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## Transcendental arguments about other minds and inter-subjectivity

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## TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS ABOUT OTHER MINDS AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Almost none of us are skeptics in our daily lives about the existence of other minds. On a practical, as opposed to theoretical level, we cannot seriously entertain the prospect that our friends and family members may be *Zombies*, without emotions and mental lives. And yet there are *prima facie* good reasons for thinking that we cannot have knowledge of the mental states of others. As Edmund Husserl puts the problem, “how can my ego, within his peculiar ownness, constitute under the name ‘experience of something other’, precisely something *other*?” (Husserl 1960: 94) While another *Philosophy Compass* article highlights some of the different ways that philosophers deal with the “problem of other minds”, here we focus on describing some of the main arguments for the existence of other minds and intersubjectivity more generally, which depend upon a transcendental justification, and which attempt to move the debate beyond the supposition of an agent with privileged first-personal epistemic access to their own minds, and who then needs to establish some kind of plausible inferential connection to other minds.

If there is a basic strategy common to transcendental accounts, it is to argue that we have certain capacities or experiences – such as perception, thought, shame, loneliness, meaningful expression and communication, self-consciousness awareness, etc. – for which the existence of others is a necessary condition. Often such a position is supplemented by claims regarding a transcendental order of presupposition, for example, that relations of knowledge are not basic to our encounter with others, and that doubting this derivative relationship of knowledge in fact presupposes a more basic relationship with others that remains intact. It might also be claimed, in this spirit, that the focus upon our epistemic relationship with other minds presupposes a first and second person differentiation, without noting that the very idea of a ‘person’ or ‘Ego’ can be understood as itself a response to, and thus dependent upon, the Other. These are precisely the kinds of arguments that various continental philosophers have mounted, whether it is perception, intensity, sensibility, mood, affect, desire, or the unconscious that is prioritized over the knowledge relationship. From such a perspective, the problem of other minds occurs only for a reflective human who has adopted (or tried to adopt) the view from nowhere, or what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls “high-altitude thinking” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 69). But if a condition of possibility of such reflection/knowing is social learning, imitation and interconnectedness, then the sceptical problem seems alleviated.

Of course, transcendental reasoning is understood very differently by all of the philosophers involved in this kind of project. For instance, Steven Crowell is correct to point out that there is a distinct tension between two contemporary transcendental philosophies of intersubjectivity: the neo-Kantian version oriented towards justification of principles (in Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, etc.) looks to provide non-contingent grounds for social life by taking the structure of dialogue and social practice as central; and the phenomenological version oriented towards clarification of meaning (in Husserl at least) sees conscious experience as the fundamental starting place (Crowell: 31). We will consider both of these trajectories in this essay, although it is worth recognising that things are, in fact, even more complicated than this typology might suggest. Merleau-Ponty, for example, makes dialogue central to his philosophy post-*Phenomenology of Perception*, and Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Paul Sartre, while both still phenomenologists in some sense, also express worries about the Husserlian preoccupation with meaning and distance their philosophies of

intersubjectivity from it. Levinas's philosophy (1979), for example, focuses on the other as that which cannot be grasped by consciousness as a totality, but nonetheless obliges a response. The face of the other – its infinite difference – is a condition for the possibility of experience that is not experienced itself: the irruption or the withdrawal of the other that elides our totalising gaze does not present itself to a phenomenological intuition; it resists being meaningfully constituted by consciousness. Notwithstanding this complexity, it is appropriate to begin with the 'founder' of the phenomenological tradition, Husserl, before considering some of the important contributions of Martin Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, all of whom use transcendental reasoning as a key part of their analyses of intersubjectivity, and finally turning our attention to the work of Peter Strawson and Apel.

## HUSSERL ON INTERSUBJECTIVITY

As Crowell observes, Husserl himself never claims to offer transcendental *arguments* as such. Instead, he speaks of his project as one of transcendental *reflection*.

For Husserl the task is not to validate synthetic a priori judgments by means of transcendental *arguments*, but to clarify, by means of a kind of *reflection*, the sense of what shows up as real ('transcendent') in various modes of experience (Crowell: 32).

The phenomenological project is fundamentally *descriptive* rather than *argumentative*. Furthermore, Husserl considers it to be a 'transcendental' form of inquiry not simply because it considers non-empirical conditions for the possibility of empirical experience, but more fundamentally because it brackets the assumptions of the 'natural attitude' *as a whole* and thereby enables radical reflection upon the life of consciousness. Nonetheless, it is possible to reassemble some of Husserl's reflections as transcendental arguments for the following reason. According to Husserl's reflections, various modes of experience exhibit a hierarchical structure; conscious acts are more or less 'basic' to the extent that they presuppose other conscious acts. For example, the *judgment* that a retaining wall is collapsing is less basic than a mere *perception* of the wall as a retaining wall, since the consciousness of the state of affairs asserted in the judgment is 'founded' upon the consciousness of the perceptual object. There is, then, a hierarchy, or order of presupposition, among conscious acts due to the 'logic' of experience itself. Now, the 'founding' relations exhibited by such transcendental *reflections* are convertible into transcendental *arguments* since they map precisely the *possibility conditions* governing certain kinds of experience. In other words, to the extent that transcendental phenomenology is in the business of reconstructing a priori hierarchies among acts of consciousness, it is *de facto* producing transcendental arguments.

A clear example of such a 'transcendental argument' is found in Husserl's well-known discussions of intersubjectivity in *Cartesian Meditations* (1960) and *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (1969).<sup>1</sup> In the hierarchy of experiences, Husserl claims, experiences of 'transcendence', 'objectivity' and 'reality' require as a

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<sup>1</sup> Husserl carried out extensive work on the problem of intersubjectivity, especially in his final years, and a large amount of the unpublished material has been available for some time in *Husserliana*, vols. XIII, XIV and XV, although so far only a small portion of this material has been made available in English translation.

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3 condition for their possibility the consciousness of ‘other minds’—or, more  
4 specifically, they require what Husserl calls the “community of egos” (Husserl 1960:  
5 107). In other words, other minds are a condition for the possibility of experience of  
6 any object *as* transcendent, objective and real.  
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8 This seems a counterintuitive claim, to be sure. From an everyday, pre-  
9 reflective point of view, it seems obvious that the world is there for us as something  
10 real that transcends our own minds, irrespective of other people. If anything requires  
11 explanation, we might think, surely it would be the experience of *other minds*. It is  
12 true, according to Husserl, that I do experience the world as other-than-myself quite  
13 independently of others. But the world so construed remains essentially the world of  
14 *my* experience; it is posited as not-I, and yet it is still the correlate of *my* conscious life  
15 and nothing more (Husserl 1960: 97-106). To accomplish the paradoxical *experience*  
16 of the world *as* an object that is *genuinely exterior to my own experience of it* requires  
17 other minds. It is only when the world is construed as an object *for others* (quite apart  
18 from *my* experience of it) that it gains its proper sense as a genuinely transcendent  
19 reality. Similarly, Husserl argues that consciousness of the world with regard to its  
20 *objectivity* requires that it be construed as *the world for everyone*; the objective world  
21 is the world as it is not just for me but for everyone. And, in this respect too, the prior  
22 constitution of the plurality of egos (‘everyone’) is evidently a condition for the  
23 possibility of the constitution of the world as objective (Husserl 1969: 237). These  
24 reflections lead Husserl to the conclusion that, whereas Kant considered the  
25 *transcendental subject* to be the condition for the possibility of objective experience,  
26 the true transcendental subject is the community of egos: ultimately, *transcendental*  
27 *intersubjectivity* is the metaphysical ground of reality, the “intrinsically first being”  
28 (Husserl 1960: 156; cf. 1969: 273-75).  
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30 As Husserl is all too aware, these reflections raise the difficult question of how  
31 we experience other egos. How are we to account for other egos, “who surely are not  
32 a mere intending and intended *in me*, merely synthetic unities of possible verification  
33 *in me*, but, according to their sense, precisely *others*?” (Husserl 1960: 89). Husserl  
34 recognizes that other minds are not strictly ‘given’ in experience (hence the  
35 distinctive problem of ‘other minds’): “properly speaking, neither the other Ego  
36 himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else  
37 belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally” (Husserl  
38 1960: 108f.). And yet, far from being a problem to be overcome, this *inaccessibility* is  
39 crucial for Husserl. Were it not for the insuperable gap between ego and alter ego, the  
40 alter ego would collapse into my own ego and “ultimately he himself and I myself  
41 would be the same” (Husserl 1960: 109).  
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43 If we nonetheless experience others, how is this accomplished? Husserl  
44 responds that it must take the form of an “appresentation”, i.e. the essentially non-  
45 present alter ego must be *given-along-with* something that *is* present. And, in this  
46 case, the thing present is the other’s body. According to Husserl, the body ‘over there’  
47 receives its sense as another ego in an “*analogizing’ apprehension*” which takes its  
48 motivation from *my* body, already understood as an animate organism, and which sees  
49 that body ‘over there’ as *another* animate organism (Husserl 1960: 111). Thus, the  
50 body of the other is seen *as* a lived body by virtue of an “*apperceptive transfer from*  
51 *my animate organism*” (Husserl 1960: 110). This presumptive transfer is subsequently  
52 confirmed by the behaviour of the other, which conforms to my understanding of how  
53 another embodied subject might act (Husserl 1960: 114). Thus we are able to  
54 experience others as immediately ‘there’ in the world, and ourselves and the world as  
55 ‘there’ for them. On this basis, it subsequently becomes possible to establish the idea  
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of the world as a common object of experience for oneself as well as for the other, extending to an open plurality of others ('everyone') (Husserl 1969: 274).

Does Husserl thereby prove the existence of other minds? Does he establish that there is in fact a real, objective world transcending our conscious experience? The arguments he offers are not intended to do either. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology explicitly brackets all questions of fact and suspends all existential commitments—not because he is a skeptic with regard to such commitments, but precisely in order to establish a space for investigating the transcendental conditions that *make possible* the experiences of the world and others that would resolve such questions. For Husserl, the factual existence of others can only be established by experience, and the same is true of the factual existence of realities and objectivities. The transcendental reflections he offers consequently only deal with the phenomenological *interconnections* between the transcendental ego, the experience of others, and the metaphysical features of the world (e.g. reality, transcendence, objectivity). What they do show, however, is that insofar as we experience the world as objective or real, we necessarily presuppose the existence of others; and, similarly, that insofar as we experience others, we necessarily presuppose the existence of ourselves as embodied subjects.

#### HEIDEGGER ON BEING-WITH-OTHERS

According to Heidegger in *Being and Time* and elsewhere, the entire tradition of modern epistemology up to and including Husserl, characterized as it is by an obsession with sceptical problems such as the problem of other minds, is the victim of a deep misapprehension. Sceptical problems only appear as problems due to the unfortunate prevalence of a phenomenologically spurious theory of mind according to which we first relate to the world as *knowing subjects to objects known*. Only on such a model does it seem plausible to think that our relationship to the world is an *achievement* of a transcendental subject; and, only on such a model can it seem as though our grasp of 'other minds' is an *achievement* of an even more mysterious and remarkable kind. Heidegger argues, on the contrary, that these epistemic 'achievements' are dependent upon a prior *relatedness to the world (and to others)* which is not at all an 'achievement' but simply a feature of human existence (Heidegger: 84-90). Far from *establishing* a relationship between an initially self-enclosed sphere of consciousness and some exterior domain, relationships of 'knowing' exploit an interconnectedness between ourselves and the world that already obtains, one of practical and meaningful *involvement* ("Being-in-the-world").

Heidegger unfolds this argument with respect to the experience of *others* as follows. There is no problem of other minds for us in our everyday, pre-philosophical attitude since in the first instance and ordinarily we do not stand as an 'I' over against 'Others', but rather tacitly understand ourselves to be 'alongside' or 'with' others in the world; we do not assign ourselves an absolute priority but count ourselves as *one among others* (Heidegger: 154). In other words, the world of others is not grafted onto our solipsistic world. Quite the contrary: the *public* world constitutes the pre-established horizon within which we find ourselves situated from the start. Indeed, according to Heidegger, it is typically in our interaction with things (*Zeug*) that we have already 'encountered' others. For instance, "The boat anchored at the shore is assigned in its Being-in-itself to an acquaintance who undertakes voyages with it; but even if it is a 'boat which is strange to us', it still is indicative of Others" (Heidegger:

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3 154). In other words, the world itself contains ‘assignments’ or ‘reference’ to others.  
4 For this reason, Heidegger claims that just as “a bare subject without a world never  
5 ‘is’ proximally, nor is it ever given”, so “in the end an isolated ‘I’ without Others is  
6 just as far from being proximally given” (Heidegger: 152). Others “*are already there*  
7 *with us*” (152) and “the world is always the one that I share with Others” (155).

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9 Now, it may appear that, rather than resolving it, Heidegger illegitimately *side*  
10 *steps* the problem of other minds by simply reasserting our naïve belief that others  
11 exist and then taking this as an inscrutable ‘given’. However, it is important that we  
12 are clear about what he is claiming. To assert that human existence is primordially  
13 “Being-with-others” is *not yet* to claim that there are others who do in fact exist;  
14 rather, it attributes a feature to human existence *as such*, a feature that belongs to its  
15 very *existential make-up* and is not contingent upon the experience of actual others. In  
16 Heidegger’s language, “Dasein in itself is *essentially* Being-with [*Mitsein*]” (156).  
17 This means that, just as each of us is always already ‘open’ towards the world around  
18 us in a non-epistemic relation of practical and meaningful involvement, so each of us  
19 is always already ‘open’ towards the social world, towards others, in a non-epistemic  
20 relation which Heidegger calls “*Fürsorge*” (‘care’ or ‘provision’) (157-61). Thus, in  
21 the same way that “Being-in-the-world” is supposed to name the *condition for the*  
22 *possibility* of discovering real entities in the world, so “Being-with” is supposed to  
23 name the transcendental feature of human existence that *makes possible* interaction  
24 with others in the world: “Dasein as Being-with lets the Dasein of Others be  
25 encountered in the world” (157).  
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29 As with Husserl, it is possible to reconstruct from Heidegger’s  
30 phenomenological descriptions transcendental arguments for this central claim, viz.  
31 that the structure of “Being-with” is an essential or apriori feature of human existence.  
32 We might look, for instance, to his assertion that “The Other can *be missing* only *in*  
33 *and for* a Being-with. Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with; its very  
34 possibility is proof of this” (157). Here, using an argument structure found repeatedly  
35 throughout *Being and Time*, Heidegger draws to our attention the experience of an  
36 *absence*—in this case, the *absence of others*, the experience of being alone. Such an  
37 experience cannot be generated by some external object, since there is no external  
38 object to provoke it. The experience must be explained by recourse to something  
39 ‘within’ Dasein itself, i.e. a disappointed anticipation of others. According to  
40 Heidegger, the disappointed anticipation attests to the ‘openness’ towards others that  
41 is intrinsic to human being, an openness which precedes and makes possible both the  
42 experience of others and the experience of their absence, both concern for others and  
43 indifference towards them.  
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47 Philosophical puzzles concerning Dasein’s “Being-with” remain, as Heidegger  
48 readily admits; but these initial observations already represent a challenge to the  
49 assumption that there is a *problem* of other minds for an *unproblematic* ‘I’, and hence  
50 represent a challenge to the assumption that philosophical reflection can and should  
51 begin with the givenness of the ‘I’ while disregarding everything else that is ‘given’,  
52 including the world and other people (151). If the overturning of these assumptions is  
53 warranted as Heidegger maintains, then Husserl’s attempt to retrace the constitution  
54 of the community of egos starting from the solitary ego is both redundant and wrong-  
55 headed. For, Husserl’s formulation of the ‘problem of empathy’ disregards the prior  
56 *relatedness to others* that Heidegger believes makes possible the experience of others,  
57 and Husserl is consequently constrained to explain empathy as a “projection” of one’s  
58 primordially given self-relation into another entity. Heidegger’s objection is plain:  
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3 “‘Empathy’ does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does  
4 ‘empathy’ become possible” (162).

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6 Although this argument has had enormous influence over succeeding  
7 generations of phenomenologists, it remains contestable and contested. Dan Zahavi,  
8 for instance, has provided a defence of the Husserlian approach in the face of  
9 Heidegger’s work (among others) by highlighting the ways in which Husserl himself  
10 anticipated the main points Heidegger makes (Zahavi, 2001a: 124-37; 2001b: 155)  
11 and also, more importantly, by showing that Husserl’s approach has the virtue of  
12 balancing both the experience of the *communicability* or *replaceability* of the other  
13 (emphasized by Heidegger) and the experience of the *transcendence* or *foreignness* of  
14 the other (emphasized, for instance, by Levinas) (Zahavi, 2001a: 159-66, but cf.  
15 Stawarska: 32-9). As we shall see, a similar dialectic plays itself out between Sartre  
16 and Merleau-Ponty.  
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## 21 SARTRE ON SHAME

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23 In the chapter of *Being and Nothingness* entitled “The Reef of Solipsism”, Sartre  
24 suggests that idealists and realists both have quite serious problems with establishing  
25 the existence of the other and typically betray their own theoretical commitments  
26 when reflecting on intersubjectivity. He then engages with and criticises the work of  
27 three of his most important predecessors – Husserl, Hegel and Heidegger – before  
28 proffering his own solution in the chapter, “The Look”.  
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31 Sartre describes a person peering through a keyhole at something on the other  
32 side of the closed door, captivated by whatever is going on. All of this occurs on the  
33 level of pre-reflective consciousness; the person is peering through the keyhole,  
34 entirely caught up in their activity, absorbed in the world. Suddenly though, they hear  
35 footsteps in the corridor and they are aware that somebody is now watching them. No  
36 longer concerned with what is going on behind the door, they are conscious of their  
37 identity as escaping them in ways that they cannot control and they are ashamed of  
38 this fact. According to Sartre, the experience of shame recognises both that we are  
39 that object which the Other is looking at and judging, and that the Other sees an  
40 aspect of us that we cannot control and that requires their mediation. As Sartre  
41 suggests, “pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object, but in general  
42 of being an object” (Sartre: 288). As Mark Sacks suggests, in this experience of the  
43 look we apprehend our embodiment in a manner that is irreducible to the body as  
44 point of view around which a perceptual field is organised (since our being embodied  
45 is revealed to us in a manner that is very different from the way it is presupposed in  
46 our absorbed coping), and also as irreducible to the brute physicalist understanding of  
47 the body (Sacks: 280). For Sartre, the important philosophical point to take away from  
48 this example is that the Other who catches the person peeping and causes them to feel  
49 shame cannot just be another object, but rather must be a subject. In other words,  
50 Sartre argues that this experience of shame, and of feeling like an object, could not  
51 happen if other people did not exist. It might be felt that such an ontological  
52 conclusion is too strong, but for our purposes it is important to note that this feeling of  
53 shame is impossible to resist; it overwhelms us and there is no room for inference.  
54 The other who perceives us may not necessarily unambiguously apprehend all of our  
55 higher-order psychological states, or at least not in the way that we experience this  
56 pre-reflectively, but they immediately apprehend us nonetheless.  
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Now it is possible that the person caught peering through the keyhole might be mistaken when they think that they have been caught in this precarious position. In fact no-one was actually there, and it is hence clear that another person does not actually have to be present for an individual to experience shame. This seems to suggest that perhaps Sartre has not refuted solipsism and the epistemological scepticism that engenders it. Sartre's response to this is to say that while there may not be someone literally there at a particular time and place in which we feel shame, at least one other person must exist – or, more minimally, must have existed – for the experience of shame to be comprehensible at all (Sartre: 280). Sartre also points out that it is significant that upon realising that our shame was initially 'mistaken', in the sense that there was actually nobody observing us prone and in an abject position, our feeling of vulnerability before the Look of the Other is actually far from dissipated; on the contrary, it is more likely that we will experience ourselves as an object all the more intensely. As Sacks notes, "what I am experiencing, despite there being no actual person in the room behind me, is that the world contains some such persons... to experience their absence is just to be committed to them existing elsewhere. That is just what it is for something to be absent rather than non-existent" (Sacks: 292). While I can be mistaken in particular cases, what is necessary is that some such other exists (or has existed) for such an experience to be possible.

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Many philosophers have challenged this account of intersubjectivity, including Sartre's 'fellow traveller' and existentialist friend (at least for a period of time), Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, the other can look at me, penetrate me to the very fibre of my being, "only because we belong to the same system of being-for-itself and being-for-another; we are moments of the same syntax, we count in the same world, we belong to the same being" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 83). In other words, for him, the conflict of Sartre's Being-for-others, which comes about as we attempt to control the look of others, is dependent upon the more fundamental experience of communication: in Merleau-Ponty's words, "we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity" (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 354). Indeed, it is in this context that Merleau-Ponty says (borrowing from Husserl), "transcendental subjectivity is a revealed subjectivity, revealed to itself and to others, and is for that reason an intersubjectivity" (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 361).

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#### TRANSCENDENTAL REASONING ABOUT OTHER MINDS IN ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

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Aside from the important contributions in the phenomenological tradition, there have been fresh attempts in recent years to make use of transcendental reasoning in relation to the problem of other minds. As Crowell explains, "motivated by the linguistic turn, these theories characterise experience in terms of intersubjective contexts: public reidentification criteria (Strawson), argumentative discourse (Apel), quasi-behavioural conditions of understanding (Davidson), and so on. Here the first-person plays no grounding role" (Crowell: 32). Indeed, Davidson's reflections on triangulation and his later formulations of the principle of charity are commonly thought to involve transcendental arguments, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that shortly after this became apparent his work was far less discussed in some of the central journals of analytic philosophy (see Duke et al: 7-26).

It is Strawson, however, with whom such arguments are generally associated, and who in fact precipitated a mini-publishing industry on their soundness. In

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*Individuals*, Strawson argues that the concept of person is basic to our understanding of ‘mind’, and if we can attribute mind to ourselves (which he says we can) then we necessarily have some logically adequate criteria for this that can also be applied in other cases, including to identify the minds of others (Strawson: 109). Against the argument from analogy, Strawson points out that such an argument depends upon my being able to identify my own experiences, which he thinks itself logically depends upon the concept of other perspectives. While there is a difference between self-ascription of mental states and other-ascription of mental states, both are nonetheless bound up in the same language-game surrounding the more basic concept of ‘person’. By showing that the concept of ‘person’ is more primitive than the abstraction from it, which is the concept of ‘mind’, Strawson is thus able to provide an answer to the conceptual problem of other minds – e.g. how do we know that it is a single concept of mind that persists throughout these two different uses, rather than involving two (or more) different concepts, a first person and second person concept? On his view, once this descriptive work regarding the connection between ‘person’ and ‘mind’ has been done, there is no coherent problem of other minds that requires an inference.

Strawson’s argument has been subjected to considerable scrutiny. Sacks summarizes the most common criticism as follows: “It would seem that [Strawson’s] argument cannot establish that the very possibility of me having experience requires that there be, or that our experience be construed as being of, other subjects... I must have criteria suited to identification of others. But this tells me about the necessity of my cognitive apparatus: not about the necessary structure of the world to which it is applied” (Sacks: 295). In other words, the argument does not show that the world must actually contain others, but merely that we must have criteria for identifying them, if they do in fact exist. Arguably it does not show even that the world must seem to us to contain others, and this is because Strawson’s position involves a “theoretical ascent” as Sacks terms it. It establishes logical dependence between self-ascriptions and other-ascriptions, rather than phenomenological dependence, and Strawson’s chief concern is with ascribing propositional attitudes to the other (ascribing beliefs and desires to them) couched in a third person perspective.

These concerns about Strawson’s approach have led to a general scepticism amongst analytic philosophers regarding the usefulness of transcendental argumentation. This is partly because of the worry that what looks like transcendental necessity may turn out to be a mere contingency: it is hard to exclude the possibility of alternative explanations for the phenomena for which one is attempting to identify *the* possibility conditions. As such, claims of transcendental ‘necessity’ risk falling into a form of dogmatism (Körner: 317-31). Doubts about transcendental claims also stem from the fact that the sceptic can always maintain that it is merely necessary that we *believe* there are extra-mental facts, since this is sufficient to account for the mental experience in question, but it does not show that there *are* any extra-mental facts (Stroud: 241-56). In other words, they don’t license any inference to reality, but simply show, in the case that concerns us, that it is necessary that I construe the world as involving others. Because of these repeatedly expressed reservations regarding transcendental arguments, they have not been given much attention in the analytic literature on other minds (Chase and Reynolds 2010: 235-51). In the final section of the essay, we shall consider whether the work of Karl-Otto Apel provides a more trenchant rehabilitation of transcendental argumentation deserving of greater attention than it has received so far.

## APEL'S TRANSCENDENTAL SEMIOTICS

Like Kant, Apel holds that the task of identifying the non-contingent conditions for the possibility of valid or objective knowledge is at the heart of the philosophical enterprise. With Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, however, Apel argues that objectivity must be understood in terms of *intersubjective validity*, which he takes to be a status that is established through discursive procedures of justification in dialogue between speakers. But if this is accepted, then it raises a set of new questions for transcendental reflection: What conditions make it possible to raise and to justify a meaningful validity claim regarding how things stand in the world or regarding how things ought to be in the world? The result, for Apel, is a paradigm shift in transcendental philosophy itself: from a focus on consciousness or subjectivity (*à la* Descartes, Kant or Husserl) to a focus on language and the pragmatics of argumentative discourse. As such, Apel famously claims that in transcendental philosophy the “I think” must be replaced by “I argue” (Apel 1994: 243).

The rationale for making this ‘paradigm shift’ to a ‘transcendental semiotics’ itself rests on a series of transcendental arguments (although Apel himself describes the arguments as a critique of “abstractive or reductive fallacies with regard to the conditions of possibility for knowledge or thought” (Apel 1998: 45)).

(i) Apel first makes clear that he accepts as a genuine advance the Kantian ‘Copernican revolution’ which shows through transcendental reasoning the irreducible role of subjectivity in rendering possible the experience of objects. The naïveté of the ‘ontological paradigm’—i.e. the style of philosophy oriented to the rational order inherent in the world of entities itself—had to be overcome by the ‘philosophy of consciousness’ (Apel 1998: 47f.). But there is, according to Apel, an analogous naïveté at work in the Kantian paradigm, and a second phase of transcendental critique is called for.

(ii) In Kant, the subject-object relation is presented as though it were prior to and independent from symbolic mediation, whereas in fact, as Peirce has shown, there is a dependency relation between the former and the latter. Interposed between the knowing subject and the object known is the sign, or more precisely, the validity claim. Without taking into account this symbolic mediation, it is impossible to account for ‘truth’ or ‘validity’: an object alone can be neither ‘true’ nor ‘false’ (contra Aristotle); a subject’s experience of ‘evidence’ or intentional relation to an object can be neither ‘true’ nor ‘false’ (contra Husserl); only a propositionally-structured claim can be ‘true’ or ‘false’, since the propositional structure is the minimal structure susceptible to intersubjective justification (Apel 1998: 47-58). Hence, if there is knowledge at all, then there are signs involved (propositionally-structured validity claims) and the symbolic order has already been invoked.

(iii) Following Wittgenstein’s private language argument, Apel argues furthermore that the public institution of rules of correct sign use among sign users is an unavoidable pre-condition for signs to have meaning (or, more precisely, to have criteria of sense) (Apel 1994: 102). From this a third transcendental argument follows: A symbolic order presupposes a *community* of sign users. Thus, in order for there to be validity, there must be an *intersubjective* context, a linguistic community.

(iv) Moreover, according to Apel, language has an irreducible ‘double structure’ insofar as it contains both a performative-intersubjective dimension and a propositional-referential dimension: one always communicates *with* someone *about* something. But, if so, then yet another transcendental argument can be mounted: The

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2  
3 semantic (i.e. propositional-referential) aspect of the symbolic order implies  
4 commitment to the existence of the world.  
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6 It follows then that neither the existence of other minds nor the existence of  
7 the external world is susceptible to sceptical doubt, since any act of doubt involves a  
8 semiosis—i.e. raises a validity claim—which for its part structurally presupposes the  
9 existence of both other minds and the external world.

10 For their part, according to Apel, each of these presuppositions has  
11 *transcendental force* since contradicting them would amount to a “performative self-  
12 contradiction” (Apel 1975: 250). The sceptic may, for instance, attempt to deny that  
13 there is an external world to which her utterance truly refers, but in the very act of  
14 doing so, she makes a validity claim which, as Apel claims to show, cannot fail to  
15 present itself as referring and referring truly, since this is built into the illocutionary  
16 structure of such utterances. Hence, she cannot *make* the claim without contradicting  
17 the *content* of the claim being made. Similarly, it is not possible within the  
18 philosophical language game of doubt to doubt *everything* without falling into  
19 inconsistency, since the presuppositions of the language game of doubt cannot  
20 themselves be doubted without being presupposed in the doubting, thus landing the  
21 doubter in a performative self-contradiction (Apel 1998: 86ff.). The presuppositions  
22 of argumentative discourse represent ‘transcendental’ foundations in precisely this  
23 sense and no other. The ‘transcendentalism’ of Apel’s philosophy, therefore, is  
24 *pragmatic* rather than *hermeneutic* in nature: it pertains to the necessary  
25 presuppositions of *speech acts* and not to necessary presuppositions of the  
26 *propositional content* of speech acts.<sup>2</sup> His transcendental philosophy aims to analyze  
27 these and other such *non-circumventible* (*nicht hintergebar*) presuppositions and  
28 idealizations embedded within the pragmatics of language use, presuppositions and  
29 idealizations which provide the non-empirical scaffolding that make possible the  
30 practices of argumentative discourse: e.g. counterfactual assumptions that one’s  
31 utterance has an intersubjectively sharable sense or meaningfulness, that it is true, that  
32 it is normatively valid, that it is sincere.

33 Whether this pragmatic style of transcendental argumentation is compelling is  
34 uncertain. On the one hand, such an approach, reliant as it is on the demonstration of  
35 performative self-consistencies or self-contradictions, seems to pre-empt what  
36 performative commitments may or may not be built into language games of assertion  
37 and argumentation, and it may be queried whether specific language games involve  
38 the particular commitments nominated by Apel. On the other hand, even if the  
39 commitments in question *are* universal to all conceivable forms of language game  
40 involving assertion and argumentation, the occurrence of the supposed “performative  
41 self-contradiction” is difficult to show and relies on the capacity of the offending  
42 speaker to ‘see’ the implicit claims his speech acts commit him to (Crowell: 38f.).  
43 Moreover, Habermas has disputed whether ‘non-circumventible’ conditions of  
44 possibility should be considered ‘transcendental’ in light of the fact that they are  
45 strictly neither known ‘prior to experience’ nor ‘non-circumventible’ (we are, for  
46 instance, able to circumvent the presuppositions built into certain language games by  
47 simply refusing to play the game) (Habermas 1998: 43-46; 1991: 228-33).  
48 Nonetheless, what matters for Apel is that the philosophical claims made by his  
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<sup>2</sup> Put another way, taking its inspiration from the work of C.S. Peirce, Apel’s form of transcendental  
argumentation takes its lead not so much from Kant’s transcendental analytic (as does the  
transcendental argumentation of Strawson, which appeals to ‘categorical schemes’) as it does from  
Kant’s transcendental dialectic, oriented as it is to the reflective reconstruction of the (regulative) ideas  
of reason (Apel 1998: 34ff.; 1992: 252f.).

transcendental semiotics are not circumventible *by arguments* since “then the very speech-act of questioning would actually lay claim to those very presuppositions of the argumentative discourse I have explicated” (Apel 1992: 253); and, to this extent the structures explicated are able to furnish the *ultimate justification* (*Letztbegründung*) needed in order to defend the possibility of validity against sceptical attack (Apel 1975). Within its relatively limited field of application, it is possible that the ‘pragmatic’ form of self-referential justification provided by Apel’s transcendental semiotics might after all prove to be more robust and less easily sidestepped than other forms of transcendental argumentation (Apel 1998: 90ff.).

Questions remain, but all of the trajectories described in this essay try, in different ways, to overcome the predicaments that arise when one begins with a certain picture of the mind, to which we have privileged epistemic access, and then seeks to establish an external connection to other minds. This traditional approach is regarded as a dead-end by all of the philosopher discussed, as it concedes too much to the sceptical problematic and makes a non-intellectualist account of intersubjectivity impossible.

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