

On Transcendental Arguments

Transcendental arguments are demonstrations of the necessary conditions of the possibility of any act of human subjectivity—thinking, understanding, believing, asserting, and so on. As such, they are “dialectically interesting” (Mourad), because their categorical premises are self-referential and undeniable, and, if their conditional premises are sound, their conclusions are likewise self-referential and cannot be denied without self-contradiction. Being implied by any possible act of understanding or assertion, their conclusions can only be affirmed.

Transcendental arguments thus function to discover or identify certain “regulative standards of justified belief” (Mourad). For this reason alone, they are significant for Christian theology. If any such standards are universal, because implied by any possible assertion, they must also be implied by any assertions of Christian witness. But, then, Christian standards of belief cannot be in all respects distinctive, and to defend the soundness of transcendental arguments is to respond both to the currently fashionable theological claim that they are and to the charges of fideism and relativism that this claim invites.

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“Belief,” according to Plantinga, is “thinking with assent.” Gamwell similarly defines the term as “assent to an understanding or, more fully stated, an evaluation of an understanding as true.” As for “understanding,” Gamwell defines it as “the discrimination or representation of realities through universals.”

Beliefs always involve interpretations of reality, and interpretations involve the use of signs that are in principle public. The concept of a sign implies that there must be public criteria for applying the sign (meaning) as well as public criteria for applying it correctly (truth). Thus any belief, involving, as it

does, interpretation by means of linguistic signs, which in turn imply public criteria for their use, implies validity claims to be both meaningful and true.

To claim truth for any belief, a subject presupposes the possibility that some argumentative appeal to experiential evidence would command consensus about that belief among the members of an “unlimited argumentation community.” So any truth claim “presupposes that certain rules of argumentation are to be followed as normative conditions for the very possibility of [discourse], that is[,] of the consensual redemption or critique of truth claims” (Apel).

The idea of an unlimited argumentation community implies a community of subjects each of whom would have ideal access to the experiential evidence for any understanding and would evaluate it accordingly, by “ideal, uncoerced argumentative appeal to evidence” according to common rules of argumentation and evidential standards (Mourad). The idea further implies that such a community “has at its disposal a sufficiently shared and clear language in which it can formulate not only its problems but also possible solutions to these problems” (Apel).

Since any subject necessarily implies that her or his beliefs are valid, she or he also claims implicitly that her or his beliefs are justified by relevant argument based on evidence. She or he claims, in other words, that there are good reasons for thinking that all other subjects to whom the belief is communicated would assent to the same understanding, given ideal communication conditions. Thus every subject necessarily affirms the reality of intersubjectively persuasive evidence appropriate to evaluating the understandings expressed by her or his beliefs.

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Subjects have a universal duty to evaluate understandings according to evidence and arguments that they believe would be persuasive to an unlimited

community of fellow subjects. Among the transcendental conditions of the possibility of all beliefs is a commitment to their validity. This commitment grounds, in turn, the validity of a universal epistemic principle or standard to the effect that subjects ought to choose beliefs that they believe can be critically validated and command consensus even within an unlimited community of discourse guided by ideal, uncoerced argumentative appeal to evidence.

The obligations of epistemological justification, however, apply to voluntary beliefs only.

A belief *b* is “justified” for a subject *S*, relative to an epistemic principle *EP*, if *b* is permitted for *S* according to *EP*, and *S* chooses *b*, at least in part, in order to comply with *EP* (Mourad).

The epistemic principles covered by this definition of justification may be either “universal” or “type-specific.” Universal epistemic principles are moral maxims prescribing duties applicable to all voluntary beliefs. Type-specific epistemic principles are moral maxims prescribing duties applicable to only some voluntary beliefs. The duties prescribed by these two types of principles are, correspondingly, “universal duties” and “type-specific duties”; and justification relative to the two types of epistemic principles is “universal justification” and “type-specific justification” respectively (Mourad).

All beliefs necessarily imply the possibility of argumentative appeal to evidential grounds; and so all voluntary beliefs ought to be universally justified relative to “a broadly evidentialist epistemic principle” (Mourad). Moreover, this universal epistemic principle implies in turn various type-specific epistemic principles relative to which particular types of voluntary beliefs ought to be justified.

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Arguing transcendently is a transcendental belief forming process. This process involves several other cognitive faculties.

Its inputs include beliefs about the existence of subjective phenomena—thinking, understanding, believing, asserting, etc.—based on introspection and formalizable as the categorial premises of transcendental arguments. Its inputs also include one or more beliefs, formalizable as the conditional premises of transcendental arguments, about the essential relationship between these phenomena and various conditions, based on transcendental implication. Its outputs, then, are based on deductive inferences involving the inputs formalizable as the two types of premises required by any sound transcendental argument

The beliefs produced by this process are self-referential, in the sense that the conclusions of a sound transcendental argument discover or identify conditions also necessarily implied transcendently by the activity of transcendental argument, or the transcendental belief forming process, itself.

Since the inputs of the transcendental belief forming process include other beliefs, its explicit outputs are not basic beliefs. But since its outputs are beliefs presupposed by every act of subjectivity, these beliefs must already have been held implicitly in a basic way by every subject prior to undertaking their explicit formulation.

The transcendental belief forming process is an epistemic method. Subjects engaged in it by arguing transcendently form beliefs about transcendental conditions by attending voluntarily and selectively to particular types of inputs. This epistemic method is appropriate for validating beliefs about the transcendental conditions of the possibility of subjectivity. And the possibility of being confirmed by the application of this method is the central criterion of the validity of beliefs about these transcendental conditions.

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Insofar as religious beliefs all express some answer to the existential question; and this question is about the meaning of ultimate reality for us, religious beliefs can all be critically validated as credible only by transcendental argument, or by the epistemic method involving the formation of transcendental beliefs. Why? Because what is properly meant by the ultimate reality about whose meaning for us the existential question asks is precisely the necessary conditions of the possibility of subjectivity, which include, of course, the necessary conditions of the possibility of being as such.

This in no way means, however, that critical, properly theological validation of the credibility of religious beliefs “is relative to a particular community of interpretation” (Mourad), as distinct from being relative to the meaning of the beliefs it is designed to validate

Beyond this first theological task that transcendental arguments may be able to perform, depending on how the “depth structure” of religious beliefs is to be correctly analyzed, there are at least the following theological tasks that transcendental arguments can perform, whatever the analysis of religious beliefs:

(1) they can defeat the self-referentially problematic position that there are no transcendental conditions of the possibility of subjectivity and thus of being as such;

(2) they can defeat beliefs about the coherence of any theological method that denies the relativity of type-specific epistemic principles to the meaning of the beliefs they are designed to evaluate;

(3) they can defeat the belief that there is no obligation to justify voluntary beliefs according to the relevant type-specific epistemic principles; and

(4) they can defeat the belief that the testimony of an authority can constitute a sufficient condition for the truth of a belief in the context of critical, properly theological reflection.