Is there an 'End' to Philosophical Scepticism?*

LILIAN ALWEISS

Introduction

Readers familiar with P. F. Strawson's work will be well aware that Strawson's reconstruction of Kant is a kind of Jekyll and Hyde, benign and perverse[1]. The benign Kant shines brightly as the empiricist who, in many ways advocates Strawson's 'objectivity thesis', whereas the perverse, is the idealist who views experience as a 'shadow of truth' (BS, 256). On the one hand, Strawson thereby does justice to Kant, which has been long overdue. The cobwebs which once shrouded Kant's name have been torn away and his doctrine again 'powerfully echoes in the analytical philosophy of our time'[2]. On the other hand, Strawson not only lets the 'other', the idealist Kant, wither away but his critique confirms a view that is prevalent in the analytical tradition: transcendental idealism leads down a thorny blind alley, creating unnecessary philosophical confusions, we can easily do without.

The purpose of this paper is neither to quibble about the way Strawson depicts Kant, nor to defend Kant's position. It sets out to explore whether Strawson's reconstruction of Kant satisfies his own task of identifying what is needed for us to have experience of an objective world.

A. Strawson's Objectivity Thesis

Strawson disagrees with Kant's view that we can only do metaphysics if it is restricted to the realm of appearances. By

* I am grateful to Steven Kupfer for his helpful comments and should like to thank the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences for providing me with a year's fellowship which has made this study possible.

[1] Cf. P. F. Strawson: *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, (London: Methuen 1966), 256, which I will abbreviate to BS.

[2] P. F. Strawson: 'Kant's New Foundations of Metaphysics', in Dieter Henrich and Rolf Peter Horstmann (eds.) *Metaphysik nach Kant*?, (Stuttgart: Klett-Kotta, 1988), 163.

doi:10.1017/S0031819105000367 ©2005 The Royal Institute of Philosophy

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

drawing a distinction between the world of appearances and the thing in itself, he gives too much credence to the sceptic. Metaphysics should be 'content to describe the actual structure of thought about the world', there is no need of postulating a world that lies beyond our grasp. We neither need to refute nor accept scepticism since we can ignore it with *good reasons*. It is sufficient to adopt 'anodyne' (cf. BS 38) version of Kant, and identify what is needed for us to have experience of an objective world without taking on board Kant's transcendental story. Strawson's aim is thereby to explore what Locke would have called the physiology of human understanding, namely the necessary conceptual structures which make knowledge of the world possible.

In this way Strawson believes it is possible to silence the sceptic and to do metaphysics. Namely it is possible to provide a comprehensive account of the fundamental structure of reality. So much we can learn from Kant. He has shown that there are certain necessary conceptual structures which make knowledge of the world possible. All we need to do is to identify what we need in order to have experience of an objective world. According to Strawson the sceptic's starting point is simply flawed. We do not begin with the subjective point of view and ask how can creatures like ourselves gain knowledge of a mind-independent reality. There is no 'worldless' subject that has to look for the world, rather Strawson informs us that the sceptic fails to see that self-awareness already *presupposes* an awareness of an objective, mind-independent world. The self-conscious subject thus satisfies what he calls the *objectivity condition*. It includes experience of objects in the 'weighty sense', which are possible for us to experience and to know, and which continue to exist unperceived.[3] These views Strawson has taken from Kant's 'Refutation of Idealism' and the 'Analogies of Experience':[4] To be able to call experience one's own, one has to be capable of thinking of one's experiences *as* experiences. One must be able to distinguish between the way objects are and our experience of them. The self-ascription of experiences includes awareness of the distinction between 'this is how things are' and 'this is how things are experienced as being'. Experience of objects in the weighty sense are thus a necessary condition of the possibility of self-ascription of experience.[5]

[3] Cf. Strawson (1959), *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. (London: Methuen). Chapter One.

[4] See section C below.

[5] Strawson (1966), 108.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

B. Philosophical Scepticism

For the moment, the question whether there is a necessary connection between self-consciousness and the objectivity condition shall be set aside. Rather, we shall be asking whether Strawson's objectivity thesis succeeds on its own terms.[6] Does he manage to silence the sceptic *with good reason*? The problem seems to be that by describing what he believes to be necessary *for us* to have self-conscious experience, he is no longer doing what he purports to be doing, namely, providing a descriptive metaphysics. He identifies 'the actual structure of our *thought* about the world',[7] but not the actual structure of the world.

Such concerns are raised by self-professed sceptics like Barry Stroud who argues that while Strawson may have convincingly shown that experience of myself is possible only if I presuppose the existence of things outside myself, this argument fails to prove that my belief is necessarily *justified*. All that has been argued is that I must *believe* that self-knowledge is possible only if I have knowledge of the external world (or other minds), yet this falls short of establishing that these beliefs are true. Stroud thereby questions the role that transcendental arguments (TA) can play. He presents the following option: Either TAs provide sufficient resources to affirm the existence of something external (an external world or other minds), or TAs can only establish that certain concepts are necessary for our experience of something external without, however, being able to prove the existence of an external world.

Strawson's argument only works if we regard it as experience directed. It fails miserably if we regard it as truth directed. To be able to prove that the belief in the external world is justified, he would have to employ the *verification principle* which he does not have. He cannot provide a criterion that would allow him to move from belief to knowledge. As T. E. Wilkerson observes: at most we can say that 'we must *suppose* that there is an external world', however we can never prove 'that there *is* an external world'.[8] We are thereby warned that we should not identify truth with rational acceptability. Descriptive metaphysics is not immune to the charge of scepticism.

Stroud points us to an *aporia*. It is important to note that philosophical scepticism here does not arise because we are able to

[6] Considerations as to whether its terms are the correct ones will not be discussed in this paper.

[7] Strawson (1959), 9, my emphasis.

[8] T. E. Wilkerson (1976), *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

prove that TAs are flawed, it arises only because we are unable to show whether this position is justified or not. Stroud thereby allows for the possibility that some alternative view or conceptual scheme may be true, even though we may never know about it. This reflects Descartes' fears that I cannot exclude the possibility that a malicious demon 'of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me'.[9] Such a critique renders transcendental arguments redundant. TAs are just one of the many schemes we might use to make sense of the world, yet in no way can we show that they are the only necessary scheme.[10] So long as it remains necessary to verify my knowledge of the world, I rid myself of transcendental arguments and fall prey to a realist position (i.e. philosophical scepticism).

Yet Strawson is not that easily rebutted. He believes it is impossible to maintain such an unsustained doubt with good reasons. In his lights, Stroud's sceptical position is illegitimate. It amounts to a rejection of some of the necessary conditions of the existence of the conceptual scheme within which alone such doubts make sense. Stroud's critique would only be intelligible if we were to have a view from nowhere[11]. We are told that the sceptic's challenge 'is set self-contradictorily high'[12] which 'reduces to the tautology: no knowledge of things is possible *except under the conditions under which it is possible;* or: we can know of things only what we can know of them'.[13] Strawson believes that 'it is not at all right simultaneously to pretend to accept the requirements of understanding and to refuse to accept them'.[14] Strawson thereby shifts the burden of proof: The sceptic first has to provide a coherent story about this alternative God's Eye point of view, before we need to take his

[9] René Descartes (1984), 'Mediations on First Philosophy' in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes Vol. II*, trans. John Cottingham. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 15 / 22.

[10] J. R. Searle for example believes that it is dogmatic to presuppose *that* there is a most fundamental structure of reality since there are lots of kinds of things—'the real mistake is to start counting at all' (Searle (1994), *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, (Cambridge: Mass.: The MIT Press), 26).

[11] Cf. Strawson (1992), *Analysis and Metaphysics: An Introduction to Philosophy,* Oxford: (Oxford University Press), 64. This is a phrase Nagel coined. See Nagel (1986).

[12] Strawson (1959), 34.

[13] Strawson (1989), 'Sensibility, Understanding, and the Doctrine of Synthesis: Comments on Henrich and Guyer' in: Eckart Förster ed.: *Kant's Transcendental Deductions*. Stanford: (Stanford University Press): 69–77, 73.

[14] See Strawson (1959), 109.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

position seriously. Since the sceptic who is a sentient creature like us cannot adopt such a point of view, we can shrug our shoulders at sceptical concerns.[15] Donald Davidson provides a similar argument with respect to language. There is no general or absolute conception of truth that goes beyond the truth of all possible sentences in a language or that could not be translated into other possible languages that we could understand. It is nonsensical to talk about a true world that remains untranslatable since we cannot 'understand it independently [of the notion of translation] at all'.[16]

Since a God's Eye point or view from nowhere remains nonsensical, Strawson believes we can do metaphysics without being haunted by the spectre of scepticism. This is also why he rejects Kant's phenomenon-noumenon distinction. It does not make sense to talk about things in themselves[17] or about an 'absolute conception of reality' that lies beyond our grasp. It is important to note that Strawson is not saying that absolute knowledge is possible, or that the real is coextensive with our *actual* conception of it, rather he 'readily admits that there are facts we do not know'.[18] To quote Strawson at length:

> There may be *kinds* of fact of which we have, at present, no more conception than our human predecessors had of some kinds of fact admitted in our conceptual schemes but not in theirs. We learn not only how to answer old questions, but how to ask new ones. The idea of the aspects of Reality which would be described in the answers to the question we do not yet know how to ask is one which, like the idea of the realms of the noumenal, though not in the same drastic style, limits the claim of actual human knowledge and experience to be 'co-extensive with the real'.[19]

Reality extends beyond what we can conceive at present, however, this extension does not point to a noumenal realm which transcends all possible appearances but remains co-extensive with, or translat-

[15] See also Hilary Putnam (1981), *Reason, Truth and History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 'Brains in a Vat', 1–21.

[16] Davidson (1984), 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: (Oxford University Press), 194. See also Wai-hung Wong (2003) 'Strawson's Anti-Scepticism: A Critical Reconstruction' in *Ratio* IXV, 2, 290–306, for a comparison of Strawson with Davidson.

[17] For the purpose of this paper I employ the terms noumenon and the thing in itself (*das Ding an sich*) interchangeably.

[18] Strawson (1966), 42.

[19] Strawson (1966), 42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

able to, the real. Our knowledge is limited insofar as there is always a need for improvement and correction, however, such corrections always remain *within* the necessary conceptual structures which make knowledge of the world possible in the first place.

In view of this Strawson advocates epistemic modesty. It suffices to provide a conceptual analysis which makes intelligible to us why we cannot do without the objectivity thesis: 'By talking about our conceptual structure, the structure of our thought about the world, rather than, as it were, *directly about the world*, we keep a firmer grasp on our own philosophical procedure, a clearer understanding of what we are about'.[20] Strawson seems content to rest his case with the modest claim that we can only explain, yet never justify why we are committed to the belief that self-conscious thought or experience is possible only if we believe that we have knowledge of external physical objects or other minds.[21] He is content to give up the wholesale verificationism in order to embrace what he regards to be 'the real project of investigating the connections between the major structural elements of our conceptual scheme'.[22] The task is to describe certain general features that are necessary ingredients in any coherent conception of experience. This is not a moment of weakness for Strawson. Quite the contrary, once we accept the limits of our conceptual structure, the force of scepticism dissipates. If we do not wish to follow Kant's transcendental perversions and plunge into unintelligibility, it seems that this is all that can and should be said.

C. The Fissures of Belief

Yet is this really so? With what justification does Strawson argue that there is a limit to what can be said? Strawson seems only to be able to justify the limit of sense by allowing the sceptic to slip in by the back door. Though sympathetic to Strawson's position, it seems to me that he renders suspect his own argument by adopting the language of belief rather than that of knowledge. He thereby asserts an unargued premise—namely—that we are precluded from knowledge claims.

I take it that Strawson employs the language of belief both epistemologically and transcendentally. Yet it seems to me that in both cases, though for different reasons, the use of the term belief

[20] Strawson (1992), 33, emphasis added.

[21] Strawson (1992), 57

[22] Strawson (1985), *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties; The Woodbridge Lectures 1983*. (New York: Columbia University Press), 22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

remains unjustified. On an epistemological level it is insufficient, on the transcendental level it is based on an unargued premise.

Let me turn to the epistemological issue first. According to Strawson, the 'Refutation of Idealism' argues that belief in the external world is necessary in order for self-knowledge to be possible. This is the exact opposite of Kant's claim. Kant informs us: The task of the 'Refutation of Idealism' is to show that, from the starting-point that we actually have, the language of faith or belief is insufficient and, indeed, illegitimate. Unlike Strawson, Kant thereby rebuts Stroud's scepticism head on: knowledge claims are possible since the *criterion of verification* is *internal* to the argument of the 'Refutation of Idealism'. Rather than eclipsing the question whether truth and knowledge claims are possible, as Strawson does, Kant accepts what Stroud has called the 'conditional correctness of scepticism'.[23]

Epistemological scepticism about the external world arises when we regard the world of material objects as secondary to self-knowledge. If we believe that there is a gap separating my experience from the world, then we can only *infer* the existence of objects outside us. The 'Refutation of Idealism' however argues that Descartes was mistaken in believing that self-knowledge is primary. It shows 'that even our inner experience, which for Descartes is indubitable, is possible only on the assumption of outer experience'.[24]

Kant provides us with the following argument: Before I know that I think and therefore exist, I need to know that there is a world that exists. Kant arrives at this conclusion through his observation that I can only experience myself in time in view of something permanent. From the first analogy we know that permanence is a substratum of all change, even the change of myself in time (Cf. CPR, A184/B227). This permanent, in turn, 'cannot be in me since it is only through this permanent that my existence in time can be determined'. If this is the case then my 'perception of this permanent is possible only through a *thing* outside me and not through the mere *representation* of a thing outside me; and consequently the determination of my existence in time is possible only through the existence of actual things which I perceive outside me' (CPR,

[23] Stroud (1995), *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press). See also Stroud (1982), 'Transcendental Arguments' in Ralph C. S. Walker ed: *Kant on Pure Reason*. Oxford: (Oxford University Press): 117–31.

[24] Kant (1933), *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith. (London: MacMillan), B275. CPR, hereafter.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

B275). Hence against Descartes, Kant shows that knowledge of my empirical self presupposes knowledge of things outside us. In this manner he believes that he is able to provide a cogent proof for the existence of things outside us.

I take it that Strawson would not quibble with this presentation. Yet Kant not only reverses Descartes' argument; he wishes to bring home to us that the language of belief is not sufficient. The 'Refutation of Idealism' only works if it precludes the language of belief: Were I just to *believe* that there are things outside me (as Stroud claims) consciousness would be unable to distinguish itself from things outside itself and thus self-knowledge would be impossible. If the world were purely 'for itself', then consciousness would have no determinate aspect of knowing that it exists in time. It is not sufficient to believe that there is something permanent outside me which makes my existence in time intelligible. Through the existence of actual things outside me, I can determine my existence in time. The criteria of verification are thus internal to the argument of the 'Refutation of Idealism'. It is not that we must *suppose* that there is an external world, but there *is* an external world. We can never accept the existence of things outside us merely on faith. It is therefore not as Stroud believes that the internal story cannot be justified so long as the external solution is ignored. Even for the internal story it is insufficient to *believe* (and not to know) that things exist outside us. On the empirical level, Strawson's language of belief will not do, it is unqualified.

The critique just raised might sound little more than a terminological quibble. After all, Strawson agrees with Kant that the 'Refutation of Idealism' provides the ground for the is/seems distinction. Like Kant, Strawson argues that it is not up to our imagination; it is not that it just seems or appears that there is an external world, but that we cannot but have this belief. In other words, it is a necessary condition of possibility for any sense, or, as Kant would say, the condition of possibility for any knowledge claim. Hence, that Strawson employs the language of belief rather than that of knowledge, though unjustified, has no serious *epistemological* implication. Yet what appears as a mere terminological quibble, actually points to something more profound.

Strawson's use of the language of belief is not merely a matter of terminology, rather I believe that his choice of terminology is based on an unacknowledged metaphysical commitment. First, it is important to note that Strawson's language in many ways echoes that of Hume. Where Hume refers to our 'natural disposition to belief', Strawson produces an argument that explains our 'natural,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inescapable commitments which we neither choose nor could give up'.[25] Hume justifies the language of *belief* by accepting the 'conditional correctness of scepticism'. As Hume points out: though the professed sceptic 'must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, [....] he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity'.[26] The language of belief is intelligible and, indeed, legitimate *because* Hume leaves us with an unrefuted scepticism.

Strawson does not wish to inherit this metaphysical baggage and argues that it is possible to adopt the language of belief, thereby endorsing one half of Hume—the naturalist—ignoring the other half—the sceptic—in the same way as it is possible to adopt only the empirical Kant and to ignore his alter-ego—the transcendental idealist —. Strawson justifies this move by arguing that it is not necessary to meet sceptical doubts by argument, they can simply be neglected because 'they are *idle*; powerless against [...] our naturally implanted disposition to belief'.[27] In other words, it is possible to be concerned with epistemological questions and to ignore metaphysical concerns which are fruitless and of no serious philosophical interest.

D. Epistemic Modesty

I can see the advantages of Strawson's position. To philosophize is not to speculate about possible worlds or possible viewpoints which we can never adopt, but to remain within the bounds of what can be known. I have no problem with Strawson's refusal either to pose or to solve the problem of scepticism.[28] Nonetheless, like Stroud, although for different reasons, I am unhappy with Strawson's descriptive metaphysics. The problem is that there seems to be a discrepancy between what Strawson says and what he does. Whilst he believes that he has achieved a right to shrug his shoulders at sceptical questions he, nonetheless, makes the metaphysical claim that he wishes to profess epistemic modesty. We can only refer to a necessary belief and never to knowledge claims.

It is this claim that I wish to take to task. For it would appear that

[25] Strawson (1985), 28. Strawson draws such an analogy by comparing Hume to Kant. He argues that both thinkers diverge at the critical level: 'Hume leaves us with unrefuted skepticism, Kant offers us his own brand of idealism' ibid., 13.

[26] Hume (1888), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 187. Cited in Strawson (1985), 11.

[27] Strawson (1985), 13.

[28] Strawson (1992), 63.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by professing epistemic modesty and pointing to the limits of sense, Strawson has endorsed a metaphysical commitment he wishes to do without. What I find difficult to understand is how Strawson can adopt the language of belief and in the same breath shrug his shoulders at philosophical scepticism. Is it really possible not to think both sides of the limit but to think only up to the limit?[29] It seems to me that once we *ignore* the sceptic, we have lost the *right* to employ the language of belief. The problem I am raising here is that Strawson simultaneously seeks to silence the problem of scepticism and to argue for the boundedness of sense. Yet the former does not provide the justification for the latter. Rather the opposite is true, the sceptic provides the justification for the language of belief. Let me repeat: my concern here is not a terminological one. My concern is that Strawson appears to justify his epistemic modesty on the unargued metaphysical premise that we are precluded from knowledge claims.

Thus, when Strawson maintains that sceptical arguments 'are idle, unreal, a pretense; and the rebutting arguments are equally idle',[30] he is saying one thing and doing another. He says that we can never adopt the view from nowhere; on the empirical level scepticism is idle. However, he then accepts the sceptical position by arguing that we can only talk about 'our conceptual structure, the structure of our thought about the world' and never 'as it were, *directly about the world*'.[31] Hence, the only language that is available to us is that of belief. However, if this is how Strawson justifies his epistemic modesty, then he has in fact reinstated the truth of scepticism and rendered TAs otiose.[32]

In a curious way, Strawson thereby repeats a fallacy that he has detected in Kant. As long as Kant distinguishes between the realm of phenomena or appearances and things as they are in themselves, says Strawson, the phenomenal world turns into nothing but a 'shadow of truth'.[33] Indeed, in the Introduction to the *Critique*, Kant seems to acknowledge as much when he states ambiguously that 'there cannot be appearances without anything that appears' (CPR, Bxxvii). Yet the same holds for Strawson's position: we cannot but employ the term belief transcendentally. Just as 'appearances' imply an inadequate representation of the real world,

[29] See Strawson (1966), 44.
[30] Strawson (1992), 19.
[31] Strawson (1992), 33.
[32] We encounter a similar problem in Putnam.
[33] Strawson (1966), 256.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'beliefs' imply an inadequate representation of truths. They hover between truth and falsity.

E. The Other Kant

This brings me to the next issue. What is required is another premise that will justify Strawson's epistemic modesty. The language of belief will not do. It suggests the truth of philosophical scepticism and thus renders TAs redundant. Yet, how else can one affirm a limit? We have learned that it is one thing to argue that scepticism is idle and another to argue for epistemic modesty. We need something to fill the gap: something that can explain from the starting-point that we actually have, namely, the basic general features of the conceptual structure—why knowledge claims are limited. In other words, we need to find a way of describing the limit sense, or, as Kant would say, our finitude positively. I believe that Kant's phenomena-noumena distinction fulfils exactly such a task.

Strawson fails to see this because he interprets the distinction epistemologically. The world of appearances for him is nothing other than an inadequate representation of the *real* or *true* world which lies beyond our reach. Such a view confirms Stroud's claim that Kant requires an *external* verification principle to justify knowledge claims. Since we do not have the tools of ever adopting an external viewpoint, knowledge claims remain provisional and, indeed, inadequate. Without question; if we read the distinction between things in themselves and the world of appearances epistemologically, we have accepted the truth of philosophical scepticism and have rendered transcendental arguments redundant.

However, against this reading we have argued that Kant contends that it is possible to arrive at knowledge claims. It is not that we must *suppose* that there is an external world, but that there *is* an external world. The proof provided in the 'Refutation of Idealism' is not provisional or in any way open to revision. Like Strawson, Kant points to necessary connections which are timeless and fundamental to any conceptual scheme[34]. Moreover, like Strawson, Kant argues that sceptical doubts are idle and, indeed, illegitimate since we can never adopt a view from nowhere. We do not need to seek for justification outside our conceptual scheme to arrive at knowledge claims since the criterion of verification is *internal* to the argument of the 'Refutation of Idealism'. In other words, on the epistemological level, Kant is immune to the threat of scepticism.

[34] See Strawson (1959), 10. Whether such a timeless notion of the apriori can be upheld is questionable, however, this is a problem for another paper.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nonetheless, Kant does draw the distinction between the world of appearances and the things in themselves. For sceptics such as Stroud, Kant has thereby reinstated the truth of philosophical scepticism on the transcendental level. The distinction allows the sceptic to argue that we might well wish to refer to knowledge of the external world, however, Kant's transcendental framework forces us to write knowledge in inverted commas. Though we do not need to invoke an external verification to provide a cogent proof for existence of things outside us, the proof that is provided is internal to Kant's system. If this is so, then we are no longer immune to the question of whether the system itself is not just a necessary framework which we use without, however, being able to justify its adequacy (externally).

The claim thereby is that Kant can only provide an internal and not an external solution to the problem of scepticism.[35] While Kant is able to show why, on the empirical level, knowledge of the world makes self knowledge possible, on the transcendental level, he has to reinstate scepticism by arguing that we can never know the unconditioned. We cannot adopt an external perspective or the view from nowhere. Kant thus seems to face a similar aporia as Strawson. He lets the sceptic slip in by the back door. We are limited to the study of phenomena, or our natural disposition to belief since we lack the tools ever to know the true world as a mind independent reality. This would suppose that the only defect with *transcendental realism*—Descartes' scepticism—is that it makes an explanation of our knowledge of the world impossible.

Yet rather than reinstating the truth of transcendental realism, the phenomena-noumena distinction paves the way for the truth of empirical realism. Like Strawson, Kant not only argues that certain epistemic presuppositions make our experience of the world intelligible, but that scepticism itself is not intelligible since we can never adopt an outside view. Moreover, like Strawson, Kant is keen to argue that we should not confuse epistemic modesty with a moment of weakness. Yet unlike Strawson, Kant justifies his position by confronting the sceptic head-on rather than shifting the 'burden of proof'.

[35] Hilary Putnam promotes such a reading of Kant. He interprets Kant as an 'internalist' or 'internal realist' promoting 'realism with a small "r"'. He is able to explicate the concept of genuinely objective knowledge in a fashion that does not presuppose the coherence of the notion of an 'absolute conception' of the world. See Putnam (1981), 60. See also Norman Kemp-Smith who argues that Kant proposes a version of a coherence theory of truth. Kemp Smith (1962), *A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (*Humanities Press), 36–7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Scepticism is motivated by the claim that it is impossible to show that there is no other world that lies beyond our grasp. Kant on the other hand argues, that even if there is a world that lies beyond our grasp, this world does not threaten the truth of our knowledge claims. What we know is never derived from an external point of view. The distinction between phenomena and noumena lies in the fact that one is conditioned and the other unconditioned. Objects conform to knowledge. They are conditioned in so far as they conform to our conceptual scheme; for Kant this would imply to our pure forms of intuitions (space and time) and the categories of the understanding.[36] For *us* the reference to an object must be understood as entailing the combination of the categories of the understanding and sensible intuitions. It is part and parcel of our human make-up that we can only see the world spatially and temporally ordered. As Kant says: 'in order to exhibit the objective reality of the pure concept of understanding we must always have an intuition' (KRV, A235 / B288). We arrive at the noumenon or thing in itself merely through abstraction, through removing the limiting conditions of human sensibility (the forms of intuition: space and time). Yet, we cannot say anything positive about the noumenon since we do not possess such a non-sensuous or intellectual intuition. Not only this, but since we do not possess intellectual intuition, we can only understand the world in terms of our own human perspective and 'cannot comprehend even [its] … possibility'.[37] That is why we can understand the noumenon only in the negative sense of the term, namely as a 'thing so far as it is *not an object of our sensible intuition*'[38] without ever being able to describe what such an object would look like. We humans lack the tools ever to know or judge what a non-human world would be like. What Kant is here saying is both: that it makes sense, and that it does not make sense, for us to say that we can have no theoretical knowledge, save from the way things are from our human

[36] Kant believes that our knowledge is limited because whatever is given has to conform to our form of intuitions (space and time). Kant thereby holds that space and time are not objective but forms of intuitions which he calls transcendentally ideal. It is exactly this contention which has been much debated. Within the limit of this paper I shall neither discuss why Kant believes space and time to be 'transcendentally ideal' nor whether his position is defensible. All that matters to me at this stage is that Kant believes that whatever is given and can be known has to conform to our form of intuitions.

[37] CPR, B 307.

[38] CPR, B 307.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

perspective of possible human experience. We can only know objects if they are spatially and/or temporally ordered and subsumed by the categories of the understanding. We can say nothing at all about an object as it is in itself—independent of that form.

Kant thereby defends a *strong* reading of the noumenon: Things in themselves—should they exist—can never *appear* since they have no relational properties. The noumenon can be defined negatively: it does *not* conform to knowledge, nor does it come under our a priori forms of intuition, space and time. We thus know that (1) the noumenon cannot be spatially-or temporally ordered and (2) that it can never become an object of possible experience, since we can only know things which conform to our human form of sensibility, that is space and time. Hence, (3) the noumenon remains unknowable in the absolute sense. Things in themselves can never *appear* since they have no relational properties. The claim that Kant thus develops is that the world that we can know conforms to our forms of intuition (space and time). What defines the noumenal realm is that it does not conform to knowledge and thus remains unknowable. If this is the case then the noumenal realm, should it exist, cannot be spatially-or temporally ordered for otherwise it could be experienced.[39]

The point that we can glean from Kant is thus that philosophical scepticism can be refuted by acknowledging a fundamental gap between our knowledge and the thing in itself. All properties have a form (they appear in space and time). In this way we cannot assume any similarity between that object and the thing in itself. There are no chairs as they are in themselves which can be contrasted with chairs as they appear to us. Rather, the appearance/reality distinction is *internal* to the realm of appearances. Objects do not represent things in themselves. There is no correspondence between the world of appearance and the things themselves (even though—and this makes Kant's position so paradoxical—we need to assume that the things themselves lie behind the world of appearances). Not only do we need to differentiate between two worlds but we need to argue that there is a gap dividing these two worlds that cannot be bridged. Things in themselves (should they 'exist') can never *appear* since they have no relational properties. They do not conform to knowledge—our a priori forms of intuition. There may well be an extension of reality beyond what can now conceive and

[39] See Allison (1976), 'The Non-Spatiality of Things in Themselves for Kant' in *Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14, 313–21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

can ever come to conceive.[40] We accept our ignorance.[41] This in itself is a metaphysical claim.

For the sceptic the two-world view suggests the paradox of closure. The gap between the world of appearances and the world as it is in itself cannot be bridged since we have no means of knowing that we actually know. Knowledge always remains provisional. For Kant, in turn, makes the metaphysical claim that the gap between the world of appearances and the world as it is in itself cannot be bridged because the truth of the world as it appears to us is not dependent on the world as it is in itself. Experience can never correspond to mind independent, or discourse independent state of affairs. That we can never know the world as it is in itself (should there be such a world), does not make us vulnerable to sceptical doubts, since we also know that the world as it is in itself can never provide us with a verification principle or criteria of truth. The absence of the forms of intuitions space and time by means of which objects are given to us, would not clear the way for unmediated knowledge of the world, but would rather remove the possibility for anything that might count as knowledge[42]. The noumenal world is nothing but a limiting concept (*Grenzbegriff*) for the theory of knowledge. Knowledge conforms to that limit. The limit defines what can be known and, indeed, what is true. This results in a new conception of truth: The contrast is no longer between knowledge that is conditioned and truth that is unconditioned as a metaphysical realist (and sceptic) would say. Rather the claim is that both knowledge and truth can be nothing other than conditioned. The

[40] The position here is close to that of Thomas Nagel. Just that Nagel believes that he is thereby reinstating the truth of scepticism. Cf. Nagel (1986) *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: (Oxford University Press), 100ff.

[41] Rae Langton has shown this well in her impressive study: *Kantian Humility*. By drawing a comparison between Kant and Leibniz, Langton argues that things in themselves stand for substances with intrinsic properties whilst the world of appearances refers to substances of relational properties. In this manner Kant expresses humility since he acknowledges that it is impossible to reduce relational properties to intrinsic properties. Whilst I find the argument very suggestive, I fail to understand how Langton can justify the claim that she is not adopting a transcendental idealist position. For after all, she is no longer just thinking up to the limit but tries to think both sides of the limit. Cf. Rae Langton (1998), *Kantian Humility,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[42] For the novelty of Kant's position is that knowledge has two branches: the categories and the intuitions. As he famously put it: 'Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind' (A51/B75).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thing in itself or the unconditioned does not provide a criterion of truth and justification.

While Strawson argues that a sceptical position is illegitimate since 'it amounts to a rejection of some of the necessary conditions of the existence of the conceptual scheme within which alone such doubts make sense', Kant, as we have said, extends this argument by providing the proof which the sceptic is seeking. From our point of view 'we cannot comprehend even the possibility' (CPR, B307) of non-sensible, divine or intellectual intuition. The question how things are in themselves transcends all possible appearances or human conceptions.[43] Kant's transcendental story thus explains to us *why* our knowledge is limited.

With the help of Kant's transcendental story we can fulfil the task Strawson has set himself, namely, to profess epistemic modesty without giving way to philosophical scepticism. We only fall prey to a verificationist principle if we believe that our world is the only possible way the world could be (monism). Kant allows for the possibility that the world might be (radically) otherwise, without threatening the truth to his position that the world, as it appears, to us is thus and so. We need to be modest, not because we accept the sceptic's charge that we can never know that we know, but because we know *what* we can never know. To know what we can never know, in many ways, is much more traumatic than the anxieties which inform the sceptic. The sceptic still lives in the hope that there is a true world out there that can prove or disprove empirical knowledge. Yet we know that we can never know. Moreover, we know that what we can never know, will *never* threaten our knowledge claims. The loss is profound and absolute.[44]

To conclude, it is possible to draw the sting out of Stroud's scepticism, and take up his challenge in earnest, if we are prepared to endorse both what Strawson has called the benign and the perverse Kant.[45] The perverse or transcendental Kant does not accept the 'conditional correctness of scepticism', rather he brings

[43] This is a view that Nagel defends. However, he is keen to give a positive and realist description of the things themselves. He wishes to show that 'our world is part of a larger universe that also contains things revealed only to forms of life inaccessible to us' (Nagel (1986), 104 & 106). The thing in itself in this sense is an *extension* of reality, even if it will never be coextensive with *our* reality.

[44] Indeed, Rae Langton argues that the claim 'that we have 'no insight whatsoever into the intrinsic nature of things' (CPR, A277 / B333) [...is] in Kant's eyes, a cause for mourning' (Langton: 1998, 14).

[45] Strawson (1966), 256.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosophical scepticism to an 'end'. The 'end' in question, however, is written in inverted commas. Like Strawson, the perverse Kant does not deny the possibility of scepticism; he denies its intelligibility, thereby paving the way for a future study in metaphysics.

Trinity College, Dublin

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press