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The Nature of Transcendental Arguments

Mark Sacks

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.

Keywords: Transcendental argument; transcendental proof; situated thoughts; transcendental idealism; scepticism; Kant's Analogies

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

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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:

$$p$$
$$p \rightarrow q$$
$$q \rightarrow r$$
$$r \rightarrow s$$

(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.

6 Two Case Studies: Kant on Substance and on Causality

To take an example of a transcendental argument from Kant, let us consider the central move in the First Analogy to be:

> All change is merely the alteration of an abiding substance.[17]

When it is considered as a bare propositional content, it is difficult to see why this should be a true statement. It sounds like a bit of metaphysical dogma. It is certainly not analytic; and it is difficult to see how as a synthetic claim there can be any corresponding fact in the world that empirically verifies or refutes it even a posteriori. The recognition of its a priori truth arises only when the sentence is taken to be expressive of a situated thought.[18]

To see this – and also to see how close situated thought is to transcendental insight – we can go back to the seemingly more trivial example of the two already mentioned. The envisaged experience of that tree can be embellished. The tree is struck by lightning and goes up in a sudden cloud of smoke. To have, as a situated thought, the content [There was a tree in the garden, and now there is not a tree in the garden], rather than merely entertaining the corresponding propositional content, is to have or envisage having the experience of me not encountering a tree now, where earlier I did. But for that situated thought to make sense, it would have to be thought that there is, throughout, something in front of me, a perceptual backdrop, such that the demise of the tree is an event, an alteration, of that underlying substrate. As Kant puts it: 'A coming to be or ceasing to be that is not simply a determination of the permanent but is absolute, *can never be a possible perception*.'[19] For the change between there being a tree in the garden at t_1 and there being no tree in the garden at t_2 to be given within the confines of one situated thought, there must be presupposed, within the domain that the thought encompasses, an abiding spatio-temporal world. Moreover, since bare space and time cannot themselves be experienced, there would have to be something that *fills* the spatio-temporal region of experience: i.e. something that persists across the tree-related experiences, sufficient to afford unity to the situated thought.

Now, whether the non sequitur attributed to Kant here can be made good[20] need not be of concern in the present context. Regardless of whether we can move to the conclusion that there must be one abiding substance underlying all change, the point here is the more modest conclusion that there must be something abiding across any one change – that if there weren't, the perception of change would not be possible. That move – from *things change* to *there must be some object that is invariant underlying such a change* – is central to the argument, and the a priori truth of it can be brought out by taking up the assertion 'things change' in the context of a situated thought: by considering how things are for the situated subject

experiencing the change. It is the situated understanding of the thought that brings out the truth of what is implied a priori by it. Nothing else *can* bring it out; but more importantly, nothing else is needed to bring it out – and this even though the move in question is not analytic but rather is informative about how the world must hold together in our experience of it.

An objection should be raised at this point. Why could the change in question not be perceived without there being anything in the external world underlying, and so perceptually bridging, the gap between the situated thought contents, of what there is in the garden at t_1 and at t_2? It may be granted that to be able to calibrate the two there must be something that remains unchanged, but why should it be specifically something *external*? Now, if we accept the Kantian view that subjective apprehension is always successive and atomistic, then arguably the only thing that can make the two perceptions commensurable, is if they are perceived as so many alterations of a single underlying external world. (Without that, we could not even make sense of the two situated thoughts belonging to a single subject.) But that would count against the present attempt to construe transcendental arguments in terms of situated thought. The point of this construal is that the validity of transcendental arguments should be established a priori just from the situatedness of the relevant thoughts, without any dependence on the psychological make-up of the thinker. Insisting on experience being successive and atomistic would precisely be to introduce commitment to a form of transcendental or empirical psychology. Moreover, it is not as if there are no psychological models that reject one or both of those conceptions.

There are several possible lines of response to this objection. The most obvious response would be to grant the objection, but argue that it does not count against the understanding of transcendental arguments in terms of situated thoughts: that on the contrary, it shows only that Kant's argument in the First Analogy is not a very good transcendental argument, precisely because it seems to turn centrally on more than pure situated thought. Alternatively, it might be thought that Kant has saddled what would be a valid proof with a substantive model of the mind. There would then be several ways of prising the argument and the psychological model apart, and one is particularly relevant in the present context.

Without going into background detail, it is enough for present purposes to note that the argument can be freed from reliance on that psychological model to the extent that the change in question is not construed as possibly being a change merely between mental states, but rather is confined to a change in perceptions purportedly of external objects, such that not only the subjective experiences but also the apprehended states of affairs are *themselves* supposed to be temporally structured.[21] For these latter to be presented as changing in relation to one another, or as abiding, there must also be an abiding external world on the backdrop of which it makes sense

to say either that where one object was there is now another, or that where one object was there is still the same object. That is, the only way for a subject to be so situated with regard to the tree and the puff of smoke as to make sense of there being an objective change from the one to the other, is if the subject is also confronted with a single background world that remains constant throughout the change. For an experience to represent its objects, say, the disappearance of the tree and the appearance of a puff of smoke, as standing in objective relations, those objects must be construed as modifications of that abiding world. And this follows regardless of whether our experience is always atomistic and successive, or is given whole as an organically unified stream. In the latter case there may be no need to appeal to an abiding external world to explain the unity of consciousness, and the two experiences – as of a tree and of a cloud of smoke – would be related to one another by virtue of being the contents of a unified subjective order. But objectually construed, those contents – tree and smoke – would stand to be incommensurable: like the contents of distinct dreams, discretely anchored, that could not be coherently plotted in relation to one another (although the occurrence of the dreams themselves arguably could). For a thinker to be situated with regard to both object domains together so as to make sense of there being relations between their denizens, even if only of temporal succession, there would have to be a common world in which the two objectual contents made their appearance.

The idea then, in response to the objection raised, is that while there might be a construal of the argument that turns on a particular psychological theory, and to that extent fails to offer a fully transcendental proof, the specific line of argument presented here does not suffer that restriction, and turns only on the a priori presuppositions of situated thought.

I turn now to a second example of a transcendental argument, also drawn from Kant. The central proposition of the Second Analogy, on one construal of it, is that everything that happens (= every event) has its cause. Again, as a mere proposition it looks like a piece of metaphysics. And Kant is clear that no one can acquire insight into that proposition merely from attending to the concepts involved, and yet that it is known 'with complete apodictic certainty'.[22] We can again understand what Kant means, by regarding the intended transcendental proof as a matter of discovering the presuppositions of having the situated thought that underpins the central proposition. We need to ask, on this construal, what is involved in someone actually having the experience of something as being an event. It seems clear that where my perception is as of an event, rather than as of two coexisting states of affairs, there the order of the perceptions involved is irreversible. That irreversibility is the mark of event-perception. The question then is, what in my experience secures that irreversibility? What in the circumstances of my experience could render two perceptions such that they could not have occurred in reverse order? And Kant thinks that the subject

would be faced with irreversibility of the two perceptions only if the perceived states of affairs involved in them were put together in such a way that the one state could not have happened except consequent upon the other.[23] We might put the relevant point by saying say that it is only thus that the subject can, *internal to the resources given to him in experience*, establish the objectual states of affairs involved as themselves being in succession, and hence explain the irreversibility of his perceptions of them. But that is just to affirm a law-governed order (which constitutes a form of causality for Kant) holding within the objectual domain wherever we are entitled to talk of experiencing events.

It is important to note that the conclusion of the argument is not simply that we must have a *belief* in a causal order, but that such belief must be true to the facts, in this sense: the empirical world of which we have experience must be causally governed. Saying that the experienced world must be causally governed does not mean that our knowledge that it is so governed is part of what is given as the content of our perceptual experience. The content of our perceptual experience of the world clearly may be insufficient to establish that it is causally ordered (for all the Humean reasons that Kant was responding to). What the Kantian argument purports to show is that there is another route to establishing that the world we experience must be causally ordered. Our belief in the causal ordering of the world will necessarily correspond to the facts about the world we experience – since those causal facts are required for experience to have the structure it does have – even if those facts cannot be read off directly from the content of our perceptual experience of that world. The importance of this, in the present context, is in bringing out that the deliverances of situated thoughts are not confined to the phenomenologically given contents of perceptual states, but rather can extend to non-perceptual descriptions of how the world, in our experience of it, must hang together.[24]

This construal of the Second Analogy helps to bring out the sense in which it can be said that a situated understanding of the implication expressed by the proposition ⌜Everything that happens (every event) has its cause⌝ provides the grounds for the truth of the proposition itself. Considering what is required for us to be so situated as to have the experience of irreversible perceptual states of an object world, and hence of the occurrence of events in it, reveals that the states of affairs involved must themselves be governed by causal laws.

The general claim here is that as in these cases, of the First and Second Analogies, so in other central transcendental arguments there will be at least one proposition the appropriate understanding of which – and establishing the truth of which – involves situated thought. This is what might be put by saying that the crucial synthetic moves involved in transcendental arguments stand to be established a priori only by the relation of the propositional content to *possible experience*.[25]

7 Reflections

With this approach to transcendental arguments in place, some important features of these arguments stand to be explained.

First, the construal of central moves as situated thoughts casts some light on the question of whether the transcendental proofs in which those moves play a part are formal deductive inferences. Something was said about this earlier in anticipation, but it is worth returning to it now. There was a lively discussion surrounding the question of the formal validity of transcendental arguments several years ago, but it trailed off before any clear conclusion was reached.[26] The treatment here implies that construing these arguments as formally valid inferences cannot be adequate. Formal deductive arguments range over, and turn on, relations between propositions or sentences. But the content of a situated thought cannot be fully captured as propositional content: the content as delivered by the situatedness of the thinker essentially extends beyond anything that the mere propositional construal of the content can deliver.[27] Because of this, although the over-all form of a transcendental argument might seem to be of a deductively valid argument (e.g. extended *modus ponens*), when it comes to the central individual moves of the argument the notion of presupposition or necessary condition involved cannot be brought into play as long as we attend only to conceptual or propositional contents. It is precisely in consequence of acknowledging this that we have secured the relevant notion of a necessary condition – or an epistemic condition – that does allow those moves to be made a priori. If the notion of 'argument' is readily taken to stand for relations between propositions or sentences (ideally such relations as constitute valid deductive forms), then it might be better to avoid confusion by talking primarily of *transcendental proofs* rather than *transcendental arguments*. Transcendental proofs are (or stand to be) valid a priori, but the necessary conditions that their crucial moves advert to are not between propositions or concepts, but between situated thought contents.

We can put it this way: the over-all proof in which those situated thoughts feature as the grounds for the central moves can be articulated as a deductive inference, but only to the extent that those central ampliative moves are taken as premised in the course of the argument, it being acknowledged that they need to be separately established by way of transcendental proof, which requires departing from the purely propositional level of understanding to situated thought. As valid deductive inferences transcendental arguments are then parasitic on transcendental proofs, at least if they are to retain any epistemological interest.

It is interesting to note in this context that Kant himself does not usually speak of transcendental arguments, but of transcendental proofs.[28] We should perhaps not read that much into this terminological fact; nevertheless, in speaking of transcendental proof, Kant says things that readily

suggest the difference captured here in terms of the distinction between propositional/conceptual contents and situated thoughts:

> In transcendental knowledge, so long as we are concerned only with concepts of the understanding, our guide is the possibility of experience. Such proof does not show that the given concept (for instance, of that which happens) leads *directly* to another concept (that of a cause); for such a transition would be a *saltus* which could not be justified. The proof proceeds by showing that experience itself, and therefore the objects of experience, would be impossible without a connection of this kind. Accordingly, the proof must also at the same time show the possibility of arriving synthetically and *a priori* at some knowledge of things which was not contained in the concepts of them.
>
> (A783/B811)

Understanding transcendental proofs in terms of the necessary conditions of situated thoughts not only serves to set such proofs aside from others, but also explains why what makes them unique precisely fits them to be called *transcendental* proofs, in Kant's specific use of the term: as identifying that which is presuppositional to experience. In dealing with the conditions of having situated thought, such proofs precisely investigate how things must be held together for experience to be possible. It is because of this that transcendental proofs will always start from the basic situatedness of thought: from the fact that *I* have experience, or that all my experiences are *mine*. This makes it clear that it is not that there are transcendental arguments, and that the *interesting* ones will start from some premiss that the sceptic cannot doubt, such as that we have experience. It is rather in the very nature of anything properly called a transcendental argument or proof that it *must* have such a premiss. That it might thereby answer the sceptic is more or less a fortunate by-product.

A second feature, connected to this, relates to the status of these conditions. To take the example of the argument for permanence drawn from the First Analogy, an abiding world might be sufficient, but what renders it also necessary for the experience of objective change or, more generally, of temporal relations in the object-world? How do we establish that no other way of securing such experiences is possible? There is a very general sense in which we cannot rule out alternatives – the sense in which God could make *anything* work differently. But since that is seemingly true of basic mathematical truths and laws of logic too, that restriction on necessity claims need not be of special concern here. Leaving aside that general sense in which nothing can be claimed to be absolutely necessary, the point is that the link established a priori here, between a situated thought and its epistemic conditions, is so direct that we cannot even begin to identify, or

conceive of there being, any mediating mechanism which might be displaced (in other times or places). The connections in question seem to be necessary precisely because they are immediate – there is no logical space into which a wedge might be driven, suggesting where modification might occur such as would sustain alternative ways of making possible the situated thoughts in question. The thing that conceals that direct link, making it seem that one could be had without the other, is that rather than a situated understanding of the thoughts in question the matter is considered at the purely propositional level – at which level there is clearly room for doubt. Given that the necessity here is not psychological or metaphysical, and given how direct it is, we might – if only as a way of flagging a point for further work – think of it as a *sui generis* necessity: the necessity of certain conditions obtaining for situated thought to be possible at all. As such it may suitably be called *transcendental necessity*, where 'transcendental' means precisely being presuppositional to situated thought, or to experience.

A third feature worth noting is that we have here, in the construal of transcendental arguments in terms of situated thought, an approach to the link between transcendental arguments and transcendental idealism. Consider the following passage, from the First Analogy:

> we ought first to have proved that in all appearances there is something permanent, and that the transitory is nothing but determination of its existence. But such a proof cannot be developed dogmatically, that is, from concepts, since it concerns a synthetic *apriori* proposition. Yet as it never occurred to anyone that such propositions are valid only in relation to *possible experience, and can therefore be proved only through a deduction of the possibility of experience*,[29] we need not be surprised that though the above principle is always postulated as lying at the basis of experience (for in empirical knowledge the need of it is *felt*,) it has never itself been proved.
>
> (A184–5/B227–8, first set of italics mine)

Kant's purpose in talking of the propositions in question being valid only in relation to possible experience is, of course, primarily to indicate his strategy of curtailing the remit of metaphysical claims in order to be able finally to establish their a priori validity. But in the present context this talk of propositions that are valid only in relation to possible experience, and which can be proved only through a deduction of the possibility of experience, is again immediately suggestive of the more minimal claim: that the crucial move in the argument can be made good only in relation to situated thought (= possible experience), rather than in terms of bare propositional thought. That a passage, the primary concern of which is to articulate the transcendental idealist setting of the argument, is found amenable to such a construal is, I think, indicative of the fact that something about the notion

of situated thought is expressive of an insight in transcendental idealism. And it is an insight that may be retained without the rest of that position.

The underlying connection can be brought out, even without reaching for any transcendental distinctions, by clarifying the *way* in which the situatedness of thought is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of transcendental proof. If what has been said here is right, then if – *per impossibile* – a person's thought could not in any respect be construed by that person as situated, then the conclusions of transcendental proofs would not be available to that person for, specifically a priori, knowledge. We are to think here of a person whose point of view would be so detached that all of his thoughts were like that in the case of the person observing the garden on a monitor, not knowing where he himself is situated vis-à-vis the camera. But what is both necessary and sufficient for a transcendental proof to work is only that the subject's thought be situated virtually: that is, that it be situated with regard to an objectual domain, the order of which may be experienced as holding independently of our subjective states of awareness of it, regardless of whether the entire situation is in itself as it is internally presented to the thinker. Within the context in which the subject finds himself embedded, at least virtually, certain things will be known a priori to obtain (known by any person whose thought is so situated). This raises the possibility of a thought being situated, while the thinker can consider that he, or the subject with whom he is identifying, might not in fact be situated as he takes himself to be. In that case we have the domain within which the thought is situated giving rise to transcendental proofs, while allowing that those proofs are valid only within, and of, the context of such situated thought. Here the domain within which situated thought is embedded parallels Kant's empirical reality; while the recognition that the a priori validity of our transcendental proofs is restricted to such domains parallels Kant's transcendental idealism. In a nutshell, the connection with transcendental idealism lies in this: in the domain of situated thought, or of experience, the necessity of making the move in question is established, and it holds true of any such context, regardless of whether it holds true of, or indeed it makes sense to talk of there being, any domain that extends beyond it.

Finally, a comment on the difference between talking of conditions of situated thought and talking simply of conditions of experience. As was noted above, the device of situated thought serves to focus attention on the relevant dimension of experience, to render its articulation cognitive. But there is more to it than that: it is the way in which situated thought presents the cognitive articulation of experience that matters. If we speak of conditions of experience without any further qualification, then we should expect the conclusions of transcendental arguments to apply not only to human forms of such experience, but to all. Kant sensibly does not advocate anything like this: he thinks that God's experience, for example, would not be subject to the epistemic conditions that apply to us. His only explanation

for this is that we have faculties of the mind that would not be shared by all other forms of experience. This relieves transcendental arguments from the uncomfortable burden of having to legislate for all possible forms of experience. But it has the cost of relying on rather dubious transcendental psychology. It also draws the relevant line in the wrong place, since not only God but also other forms of experience (such as that had by non-human animals) then stand to be excluded from the jurisdiction of transcendental arguments. Unpacking transcendental arguments in terms of the device of situated thought has the advantage of drawing the line in the right place, for the right reason, and without being committed to transcendental psychology as a means of doing it. What is identified is that, for all we have seen, these are the conditions of any experience that is articulated from the perspective of an embedded subject. That includes more than human experience, obviously, and excludes God's experience, which is precisely not situated, or from a point of view. The link between transcendental arguments and points of view (perspectives) has long been appreciated. The suggestion here is that it is not that our point of view is tainted by a particular cognitive structure that we bring with us, but that it is the notion of a situated thought, the mere notion of experience as being from a point of view, that itself imposes the relevant structure.

8 Conclusion

A point of historical diagnosis might be worth bringing out at this point. The concern with transcendental arguments has been widespread since Kant, and as much in analytical circles as in non-analytic philosophy. But there is one relevant difference we are now in a position to identify clearly. I said earlier that a standard construal of transcendental arguments in terms of conceptual or propositional presupposition missed a crucial feature of such arguments. That construal has been particularly rife in analytic philosophy. In contrast, the refusal of the linguistic ascent, in favour of a descent into the phenomena, is more readily associated with a non-analytic approach to transcendental proofs.

Specifically, the form of proof identified, in asking after the preconditions of what I have been calling situated thought, approximates to what may deservedly be referred to as transcendental or pure phenomenology. If what has been said here is right, then we have an insight into how such a pure phenomenology is of epistemic – and not merely descriptive – import; and how it helps to capture both the nature of Kant's transcendental proofs and the confinement of their validity to empirical reality, to the level of possible experience.

The best way forward, as I hope should be clear from the above, is a combination of the two approaches. We should set out the formally valid deductive arguments as the shell, while recognizing that the central moves,

which can be regarded only as premised in the run of the argument, need to be established independently, by way of transcendental proof – working through the relevant propositional content in situated thought. If that is done, the status of propositions that are synthetic but a priori stands to be established (and their scope appropriately restricted).[30]

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Notes

1 Sometimes construing it empirically, and sometimes transcendentally. A representation construed empirically is a subjective mental content that represents to the subject how things are it is the analogue of the empiricists' talk of *ideas*. At the transcendental level we come to recognize that external objects too are species of representations. Thus, for example, he says 'The appearances, in so far as they are objects of consciousness simply in virtue of being representations, are not in any way distinct from their apprehension' (A190/B235); then a page later he says: 'Now immediately I unfold the transcendental meaning of my concepts of an object, I realise that the house is not a thing in itself, but only an appearance, that is, a representation, the transcendental object of which is unknown' (A190–1/B236). The distinction between empirical and transcendental representation runs parallel to that between empirical and transcendental appearances. See also A369–70 (and throughout the Fourth Paralogism).

2 The more or less uncritical construal of transcendental arguments in terms of conceptual schemes is, of course, not without basis in Kant.

3 It is thus refreshing to find Allison's complaint (1969: p. 227):

> What Strawson has done is to change Kant's concern with the necessary conditions of the possibility of experience, and with the objective validity and *a priori* knowledge of the principles based upon these conditions to a concern with the structure of our *conception* of experience.
>
> (italics in the original)

Despite this early intervention, much of the literature on transcendental arguments has continued to be run in terms of conceptual relations or connections within conceptual schemes.

4 Moreover, as we will see later, it threatens to broaden the construal of transcendental arguments so that what makes them specifically transcendental is lost; it also, relatedly, makes it seem that there are transcendental arguments and that while the interesting ones among them will start from some premiss that the sceptic cannot doubt, that is not inherent to the kind of argument transcendental arguments are.

5 *Prolegomena*, §2 (pp. 14–15); *CPR* A7/B11.

6 For an earlier approach to the phenomenological grounding of transcendental arguments, see Taylor 1995 (originally published in 1978).

7 Allison, 1983: p. 10.

8 Ibid.

9 op. cit., pp. 11–13.

10 op. cit., p. 65.

11 This will not sever the link between the nature of transcendental proof and an insight of transcendental idealism, but will avoid harnessing that insight with a

doctrine of transcendental psychology. The idea of securing transcendental arguments without transcendental psychology is not novel. The idea of securing the central insight in transcendental idealism without transcendental psychology is less usual.

12 For more on this, see Sacks, 2000, Chs 2 and 7.

13 Although, of course, it may be true that situated thoughts are most commonly had – at least in non-reflective contexts – alongside the corresponding experiences.

14 I say 'stands to carry' in part because I have not gone into the kind of self-consciousness that would in fact carry the thinker from one to the other.

15 For another simple illustration: consider the proposition ⌜There is a table and there is a door⌝. The propositional content alone does not entail that there is something given and perceptually available between the table and the door. But the situated thought does allow me to infer a priori that if the proposition obtains, there will also be something observable (in principle – it might, of course, be occluded) between the two objects perceived.

16 It is worth noting that in these first-person cases, even when the speaker is identified by the token reflexive, there is room for a non-situated comprehension of the proposition asserted. Think, for example, of a virtual-reality simulation of a character, who might be perceived to utter the token 'I do not exist': outside observers would understand the utterance, and would understand it to be about the putative speaker. But that form of comprehension of the assertion would not be enough to make it false.

17 Kant says: 'In all change of appearances substance is permanent' (B224); 'All appearances contain the permanent (substance) as the object itself, and the transitory as its mere determination' (A182).

18 It should be clear that the discussion of Kant here and in what follows is guided by reconstructive rather than purely exegetical objectives.

19 A188/B231, my italics.

20 See Bennett, 1966: pp. 199–200.

21 For more detail, see Sacks, 2005.

22 See, for example, A737/B765.

23 I will pass over the Lovejoy/Strawson *non sequitur* objection, and the proper response to it. But see Sacks, 2000: pp. 281–2.

24 It should be noted that these remarks do not represent a weakening of the earlier commitment to the relevance of phenomenological description, but rather serve to bring out the proper form of that relevance: what is relevant is not simply the phenomenologically given content, but the phenomenological orientation which affords insights into the presuppositions of being so positioned.

25 Cf. A736–7/B764–5. The final sentence of that passage, in the Kemp Smith translation, says of the proposition in question that it 'has this peculiar character that *it makes possible the very experience which is its own ground of proof*, and that in this experience it must always itself be presupposed' (my italics). This sentence has been targeted by several of those who have addressed the question of the nature of transcendental proof (e.g. Gram, 1971, Kalin, 1972, Hintikka, 1972, Gram, 1974, Rosenberg, 1975, Gram, 1977, Kalin, 1977, Gram, 1978). This interest is in part because there is the sense that in this passage Kant makes a claim, albeit condensed, which goes beyond the mere claim that transcendental proof identifies a priori presuppositions of experience in general (see Hintikka, 1972, Rosenberg, 1975; for criticism of Hintikka see Gram, 1978: n. 8). What this additional claim would come to remains unclear in these discussions, and could be brought out particularly well in terms of situated thought: the propositions expressing the central synthetic moves make possible a way of thinking through

their content, i.e. in situated thought, which at the same time establishes the truth of what is so comprehended. (That Kant means something like situated thought in his use of the term 'experience' here might be borne out by the gloss he provides earlier in the paragraph, when he speaks of 'experience (that is, something as object of possible experience)…'.) It is, however, important not to weigh in with exegetical pretences here: the impression that arises from Kemp Smith's translation of the sentence unfortunately does not arise in the original: 'weil er die besondere Eigenschaft hat, dass er seinen Beweisgrund, nämlich Erfahrung, selbst zuerst möglich macht, und bei dieser immer vorausgesetzt werden muss'.

26 See, among others, Griffiths, 1969, MacIntosh, 1969, Wilkerson, 1970, Gram, 1971, Kalin, 1972, Hintikka, 1972, Gram, 1974, Rosenberg, 1975, Bubner, 1975, Wilkerson, 1975, Gram, 1977, Kalin, 1977, Chisholm, 1978, Gram, 1978.

27 We might put this by saying that there is something ineffable, but directly accessible, to the content of situated thoughts.

28 For example, A782/B810ff. On this, see Franks, 1999: 112, n. 4, Hookway, 1999: 180, n. 8, and Stroud, 1999: 155.

29 'daß dergleichen Sätze nur in Beziehung auf mögliche Erfahrung gültig sein, mithin auch nur durch eine Deduktion der Möglichkeit der letzten bewiesen werden können'.

30 A version of this paper was presented at the Humboldt University in Berlin, at Essex University, and at Liverpool University, and I thank participants in discussions at all three for their comments. I am especially indebted to Lucy O'Brien, Peter Sullivan, Sebastian Gardner, David Bell, and an anonymous *IJPS* referee for detailed comments on earlier versions of the paper.

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