

The One Possible Basis for the Proof of the Existence of the External World: Kant's Anti-Sceptical Argument in the 1781 Fourth Paralogism

This paper revises and expands some ideas originally presented in Chapter 3 of my *Kant and the Scandal of Philosophy* (Toronto, UTP 2007: 80-113)

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One of the most controversial (and least understood) parts of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is the Fourth Paralogism of rational psychology as presented in the 1781 First Edition (henceforth FP). Even interpreters who resist a phenomenalist reading of the Critical Philosophy, whose main tenet is that appearances or phenomena in Kant's system are to be understood as mental entities, very much like Berkeley's ideas, commonly believe that the anti-Cartesian argument Kant presents in FP makes transcendental idealism nearly indistinguishable from the Berkeleyan *esse est percipi*,¹ with the embarrassing consequence – noted by Kemp Smith – that Kant “refutes the position of Descartes only by virtually accepting the still more extreme position of Berkeley.”² This dismissive

¹ There is a long list of commentators, especially in the Anglo-American world, who support a phenomenalist reading of Kant's epistemology, and in particular of the Fourth Paralogism. Even if we confine ourselves to recent times – thus excluding H. A. Prichard (1909), C.D. Broad (1978) and Turbayne (1955: 225-236) – the following are good examples: Agosta (1981: 391), Guyer (1987: 280-1), Robinson (1994: 411-41), Van Cleve (1999: 8-12). We owe the first serious refutation of the phenomenalist reading to Graham Bird (1962). It is to Bird's merit (1962: 43-46) that he used his new approach to show that even the Fourth Paralogism should be read in a non-phenomenalist manner.

² Kemp Smith (1962: 304-5).

judgment served as a serious obstacle for the appreciation of the extraordinary anti-sceptical resources Kant puts at our disposal there. The present paper intends to remedy this state of affairs and argues that, properly understood, FP contains the best strategy Kant ever adopted against scepticism in his fifty-year-long confrontation of this problem.

I have shown elsewhere why Kant is far from embracing phenomenalism in FP. I will thus move from that result to focus on the logical structure of the anti-Cartesian argument and on its merits *vis à vis* alternative refutations. By comparing the argument contained in FP with alternative refutations (in particular Carnap's and Putnam's), and by highlighting their shortcomings, I pursue two main goals: 1) strengthening Kant's idea that transcendental idealism is "the only refuge left open" (A378)³ against scepticism; 2) showing that the argument contained in FP can be read as a sort of indirect foundation of transcendental idealism, structurally similar to the one provided in the Transcendental Dialectic. In both cases, Kant shows that failing to embrace transcendental idealism implies a very unpleasant consequence. In the Dialectic, this is the "euthanasia of pure reason" (A407/B434), while in FP it is reason's inability to prove beyond faith the existence of the external world, a condition Kant names, through a similarly suggestive expression, a "scandal to philosophy" (Bxxxviiiin).⁴ The paper is thus divided in two main parts. The first reconstructs Kant's anti-sceptical argument while the second compares Kant's argument with alternative refutations to produce further, albeit non-conclusive evidence, that transcendental idealism is "the only refuge".

³ References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are, as is conventional, to the first and second edition pagination. The translation used is that by N. Kemp Smith.

⁴ For an opposing view of the importance of external world skepticism for Kant's mature philosophy see Forster (2008): 6-15.

1. The anti-sceptical argument of FP

The first question that the interpreter faces in dealing with the Fourth Paralogism is simply its location. Why is the critique of skepticism placed among the Paralogisms? And why is it placed in the fourth position? Given the architectonic of the *Critique*, the Fourth Paralogism corresponds to the modal categories and these “have the peculiarity that, in determining an object they do not in the least enlarge the concept to which they are attached as predicates. They only express the relation of the concept to the faculty of knowledge.”(A219/B266) This means that they assert whether an object, whose concept they do not contribute to determine, is merely possible, existent or necessary. Since the Cartesian skeptic does not doubt the appropriateness of our concepts of things, but whether (external) things exist, placing the criticism of this kind of skeptic in the Fourth Paralogism seems to be rather natural.

There is however a more profound reason, a reason that points to the connection between transcendental illusion and one of the fundamental premises of skepticism, namely, the superiority of inner over outer knowledge. At the end of the 1781 Paralogisms chapter, Kant gives us one of the general definitions of transcendental illusion contained in the *Dialectic*.⁵ He claims that “all *illusion* may be said to consist in treating the *subjective* condition of thinking as being knowledge of the *object*.” (A396) In the Paralogisms this means taking the logical predicates contained in the notion of a thinking subject as features of a particular, determined object (the subject understood as a determinate entity). As Kant puts it very clearly in the Second Edition: “the logical exposition of thought in general has been mistaken for a metaphysical exposition of the object.” (B409) In the first three Paralogisms, the logical features of the thinking subject in general that are mistaken for objective features are

⁵ The others are at A295-6/B352, B427, A422/B449-50.

substantiality, simplicity, and personality. But what is exactly the logical feature that rational psychology mistakes for an objective feature in the Fourth Paralogism? In the introductory “topic” of rational psychology where, in correspondence with the four groups of categories, Kant lists the logical features of the thinking subject that rational psychology mistakes for objective features, he characterizes the feature corresponding to the modal group of categories as follows: “it [the soul] is in relation to possible objects in space.”(A344/B402) As the reader discovers in the Fourth Paralogism, the objects with which the soul is in relation are merely *possible* because their existence, ascertained through an inference from effect to cause, is dubious. And this uncertain access to external objects is implicitly contrasted with the way in which the soul ascertains its own existence. Thus to say that the soul is in relation to objects in space that are merely *possible* because their existence is inferred is an indirect way of emphasizing the immediacy and certainty through which the existence of the soul can be ascertained. And here lies the error motivated by transcendental illusion. The error is taking the access to one’s own existence in that paradigmatic manner. My existence is *analytically* inferred from the “I think,” and as such it is absolutely certain. This creates an enormous epistemic gap between the affirmation of the existence of the subject and that of external objects. Indeed, if it is conceded that our existence as subjects can be ascertained in this analytical way, the access to our existence will differ from the access to the existence of outer objects in kind, not only in degree of certainty. While the former enjoys a priori status, the latter can only be a synthetic a posteriori claim. By placing the refutation of skepticism in the Fourth Paralogism chapter, Kant is suggesting that the first step in his refutation of the skeptic is to show that this difference in kind is merely apparent. More precisely, by revealing how the idea of an analytical inference from the logical description of the subject of thought to the existence of the subject is merely illusory, Kant removes one of the grounds on which the superiority of inner over outer

knowledge rests. Once the mistake that lies at the bottom of this inference is detected and it turns out that even the cognition of my existence presupposes an empirical intuition (perception), inner and outer knowledge will no longer be considered different in kind.

Notice that Kant, on my reading, does not establish this point through his actual discussion of the Fourth Paralogism, but merely through the sheer placement of his criticism within his general treatment of rational psychology. This placement suggests, albeit implicitly, that the same ipostatization of the features of a merely logical subject (the “I” of apperception) into a noumenal subject that Kant detected in the first three Paralogisms is also key to the criticism of the fourth. Once the idea of an intellectual access to the existence of a subject is replaced with that of an empirical access to ourselves, Kant can introduce his crucial idea, explicitly presented in the discussion of the Fourth Paralogism, that both the existence of myself and that of an external object are “proved in the same manner”(A370) and that “the only difference is that the representation of myself, as the thinking subject, belongs to inner sense only, while the representations which mark extended beings belong also to outer sense.”(A371) In fact, the critique of the Fourth Paralogism *assumes* that our existence must be *perceived* in inner sense. The first premise of the Fourth Paralogism is indeed that “my own existence is the sole object of a mere perception” (A367) or, equivalently, that Descartes was justified in limiting “all perception” to the proposition ‘I, as a thinking being, exist’.”(A367) Since it is hardly trivial that Descartes took the *cogito* as resting on a perception, Kant is here presenting the Cartesian position as already reinterpreted and criticized. And the criticism is precisely that there is no access to my existence without empirical intuition, specifically, the perception of my thoughts in inner sense.⁶

⁶ On my interpretation, the Fourth Paralogism legitimately belongs to the critique of rational psychology. As we saw, the placement of the Fourth Paralogism within Kant’s general discussion of the Cartesian project plays

1.1 The Immediacy of Outer Perception

While the first premise of the Fourth Paralogism is: “That, the existence of which can only be inferred as a cause of given perceptions, has a merely doubtful existence,” the minor premise reads: “all outer appearances are of such a nature that their existence is not immediately perceived, and that we can only infer them as a cause of a given perception”. (A367) In other words, given the logical principle that no inference from the effect to its alleged cause is valid, (or at least safe) – the same effect could be produced by an infinite number of causes – and, given that the existence of outer objects is not immediately perceived, but can be at best inferred, as a cause of a given perception, the thesis of the Fourth Paralogism follows: “The existence of all objects of the outer senses is doubtful” (A367).

Since Kant and the sceptic agree that the inference from an effect to its alleged cause is invalid, their true divergence centres on whether our apprehension of outer objects can be legitimately conceptualized as a token of that type of invalid inference. Kant in fact denies that outer objects are experienced through a causal inference from inner perceptions to their outer causes. Much of the anti-sceptical argument of FP turns on whether Kant manages to refute this claim by showing that, very much like inner perception, outer perception is immediate. Kant uses to this effect two basic tools. One is the result established in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, where space is reduced to the form of outer sense – a form that presents itself to the mind as a pure intuition. The other is the criticism of the transcendental realist’s model of perception.

indeed a crucial logical role in the overall anti-skeptical argument. Kalter and Bennett (see, A. Kalter, *Kants vierter Paralogismus* and J. Bennett, *Kant’s Dialectic*, Cambridge, 1971) have an opposite opinion and deny that the Fourth Paralogism belongs to the general discussion of rational psychology.

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Starting with the last point, Kant notices that the sceptical thesis that the existence of outer things is *not* immediately perceived is a direct and perverse outcome of transcendental realism.⁷ As he puts it in a famous passage in which scepticism is labelled ‘empirical idealism’:

Transcendental realism ... inevitably falls into difficulties, and finds itself obliged to give way to empirical idealism, in that it regards the objects of outer sense as something distinct from the senses themselves, treating mere appearances as self-subsistent beings, existing outside us. On such a view as this, however clearly we may be conscious of our representation of these things, it is still far from certain that, if the representation exists, there exists also the object corresponding to it. (A371)

Transcendental realism assumes that the objects of our experience are things in themselves. As such there is nothing in these objects that they have in virtue of our intuiting them. Given this model of the mind/object relation, Kant claims that scepticism is unavoidable.⁸ What is immediately presented to the mind is *never* the object, but always a copy or representation of it. By contrast, for a transcendental idealist, space is not an objective property that must be “picked up” (somehow) by the mind, but is a form through which we first become aware of objects other than ourselves. The problem of scepticism arises precisely when some sort of “picking up” is introduced as the model that captures all aspects of a cognitive act. Kant’s idealism can be construed essentially as a denial of this idea and as an affirmation of the immediacy of outer perception.

This crucial notion can be clarified by concentrating not only on the status of space as *form of intuition*, but also on the status of the representation of space as *formal intuition*.

⁷ On this point see Bird (1962: 43-4).

⁸ See on this point Stroud’s convincing argument against Quine’s rejection of skepticism. Stroud (1984: 209-253).

Kant argues that: “space and time are represented *a priori* not merely as forms of sensible intuition, but as themselves *intuitions* which contain a manifold [of their own]” (B160). Moreover, this manifold has priority over the representations of particular objects contained in space.⁹ As Kant puts it: “We can never represent to ourselves the absence of space, though we can quite well think it as empty of objects” (A24/B38-9). Even if there were no objects, we would still intuit an external framework. We cannot intuit the object “space” as an infinite container void of determinate objects, but we can intuit an external horizon, let us call it an externality, that awaits being filled with determinate objects. If space, as a pure horizon, is given immediately and if external objects are determinations of this external horizon, they are themselves immediately given. In occupying parts of this horizon, empirical objects “borrow” the immediacy through which the horizon itself is given. Hence, there is no inference in our perceiving an external object. Its presence is immediately grasped because space, as an intuition with its own (pure) manifold, is immediately given in our cognition, and the object itself is simply a determination of this given. This obviously does not mean that the object ends up being “in” the mind as a mental entity. Kant’s view here is quite the reverse of this. The pure intuition of space allows the subject, as it were, to go outside of itself and thus be in direct contact with everything that occupies a determined place in its spatial horizon.

If we now move from the foundation of the immediacy thesis to its significance, the first thing to notice is that the sceptic’s cherished conception of the superiority of inner experience over outer experience is strongly weakened (although, as we shall see, not completely removed). Both the intuition of my inner states—and thus the consciousness of my existence—and the intuition of outer objects are immediate: “external things exist as well as I myself, and

⁹ Both points are established in the Transcendental Aesthetic. See A24-5/B39-40 and A26-7/B42-3.

both, indeed, upon the immediate witness of my self-consciousness” (A371). As Kant puts it:

In order to arrive at the reality of outer objects I have just as little need to resort to inference as I have in regard to the reality of the object of my inner sense, that is, in regard to the reality of my thoughts. For in both cases alike the objects are nothing but representations, the immediate perception (consciousness) of which is at the same time a sufficient proof of their reality. (A371)

The absolute superiority of inner sense, to which Kant was still ready to subscribe in the late 1770s, is at last denied. The parity on which Kant now insists, however, is open to an obvious objection. Even if external objects are perceived immediately, it still is the case that sometimes I merely *seem* to see such objects, but that I am actually hallucinating (or dreaming). It is a fact about human nature that we sometimes see things that, at closer scrutiny, do not exist. These epistemic failures seem to affect only outer knowledge and leave inner knowledge completely untouched. Here Descartes’ famous considerations in the Second Meditation hold. If I am conscious of a certain mental state (seeing the table), then, by that very fact, that mental state exists. Briefly put, the existence of a mental state coincides with its being represented. More importantly, *I* must exist in order to have that representation. It follows that, despite the immediacy of outer perception, inner knowledge still enjoys a certain advantage over outer knowledge.

Kant in fact never meant to deny this type of epistemic superiority. He does not present the immediacy thesis as *sufficient* to refute the sceptic. The immediacy thesis and the Evil Genius hypothesis are compatible: we could have a faculty (outer perception) that would place us in direct contact with external objects, but we could simply never have the occasion to exercise it because no external object is

ever presented to us. Even if the immediacy thesis is not sufficient, it establishes the apparently minimal, but, as we shall see, ultimately crucial point that, were we ever to perceive a genuine external object, we would perceive it immediately. To make this point is already sufficient to refute the sceptic's idea that, even in cases of genuine experience, we perceive external objects only mediately (through a mental entity). Only if this idea is rejected can the refutation of the sceptic get off the ground. Despite its modesty, the immediacy thesis plays precisely this dialectical role in the overall refutation.

1.2 The Refutation of the Sceptic. The "Official" Strategy

Kant's "official" attempt to move beyond the immediacy thesis is to be found in a passage in which the possibility of illusory representations to which no objects correspond, as in hallucinations or dreams, is clearly acknowledged. Kant states:

From perceptions knowledge of objects can be generated, either by mere play of imagination or by way of experience; and in the process there may no doubt arise illusory representations to which the objects do not correspond, the deception being attributable sometimes to a delusion of imagination (in dreams) and sometimes to an error of judgment (in so-called sense-deception). (A376)

Now, if, despite the immediacy thesis, delusions of imagination are possible, it seems that the sceptic can easily raise his usual question: how do you know that what you have just acknowledged can happen occasionally does not, in fact, happen systematically? To be sure, Kant provides a criterion for distinguishing such delusions from experience. But this criterion will turn out, as Kant himself seems to realize, at best superfluous for the refutation of the sceptic.

Let me first discuss this criterion and then show its weakness.

The criterion for recognizing delusions is the following: “To avoid such deceptive illusion, we have to proceed according to the rule: ‘*Whatever is connected with a perception according to empirical laws, is actual*’”.¹⁰ Perhaps an example can help to elucidate Kant’s point. Let us assume that, being particularly afraid of the dark and finding ourselves in a dark room, we are so overwhelmed by fear that we seem to see a threatening individual. However, we are lucky enough to find a light switch while we are still “seeing” this individual. When the light goes on, we find that our room contains no dangerous company. We are led to consider our past “perception” as a hallucination because to take it otherwise would commit us to giving up the empirical law (actually an application of it to this particular situation) that prohibits that bodies “go out of existence” or at least “disappear” from our sight with such rapidity. In other words, we take our vision as a hallucination because it does not cohere with the rest of our well-tested and usually reliable empirical laws.

Interestingly, Kant considers the deception in question and the “provision against it”—the criterion we have just discussed—to affect both dualism and idealism. By ‘dualism’ and ‘idealism’ in this context he means respectively his position and the position of his opponent.¹¹ One might wonder why Kant claims that idealism should be affected by this “provision”. Why should the sceptical idealist be interested in distinguishing between real experience and hallucinations, if part of his point is that there is no certain way to distinguish between the two? The answer is that even the sceptic has to account for the

¹⁰ See A376. Kant alludes to the same criterion also at Bxli, A492/B520, and in the *Prolegomena* (Ak. 4: 291).

¹¹ Up to this point the two terms, taken without further qualification such as ‘transcendental’ or ‘empirical’, were defined respectively as the position that holds that there is an “uncertainty” about the existence of external objects and the position that holds “a possible certainty in regards to objects of outer sense”(A367).

regularity and coherence of experience. Actually, it is *part* of the sceptical hypothesis that nothing would change in our “experience” if nothing corresponded to our representations. Even if, nothing corresponded to our representations, we would still draw the distinction between bits of normal “experience” and deviant cases. Since the latter do not cohere with the rest, we would take them as “hallucinations,” obviously not realizing that they are just “deviant hallucinations” within the general “big hallucination” to which our experience actually amounts.

The fact that even the sceptic is committed to the lawfulness of what appears to us is obviously still insufficient for a refutation of the sceptic. All we have achieved is the concession that, were the entire external world a trick of some Evil Genius, we would experience it with the same regularities to which we are accustomed. But Descartes would readily concede that much and Kant is perfectly aware of this. In fact, he seems to hold that his criterion is at best superfluous for the refutation of the sceptic because empirical idealism is “already” refuted through different considerations. He states:

Empirical idealism, and its mistaken questionings as to the objective reality of our outer perceptions, is already sufficiently refuted, when it has been shown that outer perception yields immediate proof of something actual in space, and that this space, although in itself only a mere form of representations, has objective reality in relation to all outer appearances, which also are nothing else than mere representations; and when it has likewise been shown that in the absence of perception even imagining and dreaming are not possible, and that our outer senses, as regards the data from which experience can arise, have therefore their actual corresponding objects in space. (A376-77)

Thus Kant's strategy for removing the spectre that our experience may be, *systematically*, not only on certain occasions, a mere product of the imagination, does not rest on the criterion introduced for detecting *particular* hallucinations. Rather, it rests on the following two claims, each of which Kant seems to take as sufficient for the refutation of the sceptic: a) the immediacy thesis and b) the thesis that the imagination is dependent on outer sense (the reality of the latter cannot be denied without also removing the very possibility of the former).¹² We have already seen why the immediacy thesis, although sound, is, still not sufficient in itself, for the refutation to succeed. Can we then complete the argument by relying on the other thesis?

Unfortunately, as critics have largely recognized, the thesis of the imagination's dependence on outer sense is very unsatisfactory.¹³ It rests on a bold limitation of our imaginative power, which, without clear justification, is assumed to be unable *by itself* to produce outer representations. Moreover, as Allison has pointed out, even if one concedes for the sake of argument that the faculty of imagination, *as we know it*, suffers from this limitation, "the possibility still remains that our representations of outer things are the results of some unknown 'hidden faculty'."¹⁴ Descartes himself mentions this possibility in the Third Meditation when he deals with the problem of the source of ideas that seem to come from outside us. According to Descartes, the observation that these ideas are independent of our wills is not sufficient reason for considering them as externally caused. He bases this claim on the following

¹² In his translation Kemp Smith introduces an "and" between the two theses, absent in the original, thus giving the impression that Kant takes them as individually necessary, but only jointly sufficient. However, if one looks at the original, the impression is rather that Kant lists two theses, each of which he considers sufficient. That this is his position is also confirmed by the Reflexionen where each of the two theses is often presented without the other and each is taken as sufficient ground to refute the sceptic. See for example Ak. 18: 310 where the second argument is presented independently of the first.

¹³ See, for example, Allison (1983: 301-302).

¹⁴ Allison (1983: 302).

consideration: “perhaps there is in me some faculty or power adequate to produce these ideas without the aid of any external objects, even though it is not known to me”.¹⁵ Finally, this line of thought seems to ignore the central idea lying behind the Cartesian hypothesis of the Evil Genius. In fact, Descartes’ intention is precisely to raise the possibility of a power that goes well beyond the power of the imagination as we know it.¹⁶ Thus Kant’s official strategy in the Fourth Paralogism suffers from a serious difficulty.

1.3 The Refutation of the Sceptic. The Alternative Strategy

The failure of Kant’s official strategy leads us to wonder if the problem raised by the possibility of a “super imaginative power” can be dealt with differently. We suggest that an alternative refutation can be mounted through the combination of two points, both dependent on transcendental idealism: (1) the abandonment of the transcendental realist’s picture of perception (the result achieved in the proof of the immediacy of outer perception) and (2) a reflection on the meaning, within a transcendental idealistic perspective, of the very possibility of a super imaginative power that generates our *entire* experience.

To begin with, let us recall how the sceptic assumes that both in the case of normal experience and in the case of hallucinations we perceive an “idea” (with a spatial content). The difference between the two cases is merely that in the latter case no object corresponds to the “idea.” The

¹⁵ Descartes (1996: 96).

¹⁶ Realizing the failure of this strategy, which will also be used by Kant in the Refutation of Idealism, is also crucial for assessing a series of strategies that are nothing but variations of it. For example Heidemann (1998) suggests that Kant’s sole successful strategy against the sceptic is the second edition idea that *all* material of our knowledge comes from outer sense. Heidemann, however, fails to recognize that this is just a version of the strategy here discussed and thus bound to share the same fate. It assumes what it should prove, namely, that there can’t be any superpower of the imagination that provides all the material of our knowledge.

immediacy thesis refutes this fundamental sceptical premise by establishing that whenever I perceive an external object, I do it immediately. The existence of (particular) hallucinations is no sufficient ground for inferring that what I see, even in cases of genuine experience, is an “idea” in my mind. Moreover, my entire experience teaches me that the world is constituted by two distinct sets of objects: merely temporal inner states (and myself as the owner of these states) and spatio-temporal objects. Particular hallucinations certainly exist, but they are easily detectable by looking at how they fail to square with the rest of our experience.¹⁷ Since they can be recognized only against the background of experience, their existence does not change in the least the general picture that my entire experience gives me of the world. It follows that when the sceptic asks the fatal question, of how we know that what happens in the particular case is not the general rule, we need not confess ignorance, as we would do, if we accepted the assumption that all my experience concerns is “ideas.” By contrast to this view, we can begin our reply to this query by stating that what our entire experience teaches us is that there are external things, mental entities, and hallucinations. Analogously, if the sceptic concedes that outer perception is immediate but insists that even in the case of *direct* perception of external objects my “perception” could still be a mere hallucination, we begin our response by stating that the sceptic has missed the force of the immediacy thesis. If I am having a direct perception of external objects, then I am not merely entertaining a mental entity to which something corresponds, but I am perceiving the object (not its representation). Contrastively, if I am hallucinating, then I am directly perceiving only a mental entity, not an external object. Of course, I may be mistaken in judging which of the two is a true description of my current act of experience. But this mistake is very short-lived because easily detectable

¹⁷ Kant presents a criterion for that at A376.

through the criterion of actuality (conformity with “empirical laws”).

It remains to deal with the possibility that even the background experience, whose rules tell me whether this particular experience fits within the “empirical laws” and is therefore true experience or a mere hallucination, could be itself hallucinatory. As we saw in our discussion of the criterion of actuality, the possibility still remains that the “hallucinations” we detect through the criterion are just “deviant” hallucinations within the general “big hallucination” to which our experience actually amounts. In other words, our entire experience, made of genuine perceptions and specific, first order, detectable hallucinations, could be itself a trick of the Evil Genius and therefore very different from what it appears to be. And here comes the last step in the argument. To wonder whether the world is different from the one my entire experience informs me about obviously means to wonder from a point of view external to experience itself. The fact that we are talking about our *entire* experience or about *all* we know is crucial. Since the sceptic asks us to wonder whether our entire experience could be illusory, he is really asking us to see the world from a point of view external to experience, that is, from an absolute standpoint. From the perspective of transcendental idealism, however, this means wondering how the world is in itself, namely, how it is from a point of view that abstracts from the way in which my sensibility makes things appear, that is, in space and time. But it is clear that if this is what the Cartesian sceptic is asking us, his challenge—the possibility that your entire external experience is an illusion—turns out to be an illegitimate concern. It turns out to be a vain enquiry into the nature of the thing in itself.

We can reach the same result if we construe the sceptical challenge as raising the possibility that the world is a product of some super-imagination. To say that spatial objects could be systematically just a product of an unknown faculty or super-imagination is to raise a question whose answer *by definition* falls outside the sphere of possible experience. It

means wondering as to the nature of what affects my senses, before they organize the material resulting from the affection, into a spatio-temporal form. But it is not this unknown X whose existence we need to prove in order to ground an empirical kind of realism. As Kant puts it: “We can indeed admit that something, which may be (in the transcendental sense) outside us, is the cause of our intuitions, but this is not the object we are thinking in the representations of matter and of corporeal things” (A372). If we stay within the limits of possible experience and do not attempt to determine what matter (or the soul) in itself is, the question as to whether what we immediately perceive as an external, spatial world is different from the way it appears, becomes absurd:

If, as the critical argument compels us to do, we hold fast to the rule above mentioned [do not take matter and the soul as things in themselves], we shall never dream of seeking to inform ourselves about the objects of the senses as they are in themselves, that is, out of all relation to the senses.¹⁸

In other words, it is quite possible that the cause of the affection that provides all the material of my experience is some sort of transcendent Ego endowed with an unknown (super)imagination. This transcendent Ego would play precisely the same role as does Descartes’ Evil Genius. The problem is that, once again, the possibility of raising such a *scenario* presupposes that one can appeal to how things are, independently of the organization of my senses. In the present case, it presupposes the possibility of appealing to the unknown cause of our intuitions. In some revealing passages found in the quite different context of the Second

¹⁸ See A380. An alternative way to realize the metaphysical illegitimate nature of the sceptical question is to focus on the very notion of the world with which the sceptic operates. For Kant, our experience is always an experience of particular events. We do not experience the world in its totality. The world, as the sum total of all appearances, is not the object of a possible intuition, but an idea of reason.

Paralogism, Kant provides the most explicit expression of the refutation of the radical doubt that we are proposing. He writes: “the something that underlies the outer appearances and which so affects our sense that it obtains the representations of space matter, shape, etc., may yet, when viewed as noumenon (or better, as transcendental object), be at the same time, the subject of our thoughts” (A358); also, “I may further assume that the substance which in relation to our outer sense possesses extension is in itself the possessor of thoughts” (A359); finally, “what, as thing in itself, underlies the appearances of matter, perhaps after all may not be so heterogeneous in character” (B428). The very same point is significantly repeated at the end of the Fourth Paralogism:

Though the ‘I’, as represented through inner sense in time, and objects outside me, are specifically quite distinct appearances, they are not for that reason thought as being different things. Neither the *transcendental object* which underlies outer appearances nor that which underlies inner intuition, is in itself either matter or a thinking being, but a ground (to us unknown) of the appearances which supply to us the empirical concept of the former as well as the latter mode of existence. (A379-80)

Kant’s point in these passages is clear enough. If we look at a thing from an absolute standpoint and not from the only one that is given to us, that is, sensible experience, then we can quite naturally concede to the empirical idealist that what appears as extended matter might “in itself” be the same thing as the subject, or, more precisely, merely an inner state of the (transcendental) subject. From such an absolute viewpoint, any kind of metaphysical speculation is allowed. Matter may be spirit in itself, spirit may be matter in itself, or both matter in itself and spirit in itself may exist:

If the psychologist takes appearances for things in themselves, and as existing in and by themselves, then whether he be a materialist who admits into his system nothing but matter alone, or a spiritualist who admits only thinking beings (that is, beings with the form of our inner sense), or a dualist who accepts both, he will always, owing to this misunderstanding, be entangled in pseudo-rational speculations as to how that which is not a thing in itself, but only the appearance of a thing in general, can exist by itself. (A380)

We are now in a position to see that, once one has abandoned the idea that the immediate object of our knowledge is a mental entity, the hypothesis of an unknown super imaginative power is equivalent to the possibility that the non-sensible cause of our representations, i.e. the non-sensible correlate of appearances, is this imaginative superpower. This, however, simply gives a new name to what Kant calls an external (in the transcendental sense) cause of our representations. Whereas the hypothesis of the super-imagination is threatening for a transcendental realist (it would remove the objects that our knowledge is supposed to be about), it does not concern the transcendental idealist because it would boil down to the terminological substitution of “non-sensible cause of our representation” with the more suggestive expression “super power of imagination” or “Evil Genius.” Once this super-imagination is shown to be necessarily confined to a non-sensible sphere, it becomes incapable of threatening empirical realism. We thus understand Kant’s crucial remark that “even the most rigid idealist cannot, therefore, require a proof that the object outside us (taking ‘outside’ in the strict [transcendental] sense) corresponds to our perception. For if there be such an object, it could not be represented and intuited as outside us” (A375-6).¹⁹

¹⁹ For a similar reading of Kant’s argument against scepticism see Stapleford (2008: 31f). Stapleford rightly show how the argument is immune from

1.4 A crucial objection answered

It should be clear by now that the key to Kant's reply to the sceptic turns on the reinterpretation of the Evil Genius hypothesis in terms of a question that, systematically surpassing the *totality* of any possible experience, brings us into the field of the thing in itself. The success of this argument rests precisely on the legitimacy of this reinterpretation. One could object that Descartes' hypothesis arises from the familiar cases of delusions of the imagination, such as hallucinations. As such, it certainly does not exceed the limits of ordinary experience. The sceptic needs only to affirm the possibility that unproblematic familiar cases of hallucinations could simply be the general rule. More precisely, particular hallucinations give us the opportunity to conceive of the possibility that, in analogy to what happens with these particular cases of delusion, our entire experience is a sort of "big hallucination," in which particular hallucinations would be just deviant cases of the regular hallucinatory "experience" in which we live. And it is not clear how, reasoning in this manner, the sceptic could arrive at the realm of the thing in itself. The possibility that he raises does not seem to have anything to do with the constitution of the thing in itself. Even if we assume transcendental idealism, it still seems that the possibility raised by the sceptic is perfectly legitimate. Doesn't the transcendental idealist acknowledge the

Stroud's famous criticism of transcendental arguments. Although his reference to Kant's idealism (p. 26) as a sort of partial proto-verificationism, is problematic, Stapleford and I agree that Kant has the decisive move against the sceptic when he exploits fully the anti-sceptical significance of his transcendental distinction between appearances and things in themselves. By reducing a question as to the constitution of the thing in itself to nothing, Kant makes the decisive move. Further indirect support in favour of my idea to reconsider Kant's first edition (alternative) strategy against scepticism comes from a recent analysis by Chignell (2010: 487-507) that shows how the second edition Refutation of Idealism, at least if interpreted independently of transcendental idealism and 'causally' as in Guyer (1987: 279-329) and in Dicker (2008) is far from producing the desired anti-sceptical *proof*. For a defence of the causal reading see Dicker (2011).

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existence of hallucinations? How then can he deny the legitimacy of the hypothesis that our entire experience is nothing but a systematic hallucination?

It is at this point that the immediacy thesis becomes crucial. As we saw, if we operate with the transcendental realist's model of perception, the objects that we experience (mental entities) are not those that we want to reach (objects external in the transcendental sense). Therefore, when one refers to one's entire experience, one is always talking about a mental realm. It follows that the Cartesian hypothesis does not even become a question that surpasses the limits of our experience. It is simply a question about the possibility that our entire experience could lack its desired referent. But, if we abandon the transcendental realist's model of perception, that is, if we accept the immediacy thesis, the only way to make sense of the idea that my entire external experience is a "big hallucination" is to reject this experience and raise the possibility that the world, from a viewpoint other than the empirical one, could be different. In other words, the sceptical question can no longer be where there is a correspondence between my entire experience (mental entities) and the desired objects. The question *must* rather become one of whether my entire experience, could be different from the way it is. This is, however, certainly equivalent to saying that things in themselves could be (or simply, are) different from the way in which the empirical objects appear. Strictly speaking, it is not that Kant could readily accept that, nor even that he could simply say that we know nothing about this realm. It is rather that he would dismiss the question itself as illegitimate, exceeding the set of questions that we can raise. As Kant puts it very clearly in a footnote in the Transcendental Dialectic: "Although to the question, what is the constitution of a transcendental object, no answer can be given stating *what it is*, we can yet reply that the *question* itself is *nothing*, because there is no given object [corresponding] to it" (A479/B507n.).

2. Transcendental Idealism as “the only refuge”

The response to the sceptic just reconstructed was possible only from the standpoint of transcendental idealism because only from that standpoint does the question about the constitution of the transcendental object amount to nothing. Kant however does not think that transcendental idealism provides a solid ground for a refutation of the sceptic, but that it is the *sole* philosophical standpoint from which a successful refutation could be mounted. As he famously puts it, transcendental idealism is “the only refuge” against scepticism. At first sight, this claim seems to be unwarranted. Even if we grant that transcendental realism is necessarily committed to an indirect mode of perception, and therefore necessarily committed to empirical idealism (or scepticism), alternative philosophical standpoints, apparently neither committed to transcendental realism nor to transcendental idealism, could generate refutations as solid as that just presented. This is the case, for example, for Carnap’s verificationism and Putnam’s internal realism. Both philosophers proposed refutations of the sceptic that are particularly interesting because they bear a strong resemblance to the Kantian argument we defended, and yet both seem to be able to do without transcendental idealism. Carnap proposed an argument turning on the attempt to unveil scepticism as a form of dogmatic metaphysics, thus echoing our (and Kant’s) appeal to remain within the limits of possible experience.²⁰ Putnam mounted a refutation from a standpoint – internal realism – that Putnam himself considers quite similar to transcendental idealism, and yet deprived of its allegedly dogmatic assumptions. Incumbent on us is thus the discussion of both approaches because, if they succeed, transcendental idealism will no longer be our only refuge. If they fail, however, and particularly if they do so precisely because they operate

²⁰ For an account of why Dummett’s argument against scepticism faces similar difficulties see Caranti (2007: 107-110).

without a transcendental idealistic perspective, we shall have some extra reasons to take transcendental idealism seriously.

2.1 Carnap's refutation of the sceptic

Carnap dismisses idealism because, on his view, it is grounded in a metaphysical, and therefore meaningless, point of view. For Carnap, a question or a sentence is meaningful if and only if it describes a state of affairs that can be verified or falsified through experience. Since scepticism raises the possibility of a state of affairs (the world as a systematic hallucination) that *ex hypothesi* cannot be verified or falsified through experience, it is a meaningless position. Carnap's emphasis on the necessity of remaining within the domain of experience resembles the kind of Kantian argument that we proposed. But this resemblance has limits. The empirical verifiability principle of meaningfulness, no matter how liberalized, makes, as Carnap well knows, not only idealism but also realism meaningless. The issue between a realist and an idealist about the existence of any particular thing is merely a pseudo-dispute. The realist argues that the object exists independently of its being perceived, and the idealist argues for the coincidence of its existence and its being perceived. Thus "there is complete unanimity so far as the empirical facts are concerned,"²¹ as in principle there is no empirical fact that could settle the dispute between them. Moreover, what is true of the dispute over a particular object is true of the world in general. It follows that the dispute between idealism and realism—the world exists outside our mind *versus* the world is (or may be) identical with its being perceived—is a pseudo-issue, too.

Carnap's idea that between the idealist and the realist "there is complete unanimity so far as the empirical facts are concerned" is instructive. Since it is not clear at all that, by claiming that "there is the object X out there," a realist

²¹ Carnap (1967: 333-4).

means the same thing as an idealist, the only way in which there could be unanimity is if the realist assumes that the immediate objects of his perception are mental entities. These are the “empirical facts” (about which the idealist and the realist agree) that Carnap seems to have in mind. The disagreement between the idealist and the realist is merely about whether there is a corresponding object that exists independently of the mind. Thus the meaningless realist affirmation is that there is such an object, while the equally meaningless idealist affirmation is that there is no such object.²²

The lesson to be learned from this equation of realism and idealism is that for Carnap, and this is certainly no hermeneutical breakthrough, the raw material of our experience are always sense-data, mental entities. Clearly, from a Kantian perspective, this means that Carnap is operating within a transcendental realist model of experience. The immediate objects of our knowledge are mental entities. The only difference between the transcendental realist and Carnap is that the former usually wants to affirm the correspondence of objects to these mental entities as a matter of fact, independent of the language we choose, whereas Carnap judges the question as meaningful only within a certain language, specifically, the one that includes external things.

Even if we are right in this reconstruction, how does Carnap’s siding with transcendental realism jeopardize his refutation of scepticism? To see this one need only realize that the sceptic cannot be threatened by any attempt to remove the meaningfulness of his position, as long as his

²² For Carnap, that we speak of external objects and therefore assume that they exist, is merely the outcome of the fact that we have chosen a language that includes terms referring to genuine external objects. We choose it simply because it is more efficient than a phenomenological language that includes only sense-data. But this efficiency is not to be taken as evidence in favour of the existence of external things. For Carnap, it is a merely practical advantage: it makes the verification or falsification of the sentences we utter easier. More precisely, a language that includes external things seems to be more efficient than any other for organizing and expressing sense-data in such a way that our sentences can be verified or falsified.

opponent (the realist) faces the same destiny. The sceptic can be satisfied with the fact that on Carnap's interpretation, the realist ends up in the same spot (his position turns out equally meaningless). Actually, the sceptic can even consider Carnap an ally, despite his tendency to reduce idealism to non-sense. Indeed, the freedom that Carnap gives us to choose between a language that includes external things and one that restricts itself to sense-data is really equivalent to the sceptic's thesis that there is no way to determine whether a world corresponds to our sense-data. After all, that the realist and the idealist positions are really indistinguishable is precisely what the *sceptic* (as opposed to the *dogmatic*) idealist wants.

The result of this analysis is that the mere appeal to the necessity of remaining within the domain of the available evidence is not sufficient to silence the sceptic and should not be confused with our anti-sceptical argument. If the idea of the immediacy of outer perception is not brought in, the mere appeal to what experience says is never going to be sufficient. Only if this appeal is combined with the immediacy thesis (and therefore with transcendental idealism) can scepticism be refuted. These were, in fact, just the two steps of our argument. Remember we stated earlier that the thesis of the immediacy of outer perception by itself is not sufficient to refute the sceptic. We now learn that also the second step, at least if it is taken as a generic suggestion to remain within the limits of experience, is, taken alone, insufficient. The appeal to experience as the framework within which questions are legitimate is not going to yield the desired result unless the experience we are referring to is sharply distinguished from the sense-data that Carnap assumes. Only if we mean by 'experience' the world that we immediately see, which includes the spatial world that is given to us through outer sense, can we really reinterpret and rule out the sceptical hypothesis as an illegitimate question.²³

²³ Not surprisingly, in his defense of scepticism against Carnap's charge of meaninglessness, Stroud can easily show that if the truth of statements such as "there is an object X out there" depends on the choice of a linguistic

2.2 Evil Geniuses and Brains in a Vat

The claim that no argument against scepticism can be successful unless one abandons transcendental realism could be further questioned by referring to other refutations that seem to bypass any specific reference to transcendental idealism, despite their remaining within a broadly construed Kantian framework. This is the case of Hilary Putnam's famous argument against the possibility that we are "brains in a vat." In fact, Putnam thinks, the argument can be used effectively by the "externalist" philosopher – Kant's transcendental realist – to escape the threat of external world scepticism. Let us recall the essential features of the argument to assess whether it really stands as a convincing refutation.

Putnam rephrases Descartes' hypothesis of the Evil Genius by imagining that we are brains placed in a vat containing a nutrient fluid and connected through a series of wires to a sort of supercomputer – the Matrix, we could say after Hollywood's appropriation of this philosophical fantasy. The question obviously becomes: how do we know that we are *not* brains in a vat? Putnam thinks that a bit of reflection on how words refer to objects suffices to show that this *scenario* is a mere *logical* possibility, not a *real* one. To put it differently, it is a merely *consistent* story, but it cannot be the description of how things are. In particular, Putnam believes that he is able to show that saying "we are brains in a vat" is no different from saying "I do not exist" or "all general statements are false" – two assertions evidently self-refuting. The argument takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* and goes as follows. Let us assume that we are in fact brains in a vat. When a brain in a vat thinks "there is a tree in front of me", he is not referring to a real tree (an

framework, it seems that the existence of such an object is made dependent on a subjective decision, such as the very adoption of the language that includes such things. And, as Stroud rightly says, this results in an "idealism of truly heroic proportions." (Stroud 1984: 193)

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external object as we understand it); by definition, if his thought refers at all, it refers to a “tree-in-the-image”, that is to the image stimulated by the electrical impulses sent by the super-computer. Something similar happens for any affirmation the brain could make about external objects, including the brain itself. It follows that if the brain thinks (or says) “I am a brain in a vat”, then it *must* mean “I am a brain in a vat in the image”. Therefore, if we *are* brains in a vat, when we say “we are brains in a vat”, we are, so to speak, condemned to mean that we are “brains in a vat in the image”. While it was our intention to say something *not* about our internal sense data, the logic of our language, given the presupposition that we *are* brains in a vat, denies the possibility of reaching real things beyond them. This means, however, that, if we are brains in a vat, then our sentence “we are brains in a vat”, being part of a language that is forced to refer to inner sense data, affirms something false. Now, if the truth of a state of affairs described by a sentence removes the conditions of possibility of the sentence’s being true, then the sentence is necessarily false. To quote Putnam’s succinct conclusion of the argument: “if we are brains in a vat, then ‘We are brains in a vat’ is false. So it is (necessarily) false”.²⁴

Is this ingenious argument dependent on transcendental idealism? Apparently, it is not. All we have been given is a reflection on the logic of reference and on how this leads to a paradox that seems to rule out the sceptic’s hypothesis. Putnam himself seems to think in this manner when he points out that for internalism (Putnam’s own appropriation and reinterpretation of transcendental idealism) the brains in the vat story is “just a story” that clearly presupposes a God’s eye point of view. As such, it can be easily and readily dismissed *independently of the paradox of reference*.²⁵ Things are different, however, for what Putnam calls the “externalist” philosopher. Such a philosopher believes that truth consists of correspondence between

²⁴ Putnam (1981: 15).

²⁵ Putnam (1981: 50).

words (or thought signs) and objects *as completely independent of the system of description used* (in our language, completely independent of the mind). As we said, he is what Kant calls a “transcendental realist”. For the externalist, scepticism is not just a story, but becomes a serious threat, because a description of the world that presupposes a God’s eye point of view—like the Evil Genius hypothesis—cannot be immediately ruled out as a candidate for the truth. The paradox discovered by Putnam is thus meant to be the argument that precisely the externalist is most interested in using. Now, if Putnam’s argument is to be used by the externalist philosopher, then clearly no internalist/transcendental-idealist premises can be assumed in the argument. But, if this is possible, then the *necessity* of assuming transcendental idealism to avoid the sceptical threat, on which we have so much insisted, would be falsified. In other words, if Putnam is right in assessing the logic of his own argument, then transcendental idealism is *not*, as Kant argues, “the only refuge”.

On a closer analysis, however, this reconstruction proves to be mistaken. Let us go back to Putnam’s argument. Its main thrust is that, if we are brains in a vat, we cannot *think* (or *say*) that we are. More precisely, if we are brains in a vat and (therefore) we have to speak vat-English, we fall in self-contradiction as soon as we try to express our “true” condition (*being* Brains in a Vat). It is rather evident, though, that this leaves intact the possibility that we *are* indeed brains in a vat *from the perspective of a putative external observer* (be it God or any other entity that falls outside the world we inhabit). The argument only shows that, from within our world, we cannot even *express* our wretched condition without falling into contradiction. If the sceptic is right, not only are we brains in the vat, but we also suffer the further complication that we cannot even formulate – without falling into contradiction or paradox – that this is the case. Nonetheless, it is still possible that we are brains in a vat, that the externalist view of truth is right, and that truth (so defined) would never be achieved, not even in the case

of the description of why this state of affairs holds. In sum, the sceptic would be at most forced by Putnam's argument to describe in darker terms the condition we are (or might be) in. And this can hardly count as a *refutation* of scepticism.

The lesson to be learned is that it is only from the internalist perspective that scepticism truly becomes a dismissible "story". From the perspective of transcendental realism, like Kant had warned, scepticism seems to be insurmountable and Putnam is wrong if he thinks that the externalist philosopher (in the mood for a refutation of scepticism) could *successfully* make use of his paradox of reference. From this, four main consequences follow. First, despite Putnam's way of presenting his own argument, transcendental idealism (or internalism, let us bracket the question whether they are identical) *is* necessary for being in the position to treat scepticism as "only a story". Secondly, Putnam, unlike Kant, fails to make this logical dependence clear to the extent that he suggests that even the externalist philosopher is capable of refuting the sceptic. Thirdly, whether we are going to accept the refutation of the sceptic will ultimately depend on whether transcendental idealism (or internalism) is *independently* grounded. The choice between internalism and externalism cannot depend merely on the fact that the latter position cannot refute the sceptic while the former can treat it as a story. And yet, fourthly and most importantly, if transcendental idealism is the only standpoint that liberates philosophy from absurdities, no matter how logically consistent, such as the scenario in which we are brains in a vat but we cannot even meaningfully say that we are, or from those highlighted by Kant, in which we are asked to abandon the terrain of our *entire* experience to conceptualize the hypothesis of the Evil Genius, one is led to take that standpoint very seriously (more seriously than it is usually done), even if unconvinced by other arguments meant to ground it (such as that of the Aesthetic and that of the Dialectic). And this is why it is intriguing to think of Kant's analysis of scepticism as

providing (more or less intentionally) an additional indirect foundation of his philosophical standpoint. In sum, transcendental idealism turns out to be, at the same time and without circularity, both a necessary premise – to be grounded independently – for any successful refutation of scepticism and a philosophical standpoint that gains credibility to the extent that it reveals itself as the only one capable of freeing philosophy from weird sceptical fantasies.

3. Conclusion

By discussing Carnap and Putnam the paper has no ambition to exhaust all arguments philosophy has devised to remove its “scandal”, not even all those worthy of attention. For example, Thomas Reid’s arguments against the “way of ideas” are equally interesting and instructive²⁶. And, needless to say, it is quite possible that a future argument will be able to refute convincingly scepticism without any appeal to transcendental idealism. Thus the possibility remains that a future refutation will falsify Kant’s point that transcendental idealism is the “only refuge”. If such an argument were found, we would also have less reasons to take seriously our suggestion to read FP as a powerful indirect foundation of transcendental idealism itself. Whilst not ruling out such possible findings, however, this argument should at least serve as a new way to look at one crucial part of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that is all too often quickly dismissed rather than seriously engaged with.

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²⁶ For a discussion of the problems faced by Reid’s realism and by direct realism in general in countering the sceptic see Caranti (2007: 92-97).

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