

IMAGO DEI: TOWARD A TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

[Draft]

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In recent years there has been a move in philosophical circles, both conscious and unconscious, to try to bridge the gap between continental and analytic philosophy, resulting in what has become known in some circles as “post-analytic” philosophy. In an email communication, Ray Monk, formerly Director of the Centre for Post-Analytic Philosophy at the University of Southampton has described post-analytic philosophy as

a conception of philosophy that seeks to retain the virtues of the analytic tradition—rigor, clarity, intellectual honesty—while seeking to broaden the scope of the issues and texts customarily dealt with by analytic philosophers, and, in particular, to overcome the disastrous gulf between analytic philosophers and the Continental tradition.

Philosophers of religion, however, have been slow to take up the post-analytic moniker. It has often been noted that there is a distinct difference between the way “analytic” philosophers and their “continental” counterparts approach philosophy of religion and natural philosophy. As a very rough distinction, we might say that analytic philosophers, on the one hand, tend to focus on God or the religious object while continental philosophers tend instead to focus on the more subjective human aspects of religion. My goal in this chapter is to examine whether there might be some prospect for philosophy of religion in taking a post-analytic approach to its subject, which would open up a third approach, that of focusing on God through the nature of human experience. I intend in this chapter to focus on one particular possible approach, based on phenomenological transcendental arguments.

1. Background

The stimulus for writing this chapter comes from the work of Charles Taylor, in particular his book *Sources of the Self*. Taylor’s work fits clearly under the moniker of post-analytic; Ray Monk has, in a private correspondence, described Taylor as “a paradigm case of a ‘post-analytic’ philosopher.” In investigating Taylor’s methodology in *Sources of the Self*, it became clear to me that he was making widespread use of a species of transcendental argument that finds its

roots in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. By following the thread of Taylor's transcendental arguments, it became equally clear to me that the outcome of his approach is a phenomenological argument for the inescapable necessity of a theistic moral framework for all human beings, and further, the necessity of the existence of God. I have set out my reading of Taylor in this regard elsewhere (Baker, 1999; 2000), and there is little to be gained in repeating the exegetical aspects of those papers here. My intention in this chapter is instead to set out the basic structure of this sort of post-analytic approach to philosophy of religion, and examine its possibilities and weaknesses, though I will refer to Taylor's specific argument in order to illustrate the general approach.

2. The Transcendental Argument

It is fitting that the argument I will set out below takes the form of a transcendental argument. Since Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism first opened up the possibility of this approach to epistemology, the transcendental argument has appeared in the work of philosophers on both sides of the continental/analytic divide, with G. W. F. Hegel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl and their followers representing continental philosophy, while analytic proponents of this form of argument include Peter Strawson, John Searle, Hilary Putnam and Donald Davidson, with Ludwig Wittgenstein falling somewhere in between. It appears to be entirely appropriate that a post-analytic argument should make use of this argument style.

In a recent collection focusing on transcendental arguments, Robert Stern characterizes transcendental arguments as follows:

The first, and perhaps most definitive feature, is that these arguments involve a claim of a distinctive form: namely, that one thing (X) is a necessary condition for the possibility of something else (Y), so that (it is said) the latter cannot obtain without the former. In suggesting that X is a condition for Y in this way, this claim is supposed to be metaphysical and *a priori*, and not merely natural and *a posteriori*: that is, if Y cannot obtain without X , this is not just because certain *natural* laws governing the *actual* world and discoverable by the empirical sciences make this impossible (in the way that, for example, life cannot exist without oxygen), but because certain metaphysical constraints that can be established by reflection make X a condition for Y in every *possible* world (for example, existence is a condition of thought, as the former is metaphysically required in order to do or be anything at all). Claims regarding such dependencies are central to all transcendental arguments, in a way that has made them suspect to naturalists and radical critics of

metaphysics alike, who doubt whether such claims can legitimately be made. (Stern, 1999, p. 3)

Another central characteristic of transcendental arguments is that they find their foundation in experience, that is, they are phenomenological in nature. While it may be possible to use a similar strategy where neither experience nor thought are fundamental, this would be to take the argument out of the realm of the transcendental. As Barry Stroud puts it, “To show that something is required for thought or experience would be to show that it has a very special status. We could call it transcendental status” (Stroud, 1999, p. 158).

Stern further points out:

[a]side from having a characteristic starting point in relation to subjectivity, and attempting to move out from that via claims about what makes subjectivity metaphysically possible, transcendental arguments are also recognizable in less structural terms, by the kind of dialectical strategy they adopt, which (to paraphrase Kant) aims at turning the game played by the sceptic against itself. That is, they set out to show that something that the sceptic takes for granted as a possibility (for example, that we have direct access to our inner states but no direct access to the external world, or beliefs but no reliable belief-forming methods) must be abandoned, as the one is in fact impossible without the other, for reasons he has overlooked (for example, that inner states alone cannot provide the basis for time-determination, or that beliefs by their nature must be generally true). In showing that the sceptic cannot help himself to the apparently intuitive assumption from which he begins, transcendental arguments have a way of overturning the epistemological tradition built on those assumptions, which themselves made scepticism seem possible. Behind the sceptical target, therefore, is often a wider philosophical framework against which these arguments are addressed (from empiricist accounts of perception to internalist accounts of mental content), and it is this that gives them their power to undermine prevailing orthodoxies, aside from their relation to the problem of scepticism as such. (Stern, 1999, pp. 4–5)

Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental argument which aims to show that we are embodied agents, when set out in point form, serves as a useful example of this type of argument structure, especially so because, as I have shown (Baker, 1999; 2000) this argument is strongly influential on Taylor, from whom the transcendental argument for the existence of God discussed below is derived. Merleau-Ponty’s argument can be set out roughly as follows:

- (1) We are unavoidably subjects in our experience.
- (2) We are perceiving beings, that is, perception is a basic and necessary condition of us being subjects.
- (3) Our perceptual field has a structure which allows us to orientate ourselves—foreground, background, up and down. This “orientational structure” is necessary in a strong sense to our perceptual field being fully such—when we lose this structure we no longer have perception in its true sense.
- (4) This orientational structure marks us as being embodied agents. Not just because the perceptual field focuses on the body’s location, but also (especially) because words like “up” and “down” are indications that the perceptual field is “a field of potential action” (Taylor, 1995, p. 23). As Taylor points out when describing this step in Merleau-Ponty’s argument,

up-down directionality *is* the line of possible upright stance and action; that is, it is a perception of the field as a locus of our activity Thus ... *what* we perceive is not the lay of the land or the sky. We grasp a directionality of the field which is, however, essentially related to how we act and stand. (Taylor, 1995, p. 24)

So from the “indubitable fact” that we are essentially subjects, Merleau-Ponty has argued, using the transcendental argument structure, that we are essentially embodied agents. Let’s now examine how this type of argument could be applied to the questions of philosophy of religion.

3. The Transcendental Argument for the Existence of God (TAG)

It must at this point be stressed that the argument I am discussing here is distinct from the claim made by some Christian philosophers that logic, science and morality presuppose the truth of the Christian world view because logic, science and morality depend on the truth of this world view, which argument is also sometimes called the Transcendental Argument for the Existence of God, or TAG. It is not clear to me that this argument, whatever its merits, is a transcendental argument, as it is not primarily phenomenological in nature.

Following my reading of Taylor, the transcendental argument for the existence of God could be explained as having roughly the following form:

- (1) We are essentially subjects;
- (2) It is essential to our manner of being as subjects that we perceive the world in moral terms, where “moral” encompasses all strong judgments about the good life for human beings;
- (3) It is essential to a moral outlook that it take a “hypergood perspective,” where a hypergood is understood as a good which transcends all other goods and determines our relationship to other goods. In Taylor’s usage hypergoods are “goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about” (Taylor, 1989, p. 63);
- (4) It is the nature of a hypergood that it orders and shapes other goods into a framework.

We are therefore inescapably beings whose experience is defined by a moral framework which is dominated by a hypergood. Furthermore,

- (5) It is indispensable to our moral framework that it include certain specific goods, which can be oriented to and described in differing ways.
- (6) It is the best account of these goods that they be understood as part of a theistic account. That is, once the above mentioned goods are clearly articulated, it is indispensable to our experience of them that they be described in theistic terms. The notion of a best account is one used in a technical sense by Taylor. Taylor describes this as follows:

The terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses. The terms indispensable for the latter are part of the story that makes best sense of us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes. The result of this clairvoyance yields the best account we can give at any given time, and no epistemological or metaphysical considerations of a more general kind about science or nature can justify setting this aside. The best account in the above sense trumps. (Taylor, 1989, p. 58)

Thus, using a transcendental argument structure borrowed from Merleau-Ponty, it is argued that the best account of the human self is a theistic account, and by implication therefore, that God exists.

4. Problems with the Transcendental Argument for the Existence of God (TAG)

The first and most obvious problem with TAG is that it is a transcendental argument, and this is an argument form that has long been held to have serious limitations. While there was a good deal of support in philosophical circles for such arguments in the 1960s and early 1970s, this early euphoria gave way to the cautious pessimism that is the characteristic response to transcendental arguments today. This pessimism is mostly a result of Barry Stroud's 1968 paper on transcendental arguments. Stroud pointed out that the source of the limitations of transcendental arguments lies in the fact that the transcendental argument structure rests on the existence of a "privileged class" of concepts on which thought or experience depends which "cannot be denied truly by anyone, and whose negations cannot be asserted truly by anyone." The nature of this privileged class is such that, could it be proved that a claim that a skeptic holds can never be justified on the basis of experience, for example the claim that there exists a "pre-objective world," is a member of this class, "then from the fact that what the skeptic says makes sense it would follow that those propositions are true" (Stroud, 1968, p. 254).

But Stroud points out that there is no method yet devised to prove of any particular member of the privileged class that it is a member.

More specifically, we have yet to show that those very propositions which the epistemological skeptic questions are themselves members of this class ... for any candidate *S*, proposed as a member of the privileged class, the skeptic can always very plausibly insist that it is enough to make language possible if we *believe* that *S* is true, or if it looks for all the world as if it is, but that *S* needn't actually be true. Our having this belief would enable us to give sense to what we say, but some additional justification would still have to be given for our *claim* to know that *S* is true. (Stroud, 1968, p. 255)

In addition to the general difficulties relating to transcendental arguments, there are difficulties that arise from the specific nature of the TAG. Following Taylor's "rules for a successful transcendental argument" as set out in his paper "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments" (Taylor, 1995, p. 27), there are three inter-related questions we must ask of the TAG: is each claim on which the argument is based indispensable to our moral experience? Are each of the claims apodictic? Are each of the claims based in our experience?

The first specific question we must ask is if it is necessarily the case that "the moral" really involves a special kind of experience? Certainly I would not like to dispute the claim that it is essential to our manner of being as subjects that we perceive the world in moral terms. We could however question whether

there is anything unique about this moral experience, by taking hold of the subjectivist denial that making moral judgments involves what Taylor calls “strong evaluation”—that is, denying the idea that there is “a background of distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this are of lesser value” (Taylor, 1985, p. 3). In order to defend this step in the transcendental argument we must be able to give a reason why we should treat responses of “strong evaluation” as a separate *category* of moral experience, rather than simply viewing these responses as no more than more keenly felt moral experiences of the ordinary kind.

Another issue requiring resolution by this sort of approach revolves around the point that it is far from obvious that it is essential to our experiencing life in moral terms that we take a hypergood perspective. It certainly is not obviously the case that we inevitably view the moral realm from a hypergood perspective. It is possible to doubt, as Richard Rorty does, that “we can make sense of our moral life only with something like a hypergood perspective,” and propose instead that we make sense by “simply arranging and balancing ordinary goods” (Rorty, 1994, p. 20).

There is the further problem of establishing a “best account” of our moral experience. It appears inevitable that this requires some kind of an historical account, such as what Taylor offers. But Taylor’s account has not gone unchallenged—Stephen Clark being only one example of an able philosopher who has questioned Taylor’s articulation. What would it take for such a “best account” to be apodictic, rather than merely an inference to the best explanation? A related issue is that there appears to be a worrying circularity in this kind of historiographic argument, which Alasdair MacIntyre identifies in Taylor’s usage thereof, saying:

Taylor’s historical narratives present another set of problems. His philosophical account of the modern self and the continuities of its development is presented as if deriving support from those narratives. But those narratives are interpretative, and the interpretation which informs them seems to be itself derived from that same philosophical account for which the narratives are intended to provide support. Perhaps this hermeneutic circularity is ineliminable. But we only have good reason to endorse Taylor’s interpretation of the relevant histories if we have matched its claims against those made for at least some rival interpretation of the same subject-matter, something which Taylor omits to do. (MacIntyre, 1994, p. 189)

Taylor concedes this point to MacIntyre, but contends that it carries little weight, for the circularity MacIntyre points to is due to Taylor’s historical account not having been “sufficiently” pitted against rival interpretations, and

in this sense all historiographical arguments are incomplete, for no amount of comparison can ever be considered “sufficient.” While this may be true, it does mean that it is questionable how much we should accept this kind of argument at all, for by this criterion this circularity appears always to be present in this kind of argument. Taylor’s response is perhaps of some value in the sense that it is a response to MacIntyre, who is himself fond of historiographic arguments (the arguments in *After Virtue* being a prime example) and therefore has a vested interest in affirming their value, but we need not be so easily convinced.

Another difficulty that will need to be dealt with is that, even if the TAG can show that a hypergood perspective, and therefore a theistic worldview, is an essential and inescapable part of human experience, this may not show that the *existence* of a hypergood, and further the *existence* of God, is actually indispensable to our moral experience. But it is arguable that it is essential to a theistic outlook that God exists in a manner that is detached from our experience of him.

5. Prospects for the Transcendental Argument for the Existence of God (TAG)

There are then, several difficulties to be overcome before the TAG can be considered to be a viable approach. It is not however impossible that these difficulties could be overcome, or perhaps circumvented, and I want to explore a few of those possibilities here.

The first point worth making is that there appears to be merit in exploring in detail Taylor’s hint of a response to Stroud’s criticisms, in which he claims that it is true that we cannot rely on a transcendental argument to tell us anything about the way things are, but it does, importantly, tell us about

the nature of our life as subjects. It says, for instance [in the case of Merleau-Ponty’s argument], that our experience is constituted by our sense of ourselves as embodied agents. So we are inescapably to ourselves embodied subjects. Put in other terms, we can’t effectively exercise subjectivity, and be aware of a world, without a sense of ourselves as embodied subjects; for this sense is constitutive of our awareness. (Taylor, 1995, p. 26)

Following this we might take the approach that, while the TAG does not prove the existence of God, what this type of argument does prove is that to be valid, our self understanding must be described in theistic terms.

There is some support for the undeveloped approach that Taylor points to above. Two recent papers in particular support this thesis, namely Quassim Cassam’s “Self-Directed Transcendental Arguments” and one from Stroud himself entitled “The Goal of Transcendental Arguments.” Both Cassam and

Stroud accept the weaknesses in transcendental arguments that were made clear in Stroud's 1968 paper, but both see merit in a less ambitious form of the transcendental argument. The weaknesses pointed out by Stroud occur because, as he puts it,

One thing that *has* seemed essential to the transcendental strategy is the deduction of substantive truths about the way the world is from nothing more than the conditions of the possibility of thought and experience of a world. I have questioned whether that project can succeed, or at least whether the conditions required for its success, if otherwise acceptable, would leave us with any distinctively transcendental enterprise at all ...

Put in the most schematic terms, what is problematic is that the conclusions of the most ambitious transcendental arguments without transcendental idealism are apparently meant to state how things are—that they are enduring objects, for example, or that events are related causally, or that there are persons with thoughts and feelings, and so on—and in a way that in itself says nothing about anyone's thinking or believing that things are those ways. But such conclusions about the world are to be reached transcendentially by *a priori* reflection on the conditions of our thinking and experiencing the things we do. That appears to mean that transcendental reflections start from statements like "We think or experience in such-and-such ways" or "We believe that things are so-and-so," and proceeds by necessary steps to conclusions like "Things are so-and-so." We start with what we can call psychological premisses—statements whose main verb is a psychological verb like "think" or "believe"—and somehow reach non-psychological conclusions which say simply how things are, not that people think things are a certain way. (Stroud, 1999, pp.160–161)

Cassam and Stroud, as well as Stern and others, point out that a less ambitious use of the transcendental argument structure might nonetheless reap benefits. The idea is that if we avoid following Merleau-Ponty's dictum, quoted by Charles Taylor and M. Kullman, that phenomenological reflection tells us not simply "about ourselves" but that instead its results have "transcendental implications" (Kullman and Taylor, 1966, p. 124), and simply settle for showing something important about ourselves, then transcendental arguments can be redeemed. Cassam calls this less ambitious approach the "self-directed" transcendental argument, while Stroud describes it as "modest." Cassam describes this approach as follows:

On this reading, transcendental arguments might be described as *self-directed* rather than as world-directed. Just as world-directed arguments

tell us something about the nature of the world in which our thinking and experiencing takes place, so self-directed arguments tell us something about the cognitive faculties of the thinking or knowing self. If it is a necessary condition of the possibility of a certain cognitive achievement that our cognitive faculties are thus and so, then, given the assumption that the achievement is actual, it follows that our cognitive faculties *are* thus and so. (Cassam, 1999, p. 85)

The value of such an argument would be that it fulfills an explanatory role, that is they show why it is important for us to prefer some or other understanding of the way we think about and experience the world over others. Stroud argues that the nature of the transcendental argument structure gives these “modest” transcendental arguments a “certain kind of invulnerability.”

They would be indispensable because no belief that must be present in any conception or any set of beliefs about an independent world could be abandoned consistently with our having a conception of the world at all. We would have to think of any world we could think about at all as being the way that indispensable belief says it is. That would mean that any such belief would also be invulnerable in the special sense that it could not be found to be false consistently with its being found to be held by people. (Stroud, 1999, p. 166)

Because the connections made in the argument occur solely within the realm of our thought and experience, they avoid the apparently insurmountable problem of bridging the gap between experience and world, while at the same time not forcing us into an idealist position. Nonetheless an arbitrary subjectivism is avoided, because these arguments raise the question of

how we must think of the world, and whether we must think of the non-psychological world in certain ways, in order even to think of there being persons in the world with thoughts and beliefs with the determinate contents we think of them as having. (Stroud, 1999, p. 170)

Not only is there hope for transcendental arguments as a whole, but there may also be hope here for the difficulties specific to the TAG. Many of the issues raised above revolve around the problem of showing each step to be, in Taylor’s term, “apodictic.” But the questions raised may not, simply by their being raised, suffice as defeaters. As Stroud puts it,

This is not to say that a statement expressing a necessary condition of the possibility of thought or experience could not even be thought to be false. Of course it could, if we did not know that it enjoyed that special standing.

It is also possible for us to ask, or wonder, whether a certain thing is true, even though its truth is (unknown to us) a necessary condition of thought, and hence of our asking, or thinking, anything. (Stroud, 1999, p. 159)

The “modest” or “self-directed” transcendental argument cannot by definition show that God exists, but at best that it is the “Best Account” (in Taylor’s term) of our experience that it be understood in theistic terms. While this is a weaker conclusion, it is certainly not powerless. In part the objections raised against the transcendental argument by Stroud and others are raised on behalf of the mythical “skeptic,” who will accept nothing that cannot be conclusively proven, no matter how intuitively obvious. The religious skeptic, on the other hand, is neither mythical nor as hard to convince, for there are some things that are simply accepted. In this sense, the modest Transcendental Argument for the Existence of God may well prove to have real power, in that it serves as a kind of transcendental inference to the best explanation.

Certainly, if its difficulties could be overcome, the TAG offers an interesting approach to the questions of philosophy of religion. The prospect of an argument that shows the attributes of God through inescapable human experience can only be a stimulant for philosophy of religion. And as Taylor points out, the transcendental argument is an enigmatic thing. In his words “[a] valid transcendental argument is indubitable; yet it is hard to know when you have one, at least with an interesting conclusion. But then that appears to be true of most arguments in philosophy” (Taylor, 1995, p. 33).

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