

Dissertation prospectus: “Talking to skeptics”

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§1. How can we respond when cool and careful reflection leads us to conclusions which clash with our most common, entrenched beliefs? What should we do when philosophy pressures us to change our minds in radical ways?

No doubt part of what is exciting about philosophical thought or argument is its promise to do just that. Philosophy seems to be in a uniquely good position to challenge and change our widespread, everyday beliefs—including the ones which we might, at times, call “basic” or “fundamental.” Presumably, this is thanks to philosophical argument’s characteristic generality, its critical bent, and its systematicity and rigor. When, or if, philosophy delivers on this promise, human reason triumphs over human idiosyncrasy: We come to see what once seemed obvious or even unquestionable as relics of arbitrary instinct or custom, which we—now more enlightened—may leave behind. I think this romantic view of philosophy, its goal and its potential has and perhaps always will animate its practice. It is a view to which I subscribe.

§2. But the view may seem all too romantic. Perhaps more often than not we remain obstinate in the face of alleged philosophical conclusions: We do not, and perhaps cannot, change some of the beliefs that philosophy seems to tell us to change.

I think this is often the case with philosophical skepticism. The skeptic gives a philosophical argument for the claim that certain of our most common and basic beliefs do not live up to reason’s own standards for belief. But even subtle skeptical arguments—for example, about the existence of an external world—often fail to move us. We do not, or perhaps cannot, stop believing that we are, to continue the example, in touch with an external world, even when an external world skeptic has given us alleged reasons to do exactly that.

Some philosophers say that there are no philosophical skeptics, or at least none who question beliefs in as general a manner as the external world skeptic would, were

she more than fiction. Of course, if nobody ever gave skeptical arguments of such a general nature, then our failure to be moved by such arguments would follow trivially. We cannot be convinced by arguments which no one considers.

When philosophers deny that there are philosophical skeptics, then, I think they mean to express that no one is fully or stably convinced by skeptical arguments. But why is that? Are all skeptical arguments glaringly bad? Do philosophers quickly dismiss them as flawed? It would be hubris to make such a damning judgment without an involved and systematic catalogue and treatment of skeptical arguments. And the enormous and impressively diverse literature over the last several centuries aiming at “refuting” skeptics counts against this conjecture. Some of the skeptical arguments that have been articulated are at the very least not obviously wrong.

It is more reasonable, or at least less arrogant, to think that no one is convinced by skeptical arguments, because, in some sense, no one can constantly and consistently accept their conclusions. Normally, when we find that a belief doesn’t live up to reason’s standards, we give it up. But we may not always be able to do that. Perhaps you are impressed by one of Hume’s skeptical arguments in the *Treatise of Human Nature*. Reflecting in your armchair, you feel convinced that the properties of your perceptions which lead you to believe that there is a material object which continues to exist over time “have no perceivable connexion with such an existence,” and so beliefs formed on that basis “cannot...ever lead to any solid or rational system.”¹ But try to stop believing that you are in touch with persistent material objects occupying an external world, when, for example, you make breakfast or go looking for your keys. It is hard to see how you could do that. How could you be agnostic about whether your keys exist at all and go on looking for them? Any explanation of how you, or anyone, could do that would presumably have to make recourse to some sophisticated, revisionary theory about weaker and stronger senses of taking things to exist. Even granted that we could make sense of such a theory, which is not obvious, it seems unrealistic that we could maintain such a sophisticated outlook and go on living our day to day lives. And so it is hard, then, to see how we could coherently and consistently accept the conclusion that we lack sufficient reason to believe that we are in touch with a world of material objects.

If that is how things are, then I think the thought that there are no philosophical skeptics, at least of a very general nature, is in an important sense right and in an important sense wrong. It is right, insofar as the impossibility of accepting the skeptical arguments’ conclusions shows that there is no full-blooded skeptic. That would require accepting the conclusion that certain elemental beliefs do not reach reason’s standards constantly and consistently. But the statement is wrong, because there can be partial skeptics, or doubters. Some people may see no flaws in the skeptical arguments, and so may accept the conclusion at times, or while simultaneously and inconsistently holding on to the belief which the skeptical argument challenges or even believing that its rational standards are met.

¹ Hume (1739), 217, 268.

These partial skeptics are in a way like doubting Christians. Doubting Christians go on believing in the Christian God, but with inner conflict. They cannot comprehend, for example, how an omnipotent, omniscient and beneficent God could allow for evil and misfortune. This challenges their faith in His existence, but it does not eradicate it. There may even be times when the force of these reflections on evil, from inspiration or forgetfulness, subside entirely. Of course, the analogy has its limits. There have been many full-blooded agnostics and atheists, whereas, according to the above view, there cannot be full-blooded philosophical skeptics. What is important is that a conflicted or self-inconsistent, intermediate position is possible.

§3. What happens, then, when we find ourselves in the intermediate position—when we come to find a skeptical argument persuasive, but cannot constantly and consistently accept its conclusion? We would seem to be in an uncomfortable rational bind, stuck believing things we, to some extent, doubt.

P.F. Strawson weighs in on this in his 1985 book *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*. He thinks we can come to find that there is nothing uncomfortable about the bind at all, if we reflect on our inability to accept the skeptical conclusion. Strawson calls this the “naturalistic response” to skepticism: Appreciating that the skeptical conclusion is “powerless against the force of nature, of our naturally implanted disposition to belief,” Strawson says, should teach us to see it as ultimately “idle, unreal, a pretense.”² No argument meant to make us doubtful of a common and basic belief, such as that we are in touch with a world of persistent material objects, could lead us to give up the belief that we are, since nature has made this belief “absolutely compelling and inescapable.”³ So, Strawson maintains, no counterargument to the skeptical argument need be given in order to remove its bite, and the partial doubt that may otherwise follow. For that, only the recognition of the “absolutely compelling and inescapable” nature of the belief is needed. “[W]e simply *cannot help* believing” those basic and natural beliefs which the skeptic challenges.⁴

Is Strawson right to think we can find comfort or satisfaction in the thought that natural or psychological forces prevent us from accepting the skeptical conclusion—that this shows the skeptical argument is “idle, unreal, a pretense”? I’m doubtful. Consider, again, the doubting Christian. Say, for the sake of argument, that a talented neuroscientist or psychologist determines that the doubting Christian is psychologically disposed such that she could never become a complete atheist or agnostic. What respite would she find in learning this? Would the reflections on the existence of evil suddenly lose their force, and no longer seem to count against the existence of a benevolent God? I don’t see why they would. The fact that she could not, due to psychological limitations, fail to believe in a benevolent God does not seem to make the existence of evil any less of a reason to doubt the existence of a benevolent God. A

² Strawson (1985), 19, 13.

³ Strawson (1985), 39.

⁴ Strawson (1985), 11.

single person's psychological limitations, or everyone's for that matter, seem completely independent of, and so strictly irrelevant to, the rational bearing or significance of skeptical considerations or bits of argument. For that reason, I do not see how merely finding out that we are psychologically determined to believe something could take away the bite of the relevant skeptical argument.

We can express this by saying that any appeals to our psychological limitations could only provide an "external" defense of the beliefs challenged by the skeptic: The appeal would not give us a way of understanding what is wrong with the skeptical argument, and so of defending the beliefs, so to speak, "from the inside." It follows that whatever partial doubt the partial skeptic entertains would not, and from her perspective should not, then be eradicated by finding out that her psychological makeup admits of no more than partial doubt.

§4. Strawson claims that he is channeling "Hume the naturalist" in giving his own naturalistic response to skepticism. This is not entirely wrong, but there is an important difference between the two philosophers. For while Strawson may be right to say that, for Hume, "skeptical doubts are not to be met by argument," he oversteps when he says that, for Hume, they "are to be neglected because they are *idle*."⁵ Saying this oversteps in two ways. First, Hume explicitly acknowledges that skeptical reasonings can be troubling, even while recognizing that they target "absolutely compelling" beliefs. So the reasonings are not fully "idle." And, second, Hume does not think we should "neglect" but, rather, attend to the skeptical reasonings, since doing so teaches us a humbling lesson about who we are.

In a uniquely poetic and confessional section of the *Treatise*, Hume describes himself as, in contrast to Strawson, not soothed but rather thrown into a "melancholy" or "despair" precisely by the thought that we are determined to form beliefs that skeptical considerations show do not reach the standards of reason.⁶ Hume takes himself to have established in the previous sections that even "after the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason why I shou'd assent to it; and feel nothing but a *strong* propensity to consider objects *strongly* in that view, under which they appear to me."⁷ "Habit" or "custom," as opposed to reason, is the "principle. . . which enlivens some ideas beyond others," and in doing that "determines" us to form a great deal of our beliefs.⁸ The fact that such a principle, though "natural and necessary in the human mind,"⁹ "seemingly is so trivial, and so little founded on reason,"¹⁰ leaves Hume feeling "affrighted and confounded with that forelorn solitude, in which I am

⁵ Strawson (1985), 11.

⁶ Hume (1739), 264.

⁷ Hume (1739), 265.

⁸ Hume (1739), 265. For Hume, a belief just is a lively idea. See Hume (1739), 86, 96; Hume (1975), 47–48.

⁹ Hume (1739), 266.

¹⁰ Hume (1739), 265.

plac'd in my philosophy.”¹¹ The discovery that the principles on which our beliefs are formed are mere “illusions of the imagination” fills him with “difficult” and “dangerous” questions.¹²

In short, Hume, unlike Strawson, does not immediately feel immunized from the bite of his skeptical considerations by recognizing the natural or psychological necessity of the beliefs they target. The quotes above suggest rather the opposite—that, for Hume, this recognition is a main source of the bite. For it is this recognition which shows that we cannot just accept the conclusion of the skeptical considerations, and give up the relevant beliefs,¹³ and so instead seem stuck in a bind between the demands of our rational nature and the ways of our natural instincts. Nonetheless, like Strawson, Hume thinks that proper reflection on the necessity of the beliefs will provide a way out of the bind. The reflection Hume suggests, however, is more than recognition of the beliefs as ones we are determined to have. Rather, it involves a significant shift in our self-conception.

Hume himself undergoes such a shift in the very same confessional section of the *Treatise*. While he begins the section in “melancholy,” hesitant to continue his philosophical inquiries, he ends it with a returned “curiosity” and “ambition” “to carry [his] view into [further] subjects.”¹⁴ The transformation involves several phases, though it can seem to involve only the first. This phase is a sort of forgetful relapse into natural ways of forming beliefs: “Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour’s amusements, I wou’d return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further.”¹⁵ Here Hume says that “nature herself suffices” to “cure the philosophical melancholy.” He seem to be suggesting that all that is needed for the skeptical considerations to lose their troubling nature is for life to happen and divert one’s attentions away from philosophy.

I would not find this suggestion very satisfying. There may, in general, be a place

¹¹ Hume (1739), 264.

¹² Hume (1739), 267.

¹³ That we cannot accept the conclusion of the skeptical considerations is, for Hume, a very good thing: “if the consideration of these instances makes us take a resolution to reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy, and adhere to the understanding. . . this resolution, if steadily executed, wou’d be dangerous, and attended with the most fatal consequences” (Hume 1739, 267). The so-called “trivial suggestions of the fancy” are responsible for a great deal of the beliefs that inform our action. If we were to not follow these suggestions, then, “all human life must perish. . . All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence” (Hume 1975, 160). See, also, Hume (1739), 183.

¹⁴ Hume (1739), 270–271.

¹⁵ Hume (1739), 269.

for telling a troubled conscience that it would do good to allow the necessities of life to take one's mind off one's troubles. But this alone rarely resolves the troubles. That usually involves some appropriate action or gained insight that cannot come from merely forgetting or ignoring the troubles. Luckily, I do not think that is the full story Hume wishes to tell. If it were the full story, that would make Hume's remark on the following page that "in all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our scepticism"¹⁶ very mysterious. For why would we want to "preserve" the skepticism if we remain in melancholy only as long as we keep it in mind? This suggests that the skepticism itself is meant to play some role in disarming itself.

To see that, it's helpful to note that Hume goes on to emphasize his own consciousness or awareness of the naturalness and necessity of his forming the everyday, common beliefs which skepticism targets. He says, "Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life."¹⁷ This consciousness combined with skeptical conclusions brings up a natural question, which Hume asks himself: "Must [I] strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure?" The question, formulated this way, nearly answers itself. Why rebel against one's natural tendencies to believe certain things, if the rebellion will never succeed in overcoming the natural tendencies, and will only bring melancholy and alienation? It would be better to resign and accept one's nature, and win the "indolence" and "pleasure" that come along with that. Hume answers his question with: "No: If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable"¹⁸

Nature can ease the skepticism-born melancholy, for a time anyway. But it is an appreciation of this overwhelming force of nature to eclipse the skeptical conclusions that changes Hume's disposition toward the latter. Hume accepts that he is a "fool," who cannot give reasons for his beliefs. But he comes to accept this as beneficial rather than troubling; as humbling, rather than humiliating. That requires making peace with the idea that we human beings cannot coherently hold belief up to their rational standards. As Hume puts it, "belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures."¹⁹

This humbling image of ourselves—not as rational judges, who believe only what they could articulate reasons for, but as natural creatures, who believe according to the "blind and powerful instinct of nature"²⁰—is, for Hume, the value of the skeptical considerations he propounds. It is *why* "[i]n all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our scepticism."²¹ The humbling self-conception, he explains, will have widespread humbling effects. It will make us more tentative to force our opinions on others. And it will make us more sympathetic listeners, both to others and to our

¹⁶ Hume (1739), 270.

¹⁷ Hume (1739), 269.

¹⁸ Hume (1739), 269–270.

¹⁹ Hume (1739), 183.

²⁰ Hume (1975), 151.

²¹ Hume (1739), 270.

own natural instincts. Hume says that if “dogmatical reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding. . . such a reflection would naturally inspire them with modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists.”²² In this way, skeptical considerations could lead to increased mutual recognition and social harmony.

§5. Hume goes further than Strawson, in that he provides a way for understanding how recognizing the psychological necessity of a belief could take the bite away from skepticism. It could do this by facilitating a change in our self-conception—a move from seeing ourselves as rational beings, who believe only what they are able to see themselves as having reason to, to seeing ourselves as natural believers, many of whose beliefs are the result of irrational instinct. If we jettison the view that reason sets the standards for belief, then seeing many of our beliefs as falling short of those standards would no longer perturb us. We could find ease of mind in this humble self-conception.

The cost of this ease of mind can seem very high. If we were to give up the thought that there are rational standards for belief, we lose our best resource for understanding how beliefs can be challenged and defended in a non-arbitrary and in principle intelligible way. We talk of, for example, a person’s convincing another to believe something by giving reasons for it. If we do not take there to be rational standards for belief, it would be hard to see how ‘giving a reason’ could have any privileged or meaningful bearing on what another goes on to believe. It would be hard to understand such social practices at all.

The modesty Hume suggests does not need to do away with all rational standards for belief whatsoever. Rather it involves, more modestly, the acceptance that the epistemic standing of some of our beliefs are not entirely determinable through one’s rational faculties. The tendencies of the non-rational imagination play a role.

We can find some peace of mind by coming to see ourselves and our beliefs as determined by our nature, without our being able to give or understand reasons for those beliefs beyond recognizing their natural inevitability. My sense is that any peace of mind gained involves some degree of alienation from oneself. One accepts that one cannot fully grasp the reasons for what one believes. And that means one comes to see a part of one’s own nature as, in a way, inaccessible.

To be fair, one can, on Hume’s picture, ‘access’ or become acquainted with her own natural tendencies, so to speak, “from the outside.” This external view of human affairs is perhaps exactly what Hume meant to occasion when he suggested that the data for philosophy should be “glean[ed] up. . . from a cautious observation of human life”—of “men’s behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures.”²³ Such an external view of human beings may be appropriate for “the science of man,”²⁴ conceived of as a sort of anthropology. But it understanding oneself through a sort of “anthropology”

²² Hume (1975), 151.

²³ Hume (1739), xix.

²⁴ Hume (1739), xviii.

seems to involve a kind of alienation—a kind of resignation that one cannot understand oneself entire “from the inside.” The bind seems to reappear in this sense of alienation.

But then Hume’s response to the rational bind will be hardly more more satisfying than Strawson’s. Any appeal to our being determined to believe what skepticism has called into question remains “external” in just the same way: It neither makes intelligible how the beliefs in question could meet the rational standards for belief, nor provides any insight into the error in the skeptical argument. Until both of these occur, the internal struggle remains.

This does not imply, however, that no response which, like Strawson’s or Hume’s, exploits the necessity of the beliefs in question can help us out of the rational bind. In what comes below, I want to develop a generally applicable response along those lines: I argue that if the beliefs in question are seen to be necessary “internally”—that is, from within our self-conception as rational beings—then that very finding would itself explain how those beliefs meet the rational standards of belief. That would in turn provide the necessary resources for showing that the relevant skeptical argument is misguided.

§6. What would it mean to discovery a belief is necessary “internally”? It would mean that we come to see that we could not conceive of ourselves or the world intelligibly without having that belief. That belief, we would find, plays a privileged and crucial role in our being able to make any sense of ourselves or the world around us.

To get a better sense of what this discovery would amount to, it helps to consider how one could arrive at it. The type of inquiry which could lead to such a discovery is similar to the type involved in what has come to be known as “transcendental argument.”

Transcendental arguments try to establish, through a process of self-conscious reflection, that the world must be some way in order for some very basic fact about human beings to be true.

Each of us is ready to affirm such very basic facts as ‘I exist,’ ‘I think,’ ‘I make decisions,’ ‘I can use and understand a language’ or that I do any of these things in certain immediately and universally recognizable ways. Indeed, most skeptics do not doubt these facts, which seem undeniable. This is likely because anyone who doubted or denied any of them could not get a grip on who we would then be. Someone or something who never experienced anything, or never thought at all, or never decided what to do, or never employed a language he understood, would not be one of us. These very basic facts are the lowest-level foundation of a self-conception. No one who so much as has a self-conception could fail to believe these things.

If we were to discover that one or more of these very basic facts about human beings could not have been so if not for some other fact’s being so, then we could become as certain of the other fact as we are of the very basic ones. In this way, elements of this lowest-level foundation of our self-conceptions could open a way for us to discover further truths.

Perhaps neuroscientists may someday discover what structural features of the brain

a creature must have in order to experience, think, decide or speak and understand language. We could then argue that our brains have those structural features from the fact that we experience, think and so on. But that would not be transcendental argument. A transcendental argument appeals to nothing empirical. Rather, one could come to see its soundness entirely *a priori*, through a process of self-conscious reflection. This thought has a Kantian ring. Indeed, many see Kant’s attempt to show that certain concepts apply to the objects of experience on the grounds that “through them alone does experience become possible”²⁵ as a paradigmatic transcendental argument.

§7. Transcendental arguments may seem to offer a more direct route for refuting a skeptical argument—one that does not first need to show that the belief that the skepticism targets is necessary “internally.” For if we were to discover that, for example, we must be in touch with a world of enduring material objects in order for some very basic fact about us to be so, then it seems we would have refuted skeptical arguments concerning the external world. This is because we already accept the very basic fact. So we would then have to accept the anti-skeptical conclusion. Anyone with a coherent self-conception would have inconsistent attitudes if she continued to feel any doubt.

This seems to be a younger Strawson’s strategy in his 1959 book *Individuals*. In its first chapter, Strawson tries to quell any doubt about the continued existence of unobserved objects by employing a transcendental argument. He argues that objects must continue to exist unperceived if we are to think of the world as containing mind-independent objects, or ‘particulars,’ organized in a unified spatiotemporal system.²⁶ That we think of the world this way is, for Strawson, a basic introspectable fact.²⁷ So anyone who finds a skeptical argument about the continued existence of unperceived objects troubling should become aware of an inconsistency in her attitudes. She would come to see that what she doubts is presupposed by a basic fact about herself which she cannot deny if she is to entertain the skeptical argument. As Strawson puts it, if she continues to find the skeptical argument plausible, “then [s]he pretends to accept

²⁵ Kant (1781), A93/B126. This would presumably be established through *a priori*, self-conscious critique. See, e.g., A13/B27–A14/B28.

²⁶ Strawson (1959), 24. The argument is as follows: “[I]f we are to operate the scheme of a single spatio-temporal system or framework of particulars, it is essential that we should be able sometimes to identify” the same particular at different times. And for that “we must have criteria or methods of identifying a particular encountered on one occasion, or described in respect of one occasion, as *the same individual* as a particular encountered on another occasion, or described in respect of another occasion” (Strawson 1959, 20). These “methods or criteria, of reidentification allow. . . that the field of our observation is limited” and so we do not observe things continuously (Strawson 1959, 21). That then implies that “there should be satisfiable and commonly satisfied criteria for the identity” of particulars over time, even in some cases of non-continuous observation (Strawson 1959, 24). In talking of “commonly satisfied criteria” in such circumstances, Strawson seems to suggest that objects must in fact continue to exist unobserved, since only that would satisfy those criteria. Otherwise the criteria would be criteria for something other than the identity of particulars over time and through lapses in observation. So given that those criteria are satisfied, it follows that objects must continue to exist unperceived.

²⁷ Strawson (1959), 2, 17, 20–21.

a conceptual scheme, but at the same time...rejects of one of the conditions of its employment.” And that, according to Strawson, implies that the skepticism is “unreal” or “absurd.”²⁸

Many have come to doubt, however, that transcendental arguments can succeed at putting the skeptical worries to rest. This is largely thanks to Barry Stroud’s criticism in his 1968 paper “Transcendental Arguments.” Stroud considers transcendental arguments which attempt to reveal that some proposition belongs to “a genuine class of propositions each member of which must be true in order for there to be any language.” Any proposition ‘*S*’ which belongs to this privileged class “cannot be denied truly by anyone, because it cannot be denied truly that there is some language.”²⁹ But it is very hard to establish that some proposition is an *S*, without leaving room for doubt. Stroud says, “for any candidate *S*, proposed as a member of the privileged class, the sceptic can always very plausibly insist that it is enough to make language possible if we believe that *S* is true, or if it looks for all the world as if it is, but that it needn’t actually be true.”³⁰ Stroud’s point seems to be that it would be hard to show that reflection on the nature of language could genuinely teach us how things must be as opposed to just how we must conceive of them as being in order to make the use and comprehension of language intelligible to us.

The point generalizes: It perhaps seems possible that we could discover, through self-conscious reflection, how we must conceive of the world in order for certain very basic facts about us to be true. But it hard to see how we could genuinely discover facts which are not about ourselves, but rather about the world, through that kind of reflection. If we could do that, we should be able to answer a difficult question about “how... truths about the world which appear to say nothing about human thought or experience [can] be shown to be genuinely necessary conditions of such psychological facts as that we think and experience things in certain ways.” That, Stroud says, “would be a truly remarkable feat, and some convincing explanation would surely be needed of how the whole thing is possible.”³¹

If that is right, transcendental arguments may seem impotent for combatting skepticism. They would not succeed in proving the truth of what the skepticism challenges,

²⁸ Strawson (1959), 24.

²⁹ Stroud (2000b), 21.

³⁰ Stroud (2000b), 24; cf. Stroud (2000a), 162–163

³¹ Stroud (2000a), 158–159. It is worth showing Stroud’s criticism seems plausible in the particular case of Strawson’s transcendental argument reproduced above. For what made it seem plausible that objects’ continuing to exist unobserved is presupposed by our employing a spatiotemporal framework was that objects’ continuing to exist unobserved would “commonly satisfy” our “criteria” for the identity of particulars within that framework, even across gaps in observation. The skeptic about the continued existence of unobserved objects challenges this. She claims that the need for “commonly satisfied criteria” is met by our merely *believing that* objects continue to exist unobserved. This belief would presumably involve or afford our taking the presence of certain regularities in our experience to satisfy the relevant criteria. That may seem a necessary and sufficient precondition on our employing a spatiotemporal framework. And it may seem so whether or not the presence of those regularities in our experience depends on objects’ actually continuing to exist unobserved.

but only that we must think that that is true. And that seems to be the very same bind we found ourselves in earlier.

§8. Of course, we would have found out something novel and interesting from a transcendental argument, even after it has been weakened by Stroud’s criticism. We would have found out that we have to believe something in order to experience, think, decide or speak and understand in the ways that we undeniably do. Strawson calls these findings “conceptual connections” or “connections between the major structural features or elements of our conceptual scheme.”³² Stroud calls the privileged status these beliefs are found to have “indispensability.”³³

My sense is that discovering that a belief is indispensable in this way, and understanding why, is the way out of the bind—that is, a way to alleviate the tension we feel when a skeptical argument sheds poor light on a belief we cannot but have. In coming to see a belief as necessary in order for the most very basic facts about us to be true, we come to understand that belief as meeting the standards of reason. For reason’s standards for belief, among other things, function to guarantee a coherent conception of ourselves and our place in the world. Any belief which we could correctly come to see as necessary for any coherent self-conception whatsoever would for that reason meet reason’s standards for belief.

Coming to see such beliefs as meeting reason’s standards would then give a way to disarm a skeptical argument. For that skeptical argument could then be seen as applying the wrong standards for a belief to count as reasonable. Once this is established the skeptical argument need not be answered on its own terms, and can be dismissed as misguided.

There is, of course, much that left to explain in order to make this strategy compelling. This would involve at the very least (1) explaining how, through self-conscious reflection, we could come to see a belief as necessary for our experiencing, thinking, deciding or speaking and understanding the way we do; (2) explaining how, if we were to find that a belief has this status, it would thus meet the rational standards for belief; and, (3), explaining how this would succeed at disarming a variety of skeptical arguments. I have gestured in a very rough way at how these sorts of explanations might work. My dissertation is intended to carry out each of these tasks in detail.

A full defense of the strategy would also require, (4), dealing with the worry that the rational standards I invoke could depart too much from the truth in order to count as genuinely epistemic standards. For a belief’s being required for the possibility of a coherent self-conception is not obviously the same as that belief’s being true. I intend to respond to this objection by noticing that some skepticisms I target arise from different sources than this, and so may be disarmed without answering this worry. But I also intend to answer the worry more directly.

³² Strawson (1985), 23.

³³ Stroud (2011), Chapter 5.

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