

The disjunctive conception of experience as material for a transcendental argument

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1. In *Individuals*¹ and *The Bounds of Sense*,² P. F. Strawson envisaged transcendental arguments as responses to certain sorts of scepticism. An argument of the sort Strawson proposed was to establish a general claim about the world, a claim supposedly brought into doubt by sceptical reflections. Such an argument was to work by showing that unless things were as they were said to be in the claim that the argument purported to establish, it would not be possible for our thought or experience to have certain characteristics, not regarded as questionable even by someone who urges sceptical doubts. So the argument's conclusion was to be displayed as the answer to a "How possible?" question. That has a Kantian ring, and the feature of such arguments that the formulation fits is the warrant for calling them "transcendental".

Barry Stroud responded to Strawson on the following lines.³ Perhaps we can see our way to supposing that if our thought or experience is to have certain characteristics it does have (for instance that experience purports to be of a world of objects independent of us), we must *conceive* the world in certain ways (for instance as containing objects that continue to exist even while we are not perceiving them). But it is quite another matter to suggest that by reflecting about how it is possible that our thought and experience are as they are, we could establish conclusions not just about how we must conceive the world but about how the world must be. Stroud writes:

Even if we allow that we can come to see how our thinking in certain ways necessarily requires that we also think in certain other ways, and so perhaps in certain further ways as well, ... how can truths about the world which appear to

¹ *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959).

² London: Methuen, 1966.

³ See Stroud's 1968 paper "Transcendental Arguments", reprinted in his *Understanding Human Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Several other papers in that collection are very helpful in clarifying the picture.

say or imply nothing about human thought or experience be shown to be genuinely necessary conditions of such psychological facts as that we think and experience things in certain ways, from which the proofs begin? It would seem that we must find, and cross, a bridge of necessity from the one to the other. That would be a truly remarkable feat, and some convincing explanation would surely be needed of how the whole thing is possible.⁴

According to Stroud, Kant's explanation is transcendental idealism. As Stroud reads it, transcendental idealism explains how that "bridge of necessity" can be crossed by saying that the world of which the transcendently established claims are true is "only the 'phenomenal' world which is somehow 'constituted' by the possibility of our thought and experience of it".⁵

Perhaps this might be better put by saying there is no bridge to cross. But then how satisfying a response to scepticism can be provided by such arguments? On this reading transcendental idealism does not so much respond to sceptical worries as brush them aside. Or perhaps it amounts to a concession that they are well placed. As Stroud puts it:

[T]here is the challenge of saying in what ways idealism is superior to, or even different from, the sceptical doctrines it was meant to avoid. How it differs, for example, from Hume's view that we simply cannot avoid believing that every event has a cause, and cannot help acting for all the world as if it were true, but that it is not really true of the world as it is independently of us.⁶

And even if Stroud does not succeed in raising our suspicions of transcendental idealism, Strawson is anyway suspicious of it. In *The Bounds of Sense*, Strawson claims to preserve fundamental Kantian insights, but outside the idealist frame in which Kant formulated them. So Strawsonian transcendental arguments are expressly not equipped

⁴ "Kantian Argument, Conceptual Capacities, and Invulnerability", in *Understanding Human Knowledge*, at 158-9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 159-60.

with what Stroud identifies as the Kantian apparatus for explaining how that “bridge of necessity” can be crossed. Stroud suggests, accordingly, that the Strawsonian arguments can yield only conclusions on the near side of the bridge. They uncover structural connections *within* our thought or experience, enabling us to argue that our thought or experience must be a certain way as a condition for the possibility of their being a certain other way.

That need not deprive the arguments of all force against scepticism. Suppose that whether things are a certain way comes within the scope of sceptical doubts. If we can establish that we must conceive things as being that way for it to be possible that our thought or experience has some characteristic that a sceptic would not or could not deny that it has, then we will have made some headway against that sceptical worry. This falls short of claiming to have shown that things must be that way for our thought and experience to be as they are. But with an argument of this more modest kind, we will have shown that, given the characteristic of our thought or experience that is the unquestioned starting-point of the argument, there is no possibility of our being rationally required to discard the conviction that the sceptical argument was supposed to undermine.

Strawson has come to share Stroud’s doubts about crossing that “bridge of necessity”. It is not that he has given up the Kantian project, an inquiry into how it is possible that our thought and experience are as they are. But he has come to approach the project in something like the way Stroud recommends, as tracing connections *within* how we conceive and experience things, rather than between how we conceive and experience things and how things must be. The aim of the investigation, as Strawson more recently sees it, is to establish “a certain sort of interdependence of conceptual capacities and beliefs; e.g., ... that in order for self-conscious thought and experience to be possible, we must take it, or *believe*, that we have knowledge of external physical objects or other minds”.⁷

⁷ *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 21.

2. This territory has been much worked over.⁸ I am not going to work over it any more; I have sketched this picture of the state of play, in a certain region of recent discussion of transcendental arguments, only to bring out a contrast. I am not going to consider transcendental arguments of either of the two kinds that have come into view so far: neither the ambitious kind, in which the aim is to establish the truth of general claims about the world; nor the modest kind, in which the aim is to establish only that we cannot consistently go on taking it that our thought and experience are as they are in the relevant respects while withholding acceptance of the relevant claims about the world.

Instead I want to consider a different approach to one sort of scepticism. I want to suggest that this different approach can be pursued through a kind of transcendental argument that belongs to neither of those two types.

The scepticism in question is scepticism about perceptually acquired knowledge of the external world. And the approach in question is diagnostic. The diagnosis is that this scepticism expresses an inability to make sense of the idea of direct perceptual access to objective facts about the environment. What shapes this scepticism is the thought that even in the best possible case, the most that perceptual experience can yield falls short of a subject's having an environmental state of affairs directly available to her. Consider situations in which a subject seems to see that, say, there is a red cube in front of her. The idea is that even if we focus on the best possible case, her experience could be just as it is, in all respects, even if there were no red cube in front of her. This seems to reveal that perceptual experience provides at best inconclusive warrants for claims about the environment. And that seems incompatible with supposing we ever, strictly speaking, *know* anything about our objective surroundings.⁹ The familiar sceptical scenarios — Descartes's demon, the scientist with our brains in his vat, the suggestion that all our

⁸ For a helpful survey, see Robert Stern, *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism: Answering the Question of Justification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

⁹ Stroud regularly depicts scepticism about the external world as arising like this. See, e.g., "Epistemological Reflection on Knowledge of the External World", in *Understanding Human Knowledge*, at 131: "[The philosopher] chooses a situation in which any one of us would unproblematically say or think, for example, that we know that there is a fire in the fireplace right before us, and that we know it is there because we see that it is there. But when we ask what this seeing really amounts to, various considerations are introduced to lead us to concede that we would see exactly what we see now even if no fire was there at all, or if we didn't know that there was one there." See also *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

apparent experience might be a dream — are only ways to make this supposed predicament vivid.

Suppose scepticism about our knowledge of the external world is recommended on these lines. In that case it constitutes a response if we can find a way to insist that we *can* make sense of the idea of direct perceptual access to objective facts about the environment. That contradicts the claim that what perceptual experience yields, even in the best possible case, must be something less than having an environmental fact directly available to one. And without that thought, this scepticism loses its supposed basis and falls to the ground.

It is important that that is the right description of what this response achieves. We need not pretend to have an argument that would prove that we are not, say, at the mercy of Descartes's demon, using premises we can affirm, and inferential steps we can exploit, without begging questions against someone who urges sceptical doubts. As I said, the point of invoking the demon scenario and its like is only to give vivid expression to the predicament supposedly constituted by its not making sense to think we can have environmental facts directly available to us. But if it does make sense to think we can have environmental facts directly available to us, there is no such predicament. And now someone who proposes those scenarios can no longer seem to be simply emphasizing a discouraging fact about our epistemic possibilities. When we reject the scenarios — if we choose to bother with them at all — we need no longer be hamstrung by a conception of argumentative legitimacy controlled by that understanding of their status. An accusation of question-begging need no longer carry any weight. We can invert the order in which scepticism insists we should proceed, and say — as common sense would, if it undertook to consider the sceptical scenarios at all — that our knowledge that those supposed possibilities do not obtain is sustained by the fact that we know a great deal about our environment, which would not be the case if we were not perceptually in touch with the world in just about the way we ordinarily suppose we are.

Similarly, there is no need to establish, without begging questions against scepticism, that in any particular case of perceptual experience we actually are in the favourable epistemic position that scepticism suggests we could never be in. That would similarly be to accept tendentious ground rules for satisfying ourselves in given cases that

we have knowledge of the environment. If we can recapture the idea that it is so much as possible to have environmental states of affairs directly presented to us in perceptual experience, we can recognize that such ground rules reflect a misconception of our cognitive predicament. And then our practice of making and assessing claims to environmental knowledge on particular occasions can proceed as it ordinarily does, without contamination by philosophy. There need no longer seem to be any reason to discount the fact that in real life the assessment is often positive.

3. Perhaps most people will find it obvious that reinstating the sheer possibility of directly taking in objective reality in perception would undermine a scepticism based on claiming that perceptual experience can never amount to that. (I shall consider an exception later.)

But what does this have to do with transcendental arguments? Well, it depends on how the undermining move is defended. And it can be defended by an argument that is broadly Kantian, in the sense in which the arguments I was considering at the beginning are broadly Kantian. The argument aims to establish that the idea of environmental facts making themselves available to us in perception must be intelligible, because that is a necessary condition for it to be intelligible that experience has a characteristic that is, for purposes of this argument, not in doubt.

The relevant characteristic is that experience purports to be of objective reality. When one undergoes perceptual experience, it at least appears to one as if things in one's environment are a certain way.

Consider Wilfrid Sellars's discussion of "looks" statements in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind".¹⁰ Sellars urges something on the following lines. In order to understand the very idea of the objective purport of visual experience (to single out one sensory modality), we need to appreciate that the concept of experiences in which, say, it looks to one as if there is a red cube in front of one divides into the concept of cases in which one sees that there is a red cube in front of one and the concept of cases in which it merely looks to one as if there is a red cube in front of one (either because there is nothing there at all or because although there is something there it is not a red cube).

¹⁰ §§10-23 (at 32-53 in the monograph reissue, with Introduction by Richard Rorty and Study Guide by Robert Brandom [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997]).

At least implicit here is a thought that can be put as follows. In order to find it intelligible that experience has objective purport at all, we must be able to make sense of an epistemically distinguished class of experiences, those in which (staying with the visual case) one sees how things are — those in which how things are makes itself visually available to one. Experiences in which it merely looks to one as if things are thus and so are experiences that misleadingly present themselves as belonging to that epistemically distinguished class. So we need the idea of experiences that belong to the epistemically distinguished class if we are to comprehend the idea that experiences have objective purport. If one acknowledges that experiences have objective purport, one cannot consistently refuse to make sense of the idea of experiences in which objective facts are directly available to perception.

The scepticism I am considering purports to acknowledge that experiences have objective purport, but nevertheless supposes that appearances as such are mere appearances, in the sense that any experience leaves it an open possibility that things are not as they appear. That is to conceive the epistemic significance of experience as a highest common factor of what we have in cases in which, as common sense would put it, we perceive that things are thus and so and what we have in cases in which that merely seems to be so — so never higher than what we have in the second kind of case.¹¹ The conception I have found in Sellars can be put, in opposition to that, as a disjunctive conception of perceptual appearance: perceptual appearances are either objective states of affairs making themselves manifest to subjects, or situations in which it is as if an objective state of affairs is making itself manifest to a subject, although that is not how things are.¹² Experiences of the first kind have an epistemic significance that experiences of the second kind do not have. They afford opportunities for knowledge of objective states of affairs. According to the highest common factor conception, appearances can never yield more, in the way of warrant for belief, than do those appearances in which it

¹¹ On the idea of the highest common factor, see, e.g., my *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 113.

¹² On the disjunctive conception, see J. M. Hinton, *Experiences* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973); Paul Snowdon, "Perception, Vision, and Causation", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81 (1980-1); my *Mind and World*, loc.cit.; and my "Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space" and "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge", both reprinted in my *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

merely seems that one, say, sees that things are thus and so. But according to the Sellarsian transcendental argument, that thought undermines its own entitlement to the very idea of appearances.

The highest common factor conception is supposedly grounded on a claim that seems unquestionable: the claim that from a subject's point of view, a misleading appearance can be indistinguishable from a case in which things are as they appear. That might be taken as a self-standing claim about the phenomenology of misleading appearance, available to be cited in explaining the fact that subjects can be misled by appearances. So taken, the claim is open to dispute.¹³ But the right way to take it is as simply registering the fact that, on that interpretation, it is supposed to explain: the undeniable fact that our capacity to get to know things through perception is fallible.¹⁴

The claim of indistinguishability is supposed to warrant the thought that even in the best case in which a subject, say, has it visually appear to her that there is a red cube in front of her, her experience could be just as it is even if there were no red cube in front of her. But we need a distinction here. When we say her experience could be just as it is even if there were no red cube in front of her, we might be just registering that there could be a misleading experience that from the standpoint of her experience she could not distinguish from her actually veridical experience. In that case what we say is just a way of acknowledging that our capacity to acquire knowledge through perceptual experience is fallible. It does not follow that even in the best case, the epistemic position constituted by undergoing an experience can be no better than the epistemic position constituted by undergoing a misleading experience, even one that would admittedly be indistinguishable. The acknowledgement of fallibility cannot detract from the excellence of an epistemic position, with regard to the obtaining of an objective state of affairs, that consists in having the state of affairs present itself to one in one's perceptual experience. This is where the disjunctive conception does its epistemological work. It blocks the inference from the subjective indistinguishability of experiences to the highest common factor conception, according to which neither of the admittedly indistinguishable experiences could have higher epistemic worth than that of the inferior case. And the transcendental

¹³ See J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

¹⁴ I have revised what I first wrote in this connection, partly in response to an objection from Costas Pagondiotis. I have been influenced here by Sebastian Rödl.

argument shows that the disjunctive conception is required, on pain of our losing our grip on the very idea that in experience we have it appear to us that things are a certain way.¹⁵

4. This transcendental argument starts from the fact that perceptual experience at least purports to be of objective reality, and yields the conclusion that we must be able to make sense of the idea of perceptual experience that is actually of objective reality. I have urged that that is enough to undermine a familiar sort of scepticism about knowledge of the external world.

Now there may be a temptation to object that this argument assumes too much. Should it be left unquestioned that perceptual experience purports to be of objective reality?

There is plenty of room to argue that it is proper to start there. The sceptical arguments Descartes considers, for instance, do not question the fact that perceptual experience yields appearances that things are objectively the case. Descartes's arguments question only our entitlement to believe that things are as they appear to be. The highest common factor conception owes its attractiveness to the subjective indistinguishability of experiences all of which can be described in terms of the appearance that things are objectively thus and so. This supposed basis for scepticism does not need a more minimal picture of experience.

But what if we do decide that we ought to confront a more whole-hearted scepticism, a scepticism willing to doubt that perceptual experience purports to be of objective reality? Well then, the transcendental argument I have been considering cannot do all the work. But it can still do some of the work. If this is the target, we need a prior transcendental argument, one that reveals the fact that consciousness includes states or episodes that purport to be of objective reality as a necessary condition for some more basic feature of consciousness, perhaps that its states and episodes are potentially self-

¹⁵ The essential thing is that the two sides of the disjunction differ in epistemic significance, whereas on the highest common factor conception the "good" disjunct can afford no better warrant for perceptual claims than the "bad" disjunct. This difference in epistemic significance is of course consistent with all sorts of commonalities between the disjuncts. For instance, on both sides of the disjunction it appears to one that, say, there is a red cube in front of one. In "(Anti-)Sceptics Simple and Subtle: G. E. Moore and John McDowell", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002), at 341, n. 12 and associated text, Crispin Wright makes needlessly heavy weather of this.

conscious. Strawson's reading of the Transcendental Deduction in Kant's first Critique might serve, or perhaps the Transcendental Deduction itself. It would take me too far afield to go into this here. The point is just that we cannot dismiss an argument that pivots on the disjunctive conception of perceptual appearance, on the ground that it does not itself establish the characteristic of perceptual experience that it begins from.

5. In a recent paper, Crispin Wright argues that as a response to scepticism, replacing the highest common factor conception of perceptual experience with a disjunctive conception is "dialectically quite ineffectual".¹⁶

Wright starts from a helpful account of why G. E. Moore's "proof of an external world" — at least if taken at face value — is as unimpressive as nearly everyone finds it.¹⁷ Moore moves from the premise "Here is a hand" to the conclusion, which is indeed entailed by that premise, that there is an external world. Wright takes Moore to suppose that his premise is itself grounded on something yet more basic: something Moore could express by saying "My experience is in all respects as of a hand held up in front of my face". And Wright's diagnosis of what goes wrong in Moore's argument is that the warrant this ground supplies cannot be transmitted across the acknowledged entailment from "Here is a hand" to "There is an external world". The warrant that "My experience is as of a hand" provides for "Here is a hand" is defeasible, and it is defeated if the sceptic is right and we are, for instance, at the mercy of Descartes's demon. We can allow it to warrant the premise of Moore's entailment only if we already take ourselves to be entitled to accept the conclusion of the entailment. So the whole argument is question-begging.

Wright now turns to the disjunctive conception. He sums up his verdict on it as follows (346-7):

In brief: whether our perceptual faculties engage the material world directly [the thesis that the disjunctive conception is aimed at protecting] is one issue and whether the canonical justification of perceptual claims proceeds through a defeasible inferential base is another. One is, so far, at liberty to take a positive

¹⁶ "(Anti-)Sceptics Simple and Subtle: G. E. Moore and John McDowell"; the phrase quoted is at 331.

¹⁷ Moore may intend something more subtle. But I shall not consider this possibility.

view of both issues. And when we do, the I-II-III pattern [the pattern of Moore's argument, augmented with a formulation of the ground for the premise of Moore's entailment] re-emerges along these lines:

I *Either* I am perceiving a hand in front of my face *or* I am in some kind of delusional state

II Here is a hand

Therefore

III There is a material world.

It is clear that this is a mere variation on Moore's argument as Wright reconstructs it. In this version too, the support I provides for II is defeasible. That we take it not to be defeated depends on our already taking ourselves to be entitled to accept III. So it would be question-begging to suppose the argument provides any support for III.

But what does this have to do with the disjunctive conception? The point of the disjunctive conception is that if one undergoes an experience that belongs on the "good" side of the disjunction, that warrants one in believing — indeed presents one with an opportunity to know — that things are as the experience reveals them as being. When one's perceptual faculties "engage the material world directly", as Wright puts it, the result — a case of having an environmental state of affairs directly present to one in experience — constitutes one's being justified in making the associated perceptual claim. It is hard to see how any other kind of justification could have a stronger claim to the title "canonical". And this justification is *not* defeasible. If someone sees that P, it cannot fail to be the case that P. So if one accepts the disjunctive conception, one is *not* at liberty to go on supposing that "the canonical justification of perceptual claims proceeds through a defeasible inferential base".

In urging the contrary, Wright constructs an argument whose starting-point is the whole disjunction. Of course he is right that the whole disjunction could provide at best defeasible support for a perceptual claim. But what he has done is in effect to cast the whole disjunction in the role in which the supposed case for scepticism casts the highest

common factor. And the point of the disjunctive conception is precisely to reject the highest common factor picture of the justification for perceptual claims.

I do not mean to suggest that a I-II-III argument starting from the “good” disjunct would be any more impressive as an augmentation of Moore’s “proof” than the I-II-III argument Wright considers, starting from the whole disjunction. I shall come to that in a moment. The point for now is that Wright is wrong to claim that the disjunctive conception leaves one free to think perceptual claims rest on defeasible inferential support.

What has gone wrong here?

Wright apparently assumes that a dialectically effective response to scepticism would need to be what Moore — again, if we take his performance at face value — tries to produce: that is, an argument that directly responds to the sceptic’s questioning whether there is an external world. Such an argument would need to start from a premise available without begging a question against the sceptic, and it would need to transmit warrant legitimately from that premise to the conclusion that there is indeed an external world. And only the whole disjunction is non-question-beggingly available as a premise for such an argument.

But the point of the disjunctive conception is not to improve our resources for such arguments.

At one point (341) Wright acknowledges, in a way, that when I appeal to the disjunctive conception I do not claim to be directly answering sceptical questions. The acknowledgement is backhanded, since Wright describes my disclaimer as “an official refusal to take scepticism seriously”. It is worth pausing over this description. The wording would be appropriate if in order to take scepticism seriously one had to attempt direct answers to sceptical questions. But that seems simply wrong. Surely no one takes scepticism more seriously than Stroud. And Stroud thinks “the worst thing one can do with the traditional question about our knowledge of the world is to try to answer it”.¹⁸

Wright notes my suggestion that the disjunctive conception “has the advantage of removing a prop on which sceptical doubt ... depends”, as he puts it. But he treats this as a mere lapse from the “official refusal”, as if removing a prop could only be offering an

¹⁸ “Reasonable Claims: Cavell and the Tradition”, in *Understanding Human Knowledge*, 56.

answer to a sceptical question. Only on that assumption could noting the inefficacy of the re-emergent I-II-III argument, the argument that starts from the whole disjunction, seem relevant to the anti-sceptical credentials of the disjunctive conception.

The disjunctive conception cannot improve on Moore in the project of proving that there is an external world. Wright is correct about that.

This is not, as Wright has it, because the disjunctive conception allows us to go on holding that “the canonical justification of perceptual claims proceeds through a defeasible inferential base”. As I have insisted, the disjunctive conception is flatly inconsistent with that thesis. The canonical justification for a perceptual claim is that one perceives that things are as it claims they are, and that is not a defeasible inferential base.

The point is, rather, that if one lets the sceptic count as having put in doubt whether there is an external world in which things are pretty much as we take them to be, it becomes question-begging to take oneself, on any particular occasion, to *have* the *indefeasible* warrant, for a claim such as “Here is a hand”, constituted by, for instance, seeing that there is a hand in front of one. In the dialectical context of an attempt to show that the sceptical scenarios do not obtain, the indefeasible warrant for “Here is a hand” constituted by seeing that there is a hand in front of one can no more be transmitted across the entailment to “There is a material world” than can the defeasible warrant Wright considers in his diagnosis of Moore. In Moore’s argument as Wright reconstructs it, the fact that the warrant’s support for “Here is a hand” is not defeated depends on our already taking ourselves to have grounds for the conclusion supposedly reached by entailment from there. In the argument I am considering now, our conviction that we have the warrant at all depends on our already taking ourselves to have grounds for the conclusion. This, incidentally, suggests a different account, which seems no less plausible than Wright’s, of the implicit warrant for the premise Moore actually starts from. In any case, whether or not it is what Moore has in mind, an argument that starts from one’s seeing a hand in front of one would be just as useless for Moore’s purpose — if, again, we identify his purpose by taking his performance at face value.

But all this is irrelevant to the anti-sceptical power of the disjunctive conception. What the disjunctive conception achieves is indeed to remove a prop on which sceptical doubt depends. That is Wright’s wording, but he does not allow it to carry its proper

force. The prop is the thought that the warrant for a perceptual claim provided by an experience can never be that the experience reveals how things are. The disjunctive conception dislodges that thought, and a sceptical doubt that depends on it falls to the ground. There is no need to do more than remove the prop. In particular, as I explained before, there is no need to try to *establish* theses like the conclusion of Moore's argument, with the ground rules for doing so set by scepticism. The idea that such theses are open to doubt now lacks the cachet of simply emphasizing an epistemic predicament constituted by its being impossible for experience to reveal to us how things are. There is no such predicament, and now it is perfectly proper to appeal to cases of ordinary perceptual knowledge in ruling out the sceptical scenarios, or — better — in justifying a common-sense refusal to bother with them.

Wright might be tempted to seize on what I have just said as vindicating his talk of my “official refusal to take scepticism seriously”. But like Stroud, I hold that the way to take scepticism seriously is not to try to disprove the sceptical scenarios. We take scepticism seriously by removing the prop, thereby entitling ourselves to join common sense in refusing to bother with the sceptical scenarios.¹⁹

Considering the form “*Either* I am perceiving thus-and-such *or* I am in some kind of delusional state”, Wright offers this reconstruction of the sceptical reasoning that, according to him, survives the disjunctive conception (346):

[I]n this case it is our practice to treat one in particular of the disjuncts as justified — the left-hand one — whenever the disjunction as a whole is justified and there is, merely, *no evidence for* the other disjunct! That's a manifest fallacy unless the case is one where we have a standing reason to regard the lack of any salient justification for a disjunct of the second type as a reason to discount it. And — the sceptical thought will be — it's hard to see what could count as a standing reason except a prior entitlement to the belief that delusions are rare. But that's

¹⁹ In writing here of a common-sense refusal to bother with the sceptical scenarios, I am echoing a remark at *Mind and World*, 113 (in the passage Wright cites to document the “official refusal”): “The aim here is not to answer sceptical questions, but to begin to see how it might be intellectually respectable to ignore them, to treat them as unreal, in the way that common sense has always wanted to.” Of course it takes work to reach such a position. This attitude can look like a “refusal to take scepticism seriously” only given the picture of what it is to take scepticism seriously that Stroud rejects.

just tantamount to the belief that there is a material world which, at least on the surfaces of things, is pretty much revealed for what it is in what we take to be normal waking experience. So, the Sceptic will contend, that broad conception once again emerges as a rational precondition of our practice, even after the disjunctive adjustment to the concept of perception; and on its warrantedness depends whatever warrant can be given for our proceeding in the way we do. Since it cannot be warranted by appeal to the warrant for specific perceptual claims — Moore’s proof being no better in this setting than before — the Sceptic may now focus on the apparent impossibility of any kind of direct warrant for it, and the dialectic can proceed essentially as before.

It is clearly correct that our practice of assessing the credentials of perceptual claims could not be rational if we were not entitled to the “broad conception” according to which the external world is pretty much the way we take ourselves to experience it as being. But it is tendentious to suppose it follows that the rationality of our practice is in jeopardy, unless the “broad conception” can be warranted *in advance of the practice* without begging questions against scepticism. And it is wrong to suppose the disjunctive conception leaves unchallenged the idea Wright here exploits, that the justification for a perceptual claim must go through the whole disjunction, exploiting some supposed standing reason for discounting the “bad” disjunct. The justification for a perceptual claim is an entitlement to the “good” disjunct. What entitles one to that is not that one’s experience warrants the whole disjunction, plus some supposed ground for discounting the “bad” disjunct. That would commit us to trying to reconstruct the epistemic standing constituted by perceiving something to be the case in terms of the highest common factor conception of experience, plus whatever ground we can think of for discounting the “bad” disjunct. I think Wright is correct that that is hopeless; if we see things this way, the sceptic wins. But the disjunctive conception eliminates the apparent need for any such project, because it contradicts the highest common factor conception.

What does entitle one to claim that one is perceiving that things are thus and so, when one is so entitled? The fact that one is perceiving that things are thus and so. That is a kind of fact whose obtaining our self-consciously possessed perceptual capacities

enable us to recognize on suitable occasions, just as they enable us to recognize such facts as that there are red cubes in front of us, and all the more complex types of environmental facts that our powers to perceive things put at our disposal.

Of course we are fallible about the obtaining of such facts, just as we are fallible about the facts we perceive to obtain. I can tell a zebra when I see one — to take up an example Wright borrows from Fred Dretske (342-4). If what I believe to be a zebra is actually a cunningly painted mule, then of course I do not recognize it as a zebra, as I suppose, and I do not have the warrant I think I have for believing it is a zebra, namely that I see it to be a zebra. My ability to recognize zebras is fallible, and it follows that my ability to know when I am seeing a zebra is fallible. It does not follow — this is the crucial point — that I cannot ever have the warrant for believing that an animal in front of me is a zebra constituted by seeing that it is a zebra. If the animal in front of me is a zebra, and conditions are suitable for exercising my ability to recognize zebras when I see them (for instance, the animal is in full view), then that ability, fallible though it is, enables me to see that it is a zebra, and to know that I do. My warrant is not limited to the disjunction “Either I see that it is a zebra or my visual experience is misleading in some way”. That is the highest common factor conception, and fallibility in our cognitive capacities cannot force it on us.²⁰

6. Transcendental arguments of Stroud’s ambitious type aim to establish large-scale features the world must have for it to be possible that thought and experience are as they are. Those of his modest type aim to establish large-scale features we must conceive the world to have for it to be possible that thought and experience are as they are.

The argument I have considered belongs to neither of these types. It does not offer to establish anything about how things are, let alone must be, in the world apart from us, so it is not vulnerable to Stroud’s doubts about arguments of the ambitious type. But the way it makes itself immune to those doubts is not by weakening its conclusion to one about structural features we must conceive the world to have. The conclusion is rather one about how we must conceive the epistemic positions that are within our reach,

²⁰ A misconception of the significance of fallibility on these lines is the topic of the passage in my *Mind and World* (112-3) that Wright comments on at 341, n. 13. His remarks there seem to me to miss, or ignore, the dialectical context of the passage he is commenting on.

if it is to be possible that our experience is as it is in having objective purport. That frees us to pursue our ordinary ways of finding out how things are in the world apart from us. The specifics of what we go on to find out are not within the scope of what the argument aims to vindicate.

That might seem to distance this argument from much in Kant, who is presumably the patron saint of transcendental arguments. In sketching the argument, I have not needed to connect it with the question “How is synthetic *a priori* knowledge possible?”, or with an investigation of the principles of the pure understanding. But there is still the fact that the argument displays its conclusion as a necessary element in the answer to a “How possible?” question about experience. Moreover, Sellars’s account of how experience has its objective purport, which the argument exploits, is strikingly Kantian, in the way it represents the content of an experience as the content of a claim. Sellars links the fact that experience is of objective reality with the fact that to make a claim is to commit oneself to things being objectively thus and so. This talk of claims is Sellars’s counterpart, after the “linguistic turn”, to Kant’s invocation of judgement. So perhaps the argument I have been considering can be seen as belonging to a minimal Kantianism. In the argument’s background is an explanation of the objective purport of experience in terms of the fact that experience exemplifies forms that belong to the understanding. But in the argument as I have considered it so far, we exploit that Kantian thought without needing to concern ourselves either with how the world must be or with how we must conceive the world to be. Of course this is not the place to try to take this any further.