine this neo-Kantian program. Both charge that the various "transcendental" arguments offered against the sceptic depend upon the tacit adoption of a dubious "verification principle". These articles—one by Judith Thomson on the private-language argument<sup>2</sup> and the other by Barry Stroud on various arguments of Strawson's and Shoemaker's<sup>3</sup>—make the point that these arguments all seem to be saying "In order for 'X' to have meaning there have to be criteria for identifying X's, and the sceptic cannot even talk about X's unless he accepts that these criteria are sound. Since these criteria are obviously satisfied, he cannot deny that there are X's". But, Thomson and Stroud rejoin,<sup>4</sup> the most that this sort of argument can show is that it must seem to us as if there are X's—not that there actually are X's. For purposes of giving "X" a place in the language-game, so to speak, apparent X's are as good as real X's. So, if all the "transcendentalist" has to go on is that "X" does have such a place, he will never get from there to the reality

<sup>2</sup> Thomson, "Private Languages," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, I (1964): 20-31. This article has been reprinted in Stuart Hampshire (ed.), *The Philosophy of Mind* (New York, 1966): 116-143. I shall cite Thomson by reference to the pagination in this anthology.

<sup>3</sup> Stroud, "Transcendental Arguments," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXV (1968): 241-256.

<sup>4</sup> Stroud, p. 255. Thomson does not make this point explicitly, but it follows naturally from what she says at p. 141.

of X's. To mend his argument, the transcendentalist would need a principle which says that (as Stroud puts it, referring to the case of material objects) it is not possible "for all reidentification statements to be false even though they are asserted on the basis of the best criteria we ever have for reidentification"<sup>5</sup>—in short, a "verification principle".

I think that Thomson and Stroud have shown something very important—viz., that no transcendental argument will be able to prove necessary existence (e.g., of material objects). Their point that appearance is as good as reality for giving meaning to terms seems to me decisive. But despite this, the kind of "parasitism" argument which is offered by Strawson and can plausibly be attributed to Wittgenstein survives intact. The reason is that a parasitism argument says to the sceptic: "If you merely say that all the reasons we have for thinking such-and-such's to exist or to be impossible might be insufficient, you cannot be refuted. All that you have done then is to say that, in metaphysics as in physics, it is always possible for a better idea to come along which will give a better way of describing the world than in terms of what we thought must necessarily exist, or which will make it possible to recognize the existence of what we previously thought impossible. We can only catch you out if you purport to actually advance such a better idea. Then we may be able to show that your new way of describing the world would not be intelligible to someone who was not familiar with the old way". This line of argument is applied, in particular, to the "Cartesian" sceptic who says that everything that we now describe in terms of, e.g., persons and material objects, could be described in terms of experiences—in a "pure-experience" language. The force of "parasitism" arguments here is to show that we cannot in fact describe such a language (and thus, *a fortiori*, to show that we cannot describe a private language).<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of such arguments, it does not matter whether there are persons and material objects or whether we simply believe there are.

The point I want to make in this paper, then, is that the only good "transcendental" argument is a "parasitism" argument. To

<sup>5</sup> Stroud, p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> For the connection between the private-language argument and the possibility of a pure-experience language see John Turk Saunders and Donald F. Henze, *The Private-Language Problem* (New York, 1967). In a forthcoming paper called "Criteria and Necessity" I have tried to capitalize on and highlight the connection which Saunders and Henze have drawn.

develop this, I shall go over some things which Thomson and Stroud say and try to explain in more detail how the force of the anti-sceptical arguments which they discuss can be preserved while admitting the point that there is no sound inference from the way we think or speak to truths about the possibility of experience or language. I shall begin with the more limited case of Thomson, who restricts herself to Malcolm's version of the private-language argument.

Thomson analyzes Malcolm's presentation of this argument into the following three steps:

- (1) . . . if a sign which a man uses is to count as a word in a language, his use of it must be governed by a rule—here specifically, if a sign which a man uses is to count as a kind-name in a language, his use of it must be governed by a rule of the following sort: You may call anything of a kind X "K", and you may not call anything "K" which is not of kind X. (2) If a sign which a man uses is to be governed by a rule of this sort it must be possible that he should call the thing a "K" thinking it is of the kind to be called a "K" and it not be . . . [(3)] There is no such thing as a man's thinking a thing is of the kind to be called "K" and it not being so unless it is logically possible that it be *found out* that it is not so.<sup>7</sup>

She points out rightly that the third—"verificationist"—premise is essential to the argument since "there must be something which rules it out that [one] should quite acceptably reply: Perhaps it can't be found out that my sensation is or is not of the required kind, but all the same it may be that it is."<sup>8</sup> Now let us construe "finding out" in (3) as what Thomson calls "weak finding out"—i.e., "confirming" rather than "conclusively verifying": only on such a construal, I should argue, does anything like the private-language argument emerge as plausible. Then to complete the argument we can add

- (4) It is not to count as confirming or disconfirming that something is a K if our *only* reason for deciding that it is or is not is that a man is or is not inclined to call it a K, having as his sole reason that it is or is not similar to what he has previously called a K,

and derive the conclusion

- (C) If the only logically possible way of confirming or disconfirming that something is a K is to find out whether a man is inclined

<sup>7</sup> Thomson: 131-2.

<sup>8</sup> Thomson, p. 133.

to call it a K, having as his sole reason that he remembers that it is or is not similar to something which he has previously called a K, then "K" is not a word in his language.

What this argument comes down to is the claim that if all we "know" about K's is that there is a K if and only if a man believes there is, then we don't know *anything* about K's, not even that. To see the force of this, consider a man who occasionally utters "There is a K now", but cannot tell you what a K is; it is not, he says, a sensation nor a beetle nor anything else he can put a name to. It is just a K. To put it another way, nothing (except trivia like "There is a K now or *p*") follows from "There is a K now" and it follows non-trivially from nothing (to our knowledge). In this situation, Wittgensteinians want to say, "K" hasn't been given a meaning. To give it a meaning, all that we would need would be belief in a correlation of utterances of "K" with something—anything which would set up confirmation-relations between "There is a K now" and some other statements (other than logically entailed statements). But before such correlations are made, the man himself should not take himself to be describing something or reporting something when he says "There is a K now". Nor in fact would he. He would view himself as under some sort of compulsion, not as making a statement. The claim made in (4) is thus just a corollary of the slogan that meaning is use—where this slogan is spelled out as: a statement like "There is a K now" has to be taken to bear some non-trivial inferential relations before it has a place in the language-game. Seen from another angle, it is a corollary of the notion that "a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense".<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (3rd ed., New York, 1958), Part I, sec. 257. Note that an entirely adequate stage-setting would be provided if the man explained that K was a sort of sensation—for we know what sensations are and know that people are reliable reporters of them (even when a particular sort of sensation is not accompanied by an behavioral or environmental correlate). *Pace* the famous "private-diary" passage (*ibid.*, I, sec. 258), there is no difficulty in giving meaning to "E" once one has identified it as standing for, e.g., that funny sensation I had last Wednesday. All that is needed to give meaning to "sensation" is that some sensation reports should bear non-trivial inferential relations to some statements which are not sensation reports (statements about environment, behavior, brainwaves, or what you will). This condition does not have to be satisfied for each and every species of sensation, but only for the genus. The meaningfulness which "I am having a sort of sensation which I shall call 'e'" inherits from the correlations between other sensations and public events is passed along, so to speak, to "There is an E now". Thus the condition specified in (4)—"our *only* reason. . ."—is no

There is much that can be said against this argument, and to defend it and develop its full anti-Cartesian force would require more space than I have in this paper.<sup>10</sup> I want to make only one point about it. Whatever else might be wrong with it, the principal objection which Thomson brings against the "verificationist" premise (3) does not work.

This objection is as follows:

The principle, it will be remembered, was this: A sign "K" is not a kind-name in a man's language unless it is possible to find out whether or not a thing is K; and let us call this condition on a man's use of a sign "C". What we might then ask is: is "C" a kind-name in a language? Well, it is a kind-name in a man's language if it is possible to find out whether or not a sign in a given use does satisfy this condition. Does "K" in the preceding example [the example of a man who claims to be able to see that some things we call "black" have a distinctive color called "K"] satisfy it—over and above its seeming to its user that it does? Do "table" and "chair" satisfy it—over and above its seeming to some non-sceptic that they do? . . . How should I find out whether or not they do—which is not merely to be a matter of asking myself whether or not it seems to me that they do?<sup>11</sup>

The question Thomson raises here is: why should we think that any established practice of confirming a statement S by reference to certain criteria having been fulfilled is a *sound* practice? And the answer is that it does not here matter whether it is or not. For instead of (3) we can substitute

(3') There is no such thing as a man's thinking a thing is of the kind to be called "K" and it's not being so unless some way of confirming that it is a K is accepted by him

and alter "the only logically possible way of confirming or disconfirming that something is a K" in (C) to "the only way accepted by a man of confirming or disconfirming that something is a K". We then get an argument which is just as good as the original

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longer satisfied once a K is specified as a sensation. For we can have not only the fact that the man is inclined to say, 'It seems similar to what I usually call "K", so I'll call it "K"', but all the reasons which make us take people's reports of their inner states as reliable.

<sup>10</sup> In particular, a defense of this argument would have to show that we could not describe a "pure-experience" language—one in which sensations, e.g., were correlated only with other sensations. I do not think that a knock-down argument can be given on this point, but I think that Saunders and Henze give a convincing presentation of the difficulties involved.

<sup>11</sup> Thomson: 141-2.

(better, in fact, because it avoids Quinean doubts about the notion of "logical possibility"). This reformulated argument preserves the strength of the meaning-as-use principle explicated above while making clear that the verificationist does not have to say that any of the methods of confirmation which are built into familiar language-games should be good methods. All he has to say is that there has to be a situation which present practice would call "a man's having accepted a method of finding out whether something is a K" if there is to be a situation which present practice would call "a man's thinking a thing is of the kind K and its not being so". This brand of verificationism makes meaningfulness depend not upon a word-world connection, but upon connections between some bits of linguistic behavior and others.<sup>12</sup>

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Summing up what I have been saying about Thomson, I conclude (1) that the verificationism she correctly discerns in the private-language-argument is no more or less objectionable than the familiar Wittgensteinian claim that it does not make sense to suppose that a man might know the meaning of only one word, and (2) that the "what if we only believed that we had other ways of finding out, but did not really?" objection has no force against this sort of verificationism. I now go on from the particular case of the private-language argument to the general case sketched by Stroud.

Stroud argues that it not only takes a verificationist premise to complete transcendental arguments, but that invoking such a premise makes such arguments superfluous:

The verification principle that the argument [Strawson's argument that we can know that objects continue to exist unperceived] rests on is: if the notion of objective particulars makes sense to us, then we can sometimes know certain conditions to be fulfilled, the fulfillment of which logically implies either that objects continue to exist unperceived or that they do not. The sceptic says that we can never justify our acceptance of the proposition that objects continue to exist unperceived, but now there is a direct and conclusive

<sup>12</sup> Compare Neurath's notorious claim that as long as we have some protocols to endow non-protocols with meaning, it does not matter what the character of the protocols is. Specifically, it does not matter whether they are reports of the "given" or not. The step which Wittgenstein takes beyond Neurath is to remark that the protocols wouldn't be protocols, wouldn't themselves be meaningful, unless they had been caught up in a web of inferential relationships to other protocols and to non-protocols. The kind of verificationism common to Neurath and to the later Wittgenstein is, of course, of no use whatever in demarcating science from metaphysics or theology.



answer to him. If the sceptic's claim makes sense it must be false, since if that proposition could not be known to be true or known to be false it would make no sense. This follows from the truth of the verification principle. Without this principle Strawson's argument would have no force; but with this principle the sceptic is directly and conclusively refuted, and there is no further need to go through an indirect or transcendental argument to expose his mistakes.<sup>13</sup>

The first point I want to make about this is that it is not, as Stroud suggests,<sup>14</sup> a debatable matter whether such a verification principle might be true. It is obviously false. A principle which says that in order to make sense of talk about X's you have to be able to state certain criteria the fulfillment of which "logically implies" that X's exist would entail that everything that people had ever understood talk about and rationally believed in—witches, perturbations in the luminiferous ether, gods—would have to be incorporated in our ontology. For the criteria which witch-believers, e.g., used to identify witches were very frequently fulfilled. We cannot get out of this by saying that the criteria for there being witches turned out *not* to be fulfilled because eventually, in the eighteenth century or so, a better explanation of "witch"-phenomena was adopted. For broadening the meaning of "criterion" in this way would mean that we can never tell whether our criteria for anything are fulfilled; some better explanation of, e.g., "material object"-phenomena might always come along. Nor can we get out of it by saying that people never did talk "meaningfully" about witches or gods or the luminiferous ether. This is an *ad hoc* dictum which twenty years of tinkering with the verifiability criterion failed to make good. As Stroud notes, this sort of verification principle is just the paradigm-case argument all over again,<sup>15</sup> and (as Chisholm<sup>16</sup> and others have argued) the latter argument would only work if we could somehow show that certain words could only be taught ostensively, and only by ostention of genuine examples of its referent. This latter claim should be the last which anyone impressed by Wittgenstein's remarks on meaning would want to make.

The second remark I want to make is that if transcendental arguments are, as by Stroud, defined as those which prove "that

<sup>13</sup> Stroud, p. 247.

<sup>14</sup> Stroud, p. 256.

<sup>15</sup> Stroud, p. 245.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Roderick Chisholm, "Philosophers and Ordinary Language", *Philosophical Review*, LX (1951): 317-28.

certain concepts are necessary for thought or experience",<sup>17</sup> then the whole dialectical force of these arguments must be to show the "parasitism" of suggested alternative concepts. What would be the point of knowing, for example, that you have to think about material objects if you are going to think about anything at all, except to defeat the man who suggests a different "conceptual framework"? Transcendental arguments must be at *least* parasitism arguments, whether or not I am right in saying that they are at most parasitism arguments. But it would be strange if we could know *in advance* of someone's proposing an alternative conceptual framework that it too would be parasitic on the conventional one. No one would believe the claim that *any* new theory in physics would necessarily be such that it could never replace, but could at most supplement, our present theories. One would have to have an extraordinary faith in the difference between philosophy and science to think that things could be otherwise in metaphysics. So there is reason to suspect that the force behind any such claim will actually be arguments for the parasitical character of certain *particular* alternatives.

Thirdly, in the case of Stroud's clearest example of transcendental argument—Strawson on objective particulars—what we in fact find is just such arguments. There is no *general* argument in *Individuals* that we cannot think without thinking about material objects; there are only arguments against particular suggestions about how we could avoid thinking about them. It must be admitted, however, that Strawson is misleading on this point. He says, in the context surrounding the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper that it is absurd for the sceptic to suggest

that we do not really, or should not really, have conceptual scheme that we do not have; that we do not really, or should not really, mean what we think we mean, what we do mean.

This is absurd, he says, because

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<sup>17</sup> Stroud, p. 242. Later (pp. 251f). Stroud suggests that this condition can be sharpened up by saying that transcendental arguments must find conditions for the possibility of language—because the sceptic could always get out of, e.g., a transcendental argument for "There are material objects" by denying that we understand talk about material objects but could not, on pain of self-referential absurdity, deny that there was language. I do not think that the absurdity would be greater in the second case, however. To make the sceptic say that we never understand what we mean by "table" seems to me as good a *reductio* as making him say that he is not using language when he asserts his scepticism.

the whole process of reasoning only starts because the scheme is as it is; and we cannot change it even if we would. Finally, we may, if we choose, see the sceptic as offering for contemplation the sketch of an alternative scheme; and this is to see him as a revisionary metaphysician with whom we do not wish to quarrel, but whom we do not need to follow.<sup>18</sup>

These remarks are puzzling. In the first place, the fact that “the whole process of reasoning starts because the scheme is as it is” has no force; the same could be said about the process of reasoning gone through by the sceptic about witches. In the second place, Strawson seems to be going in two directions at once. On the one hand, he is saying that no revisionist metaphysics could possibly be a viable alternative because “we cannot change it even if we would”. On the other hand, he seems to be saying that “revisionary” metaphysicians can just be ignored—that they are playing a different game. But this second strategy can hardly represent Strawson’s real intention, for he goes on to spend the rest of the chapter explaining what is wrong with two revisionary efforts—the attempt to make “private particulars” basic and the attempt to make events or processes basic.<sup>19</sup> Further, these latter attempts are just what is required, and all Strawson has got, to show that “we cannot change it even if we would”.

For a class of particulars to be “basic” is for it to be such that “it would not be possible to make all the identifying references which we do make to particulars of other classes, unless we made identifying references to particulars of that class, whereas it would be possible to make all the identifying references we do make to particulars of that class without making identifying reference to particulars of other classes”.<sup>20</sup> If material objects are such a class then *Aufbau*-philosophers who propose to construct bodies and persons out of “elementary experiences”, and Whiteheadians who propose to construct them out of events, are just wrong. For if these revisionists are saying anything they are saying that thinking

<sup>18</sup> *Individuals*, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> To my mind, the contrast Strawson draws (but makes little use of) between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics is a false start. To describe our actual conceptual scheme will either be platitudinous or, in Wittgenstein’s phrase, “assembling reminders for a particular purpose”. What would the purpose be if not to put us on our guard against the revisionist? Suggesting that descriptive and revisionary metaphysics are distinct disciplines seems like suggesting that conservative and radical political thought are distinct disciplines.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*: 38-39.

in terms of bodies and persons is optional.<sup>21</sup> Strawson's argument against "private particulars" (sensations, mental events, sense-data) as possible candidates for basicness is crisp and simple; his argument against events is long and tenuous. Because I think the latter argument fails and has been adequately criticized in the literature,<sup>22</sup> I shall ignore it here. The former argument, however, seems to me the heart of what Strawson has to say in the first part of *Individuals*, and the basis for the general feeling that *something* important was shown there.

This former argument is built around the same point as is used in the "Persons" chapter of *Individuals*: the point that "the principles of individuation of such experiences essentially turn on the identities of the persons to whose histories they belong." To this, the *Aufbauist* would presumably reply that this may be true for public discourse, for "identification" as agreement on reference between a speaker and a hearer—but that limiting the sense of "identify" in this way as Strawson does<sup>23</sup> stacks the cards. Each person can, he would go on, identify his own private experiences without thinking of himself as a person; he identifies his experiences first, and himself later, so to speak. To rebut this, Strawson needs to invoke some form of the private-language argument; he needs to be able to say, at least, that you cannot (as in the Cartesian tradition) identify one of your experiences just by having it, but that you have to know some language to identify it *as* an experience and that this language cannot be learned by someone who has not first or simultaneously learned what persons and their bodies are.

To come now quickly (and dogmatically) to a close: if I am right in saying that Strawson's only good transcendental argument for the "necessary" character of material object concepts boils down to the private-language argument, then we have some grounds for

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<sup>21</sup> One can, of course, take Goodman's line the *Aufbauist* efforts shouldn't be seen as resting on a claim of epistemological priority for their primitive notions, but as simply intellectually satisfying thought-experiments. (Cf. Nelson Goodman, "The Significance of *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt*", in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (LaSalle: Open Court, 1963): 545-558.) It is questionable, however, whether anyone would have gone to the trouble of constructing such systems unless they had thought philosophical problems were thereby resolved, and hard to see how any such problems could be resolved unless epistemological priority were claimed.

<sup>22</sup> See especially J. M. E. Moravcsik, "Strawson and Ontological Priority", in *Analytical Philosophy, Second Series*, ed. R. J. Butler (Oxford, 1965), esp. pp. 114-119.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Individuals*, pp. 16, 45.

suspecting that there is really only *one* transcendental argument to worry about—that what looked like a general technique of argument which might be applied to anything is actually a single anti-Cartesian argument which keeps popping up in different guises. The target, in each case, is the same—the notion that we can start with knowing about nothing save our own experiences and go on from there. In theory, there is no reason why parasitism arguments should not work against many different revisionary schemes, including some that have nothing to do with Cartesianism. But in fact it is hard to think of examples. However, that may be, there can be no such thing as a *general* critique of the validity of transcendental arguments of the sort which Stroud attempts. They have to be criticized case by case; each charge of parasitism has to be evaluated on its own merits.

A last word about verificationism: the insight which lay behind the original (Peircian) verificationist notion that “you don’t know what “This is an X” means unless you know how to confirm it” may be explicated as the claim that to know meaning is to know inferential relationships. This insight has nothing to do with empiricism nor with phenomenalism. It needed, however, to be combined with the notion that knowledge is always conceptual (“intuitions without concepts are blind”), and the notion that to have a concept is to have the use of a word, before its anti-Cartesian force could be seen. When brought together with these latter notions it gave rise to the notion that you couldn’t know about anything unless you could talk about quite a lot of different things. The Malcolmian formulation of the private-language argument, Strawson’s arguments in both chapter 1 and chapter 3 of *Individuals*, and a great deal else that is central to contemporary metaphysics thus does indeed, as Thomson and Stroud show, depend upon verificationism. But the sort of verificationism on which it depends is not obviously false, and is at any rate not the utterly implausible sort which Stroud suggests may be needed.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Aryeh Kosman for valuable comments.