

Review

Kant's Transcendental Arguments: Disciplining Pure Reason by Scott Stapleford

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Dennis Schulting, University of Amsterdam

Among the many books published on Kant, this one stands out. With a little over 150 pages the book is relatively short and it is written in a snappy style, which makes it a pleasure to read. It is tightly argued without falling into the ever more beguiling trap of attempting to transpose Kant's thoughts into latter-day formal language. More importantly, it presents a convincing account of a central (perceived) problem in Kant, regarding the 'Refutation of Idealism' (Refutation for short), and deals with it expeditiously. Also, it is one of those very few books on Kant with which I happen to agree on most counts. This is especially significant as the author of the book, coming from an analytic background, doesn't shy away from seeing Kant as the unfashionable idealist *sans phrase* that I also believe he is (although I am more positive about the *philosophical* tenability of Kant's position than I think the author is). This has important repercussions for the way that Kant's Refutation, usually regarded as Kant's final rebuke to idealism, is expounded here. It thus makes the book an indispensable read particularly for those interested in Kant's criticisms against idealism who desperately want him to be on the side of the realists (*sans phrase*).

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The book is subdivided into four main chapters, the most important of which are chapter 1, on the nature of Transcendental Arguments (TA for short in the remainder of this review) and their supposed anti-sceptical thrust, and chapter 3, which deals with the Refutation in detailed scholarly fashion. Chapters 2 and 4 are on ‘The Transcendental Method’ and ‘The Transcendental as a Level of Discourse’ respectively, and concern more general issues related to Kant’s positive view of what constitutes a transcendental proof, namely to explain ‘the possibility of experiencing an object corresponding to some concept’ (51). Especially Stapleford’s delineation, in chapter 2, of a much-neglected chapter in the first *Critique*, on the discipline of pure reason, is valuable. I shall focus on chapters 1 and 3, however, as they contain the meat of the book and will be seen by many as containing the more contentious views.

In chapter 1, the author links the central aim of the book, to understand Kant’s transcendental method of proof, to the debate on TA, although one might, as the author notes, object to the substitution of the term ‘argument’ for ‘proof’, which namely is Kant’s own label for the procedure of transcendental analysis. The author points to a felt urgency that one detects in this debate, ‘as if the fate of philosophy’ depended on the success of the cogency of TA. (1-2) But Kant’s transcendental project might be very different from what one is usually looking for in Kant. Kant might not provide the answers that one wants. Stapleford thinks ‘that the main motivation for turning to Kant has been the almost universal confusion about what a transcendental argument is’. (3) One of the aggravating problems in the TA debate is the lack of ‘careful historical analysis’ (3). To remedy this defect, Stapleford seeks to know what Kant aimed for with his own TA, without anachronistically ‘applying any pre-conceived notions of what would make such an argument effective or interesting’ (3). This, I think, is a very welcome indication of serious historically informed scholarship on Stapleford’s part. By contrast, among Anglophone commentators it is often deemed legitimate to combine the historical

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with a philosophically thematic focus, as if to highlight the old adage that we understand an author better than he did himself, often resulting in a curious mix of historical exposition and philosophical analysis, if not brazen ahistorical philosophical reductionism. As Stapleford rightly notes: ‘We can certainly go beyond Kant, but in order to do that we first have to understand him.’ (5) This does not mean, of course, that we are not looking for arguments; we do after all want to understand Kant’s *reasoning* and are not concerned with historical details *per se*. Stapleford’s sensible views on the hermeneutics of interpretation should be taken to heart by all analytically inclined Kantians.

The upshot of Stapleford’s reading of the central text part in which traditionally Kant’s supposed TA par excellence is located, the Refutation, is bound to be unwelcome, as Stapleford concludes that the Refutation is ‘not really meant to be a refutation of idealism in any sense that is likely to satisfy our realist instincts, but that it is much more a refutation of empiricism.’ (5) That Kant’s intention turns out *not* to ultimately prove the ‘existence of mind-independent entities’ (5), so the contrary of what is seen as the very purpose of TA, suggests the ‘unsuitability of the transcendental method for securing any ontologically weighty conclusions’ (5) about an independent world of mind-external objects.

Stapleford addresses a series of responses to Barry Stroud’s famous objection to TA. According to Stroud, TA appear to neglect the distinction between a claim about how we think about the world and its objects and a claim about how the world is, and any anti-sceptical argument should be able to bridge the gap between how the world is and how we think the world is. Stapleford then suggests that ‘some form of verificationism such that statements about the world apart from any relation to us are strictly meaningless’ will render sceptical hypotheses regarding such a possible gap equally meaningless (9). But in that case the ‘verificationist principle [...] is doing all of the anti-sceptical work and *not* the transcendental argument’, which makes TA superfluous (9).

Commentators have since taken Stroud's objection to be a direct challenge to Kant's project, but Stapleford believes that 'any reading of Kant on which Stroud's objection *is* relevant must be based upon a misinterpretation of his critical programme' (10).

Turning to the Refutation itself, and specifically focussing on the question who is Kant's explicit adversary there, Stapleford first argues that the Refutation is first of all a dialectical argument that has an anti-idealistic force and contains a transcendental proof of its main premise; but as for Kant no transcendental proof can be apagogic, the transcendental proof in the Refutation is not an indirect one (i.e. a *reductio*). 'Only as directed against the problematic idealist [...] does the argument become indirect' (11). It is the dialectical argument, then, that has the polemical force against the opponent, whilst the transcendental argument 'furnishes [...] a premise asserting a relationship of dependence between experience and one of its conditions' (12). In other words, the argument of the Refutation as a whole can hardly be seen as transcendental.

Stapleford subsequently expands on Robert Stern's recent attempt to attenuate attempts to see the Refutation as strongly anti-sceptical by employing the distinction between epistemic and justificatory scepticism, so as to avoid Stroud's objection. Kant's Refutation is on that systematically revisionary basis to be seen as 'directed against a normativist justificatory sceptic' (14), the position where it is not questioned whether there truly is a world external to our minds, but whether it can be rationally legitimated that we believe there to be such a world. The opponent of the Refutation is then not someone of the Cartesian stripe, but more someone who thinks along Humean lines.

Stapleford points out (16ff.) that, apart from Kant's expressive statement that Descartes is his target, one reason that Hume cannot be the target of Kant's Refutation is that at B276 Kant identifies the sceptical idealist as one who thinks we can *only infer* outer things, whereas Hume specifically denies that 'the conditions for any such inference were met'

(17), meaning not that the inference were only doubtful, but rather it is wholly groundless. Furthermore, Stern's normativist reading is clearly 'a modern interpolation' (21), as 'Kant just doesn't talk about belief in the Refutation' (21). Similarly, 'Stern only discusses the fact that we *perceive* external objects immediately, when what the Refutation is really intended to establish is that we perceive outer appearances, *as objects*, immediately.' (23) Stern's weakening move results in accepting that Kant can only prove that we know the world as it *appears to us*; an indefeasible proof against the sceptic cannot be given. Although Stapleford disagrees with Stern's move generally, and he criticizes Stern's neglect to explain Kant's real intention (to prove immediate perception of *objects*), he concurs with Stern in believing that Kant was not 'attempting to prove something about the world as a thing in itself'. (20) This is an important facet of Stapleford's idealistic take on the Refutation, in which he differs radically from Paul Guyer's prominent realist reading (on which more below).

In the last two sections of the first chapter Stapleford outlines what he calls Kant's 'proto-verificationism'. He refers to what he calls Kant's 'framework principle' (26). The framework meant here is 'a set of concepts that makes possible either experience of or discourse about objects [...]' (26). Claims that are not about objects within this framework are empty, although not meaningless (which on full-fledged verificationism they would be). After providing textual support for this view, Stapleford subsequently connects the framework principle to Stroud's objection that TA 'could never prove anything about how the world is independently of us' (31). At this point, Stapleford's committed reading of Kant as an idealist *sans phrase* comes to the fore: 'Kant's proto-verificationism ensures that any sceptical challenges about the world as an object in itself are nothing to us, since the world in itself is precisely *not* an object of knowledge for us, according to Kant's transcendental idealism' (31). The Stroudian objection against TA thus is, at least on Kant's version, not germane, as Kant

would gladly admit to any obstinate sceptic insisting on an unexplainable discrepancy between mind and world that the forms of our experience ‘don’t correspond with the way the world *really* is independently of our experience’ (32). They only correspond to ‘*dependent* objects’, i.e. phenomenal objects or appearances. Hence, the ‘necessary correspondence that Kant’s transcendental idealism establishes between *a priori* concepts and the phenomenal fabric of the world is of an anti-empiricist, rather than anti-sceptical description’ (33). The Refutation is, in other words, not directed against any hardline sceptic.

In chapter 3, Stapleford addresses in great detail the arguments that Kant himself presents in the Refutation and then later in drafts published as a set of *Reflexionen* in the *Nachlass*. His careful dissection of Guyer’s reading of pivotal passages that Guyer sees as supporting a realist reading is very illuminating and, to my mind, convincing. Guyer’s take on the Refutation is well known. He believes that in the Refutation, and then later even more clearly in the aforementioned *Reflexionen*, Kant argues for ‘full-bodied realism’ (62). Stapleford takes this view to task. Among other reasons for dismissing it is the fact that Guyer relies too heavily on the presumption that Kant was mistaken in regard to his initial idealist position (in particular in the Fourth Paralogism in the A-edition) and subsequently attempted to redress the mistake in the B-edition (the Refutation) and afterwards in the various drafts, which is first of all of course in conflict with Kant’s own view of the difference between the *Critique*’s A and B-versions as being merely of a presentational nature. More importantly, however, the *Reflexionen* on which Guyer relies most do not unambiguously support the realist reading, as Stapleford scrupulously shows, and allow a very different reading which in fact prohibits Guyer’s realist take.

As had been noted by Kant’s contemporaries, in particular Pistorius, Kant prevaricates between two notions of object in the Refutation, one of object as phenomeno-

logically distinct from us and one of object as ontologically distinct from us, what Kant labels as external in the ‘transcendental’ (A373) or ‘intellectual sense’ (A367). As Pistorius pointed out perceptively in his review of the second edition of Kant’s first *Critique*, if the objects meant here are only phenomenologically distinct, then ‘the entire Refutation is a mere word play’ (68). Guyer though argues that other than in the 1781 Fourth Paralogism in the 1787 Refutation Kant indeed seeks to show ‘the ontological independence [of objects] as the immediate condition of inner experience’ (69), even though they still depend on us for their being *represented* as spatial. Stapleford aims to rebut this reading and to show that on the evidence available Kant does not mean externally as in ‘ontologically independent’. After considering and then quickly dismissing a more recent take from Guyer, Stapleford expounds in great detail Guyer’s arguments and scrutinizes his claims of textual support for the ontological reading. He shows that in the *Reflexionen* Kant only ever has the phenomenological independence of objects in mind. For example, regarding R6323 Stapleford asserts against Guyer’s reading of the evidence that there ‘is nothing here to suggest that the object *qua thing in itself* has any role to play with respect to the temporal ordering of experience.’ (74) Stapleford considers a *Reflexion* ‘on which Guyer relies most heavily’ (77), i.e. R6313, and concludes after carefully parsing the text that it does not unambiguously support Guyer’s reading and is in fact ‘sandwiched between two other[.] [paragraphs] that speak fairly clearly against it.’ (80)

In the central section of chapter 3 Stapleford provides his own account of the Refutation proof; after a sketch of the general structure of the argument, Stapleford points out why Descartes is the target of the argument, circling around the possibility of the experience of the transcendental subject, that is, ‘how the *a priori* representation “I am” can become an object of knowledge, [...] [that is,] can be given in intuition’ (94). The argument can then be called transcendental ‘to the extent that it deals with the question of what

can be known *a priori* concerning my existence as an empirical object'. (95) The problem which ensues is that, on this reading, Kant has not 'established that there is anything *objective* about experience at all', and so the Refutation has no real clout as an argument against idealism, as it merely supplies an argument regarding what are the conditions for the *experience* of the self as an object, leaving unexplained the object's reality.

In the Fourth Paralogism a different argument against idealism can be found, namely one from sensory content; Kant there points out that, as Stapleford writes, 'it is enough to refute idealism that there is a content or "material" component given to the cognitive faculties that is not itself produced by those faculties' (96), implying that 'empirical realism is beyond question' (A375) (96-97). But again, 'this strategy will be ineffectual against empirical idealists of either stripe, Cartesian or Berkeleyan', as Stapleford subsequently points out (98), for there are resources available within empirical idealist theories that could account for the external provenance of sensory content.

On what basis does Kant then have an argument against the empirical idealists? Stapleford goes on to show that, for Kant, object and hence empirical reality are 'spelled out in terms of *a priori* connectedness of representations'; and, that which is real 'is just that which is given in perception' (101). In this context, Stapleford brings up something that mostly gets forgotten by commentators, namely that the Refutation is inserted, in the B-edition, into the section on 'The postulates of empirical thinking in general', where Kant expounds the conditions for the application of the categories of modality to empirical experience. The Refutation's argument for 'the dependence of inner experience on the existence of actual things outside of me' fits in neatly with the Postulates' account of 'what it is for something to be actual [*wirklich*] in the empirical sense' (101). Now it is perception, as Kant asserts, that will furnish actuality (102) and although Kant specifically allows for 'counterfactual inferences beyond the immediately perceptible', this does

not yet sufficiently differentiate Kantian idealism from the empirical idealists, as both ‘Berkeley and a moderate Cartesian solipsist could provide for the existence of objects in terms of the connection of possible perceptions with actual perceptions by means of associative laws’. (103) What does differentiate Kant’s transcendental idealism from empirical idealism is the a priori character of the connections of perceptions that purport to be about objects. The objective reality of our perceptions can only be had through conceptualization by virtue of the categories as providing that a priori connectedness, which ‘implies that the associationist account of objects espoused by pure empiricists must be wrong’ (104). It is the a priori connections among my perceptions that ‘render experience *objective*’ (105). In other words, ‘[r]eality, in the empirical sense, amounts to the *a priori* connectedness of given sensory content’ (105), whereby the a priori connectedness accounts for the transcendental component of Kant’s transcendental idealism. But it also means, as Kant declares himself at A371, that objects *are* nothing but these connected representations, i.e., in Stapleford’s words, ‘*nothing but sets of actual and possible representations* between which *a priori* conceptual and intuitive relationships obtain’ (121), which accounts for the unmistakably idealistic bit of transcendental idealism.

This leads Stapleford to read Kant’s assertion, in the Refutation, that ‘the perception of this persistent thing is possible only through a thing outside me and not through the mere representation of a thing outside me’ (B275) such that it concerns a contrast, not between ‘representation’ and ‘thing’, which might suggest that a thing is meant that is ontologically distinct from us, as Guyer would have it, but between ‘mere representation’ and ‘thing’ as ‘object’ in the aforementioned sense of a priori connection of perceptions, which is the linchpin of Kant’s answer to the empirical idealist. That the subject of experience is then both that which conditions and is conditioned by the object might seem circular, but Stapleford rightly points out, in the

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concluding section of chapter 3, that Kant distinguishes between transcendental and empirical consciousness, and the self-consciousness as a possible *object* of experience that is at issue in the premise in the Refutation is of course empirical consciousness and not the transcendental subject that categorially determines any possible object of experience.

Concluding, Stapleford observes, controversially but entirely consistently, that the Refutation ‘does not recant on [the Berkeleyan] position’ of the Fourth Paralogism, i.e., ‘that the existence of objects needn’t be inferred since we do not have to go outside the contents of our own minds to reach them’; they ‘are immediately given as intra-mental entities’ (117). What the Refutation adds, and which reveals it to be directed against both the Berkeleyan and Cartesian, is making explicit a second sense of the immediate awareness of objects, namely as ‘already constituted according to *a priori* rules of connection’. This is how, Stapleford asserts, Kant ‘overturns transcendental realism and empirical idealism at one stroke’ (117). It might seem as if, on this account, Kant is just a Berkeleyan after all, although Stapleford clearly does not intend this to be so. What I take Stapleford to mean is that insofar as Kant, like Berkeley, denies bodies existing external to the mind — which is one of the conspicuous claims of the Fourth Paralogism (and a position that is confirmed in the 1783 *Prolegomena*; §49; cf. §52c) — he rejects any form of transcendental realism, but to the extent that Kant, unlike Berkeley and in fact against him, argues for the *empirical reality* of bodies as *a priori* connected representations he rejects empirical idealism. So it is only in one respect that Kant’s position can be compared to Berkeley’s, the respect in which Kant truly must be considered an idealist, who regards objects of perception or appearances as mere representations.

There are a few minor details which I would work out differently, but the overall resolutely idealistic picture Stapleford paints of Kant is the right one. It might be unwelcome to unrepentant realists, but I think his interpretation of Kant's transcendental idealism, in particular of the *Critique's* Refutation, does justice to the historical Kant and is thus what a truly historically rigorous account that takes the arguments seriously should be like, whatever the arguments' philosophical merits. I heartily recommend this well-researched monograph to specialists working on the Refutation and connected issues. It is to be hoped too that there will be a paperback reissue soon so that more students of the Refutation can affordably profit from its many insights.
