

Transcendental Philosophy Bull Session, with Jackie Ess & Peli Grietzer

Peli Grietzer & Jackie Ess

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Abstract

Peli and Jackie stayed up all night, talking about transcendental philosophy. This is the transcript.



Figure 1: two bulls

Peli and Jackie stayed up all night talking about philosophy and made a transcript.

Peli Grietzer: kevin sent me a little thing he wrote explaining kant and wittgenstein to himself and in response i got out what i think is maybe my

best casual statement of how i currently understand philosophy and what i currently take hegel's big good idea to have been:

this seems right to me! i'd add that what kant calls 'a transcendental argument' is a bit related to what you described later wittgenstein as doing. a transcendental argument is something like a demonstration that when asking the question 'why should i accept proposition x,' about a certain special proposition like for example 'there are objects and not just sense-impressions,' you are already implicitly relying on a framework relative to which x is true by tautology. so a transcendental argument is kind of a claim that you're implicitly using certain definitions or frameworks, but failing to reflect on the fact that you use them, and so fail to realize that you're committed to a certain answer to these questions. (that is, you are committed to the answer that follows tautologically from the framework you're implicitly using). in a way wittgenstein's big move was just to reframe all this in terms of language – the 'framework' is ordinary language, and the implications of the framework are the things we're normally allowed to sensibly say in the contexts in which we're normally allowed to sensibly say them.

the metaphysical statements, for kant or wittgenstein, are sort of free-spinning cogs unattached to the rest of the system, as you i think noted on twitter.

hegel, contra kant, and i think this cuts against wittgenstein as well, takes the view that the antinomies appearing in metaphysics are really the expressions of restlessness or instability in the entire 'system,' and they're actually how the system leverages itself into self-understanding and self-change. a system or framework where something feels both like a fundamental question and like a meaningless or unanswerable question has the task of 'sublating' itself into a system or framework where that question makes concrete sense. and hegel also says, i think, that the problem is that these groundless questions appear within the framework as ungrounded because we don't see how the framework itself is grounded in something beyond itself, how the framework itself expresses a certain move or position within some larger arena of thought and/or life and/or sociality, and how the question expresses the unease-with-itself of this position, and our inability to give sense to the question speaks to our inability to see our framework as it would be seen from a more concrete and expansive framework that can describe what the unease of our framework was about. at least that's my understanding of hegel as of like a week ago

Jackie Ess: this is very similar to what I said to him, and this is why I was Heidegger-posting the other day

J: because I actually think heidegger kills the transcendental project

J: I wonder if I could extract what I said to him

J: I mean, it was the context for this

going heidegger-mode in the chat. would be curious what friends make of this. do not retweet (not that there was much risk of that) pic.twitter.com/qKejCkUA2d

— Jackie Ess (@jackie_ess) July 6, 2020

J: and I would summarize a transcendental argument as “when we say that X, some fact about experience, is known a priori what we mean is that X is entailed by the minimum structure of having an experience at all”

J: so famously, in the transcendental deduction chapter of the critique of pure reason, he thinks he can derive everything from the “transcendental unity of apperception” which cashes out to all my experiences having some “mine-ness”

J: I don’t know how convinced I should be by such things. the most deflated account I ever found of this stuff is in henry allison’s book, “kant’s transcendental idealism”

J: transcendental grounding seems to be splitting the difference between a priori and empirical, and splitting the difference between subjective and objective

J: the claim is that there are things which we can do no other than believe, else we would be incoherent and not ourselves

J: and famously, that leaves open a little space for us to be totally wrong (this is all I think he means by “not knowing the thing itself”)

J: there are “conditions of the possibility of experience” and kant is hoping to reground what was previously said in metaphysics as among those conditions or their entailments

J: what this sounds similar to, closer to our own time, is the grounding of subjective bayesianism.

J: you can’t very well make a non-bayesian numerical assignment of degree of belief. but as we’ve discussed here before, it *is* possible to avoid any assignment

J: so bayesianism has some kind of special status, but its status may not be truth

J: what seems weird in kant is that there is no history and no scientific development accounted for

J: the transcendental deduction is like, and I mean you should read it

J: it’s a DEEP sip of kool-aid

J: and what you find in hegel is very similar transcendental machinery, with the crucial difference that he's in the first person plural. and he sees everything as mediated by actual history and culture, there's contingency

J: hegel also thinks he's resolving some big technical problems in kant, as all the generation after him did, which is this distinction between concepts and intuitions

J: there's this trouble of how our ideas and sensations actually link up. and this obsesses everybody for a generation after kant, even as it's an almost totally illegible concern for us

J: now one of the weird things for us, coming to this, is that what kant takes to be obvious psychological structure doesn't seem obvious at all

J: like wtf is "the understanding"? I don't know that we would map it out the same way

J: we do some seeing and some knowing or something. but kant seems weirdly over-optimistic about his ability to know the structure of experience and draw strong conclusions from it

J: that's a place where i think you get a little bit of breakdown

J: but the thing is, his "copernican turn," to the domain of the transcendental, does seem broadly accepted in philosophy after kant

J: could say that even though people are not believing kant, and perhaps they're thinking

J: they can do the same move and get a better result than him (no trouble at the concept/intuition junction, no frustrating carrot of the unconditioned)

J: they basically accept the idea that experience is structured, and that "meta-physics" should essentially be the determination of that structure, and figuring out how to harmonize structural entailments with empirical knowledge

J: so kant sort of wins, philosophy becomes about knowledge and experience in a way it wasn't always before

J: however I am sort of pessimistic about this whole strain. I think that we're very bad at knowing about knowing, especially when the only tools are introspection and argument

J: and you could sort of connect that perspective to wittgenstein. especially the later wittgenstein, he seems relatable in that his philosophy expresses an extreme confusion at

J: what we are even doing when we speak, let alone when we claim that we know

J: he doesn't as far as I know shine a very bright light on "experience as such"

J: but I'd guess the latter is even more confused than language

P: i guess my kant and hegel are both very filtered through analytic in that the whole ‘experience’ aspect of it doesn’t naturally occur to me, and i tend to think of it more in terms of the commitments incurred by the discursive act of asking a question

P: but I think Hegel at least really does go there?

P: that is, the interesting thing about hegel over kant for me

J: Dawkins shirt meme — “we are all Brandomians”

P: is the idea that the ‘categories’ or whatever come out of a process of dealing with antinomies that arise in trying to conceptualize yourself

P: it’s not a structure that’s just there, to be noted and obeyed. it’s a structure that emerges from the process of asking what the fuck is going on

J: I think if we go really far in that direction we might get to something difficult to dispute

J: certainly I wouldn’t want to say that experience is totally unstructured or that we can know nothing about it

J: likewise implicit discursive commitments

P: I guess I’ve become very sublation-pilled. like, i think there’s really something to the idea that a self-consciousness drive or rationality drive generates something if you run with it. i don’t know if you’ve seen my posts about this, but i’ve become sort of interested in kind of sufficiency based rather than necessity based transcendental thinking

What I mean is, he describes a type of agent for whom a particular doubt-procedure or negation-procedure (‘suspension’) whose objects are propositions about what to think and what to do is king, and argues that this procedure has an attractor

— Peli Grietzer (@peligrietzer) June 17, 2020

How I spent my summer vacation pic.twitter.com/EWg9srPiSL

— Peli Grietzer (@peligrietzer) July 5, 2020

P: it’s like, i think one could start with something like an idea of freedom/autonomy and really actually get a lot of stuff down by saying ‘so there’s this information processing system that leverages itself towards freedom/autonomy, you can guess the rest’

P: With Heidegger it’s like, we wanted thought to describe experience without changing experience, I guess?

J: a lot depends on whether particular arguments succeed

P: But more concretely I think the very beginning of the Phenomenology anticipates the Heideggerian objection you describe and answers it? Basically that

it's not the conditions of experience that transcendental philosophy is about, it's about the conditions of thinking about experience (to start with)

J: well, I guess what I am saying is that I am not at all convinced we have traction there either

J: we don't have much access to thinking but by language

J: and language is a much bigger mess than hegel thinks, we don't get past it

J: these projects would be, I should say, totally different if they were more convincing

J: there is real content in the fact that hardly anyone can decode or be convinced by the transcendental deduction

J: that hegel's logic is famously arcane, and that his historiography is extremely questionable

J: so what I would say is that every suggestion of a transcendental project succeeds and every realization fails

P: I wonder why I find this besides the point. i guess my instinct is something like 'the ancient atomists didn't get the details of nature right but the sort of nailed the basic idea of what nature is'

P: yeah that's fair, but i don't see how this relates to the heideggerian critique per se?

J: relation to heidegger is that I think heidegger makes a real effort to say something like "the reason this attempt to find the conditions of the possibility of experience failed is because experience as such is not even a thing"

J: the atomists didn't get the details of nature right but also it might have been fine for them not to exist. I don't think they are really vindicated by later atomic theory

P: it's more that they laid out the idea of reductive explanation and the distinction between appearances and physical reality in pretty much the right way, the atomists

P: well, for kant experience is like, almost by definition, 'the stuff you refer to when you refer to the possibility of appearances not matching reality'

P: it's so tied to the argument with hume

P: and to say, actually you can't talk about experience as such –

P: That's kind of saying that kant was exactly right?

J: no, because kant thinks he can elaborate a structure

P: the whole point of the first critique, i think, is meant to be exactly that talking about experience is in no way safer or more minimalist than talking about the world

J: it is much better to say the transcendental deduction. I take that argument to be the core of the first critique

J: if it doesn't convince you, then you're reading history of philosophy

J: it works or it doesn't

J: kant himself wrote two versions of it, the very fact of going from the A deduction to the B deduction is an indication that he saw it as close to the core of his project.

P: i feel like 'if the transcendental deduction doesn't work the Kantian revolution doesn't work' is an extremely radical take

J: only as radical as taking kant at his word

J: but this is what I take to be a characteristically modern position

J: like, why does someone like heidegger depart from the transcendental project

J: which he's clearly trying to complete in being and time

J: I think he figured out that you can't do it

J: and it's quite interesting to go to kant and say like. you are my lawyer, will I beat the charge? that level of reading for argument

J: which hardly anyone does, because usually they are interested in the history of philosophy or in generous, reparative readings, among other forms of ventriloquism

J: and the observation I am making is that I think that fails not only for kant

J: but for everyone

J: if it was only kant who failed, then you could find another transcendental bandwagon to jump on

J: for example, kant evidently thinks that the categories are fixed. they have no history, are insensitive to scientific development etc. Hegel doesn't. He's more slippery than that. But he fails too.

P: I think you're reading kant through Phenomenology in a way that many people find very weird. like, the idea that kant's goal is to try to describe the structure of experience is, i think, very different from what most post-kantians would see as the point of kant

J: my goal isn't to knock down kant

J: his copernican turn occurred. philosophy became epistemology. everybody in his wake works in this space of the transcendental, with small variations

J: until the 20th century

J: I think perhaps that had to occur

J: I am not an anti-kantian

J: however, when you move into that space of the transcendental and try to get some traction

J: it matters whether anything you say is true

J: does A imply B

J: henry allison made a valiant attempt to extract a minimum viable version of the transcendental deduction

J: I don't think it would have to be 100% perfect by the way

J: just like "at all convincing"

P: like, when you say heidegger says the philosophers try to derive the zuhanden from the vorhanden – isn't the goal of the first critique exactly the other way around? To show, contra hume, that you can't talk about experience without talking about space and time and things like that, and so the skeptic claiming to have a concept of experience but not of space and time and things like that is off?

P: and what do you see as occurring in the 20th century?

J: a crisis of credibility of the transcendental project as such

J: we go from seeking a small modification to just not buying it at all

J: I don't think Kant exactly draws the Zuhanden from the Vorhanden, but I don't think he is talking about Z at all for the most part. I think the plan is to show that in order to have simple V you're committed to some seemingly metaphysical entailments (unity of apperception, space, time, causation)

J: I don't think that this Z/V distinction is really what I'd gun for if I wanted to establish what I think about kant

J: except in a retrospective sense, I think it might help to think in the wake of what I claim is the failure of the kantian project

J: and that failure is straightforwardly: transcendental deduction fails

J: and attempts to do things like the transcendental deduction, for example, hegel seems to think there is a local transcendental deduction

J: your implicit metaphysical commitments are a matter of your concrete history, life and world

J: that sounds pretty good

P: a couple of different things in the air here, but i think i still don't understand the heidegger connection

J: but again, could you figure out what they actually are

J: well I think that the later heidegger particularly, I want to say that his turn to mysticism is partly his conviction that philosophy was doomed entirely to failure

J: but that his definition of philosophy might be narrow or unrecognizable to a contemporary

J: and is virtually identical with the transcendental project

J: i.e. an elaboration of the implicit conceptual structure of experience

J: or I should say, implicit conceptual commitments

J: so he's an interesting figure in the sense that he sees the end of all of this stuff. correctly imo. only he sees it as a catastrophe, and through the lens of his own failure to complete being and time etc

J: of course, if it had been 100 years earlier he could have simply declared being and time complete

J: and for hundreds of years after people would be talking about how it's Kinda True

J: but this project is for the moderns actually impossible

J: so he is anti-philosophizing, in the wake of disenchantment

J: this is what I was taking from my attempt to read beitrage last year

P: i mean, i feel like the big issue for transcendental philosophy as you describe it is that obviously 'commitments' isn't the kind of thing an experience can have

P: conceptual activities might have them though, depending on how you understand the idea of commitment and of conceptual activities

P: i think you're thinking of a version of kant the leads to heidegger and i'm thinking of a version of kant that leads to dummett and carnap

J: right, eventually you can say "what are the implicit entailments of this discourse?" and it would be hard to find any issue with that question

J: in the end I think we're agreeing. because what I'm taking as the transcendental project is to solve classical philosophical problems

J: once you give up on that

J: you can do whatever you want

J: so what I was saying to kevin

J: was that heidegger and the analytic philosophers are *both* working in the wake of what I would consider to be the transcendental project

P: see, i think of wittgenstein as analytic kant and sellars as analytic hegel

J: but you know, I think kant actually wanted to, if not answer the question, resolve a genuine crisis regarding the relationship of philosophy to atheism, whether humean skepticism makes science impossible, etc

J: and what you find in the 20th century is no one really thinks they can do that with a transcendental method

P: what i think of as the basic kantian move, which is ‘you think restricting yourself to x-talk/x-concepts is a kind of minimalism, but actually x-talk/x-concepts depend on so much other kinds of talk/concepts’ as like what almost the entirety of ‘sophisticated’ analytic philosophy is up to. wittgenstein, davidson, dummett, putnam, and so on

J: I guess the way I read that move is to say “there is no discourse unafflicted by philosophical trouble”

J: so through the lens of revenge paradoxes

J: where I characterize revenge paradoxes as something like “I tried to remove paradox by adopting a restricted style of sentence or a fancy paraconsistent logic, but then you used those tricks to reproduce the same trouble or something just as bad”

P: I should go to sleep, but might pick this up again tomorrow?

J: yeah please do

J: parting thought is that I’ve come around to those strains of sophisticated analytic philosophy

J: and what I’m saying is that this is one path, and heidegger’s mysticism are another, which differ in their response to the same wreck

P: oh, one thing – you don’t think, that, like, the fact that we can’t get rid of causation and agency even though they don’t appear in fundamental physics is, like, a pretty solid example of a transcendental type thing?

J: I don’t think that either exists ;)

J: that’s what I like about the trippiness of heidegger

J: I don’t think it’s even so hard to get rid of those things

J: some kind of loose temporality, sure

J: but what if there aren’t “events”

J: or if the Event is as constructed a Thing

J: when the Ereignis hits

J: more like Enpwning amirite

P: i think i see where you’re coming from

P: like, you see kant as throwing his hat in the same ring as, like, the stoned college student wondering whether cats have a concept of time

P: and as having to account for, like, what you experience on acid

P: you're probably right

P: though i think there's a way of thinking about kant where he's a lot like husserl, concerned with experience as such, and a way of thinking about kant where he's concerned with, like, objects in as much as creatures dependent on the senses can relate to them

P: and the second reading has i think a much smoother transition to sophisticated analytic

P: with a kind of change of focus from the senses to language, but only a change of focus because the language/verification-conditions connection keeps language and the senses close

P: and kant's stressing of the conceptual nature of sense-perception already got the senses closer to the linguistic

J: it's funny that only stoned kant has to get anything right...

J: based kant

J: I don't think what I am saying is so dependent on stonerism though

J: I think I am saying, here is Kant saying "here, I found better grounds for a priori knowledge" "cool, how did you do that?" "transcendental deduction!" "great, how does that work?" "ummm"

P: Maybe relevant is that I think Kant's biggest idea is the idea of a 'regulative principle'

J: I should let you sleep but how would you explain that?

J: ah ok I remember the term

P: where you have to make-believe something in order for everything else to not fall apart and that makes it functionally real

P: I've actually got to run buy a snack or something too hungry to fall asleep :)

J: yes. well, here is the thing. I could imagine a situation where I say "I have to make-believe one of these hundred propositions, but it doesn't matter which one"

J: or that set could be infinite

J: in which case we might have something like a regulative principle but very little traction

J: this is what I think actually happens

J: so the question would be: if you're interested in establishing some regulative principles, is it possible to actually establish a *determinate* regulative principle, and show that it is actually regulative

J: in other words that it has the kind of necessity you're talking about

J: and this is precisely what I am saying has never failed to fail

P: so, the reason i brought in stoner-kant, is that i think one has to admit, for example, that even there's a stoner sense in which you can give up causation in your understanding of everyday reality, there's also a non-stoner sense in which you can't?

J: i agree, yet I think that on your way from that observation to the kind of regulative principle kant thought you could take to the bank

J: you always get lost

J: along the forest paths (holzwege)

P: I think reza's book, though very messy, tries to come in at more or less this exact crisis-point or crossroad. He's really trying to sort of pitch sophisticated analytic philosophy as actually doing all the 'classical' stuff if you take it far enough literally enough. i'm pretty unsure whether it works out but there's something exciting there

P: btw i'm also not sure i agree the transcendental deduction is such a clear failure. i think the broad-contours version presented here has a lot going for it

P: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/#TraDed>

P: the basic move of the transcendental deduction is, i think, the exact 'introspection is a very late-in-the-game concept, actually' move that plays a huge role in e.g. sellars and wittgenstein

P: speaking of memoirs have you read Ray's yet?

J: I have not, I've been deeply engaged in a literary hoax

P: ?

J: in spite of what I said yesterday I think I will tell you about this. vanity wins

J: so let me lay out some context

[...]