

On McDowell's Conception of the 'Transcendental'¹

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RESUMEN

En sus escritos recientes, desde *Mind and World*, John McDowell emplea a menudo el término "transcendental". En este artículo, comienzo centrándome en su reconstrucción del razonamiento de Sellars en "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", como incluyendo un interesante y peculiar tipo de argumento transcendental; y a continuación me aproximo a la obra anterior de McDowell, con el fin de examinar la evolución de su concepción más general de lo "transcendental". Estoy especialmente interesado en la defensa "transcendental" de lo que McDowell denomina empirismo "mínimo" (y "transcendental"), y en último término trataré de evaluar en qué medida su estrategia argumentativa está en armonía con su wittgensteiniano enfoque "terapéutico" de los problemas filosóficos.

ABSTRACT

In his recent writings, since *Mind and World*, John McDowell often employs the term "transcendental". In this paper, I begin by focusing on his reconstruction of Sellars' reasoning in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", as involving a peculiar and interesting kind of transcendental argument, before drawing on McDowell's earlier work, in order to survey the evolution of his more general conception of the "transcendental". I am particularly interested in the "transcendental" defense of what McDowell calls "minimal" (and "transcendental") empiricism, and will eventually try to assess the extent to which his argumentative strategy is in harmony with his Wittgensteinian, "therapeutic" approach to philosophical problems.

I

There are different construals of the term "transcendental" and different conceptions of transcendental philosophy. Nevertheless, most philosophers would agree that the core meaning of the term goes back to Kant's suggestion that transcendental inquiry deals with "all cognition that is occupied not so much with objects, but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is to be possible *a priori*" [Kant (1997), A12/B25]. Thus, the epistemological inquiry undertaken in the first *Critique* focuses on the *a priori* conditions of possibility of our mode of knowledge of objects and, following the directives dictated by the Copernican turn, leads to the elaboration of the

peculiar positions of transcendental idealism. Now, moving on from Kant's original version of transcendental philosophy, and bypassing its many transformations through the centuries, we shift to the study of the revival and the adaptation of his methodological guidelines by Peter Strawson, who strives to disentangle them from all kinds of objectionable idealism. The key idea that is operative in Strawson's descriptive metaphysics is still that of *a priori* conditions of possibility (of identification and reidentification of particulars in human communication). His proposal involves the use of transcendental arguments, with a view to establishing certain basic facts concerning our knowledge and experience and, presumably, concerning the *world* of our experience, by proving that they constitute necessary conditions of intelligible communication.² The success of his enterprise would enable us to silence sceptics who disputed such facts, and really "pretended to accept a conceptual scheme, but at the same time quietly rejected one of the conditions of its employment" [Strawson (1959), p. 35]. Unfortunately, it was soon shown by Barry Stroud that, insofar as these arguments aspire to uncover essential features of the *world* and not of our *conception of the world*, they have to appeal to tacit and apparently questionable idealist or verificationist assumptions [cf. Stroud (1968)]. Strawson himself recognized the force of this criticism and opted for a more modest or weak construal of his transcendental arguments, which would be thus considered as sufficient to establish only necessary connections among our most basic concepts.³

Indeed, I believe that transcendental reasoning cannot be fully understood and cannot succeed in sustaining its conclusions, if it is considered apart from a complex set of goals and presuppositions that constitute the framework of an overall strategy.⁴ In this paper, I shall try to outline the framework of John McDowell's transcendental assumptions that permeate his argumentative strategy. Now, if we turn to McDowell's recent work — and more particularly to his writings since *Mind and World*, we will come across a new way to interpret transcendental argumentation that claims to dissociate it both from the obscure ventures of Kantian metaphysics and the ambitious tasks of the early Strawsonian project,⁵ without however equating it with a simply inflated and upgraded form of conceptual analysis. His own version of transcendental inquiry is elaborated in his Woodbridge lectures of 1997; in a number of papers in which he engages in the study of Sellars, attacking the alternative reading put forth by Robert Brandom; and in his various replies to his critics. It leads to and supports his succinct reconstruction of an elementary, but presumably very effective form of reasoning that he attributes to the author of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind".⁶

In what follows, I shall begin by focusing on this reconstruction of Sellars' argument, before drawing on McDowell's earlier work in order to survey the evolution of his more general conception of the "transcendental".

I am particularly interested in the “transcendental” defense of what McDowell calls “minimal” (or “transcendental”) empiricism, and I will eventually attempt to highlight the way in which his strategy is adapted to his Wittgensteinian, “therapeutic” approach to philosophical problems.

II

In fact, McDowell's reappraisal of Sellars' positions and especially of his argumentative methodology, that is supposed to correct his earlier construal leading to the objections put forth in *Mind and World* [McDowell (1994), pp. 140-6], lays emphasis on the Kantian inspiration and the transcendental character of the Sellarsian project. According to his analysis, behind the concern with the problem of justification, which motivates the attack on the “Myth of the Given”, we may discern a “transcendental thought — pertaining to conditions for it to be intelligible that our thinking has objective purport at all [...] that we need to be able to see how the spontaneity of the understanding can be constrained by the receptivity of sensibility” [McDowell (1998a), p. 365-6]. Sellars' empiricism, and more particularly his “sense-impressions inference”, is characterized as transcendental in so far as “it is directed toward showing our entitlement to conceive subjective occurrences as possessing objective purport. [...] The explanation [he] envisages is transcendental, because it is needed, he thinks, in order to vindicate the legitimacy of the apparatus — the talk of experiences as actualizations of conceptual capacities, which as such ‘contain’ claims, but in a distinctively sensory way — in terms of which we enable ourselves to conceive experiences as ostensibly *of objects* at all” [McDowell (1998c), p. 445].

We shall have to come back to the conception of the transcendental account of empiricism attributed to Sellars and further developed by McDowell. At this point, we are going to examine McDowell's construal of the argumentative methodology that is presumably essential to this account. What is at issue is the possibility and the anti-sceptical potential of a “third” kind of transcendental argument that he reconstructs from the Sellarsian texts. This kind of transcendental argument should not be described as either strong, since it does not aspire to derive the necessary structure of *reality as it is* from facts of our experience, or weak, since it does not cast light only on the necessary features of *our conception of reality*. The necessary conditions it tries to establish rather pertain to “how we must *conceive the epistemic positions* within our reach if it is to be possible that our experience is as it is in having objective purport” [McDowell (unpublished b); my emphasis].

Indeed, we could argue that “for it to be 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” [*Ibid.*]. Here, McDowell draws our attention to “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”:

Sellars urges something on these lines. The very idea of the objective purport of visual experience (to single out one sensory modality) is intelligible only if one appreciates that, among experiences in which, say, it looks to one as if there is a red cube in front of one, some are cases in which one sees that there is a red cube in front of one, and some are cases in which it merely looks to one as if there is a red cube in front of one (either because there is no cube there at all or because, although there is a cube there, it is not red) [*Ibid.*].⁷

This is a crucial move, because it allows us to appeal to a disjunctive conception of the epistemic significance of experience which helps us remove a sceptical “prop”, that is, the idea that the “warrant for a perceptual claim provided by an experience can never be that the experience reveals to us how things are”. Hence, we may replace the “highest common factor” conception of perceptual experience, according to which “appearances may never yield more in the way of warrant for belief, than do those appearances in which it merely seems that one, say, sees that things are thus and so”. We are thus able to dislodge a key assumption of a whole epistemological tradition which stood in the way of the notion “of a direct perceptual access to objective facts about the environment” and was the source of a pernicious scepticism [*Ibid.*].

It looks as if we could consider this type of argument as a “neglected methodological option”,⁸ first discovered and exploited by Sellars, which shows us how to limit the metaphysical pretensions of ambitious transcendental reasoning, while going beyond the simple elucidation of essential features of our mental constitution, or of necessary conceptual connections. It supposedly conforms with a “minimalist Kantianism” that does not bother to establish synthetic *a priori* truths [*Ibid.*].

However, I am afraid that this option is neither novel nor effective. If we attempted to cast the argument in question in the characteristic form of most transcendental arguments, according to a standard description [cf. Moore (1999), pp. 270-1], we can isolate the following structure:

- 1) Our perceptual experience purports to be of objective reality.
- 2) We would not be able to comprehend the idea that our perceptual experience purports to be of objective reality if we could not make sense of an epistemically distinguished class of experiences, in which how things are makes itself available to us in perception.

- 3) We must be able to make sense of a distinguished class of experiences, in which how things are makes itself available to us in perception.
- 4) There exists an epistemically distinguished class of experiences, in which how things are makes itself available to us in perception.⁹

Unfortunately, it is not at all clear that the fact that we cannot avoid *making sense* of a "distinguished" class of experiences, in which how things are makes itself available to us, guarantees that there is indeed such a *non-empty* class, unless, of course, we subscribe to a kind of verificationist assumption that our best criteria for veridical perceptual experience must sometimes be *actually satisfied*, for us to be able to make sense of the very notion of objective content.¹⁰

Now, it may be objected that my reading of McDowell's transcendental argument is not accurate insofar as the sceptic to whom it is addressed does not worry about the actual *truth* of our thoughts but about their very *intelligibility*. He does not dwell on the threatening possibility of massive error, but rather on our inability to make sense of the availability of environmental facts to our mind. Thus, we should not be concerned about the fallibility of our actual perceptual claims, but about the alleged impossibility of a direct access to the world to which they refer. This is why McDowell believes that what is essential is to establish only the intelligibility of such a direct access, in other words, of the availability of environmental facts, of the "openness" of our mind to the world, that is, premise (3) above. Having done so, we may be able to get rid of the "highest common factor" conception, presumably adopted by the sceptic, and to replace it by the "disjunctive conception" (of veridical and deceptive perception) which explains the possibility of a direct perceptual grasp of "environmental facts". Hence, as he put it in *Mind and World*,

[w]e achieve an intellectual right to shrug our shoulders at sceptical questions, if they are asked with the usual philosophical animus, namely, to point up a supposed problem about whether our thought is in touch with its purported topics. Of course, we are fallible in experience, and when experience misleads us there is a sense in which it intervenes between us and the world; but it is a crucial mistake to let that seem to deprive us of the very idea of openness — fallible openness — to the world, as if we had to replace that idea with the idea of emissaries that either tell the truth or lie. It is only because we can understand the notion of appearances constituted by the world's making itself manifest to us that we can make sense of the empirical content, embodied in the idea of a misleading appearance. When we are not misled by experience, we are directly confronted by a worldly state of affairs itself, not waited on by an intermediary that happens to tell the truth [McDowell (1994), p. 143].

The trouble is that most sceptics will remain unimpressed by such a rebuttal. To begin with, those who stick to a more “whole-hearted” sceptical stance will probably reject the initial premise, according to which “our experience purports to be of objective reality”. Indeed, McDowell acknowledges that we may have to appeal to a more basic, Kantian or Strawsonian 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-conscious” [McDowell (unpublished b)]. However, even if such an argument holds, they could insist that, although they recognize the need to make sense of the objective purport of experience, they may still find the very idea of the “availability of environmental facts in perception” unintelligible. McDowell would have to convince them about the meaningfulness of perceptual experiences construed as claims (already suggested by Sellars), and eventually try to sustain his account through his further arguments concerning the conceptual character of empirical content. His “minimally” Kantian¹¹ transcendental move, pertaining to the necessary conditions of the objective purport of experience, would not suffice by itself, and if he were able to impose his common sense criteria of meaningfulness of ordinary perceptual claims on independent grounds, it would probably prove redundant.¹²

Moreover, it seems that one does not have to resort to extreme scepticism about objectivity or intelligibility in order to dispute the anti-sceptical force of the disjunctive conception. As it was recently pointed out by Glendinnig and de Gaynesford,

[w]e are to suppose that the subject’s best theory of his or her current perceptual standing (the appearance that such and such is the case), is *either* a mere appearance *or* the fact that such and such is the case making itself perceptually manifest. But no sceptic *need deny this*. The sceptic’s conclusion is only that in every case one must suspend judgment as to *which*... For on the basis of any given subject’s perceptual standing there is no way for it to provide any adequate grounds for insisting that either option is true or false [Glendinnig & de Gaynesford (1998), p. 29].¹³

To be sure, I do not want to imply that the Sellarsian transcendental argument is uninteresting or totally useless in the effort to disarm some sceptics. All I am saying is that it does not constitute a really “neglected” distinct option, and that it does not establish in a conclusive way that the world “makes itself available”, “presents”, or “opens itself” to us in perceptual experience. The “class of distinguished experiences”, may be *intelligible* as a *possibility* — contrary to the most hyperbolic sceptical worries — but may

always remain empty, despite transcendental reassurances.¹⁴ Moreover, the question is whether the disjunctive conception is “transcendentally” forced upon us a *necessary* position and not just as a plausible and perhaps preferable alternative, or, more particularly, whether the argument appealed to by McDowell manages to persuade us to adopt it, without support from other, independent considerations. After all, transcendental arguments, however ambitious or modest, are supposed to lead to the clear *elimination* of incoherent notions and their conclusive replacement by correct ones.¹⁵

In any case, I think we could acknowledge that we may have established, by endorsing Sellars' and McDowell's reasoning, what Stroud has described as the peculiar indispensability and invulnerability — not the *truth* — of the claim that there must be such a privileged class of experiences *in which the world makes itself available to us*. This is so because our belief that the world makes itself available to us, in some “excellent” or “distinguished” experiences, cannot be consistently abandoned with our having a conception of objective content at all.¹⁶ It is, I think, plausible to qualify such a result as rather modest, insofar as one talks about our own *understanding* of our epistemic predicament, rather than the predicament itself, unless, of course, one subscribes to a view that rules out *a priori* the logical possibility of a radical discrepancy between the way the world actually relates to our minds and our conception of this relation. As McDowell himself puts it, the conclusion we have reached pertains to “how we must *conceive* the epistemic positions that are within our reach, if it is to be possible that our experience is as it is in having objective purport” [McDowell (unpublished b)].

However that may be, it is obvious that McDowell's appeal to transcendental argumentation is part and parcel of his more general strategy of a defense of “minimal empiricism, transcendently slanted”, that is “a conception in which experience lets objective reality come into view” [McDowell (2002), p. 287]. This defense is not directed only against extravagant sceptical possibilities of Cartesian origin, but also against all those philosophers who, anxious to correct the mistakes of crude, foundationalist empiricism, do not hesitate to throw the baby out with the bathwater and end up without any proper account of the role of (perceptual) experience in the grasp of objective content. In the next part of this paper, I shall turn to McDowell's implementation of a large scale philosophical enterprise and try to determine some of the implications of his *commitment to a transcendental methodology*.

III

Now, I have argued elsewhere that, even if we cannot come up with a univocal and clear definition of the term “transcendental”, we could perhaps

isolate some of the main features of a distinctive philosophical stance that we may characterize as transcendental, and that we encounter in the work of several thinkers since Kant.¹⁷ Thus, we may describe specific senses or rather aspects and nuances of the notion of the “transcendental” — according to different or even conflicting interpretations — to which these philosophers are apparently committed. We can easily understand that most of these aspects are interconnected, although they may be considered and developed separately. They are the following:

a) The first, most elementary mark of a transcendental enterprise, that we have already emphasized in the introduction of this paper, is the inquiry into *a priori* conditions of possibility of knowledge and intelligible experience. All the other features that we think we can identify are somehow related to this endeavour, which determines the selection of premises and the conclusion aimed at.

b) Transcendental approaches in most cases undertake to overcome or avoid untenable oppositions and dualisms by neutralizing their mistaken pre-suppositions. They often point to a “third solution”, achieving a deeper synthesis of conflicting insights. The original model of such approaches is, of course, the attempt at a combination of realism and idealism in Kant’s critical philosophy. The result is not a superficial compromise, but a novel, complex position.¹⁸

c) “Transcendental” is usually distinguished from “empirical”, and it is crucial to learn how to keep the two separate, as one proceeds in a transcendental enterprise, even though this distinction does not entail any permanent epistemological split. What should be noted is that when we adopt the transcendental stance, we operate at a philosophical level which leaves the ordinary, empirical dimension unaffected. In fact, according to Kant, if we intend to protect our conception of the latter from the distortions of misleading philosophical hypotheses, we must reinterpret our more or less substantive metaphysical assertions from a transcendental standpoint that eventually provides a *vindication* of our empirical beliefs. Thus, *transcendental idealism* goes along with *empirical realism* — the realism supposedly taken for granted by common sense and by science. Of course, it is rather difficult to understand the kind of idealism involved, as well as the relations — of parallel existence, or interaction — of the two levels, engaging two standpoints, rather than two different ontological dimensions.¹⁹

d) The attempt at an overcoming of oppositions, or at a reconciliation of antithetical views and the coexistence of different levels or standpoints creates

serious problems of stability and coherence. Indeed, following a transcendental reading of Wittgenstein and a particular Wittgensteinian realignment of transcendental philosophy, transcendental truths are *paradoxical*, in so far as they cannot be properly expressed within our language. They reveal the limits of our language, which can only be *shown* in a way, but not *said* correctly in conformity with the rules of logical grammar.

e) A transcendental account would aspire to establish necessities of a peculiar, anthropocentric kind, to be distinguished from both strict, logical necessity and purely contingent, natural or social/conventional, relative "necessities". Traditional metaphysicians pursued transcendent knowledge, hoping to discover necessary propositions, true in all possible worlds, and tried to explore reality conceived *sub specie aeternitatis*, from a "God's eye point of view", or from "nowhere". Transcendental philosophers are content with propositions true in *all possible worlds intelligible to us or to rational beings like us* — the understanding of which is inescapably dependent on our human "mindedness". This dependence on the human mind seems to point to an irreducible dimension of reflexivity or self-referentiality of transcendental thinking.

Here, we cannot embark upon a detailed critical analysis of the above characteristics of most self-styled transcendental approaches, particularly regarding their idealist, or anti-realist and verificationist implications, alluded to in (c), (d) and (e).²⁰ We should rather turn to McDowell's uses of the term "transcendental", with a view to detecting the presence of such more or less traditional aspects of transcendental philosophy in his argumentative strategy and in his conclusions. More specifically, our aim is to point to the degree of mutual attunement, but also to some of the tensions among his metaphilosophical presuppositions, his methodological choices and his substantive commitments, provoking the ongoing transformation of his conception of transcendental inquiry. Indeed, a close study of McDowell's work shows that most of these features can be traced in one form or another in his thinking, as it evolves from the early eighties to the present.

To begin with (a), the main transcendental query or concern, that preoccupies him and that he considers as clearly Kantian in spirit, is how it is possible for "our thought to be directed at the objective world". This takes the more particular form of the question, "how is empirical content possible?" [McDowell (2000a), pp. 3-4]. It necessitates a particular philosophical investigation of experience that soon shows that traditional forms of empiricism do not provide a satisfactory account, insofar as they cannot show how experience can be "answerable to the world" and can constitute a "tribunal"²¹ for our world views. Sellars helped us realize that we cannot be satisfied with

the mere causal impact of the deliverances of the senses that were previously supposed to provide a “given” element, capable of playing a justificatory role. However, many philosophers who endorse Sellars’ criticism of the Myth of the Given and adopt a form of coherentism, tend to jettison empiricism altogether, to the extent that they do not pay proper attention to the need for answerability to the world through a “rational friction”, made possible by the empirical content grasped by our sensibility. They seem content with what Davidson dubs a “pallid claim” for experience (and empiricism), according to which “all knowledge of the world comes through the agency of the senses”.²²

Now, McDowell purports to restore a well-balanced and harmonious conception of the relations between mind and world, and by the same token to defend a “deeper” empiricism of Sellarsian inspiration, which is not “narrowly epistemological”, but “transcendental” [McDowell (1998c), p. 436]. Indeed, such an empiricism would provide a response to our “transcendental anxiety” about empirical content and could be seen as simply “a way of not being beset with a mystery over the fact that there are world views at all” [McDowell (1999), p. 97]. It is minimal, presumably because it does not involve any detailed claims about the precise operation of our sensory apparatus in the acquisition and justification of knowledge of the world, but it is still quite robust and *transcendentally* significant, since without it we would be left with a deficient understanding of the *possibility* of an epistemic access to objective facts.

Thus, if we return to our list of the characteristic marks and implications of the transcendental stance, we notice that McDowell’s project does aim at deconstructing well-entrenched dualisms and dichotomies (both epistemological and metaphysical) by undermining their erroneous common presuppositions [feature (b) above] : naïve foundationalism — relying on the myth of the given — and coherentism; bald naturalism and rampant platonism; and emphasis on the irreducibility of reason and limitation to the lawlike natural regularities, should all be replaced by “deeper” or “higher” positions that do not simply dismiss, but take seriously, the motivation of the claims on both sides and acknowledge the force of the conflicting intuitions in each case. Of course, one may wonder whether it is advisable to follow McDowell on the Hegelian — rather than Kantian — road of overcoming such dichotomies without worrying about the counterintuitive implications of the positions reached.

In fact, before any attempt to assess his general approach, it is worth remembering some earlier instances of his adoption of the transcendental strategy we are trying to describe. The synthesis proposed in *Mind and World* may be considered as the result of the implementation of a more comprehensive, advanced and elaborate version of this strategy.

From the very beginning of his philosophical enterprise, McDowell seemed to be interested in striking a middle course, or finding a “third way”, between the anti-realism in the theory of meaning espoused by Michael Dummett and Crispin Wright and forms of traditional Platonism. In his “Anti-realism and the Epistemology of Understanding”, McDowell responded to charges that his acceptance of a possibly verification-transcendent world was a “mere reflection of grammar”, by advancing a view very close to the neo-Wittgensteinian account of transcendental truths referred to above (d):

if the “reflection” thesis is a truth, then it is a transcendental truth, the sort of thing which shows, but cannot be said. For there is no standpoint from which we can give a sense-making characterization of linguistic practice other than that of immersion in the practice; and from that standpoint our possibly verification-transcendent world is certainly in the picture. If the reflection thesis licenses an anti-realism, then it is a transcendental anti-realism, one which need not clash with the conviction of the ineradicable necessity of [the thesis of realism] R in our making sense of ourselves [McDowell (1981), p. 342].

And in criticizing his opponents, to whom he attributes an unwarranted, excessive epistemological demand for solid foundations, he describes their position as,

a meaning-theoretical anti-realism which stands to the misperceived deep doctrine as a shallow empirical idealism would stand to an analogous transcendental idealism. The transcendental realist claims that from the cosmic exile’s perspective one would be able to discern relations between our language and a realistically conceived world. Anti-realists justifiably recoil, but in different ways. The meaning-theoretical anti-realist recoils into giving a different picture of how things would look from that perspective; but the right course is to set our faces against the idea of a cosmic exile [*Ibid.*, pp. 342-3].

A similar commitment to an anthropocentric notion of realism — very close to what Putnam dubs “realism with a human face” — was underlying McDowell’s critique of non-cognitivism in ethics and his defense of moral objectivity, appealing to an analogy between values and secondary properties.²³ More generally, he wanted to criticize the “absolute conception of reality” adopted since the time of Descartes, which has given rise to the gradual scientific impoverishment of the modern world view.

In his paper “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule”, he attacked sceptical and anti-realist construals of Wittgenstein’s analysis of rule-following (put forth by Kripke and Wright) and once more tried to show the plausibility of a robust, realistic sense of objectivity; this sense of objectivity allowed us to retain a truth-conditional conception of meaning, but without relying on some

transcendent viewpoint. He found cogent a “transcendental argument” against anti-realism, to the effect that “a condition for the possibility of finding real application for the notion of meaning at all is that we reject anti-realism”, and tried to supplement it by a “satisfying account of how anti-realism goes wrong” [McDowell (1984), pp. 351f]. To be sure, his attribution to Wittgenstein of a kind of anthropocentric realism (with a small “r”) was no longer accompanied by an eagerness to recognize the legitimacy of any peculiar transcendental claim, the logical status of which would turn out to be paradoxical. He did not insist on the idea and on the terminology of a combination of empirical realism and transcendental anti-realism.²⁴ Henceforth, his construal of the transcendental apparently retained only partly the aspects we have summarized under (d) (and (e)) above.

Nonetheless, McDowell is still ready to endorse “transcendental postulations” and to appeal to the “transcendental role” of one or another concept, thought, or account, in order to seek “transcendental clarification” and “vindication” [McDowell (1998c), pp. 471, 447, 457, 473; (1998a), p. 366]. It should be remarked that he does not use the term “transcendental” so often in *Mind and World*, probably because his references to Kant include a very dismissive account of the metaphysical results of the original transcendental enterprise of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Following to an important extent Strawson’s two-worlds interpretation of transcendental idealism, he criticizes Kant on several points, including his conception of the transcendental self [cf. Thomas (1997)]. It is clear to him that transcendental philosophy leads to a dead end if we attempt to pursue it from an external, transcendent standpoint, from “sideways on”, as he puts it.²⁵ Otherwise, it could presumably be considered as a fruitful and interesting endeavour, in which he urges us to engage. In fact, as we have already pointed out, McDowell distinguishes between the more “shallow” epistemological inquiries and the “deeper” transcendental ones, dealing with conditions of possibility. When one reads his most recent papers one is tempted to speak of a kind of *re-transcendentalization* of analytic philosophy,²⁶ after so many pronouncements on the *de-transcendentalization* of analytic as well as of other forms of philosophising.²⁷

However, we must realize that transcendental thoughts and the transcendental tasks to which they give rise are supposed to be “innocent”, provided they do not saddle us with metaphysical mysteries. Sellars’ transcendently motivated empiricism is presumably innocent in this respect, and should be recognized as a profound and important analysis of our experience that shows how it can have objective purport. We should simply disregard his frequent lapses — castigated by McDowell — into the interpretative quest for an incoherent, “sideways on” approach in his reading of Kant’s work. One assumes that McDowell’s own transcendental approach is also innocent and legitimate and in no way commits him to any problematic metaphysics.

IV

It is at this point that we must take into consideration McDowell's insistence on the therapeutic character of his enterprise. His conclusions are supposed to be regarded as Wittgensteinian reminders that will take us back to the bedrock of our language-games and not as philosophical theses. Actually, the notion of the transcendental itself is quite often interpreted in the light of quasi-medical metaphors, something which would have pleased the later Wittgenstein. We begin our "transcendental job", when we suffer from some form of "transcendental anxiety" or "discomfort", and the attainment of our explanatory, or rather justificatory goal shall offer us "transcendental relief" [McDowell (1998a), pp. 366-7]. The question is then how we should interpret the status of the substantive results of our inquiry, if we do believe that there are any such results.

Indeed, what distinguishes McDowell's conception of his transcendental strategy from almost all his predecessors (from Kant to Strawson) is the fact that he does not seem to aspire to some kind of philosophical truth, let alone a strong, and transcendently necessary uniqueness claim to be derived from valid transcendental arguments. In any case, he hastens to disown such a uniqueness claim. As he points out in his rejoinder to Brandom, whom he accuses of ignoring the "dialectical organization of his book",

I recommend a picture in which experience is actualization of conceptual capacities in sensory consciousness, not as *the only theory of perception* [my emphasis] that meets requirements we can impose on any such theory independently of any particular context, but as the way to relieve the specific philosophical discomfort that I consider [...]. The discomfort involves wanting to preserve the thought that actualizations of conceptual capacities belong in a *sui generis* logical space of reasons, in the face of a transcendental anxiety it can easily help to generate. Relieving the discomfort in the sense I mean, requires seeing how the thought can be preserved without generating the transcendental anxiety. Embracing bald naturalism would be a way to avoid the discomfort but not a way to relieve it [McDowell (1998b), pp. 403-4].²⁸

Now, going back to McDowell's reconstruction of the Sellarsian transcendental argument, based on the intelligibility of the objective purport of experience, we realize that we cannot appreciate his interpretation of its use, unless we understand his general attitude to scepticism *as a source of transcendental discomfort*. The limitations in its scope and in its demonstrative force that we have tried to point out are not considered as a serious defect. We must have already understood that, according to McDowell, sceptical queries cannot be answered in a direct way but should rather be diagnosed as misguided philosophical departures from common-sense, to which we shall

eventually return. “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.” This is why, as we saw earlier, our aim was supposed to be just to “achieve an intellectual right to shrug our shoulders at sceptical questions” [McDowell (1994), pp. 113, 143].

Hence, the idea of a neglected argumentative option could perhaps be conceived as involving an implicit allusion to the diagnostic and therapeutic employment of transcendental reasoning for the treatment of various kinds of scepticism.²⁹ *Pace* Wright, this is not a question-begging and dogmatic rejoinder, based on “a refusal to take scepticism seriously” [Wright (2002b), p. 341]. “Of course, it takes work to reach such a position”, and we may thus be justified in claiming that we have “entitled ourselves to join common sense in refusing to bother with the sceptical scenarios” [McDowell (unpublished b)].

We may also remark that the correct understanding of McDowell’s general metaphilosophical outlook is probably the key to the proper assessment of some of his responses to frequent charges of idealism. Of course, an adequate discussion of this issue would require a detailed analysis that could be the topic of another paper.³⁰ Here, we will limit ourselves to some observations regarding the construal of the views put forth explicitly or implicitly in *Mind and World*. The notion of the “unboundedness of the conceptual”, the conceptual character of the content of perceptual experience, the “re-enchantment of the world”, and the endorsement of an identity conception of truth expressed by the thesis “A true thought is a fact”, could indeed be interpreted as coming perilously close to theses akin to a form of Hegelian objective idealism, or anti-realism.³¹ It may be feared that we are asked to jettison the mind independence of reality.

However, McDowell insists that his account in no way threatens our belief in the independence of the world. Experience is described as the “passive actualization of conceptual capacities in receptivity”, and its content does not involve dependence on the activity of our “spontaneity” [McDowell (2002), p. 273; (2005), p. 84]. Moreover, as he puts it in his reply to Pascal Engel’s criticism, concerning his adoption of the identity theory of truth, there is no risk to identify facts with items in the mind, or mental entities:

neither side of the identity thesis should be supposed to be intelligible in advance of understanding the other, as if it could be used to explain the other. True thinkables already belong just as much to the world as to minds and things that are the case already belong to minds as to the world... It should not even seem that we need to choose a direction in which to read the claim of identity. A Fregean sense is also something that is the case and hence in the world. It being a thinkable does not imply that it is somehow primarily “mental” and so able to be conceived as an element in the world only on some idealistic con-

strual of the world... Conceiving the world as everything that is the case, and so as located in the realm of sense in no way sleights the reality of the inhabitants of the realm of reference [McDowell (2005), pp. 83-5].

Now, I would like to argue that the crucial move in McDowell's reasoning consists in his refusal to consider the identity thesis as more than an obvious "truism", as a substantive claim with metaphysical implications. To quote McDowell, once more, "the word theory is a poor fit for something that is beyond dispute" and this is why he uses the expression "the identity conception of truth", which he substitutes for "the identity theory of truth" in the title of his paper [*Ibid.*, p. 83]. Actually, he could pursue his Wittgensteinian approach in a more pronounced way, by refusing to grant the statement that "true thoughts are facts" even the status of a "thesis", or a "position", in other words, of an assertion that could be disputed and needs defense. One may, of course, follow Engel in continuing to worry about the implications of the "bipolarity" of propositions that are supposed to express the facts in question and about the way to interpret their identification with our thoughts [cf. Engel (2005)].

However that may be, the above debates on the proper understanding of McDowell's views allow us to realize the peculiarity of his novel use of the concept of the transcendental. The term does seem to invoke, not just any inquiry into conditions of possibility, but also a complex argumentative process of legitimation of our notion of objective experience.³² One could perhaps recall the Kantian idea of a transcendental deduction understood in a broad sense.³³ Nevertheless, this "deduction" is undertaken basically in order to deal with a peculiar philosophical "anxiety", which requires dialectical treatment.³⁴ And the results of this treatment do not constitute new knowledge — let alone *necessary* or *paradoxical* knowledge of any kind, apart from a recovery of plain, common sense knowledge we may already possess. The questions which remain open involve the nature of philosophical thinking itself.

Is transcendental discomfort nothing more than discomfort caused by "an image that kept us captive", to be replaced by another (correct or legitimate) image which shall give us (transcendental) relief by allowing us to return to the beliefs of common sense? In other words, is it impossible to assimilate the urge to philosophize to a "healthier" mental condition, such as pure intellectual curiosity, capable of generating a quest that would lead to positive, cognitive or quasi-cognitive results? Are the elaborate arguments employed in the process of curing us from the discomfort and, more particularly, their conclusions, *simply* reminders that are supposed to take us back to the sanity of common sense, or of our language-games? Or is it rather the case, as Strawson suggested in his review of McDowell's book, that we are being offered a very interesting piece of benign, however sophisticated and ambitious, constructive philosophy - perhaps an example of a new descriptive metaphys-

ics [cf. Strawson (1994)]? Or should we compare this conception of philosophizing to Robert Nozick's (non scientific but also non-therapeutic) metaphilosophical proposal in *Philosophical Explanations*, to the effect that we should substitute explanation for proof in philosophy and that in our effort to explain "how something is possible" we should accept more than one admissible view, which in any case abandons the uniqueness claims of traditional transcendental accounts?³⁵ Could "minimal empiricism" — which does sound like a philosophical thesis after all — be nothing more than the ordinary, everyday acceptance of a non-problematic relation between mind and world? And if so, does it require a "transcendental defense" rather than integration within a more straightforward — however complex and subtle — piecemeal pursuit of a Wittgensteinian *Übersicht* of our linguistic practices?

Undoubtedly, the above questions are very difficult to answer and cannot be addressed properly in the context of this paper. I would like to submit that McDowell's effort to provide a therapeutic dissolution of transcendental tendencies does not seem to be fully successful, in so far as the implementation of his Wittgensteinian approach does not always seem to be consistent with the appropriation of philosophical techniques and positions coming from a variety of historical sources, and theses.³⁶ I cannot expand on the assessment of the accusations of idealism and of his rejoinders. I would simply like to express my agreement with Michael Friedman's doubts about the attainment of his "quietist" goals through his Hegelian *tour de force*.³⁷

In any case, if we return to the short transcendental argument that he reconstructs from the materials provided by Sellars, we could perhaps agree that this elementary move in defense of minimal empiricism does work at the end of the day, but only if it is interpreted either along the Stroudian lines suggested above, or as a simple and very limited therapeutic gambit. However, McDowell does not rest after having secured its conclusion, construed not as a thesis, but only as a "reminder", as metaphysically innocent as possible. McDowell's reconstructed argument could thus be regarded as constituting the first step of an extensive "transcendental deduction", not only of objective content, but also of the cooperation of spontaneity and receptivity, of the unboundedness of the conceptual and eventually of the normativity of second nature. Unfortunately, it is in the process of developing this "deduction" of claims, sounding much more like substantive positions rather than as "reminders" of common sense views, that McDowell's methodology fails to convince us about its conformity with the Wittgensteinian model of philosophizing, which in its more orthodox instances is supposed to cure us of metaphysical knots and provide us only with an *Übersicht* of our various language-games.³⁸ It is while examining this more advanced and more speculative part of his work that one wonders if one is not after all justified in feeling that, to put it in David Bell's words, "a transcendental argument ought, as such, to have something transcendental about it, according to which such an

argument will be non-local in scope, non-naturalistic in intent, and anti-realist in import.”³⁹ The final question that we must ask ourselves is whether we can avoid the commitments of a more widespread re-transcendentalization of our thinking, probably resulting from our attempts to alleviate transcendental discomfort that may persist or re-emerge even *after* the adoption of minimal empiricism.

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NOTES

¹ This paper is based on the elaboration and further development of much shorter texts presented at the Third International Conference of the ESAP in Maribor (June 1999) [“Transcendental Philosophy in a New Guise”], at the Fourth Athens-Pittsburgh Symposium (June 2003) [“Transcendental Arguments Old and New” (A Comment on John McDowell’s “Twentieth Century Transcendental Arguments: A Neglected Option?”)], at the Second Colloquium at the Latin Meeting of ESAP in Aix-en-Provence, November 2003 (with Pascal Engel as commentator) and at the XIV Inter-University Workshop on Philosophy and Cognitive Science which took place in Murcia (March 2004). I would like to thank the participants in these events for their questions and remarks, Costas Pagondiotis for our frequent exchanges on a variety of related philosophical issues, and particularly Professor McDowell himself for his replies to my comments. I am also indebted to Miltos Theodosiou’s reading of McDowell’s account of a “neglected” kind of transcendental arguments based on his reconstruction of Sellars. See the discussion below, section II and note 12.

² It should be noted that the term Kant employed in the *CPR* was not transcendental “arguments” but transcendental “proofs” (*Beweise*) and “deductions”.

³ See Strawson (1985), pp. 21-3. See also the distinction introduced by Quassim Cassam between “world-directed” and “self-directed” transcendental arguments, which is somewhat analogous to the one between what, following Stroud, we may describe, respectively, as “strong” or “ambitious” and “weak” or “modest” arguments [cf. Cassam (1999)].

⁴ I will come back to this point in the discussion below (section II). See also Stroud (1999), Bell (1999).

⁵ As presented in Strawson (1959) and (1966).

⁶ See McDowell (1998a), (1998b), (1998c), (1999), (unpublished a), (unpublished b). Here, I am not going to dwell on exegetical issues concerning the proper interpretation of Sellars. I am inclined to think that, although both McDowell’s and Brandom’s alternative readings correctly emphasize different aspects of Sellars’ thought, which are in tension with one another, McDowell pays closer attention to Sellars’ texts and displays a better understanding of their important transcendental thrust.

⁷ See Sellars (1963), §§10-23.

⁸ The expression “neglected option?” occurs in the title of the earlier version of one of McDowell’s recent papers (unpublished b).

⁹ This way of reconstructing McDowell’s rendering of Sellars’ argument [in McDowell (unpublished b) *passim*] may allow us to dispense with the reference to a “distinguished class of experiences” and go directly to the idea that “how things are makes itself available to us”, although, of course, a careful analysis would have to take into account this “distinguished class” which ensures the “availability” of “environmental facts” or “states of affairs”.

¹⁰ According to A. Moore’s brief summary of the most common objections to any transcendental argument conforming to the pattern we have just applied in the construal of McDowell’s account of Sellars’ reasoning, the worries about their validity focus among other things: on the question-begging presuppositions of the way we interpret premise (1); on the truth of premise (2); on the modality involved in (2) and the first conclusion (3), more particularly on the eventual conflation of conceptual with psychological modalities; on the self-referential or first-personal element in (2) and (3); and on the possibility of a modal fallacy of confusing the necessity of the hypothetical with the necessity of the consequent [(2) – (3)] [cf. Moore (1999)]. However, critics following Stroud usually dispute the legitimacy of the transition from (3) to (4) — allowing us to move from a more modest to a more ambitious claim. On this, see Stroud (1968), pp. 247-8ff.

¹¹ McDowell describes his Sellarsian transcendental argument as “belonging to a minimal Kantianism” (unpublished b).

¹² At this point, one may be reminded of Stroud’s criticism of Strawson in Stroud (1968). See also Theodosiou (unpublished) who draws on McDowell’s views concerning the content of perceptual experience, from the earlier formulations in McDowell (1982) to the more recent account in McDowell (1994) and (1998c).

¹³ See also de Gaynesford (2002), p. 329. I believe this objection underlies Crispin Wright’s criticism to the effect that McDowell’s appeal to the disjunctive conception is nothing more than a new version of G. E. Moore’s notorious dogmatic response to scepticism. See Wright (2002b) and McDowell’s attempt at an answer [McDowell (unpublished b)]. Here, it should be noted that Glendinnig and de Gaynesford (1998) criticize McDowell for not being consistent and radical enough in his attack on the Cartesian conception of subjectivity and point to the alternative approach elaborated by Heidegger.

¹⁴ Of course, one may insist that the very understanding of the idea of an epistemically distinguished class of experiences presupposes acquaintance with actual instances of its members. However, this assumption seems to involve the verificationism detected by Stroud (see above, notes 10 and 12). One could also compare such reasoning to “paradigm case” arguments, to the effect that we cannot understand a distinction such as the distinction between “appearance” and “reality”, unless we are familiar with actual examples of real, veridical perception.

¹⁵ Here, one could perhaps agree with de Gaynesford’s claim that “the term ‘transcendental’ may be an unfortunate (because misleading) label for McDowell’s response”, insofar as his purpose is to “ground his contentions in intentionality rather than epistemology, and to show how apparent rival positions like scepticism may be dissolved only if one refuses to confront them on the ground they choose” [de Gaynesford (2004), p. 20]. However, de Gaynesford seems to rely on a very narrow conception of

transcendental arguments and to miss the similarities between McDowell's strategy and the goals of any transcendental approach since Kant, aiming at undermining the false presuppositions of rival positions. See the discussion that follows (section III), concerning the characteristics of the transcendental stance and their Wittgensteinian transformation.

¹⁶ See Stroud (1999), pp. 214-8 and *passim*, especially p. 216, on the relation between the "indispensability" and the "invulnerability" of beliefs. Stroud applies this idea to some of the well known transcendental arguments put forth by Strawson, and more recently by Davidson, and he develops it in his antireductionist defense of beliefs about the reality of colours, which cannot be consistently "debunked", in Stroud (2000).

¹⁷ Variants of this account of the transcendental stance are elaborated in Virvidakis (1984), (1990). For an alternative, though in many ways similar analysis of the characteristics of transcendental enquiry, see Bell (1999), pp. 198-202.

¹⁸ The emergence of Hegel's dialectic is also related to a further elaboration and development of this attitude, aiming at overcoming untenable oppositions, although it follows a different direction. Thus, Kant would probably insist on the distinctness of cognitive elements and faculties, even at the cost of confronting unresolvable tensions — that he would try to deal with in the spirit of his critical philosophy —, rather than embrace a problematic epistemological or ontological holism. He would repudiate the Hegelian "mediations" and "syntheses".

¹⁹ I am here alluding to the difference between the "two-worlds" and the "two-aspects" interpretation of Kantian transcendental idealism. For a forceful defense of the latter, also presented to an important extent as a viable philosophical option, see Allison (2004).

²⁰ See Stroud (1968) and Virvidakis (1984). See also Bell (1999), pp. 189-210.

²¹ A Kantian expression curiously appropriated by Quine, who, according to McDowell, is unable to do justice to the notion of this "rational" tribunal, since his "bald naturalism" confines his justificatory moves to the "realm of law" and lacks the indispensable reference to the "space of reasons". See McDowell's argumentation in (1994).

²² Davidson, "Meaning, Truth and Evidence", quoted in McDowell (1999), p. 88.

²³ For an interpretation of McDowell's positions in this area in the light of his more general transcendental approach, see Virvidakis (1996), pp. 151-8.

²⁴ In fact, he openly criticizes Jonathan Lear, who does try to defend a form of paradoxical, transcendental idealism of Wittgensteinian origin, in McDowell (1994), pp. 158-9. Furthermore, his recent sympathy for the new, resolute reading of the *Tractatus*, proposed by Cora Diamond and James Conant, seems to renew and reinforce his reluctance to accept the intelligibility of paradoxical metaphysical truths that can be *shown* but not *said* meaningfully. If we do accept this reading we should reject the idea of any "significant" or "important" nonsense. For a detailed presentation of this approach, see the essays in Crary & Read (2000).

²⁵ He is now ready to acknowledge that the discussion of Kant in *Mind and World* was flawed because it mistakenly relied on such an interpretation of the Kantian project [McDowell (1998c), p. 446]. For a succinct assessment of the importance of Kant's insights concerning the relations between reason and nature and for an interesting proposal for a reinterpretation see also, McDowell (1995), pp. 159-67.

²⁶ This description is, strictly speaking, accurate, provided one agrees, *pace* Crispin Wright, that McDowell's writings should still be regarded as analytic philosophy. See Wright (2002a) and McDowell's rather ironical reply [(2002), p. 291].

²⁷ See among others, Habermas (2001a), (2001b), and Niquet (2000). For a different attempt at a re-transcendentalization, also partly inspired from Sellars, see also Haugeland (1998), pp. 298-9ff. To quote the main idea presented in the blurb of the book, "What is *objective* knowledge and how is it possible? The answer broached in an explanatory way, amounts to a contemporary revival of transcendental constitution — an idea prominent in the history of philosophy, but *largely absent from the recent literature.*" (my emphasis).

²⁸ Here it is perhaps worth contrasting McDowell's position with Kant's constraints on transcendental proofs, "Every transcendental proposition ... proceeds solely from one concept and states the synthetic condition of the possibility of the object in accordance with this concept. The ground of proof can therefore only be unique, since outside this concept there is nothing further by means of which the object could be determined, and the proof can therefore contain nothing more than the determination of an object in general in accordance with this concept which is also unique" [Kant (1997), A788/B816].

²⁹ In fact, McDowell's anti-sceptical use of transcendental argumentation could be profitably compared and contrasted to Strawson's Humean reinterpretation of the goals and the scope of his own transcendental arguments, which could presumably help us show the *idle* character of scepticism [Strawson (1985), pp. 18-9ff]. As we pointed out earlier, this reinterpretation was instigated by Stroud's critique. (See above, note 3.) In any case, the arguments we are considering address modern and not ancient scepticism.

³⁰ For an interesting account, see Thornton (2004), pp. 209-44.

³¹ For some of the most eloquent expressions of this way of interpreting McDowell, see Friedman (2002), Dodd (1995), and Engel, (2000), (2001), (2005); and for a more positive assessment of his appropriation of post-Kantian idealism, Bernstein (2002), and Pippin (2002). See also the responses provided in McDowell (2002), (2005).

³² See also his paper on Rorty [McDowell (2000b)]. See Thornton (2004), pp. 209-44.

³³ See Dieter Henrich's analysis of the original legal meaning of "Deduktion" in German, in Henrich (1989).

³⁴ It must be admitted that if deduction is broadly construed here, just as an argumentative procedure of legitimation or justification, "transcendental" in the broadest possible sense could also be taken to mean simply whatever involves genuine "philosophical" reflection, as opposed to empirical scientific explanation. McDowell sometimes does speak in a way that implies such an understanding of the term: "we have to reconceive it transcendently, or speaking as philosophers" [McDowell (1998), p. 469]. Unfortunately, this rather loose interpretation of the term "transcendental" seems to amount to a trivialization of its meaning.

³⁵ In Nozick's words, "The explanations to follow are put forward not as the sole correct view on their topics, but as members among others of admissible classes, with the hope that they will be ranked first, or at least highly. On the view presented here, philosophical work aspires to produce a highest ranked view, at least an illumi-

nating one, without attempting to knock all other theories as inadmissible" [Nozick (1981), pp. 23-4]. See also the discussion of his proposal at pp. 21-3.

³⁶ In private conversation McDowell assured me that his Hegelian construction is nothing but a roundabout and complicated way of treating transcendental anxiety, which, however, is indispensable, in order to take care of all the knots and tangles accumulated by the modern philosophical tradition. In order to untie the knots we may have to imitate the moves that led us to them in the first place. A Rortian pragmatist dismissal, amounting to the replacement of one philosophical "vocabulary" by another would not work, in so far as it would not constitute a proper therapy for confusions that are bound to arise again and again when we philosophize.

³⁷ See Thornton (2004), pp. 21, 244. As Friedman puts it, "For it is characteristic of Wittgenstein's own method ... to deliberately set back from any explicit engagement with the philosophical tradition at all and to concentrate, instead, on particularistic and self-consciously non-theoretical investigations of imaginary 'language-games'. It is this method of exploring the limits of our language *from within* that is then Wittgenstein's replacement for traditional philosophy. In light of the historical-philosophical tangles produced by McDowell's attempt to bring Wittgensteinian 'quietism' into some kind of explicit relation with the philosophical tradition nonetheless, one can only conclude, in the end, that Wittgensteinian quietism may itself only make sense in the context of Wittgensteinian philosophical method" [(2002), p. 48]. It should be noted that McDowell himself has recently voiced his worries about the use of the term "quietism", which however is interpreted in a sympathetic spirit in *Mind and World* [McDowell (1994), pp. 175-80]. For a criticism of the attribution of the stance of quietism to Wittgenstein himself, see Schulte (2001). See also Virvidakis (unpublished).

³⁸ It should be noted that Robert Brandom also talks of an alternative "expressive transcendental deduction of the necessity of objects" that could be contrasted with McDowell's argumentation [Brandom (2000), p. 41]. This "deduction" is elaborated mostly on the basis of semantic considerations. Brandom's purely pragmatist rationalism, despite its partly Kantian starting point, is more explicitly Hegelian.

³⁹ See Bell (1999), p. 209. Bell, who quotes McDowell's "Anti-Realism and the Epistemology of Understanding" (1981), distinguishes between such arguments, conceived as transcendental in the proper sense of the term, and most current analytic anti-sceptical "transcendental-arguments", to which he assimilates Kant's "Refutation of Idealism" — that he does not regard as properly transcendental.

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