Book Section:

Silencing the Sceptic? The Prospects for Transcendental Arguments in Practical Philosophy

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the prospects of using transcendental arguments against scepticism in practical philosophy, focusing especially on Stroud's classic objections from 1968, and his claim that some form of idealism may be required in order to make them work. This might suggest one way in which such arguments are perhaps more effective in the practical case than the theoretical one, because anti-realism in ethics is less revisionary than in theoretical philosophy. But even in practical philosophy, people have often wanted to be more ambitious than this, where they have particularly appealed to retorsive transcendental arguments in order to "silence the sceptic". I argue, however, that such arguments either collapse into deductive transcendental arguments, or just make the sceptical position harder to rebut, in both the theoretical and practical cases. There is thus little to be gained from this strategy of dealing with scepticism.

Ever since Barry Stroud's classic 1968 article on transcendental arguments (Stroud 1968), the status of such argument in theoretical philosophy has remained rather embattled: though arguments of this sort continue to be produced, there is a sense that perhaps they flatter to deceive, and cannot really do the job that is required of them. On the other hand, it is often felt that transcendental arguments in practical philosophy are more promising, and more likely to succeed where theoretical transcendental arguments have failed.

I wish to suggest that there is one cogent ground for this optimism that the proponent of the practical transcendental argument is entitled to appeal to – namely that in this area, some sort of anti-realism or idealism is plausible, which makes it easier for the transcendental argument to achieve its goal. However, proponents of practical transcendental arguments have not always based their optimism on this consideration, and indeed have tried to use transcendental

arguments to defend realism in ethics. But this then raises the question if there is any reason to think non-idealist practical transcendental argument are likely to be any more successful than their theoretical cousins. Proponents of such arguments have often suggested there is greater reason for optimism here, on the grounds that they can somehow "silence the sceptic" by forcing her to assume whatever it is she doubts or denies in what is called a "retorsive" manner, as it turns the sceptic's doubt back on herself; and this strategy is said to be particularly effective in practical philosophy.

By contrast, my aim in this paper is to suggest we have no such reason for optimism. I will begin by distinguishing these retorsive arguments from deductive transcendental arguments, and I will then consider how Stroud's challenge applies to each. I will then argue that in fact retorsive transcendental arguments collapse back into deductive transcendental arguments, so that it is really only in the latter form that the sceptic can be addressed, in a way that will have to be suitably modest.

1. Two types of transcendental argument: deductive and retorsive

I want to begin by distinguishing between two ways in which transcendental arguments have been presented, as this will help us better assess the prospects of this form of argument in relation to scepticism.

We can start by asking: what makes something a distinctively transcendental argument? I would say that it must contain a *transcendental claim*, which states that something is a necessary condition for the possibility of something else, where the necessity in question is less than logical and more than empirical.

Now, the first and perhaps most straightforward way a transcendental claim can be used against a sceptic is in a deductive argument, where it forms the second premise, and where the first premise is something the sceptic accepts, from which the transcendental claim is used to derive a conclusion which the sceptic doubts or rejects, thus giving us a transcendental argument of this form:

1. p (e.g. there is thought, consciousness or a way things appear)
2. q is a necessary condition for the possibility of p (where q is e.g. an external world, or other minds)

3. Therefore q

Clearly, at first sight, there are attractions to an anti-sceptical argument of this sort. First, they are meant to begin from premises that sceptic will accept, and therefore defeat the sceptic on her own terms. Second, they are deductive arguments, and so provide us with more certainty than inductive or abductive arguments. Third, they do not merely rebut the sceptic by questioning the sceptic's argument, but actually refute her, by proving what the sceptic doubts or questions. However, of course, transcendental arguments of this kind suffer from well-known problems, which I will come back to in the next section.

Before I do so, let me first bring out how these deductive transcendental aerguments have been distinguished from what have been called "retorsive transcendental arguments" (to use terminology adopted by Gaston Isaye, Christian Illies, and John Finnis amongst other). The idea here is not to use the transcendental claim to show that the conclusion is true in a deductive manner, but rather to show that the sceptic's position is self-undermining in some way, as involving some sort of contradiction, for in doubting p, the sceptic is at one and the same time committed to the truth of p, as that commitment is a necessary condition for the possibility of doubt; and from the self-contradictoriness of doubting p its truth is then supposed to be established.

Here are some passages to this effect, taken first from Finnis, then from Illies, Karl-Otto Apel and Wolfgang Kuhlmann:

> Hence the work to be done by a retorsive argument exploiting operational self-refutation consists in drawing out the "implicit commitments" of the interlocutor, that is, the propositions entailed by "someone is asserting that….", that is, by the facts given in and by the interlocutor's statement. (Finnis 1977: 67)

> Essentially, this type of argument is designed to show that some judgement "r" is true because it cannot be rejected rationally. It does so by showing that any scepticism about r inevitably presupposes the truth of r by the implications of the very act or performance of sceptically regarding it. Thus, scepticism about the truth of r leads to a self-

contradiction or inconsistency between what is *expressively* stated by the sceptic (the expressed judgement is "not-r") and what is *implicitly* expressed by his act of assertion (the implied judgement is "r"). Affirming r also presupposes the truth of r by the implications of it being a rational act. The affirmative judgement can therefore consistently be raised since the same truth is affirmed expressively and implicitly. Given that the original assumption can only be true or false, it follows that it must be true, since it is self-contradictory to judge it as false. (Illies 2002: 45)

Everyone, even if he merely *acts* in a *meaningful* manner – for example takes a decision in the face of an alternative and claims to understand himself – already implicitly presupposes the logical and moral preconditions for critical communication. (Apel 1980: 269)

Necessary presuppositions of meaningful argumentation (discourse) obviously must be secure against every argument, for if one were to argue against them, then the arguments would undermine themselves. (Kuhlmann 2016: 243)

Such arguments have been called "retorsive" from the Latin "retorquere", meaning to twist or bend back, referring to the way in which such arguments "turn back" the sceptic's own position against her. Of course, in some sense even the deductive transcendental arguments do this, as they are meant to start from a premise the sceptic accepts and then establish what she doubts on this basis. But retorsive transcendental arguments are meant to do more "bending back" than this, as they are meant to show the sceptic's position is self-contradictory and undermines itself, such that it cannot even be coherently articulated.

We thus seem to have two ways of using transcendental arguments, which are distinct from one another. I now want to consider if either way is to be preferred over the other, when it comes to dealing with familiar challenges to transcendental arguments – particularly Stroud's well-known objection.

2. Stroud's objection to transcendental arguments

In his famous 1968 paper, Stroud cast doubt on transcendental arguments from which they have struggled to recover ever since.

The nerve of Stroud's critique, as I understand it, is his attack on the transcendental claim which needs to play a role in both types of transcendental argument, namely that q is a necessary condition for the possibility of p, where Stroud argues that the sceptic can always plausibly weaken this claim to: believing q, or judging q, or it appearing that q is a necessary condition for p, from which q itself does not follow without some further appeal to verificationism or idealism – which are both objectionable positions in themselves, and anyway would render the transcendental argument redundant, as they contain enough to refute scepticism on their own. Stroud put the key move as follows:

> the sceptic can always very plausibly insist that it is enough [that] we *believe* that [q] is true, or [that] it looks for all the world as if it is, but that [q] needn't actually be true. (Stroud 1968: 24)

It is worth pausing, however, to ask two questions:

(a) how plausible is the "weakening move" to believing q etc, rather than q?

(b) does it matter which form of transcendental argument we are talking about – deductive or retorsive?

Let me begin by considering (a), the plausibility of the "weakening move".

In his 1968 paper, Stroud does not say much to justify this, and just gives two examples of transcendental arguments where it might apply (one by Strawson and one by Shoemaker): but this could perhaps seem a poor inductive base on which to condemn a whole class of arguments. Just because the weakening move might "very plausibly" apply to these examples, this would not seem to establish that it can be applied to transcendental arguments more generally, unless more is said.

However, Stroud does offer a more general argument elsewhere, in Stroud 1994. Here he suggests that to claim that some fact about the world is a necessary condition for the possibility of some other fact, we would need to "find, and cross, a bridge of necessity from the one to the other. That would be a truly remarkable feat, and some convincing explanation would surely be needed of how the whole thing is possible" (Stroud 1994: 159). So, the sceptic can "very

plausibly insist" that q itself is not needed to make p possible, because she can question our confidence about the modal claim involved, forcing us to weaken it in the light of reasonable doubts we might have about such claims. Let me call this Stroud's modal argument for weakening.

How cogent is it, and does it apply more to one kind of transcendental argument than the other? First of all, in relation to the modal argument itself, it could be questioned using counter-examples. So take the Cogito, conceived of as a deductive transcendental argument:

1. I think
2. Existence is a necessary condition for the possibility of thinking
3. Therefore, I exist

Could the sceptic "very plausibly" weaken the second premise to "appearing to me that I exist" or "believing I am existing" as the necessary condition? In fact, this doesn't seem plausible at all or even coherent, as it is not clear how it could seem to me that I exist without already existing, while believing is itself a form of thinking, so cannot be a condition for the latter. (Of course, as Lichtenberg and others have argued, one might think the Cogito could be weakened in other ways: e.g. that the move from 2 to 3 does not work, as all 2 establishes is that something exists, not necessarily an I or subject – but that is a different issue.)

Second, at a more general level, there may also be a problem with Stroud's objection. I have argued elsewhere (cf. Stern 2007) that it isn't so strong, as it relies on the idea that modal claims are always easier to establish in relation to how we must think than how the world must be, as this is what Stroud uses to say that there is some special "bridge of necessity" that is required in the latter case that is not required in the former, which is why the transcendental claim can always be "weakened". But why think this is so? The thought seems to rely on an implausible Cartesianism about the structure of our beliefs and experiences as against our knowledge of the external world, as if we have privileged access to the modal structure of the former but not the latter.

But still, as I have also suggested previously (Stern 2007), one could claim there is a difficulty here which Stroud is right to pick up on: Namely, that the dialectic with the sceptic makes it very unlikely that the transcendental claim can be used to do useful work: For, suppose you doubt the existence of the external

world, because you have your doubts about perception as a source of knowledge; it then seems highly unlikely that you will be won round by a modal claim of the sort embodied in the transcendental claim. For, if you have doubts about perception, surely you will have even more doubts about such claims? So we either need to refute the sceptic sooner at the level of perception, or the transcendental argument will come too late.

So, it appears, albeit for reasons different from the ones offered by Stroud, the weakening move seems hard to resist. It may therefore be wiser to consider instead if it can somehow be accommodated in an adequate response to scepticism, either by deductive transcendental arguments or retorsive transcendental arguments or both. Let me consider each in turn.

3. Deductive transcendental arguments and practical scepticism

When it comes to deductive transcendental arguments, various sort of so-called "modest transcendental arguments" have been proposed, which are claimed to have some value against the sceptic, which do not take a retorsive form. So, for example, it is argued that by establishing that some belief is a necessary condition for a large number of our other beliefs, that make the first belief justified on coherentist grounds, in a way that is compatible with Stroud's weakening move. But this is no longer a simple deductive transcendental argument, as it operates by adding an appeal to a theory of justification into the argument, rather than relying just on the transcendental claim itself to do the work: The transcendental argument establishes that our network of beliefs has a certain structure, but the basis on which we take those beliefs to be justified is the coherentist principle, that one is entitled to believe p if doing so renders your belief-system more coherent. (For further discussion of this "modest" approach, see Stern 2000.)

So could there be a deductive transcendental argument that would work on its own against the sceptic, while accommodating Stroud's weakening move? Stroud thought this could not work in the theoretical case, as it would then be about what we must believe or how things must appear to us – and we can't get from there to claims about the world, without verificationism or idealism, which many would find as problematic as scepticism itself. But perhaps in the case of

practical philosophy, this is less of a worry: For after all, many people are anti-realists or idealists or constructivists in ethics, and indeed take this to be the common-sense view, rather than a revisionary one. If so, then there may be nothing wrong in ethics with combining a transcendental argument with idealism, to accommodate Stroud's criticism.

I think we can see how this option might work by looking at Christine Korsgaard's attempt to offer a transcendental argument for the value of humanity, which I have also discussed elsewhere (Stern 2011), so will be brief here. The transcendental argument that Korsgaard proposes is modelled on a position which she finds in Kant and which she outlines as follows:

> [Kant] started from the fact that when we make a choice we must regard its object as good. His point is the one I have been making—that being human we must endorse our impulses before we can act on them. He asked what it is that makes these objects good, and, rejecting one form of realism, he decided that the goodness was not in the objects themselves. Were it not for our desires and inclinations—and for the various physiological, psychological, and social conditions which gave rise to those desires and inclinations—we would not find their objects good. Kant saw that we take things to be important because they are important to us—and he concluded that we must therefore take ourselves to be important. In this way, the value of humanity itself is implicit in every human choice. If complete normative scepticism is to be avoided—if there is such a thing as a reason for action—then humanity, as the source of all reasons and values, must be valued for its own sake. (Korsgaard 1996: 122)

This argument can be laid out as follows:

(1) To rationally choose to do *X*, you must regard doing *X* as good.

(2) You cannot regard doing *X* as good in itself, but can only regard doing *X* as good because it satisfies your needs, desires, inclinations, etc.

(3) You cannot regard your desiring or needing to do *X* as making it good unless you regard yourself as valuable.

(4) Therefore, you must regard yourself as valuable, if you are to make any rational choice.

Consider this example. To rationally choose to eat this piece of chocolate cake, I must think that eating the cake is good in some way. How can I regard it as good? It seems implausible to say that eating the cake is good in itself, of intrinsic value. It also seems implausible to say that it is good just because it satisfies a desire as such: for even if I was bulimic it might do that, but still not be regarded as good. A third suggestion, then, is that it can be seen as good because it is good for me, as satisfying a genuine need or desire of mine. But if I think this is what makes eating the piece of cake good, I must value myself, as otherwise I could not hold that satisfying me is sufficient to make something good enough for it to be rational for me to choose to do it; so I must regard myself as valuable.

There are various issues that might arise with this argument. But focusing just on the Stroudian worry: Because this is an argument about value, there may be less concern that the conclusion is merely about how you must *regard yourself* as valuable, rather than *being* valuable in some more realist sense, as such anti-realism is more generally acceptable in ethics than in other areas. Thus, in this sense, we may think that transcendental arguments are more likely to be successful in practical philosophy than in theoretical philosophy, as the Stroudian weakening move can be taken on board with much less damage being done to our prior expectations concerning what we want a transcendental arguments to accomplish.

When it comes to deductive transcendental arguments, therefore, we seem to have two options in the face of Stroud's challenge:

(a) adopt a modest transcendental argument, that supplements the transcendental argument in some way with a further theory of justification

(b) focus on the practical case, where some form of anti-realism is acceptable

Thus, in this sense, we may think that transcendental arguments are more likely to be successful in practical philosophy than in theoretical philosophy, as the Stroudian weakening move can be taken on board with much less damage being done to our prior expectations concerning what we want a transcendental argument to accomplish, as here we are not interested in defending a realist point of view.

4. Retorsive transcendental arguments and scepticism

However, even in the practical case, there are those who have thought we can do better, so this use of a deductive transcendental argument within an anti-realist context will not satisfy them. The question is, then, can we be more ambitious than this?

It has been argued that we *can* perhaps do better, by making use of retorsive rather than deductive transcendental arguments. For, using arguments of this retorsive kind, even if we allow Stroud his weakening move, it may seem we can still convict the sceptic of having contradictory beliefs, and from that conclusions satisfactory to the realist may still appear to follow. Optimism of this sort has been expressed by Finnis and Illies, and others. Without going into all the details of their arguments, I nonetheless want to question their optimism, essentially by proposing a dilemma for this form of transcendental argument:

(i) either arguments of this retorsive form collapse into deductive transcendental arguments, in which case they are no better off

(ii) or they do not, but then they have to abandon their use of a transcendental claim at all, and so cease to be transcendental arguments

The argument for this is a follows.

As we have seen, retorsive transcendental arguments are meant to be distinct from deductive transcendental arguments, in the sense of establishing that the sceptic must fall into self-contradiction. However, there are ways of convicting someone of self-contradiction that do not involve a transcendental claim, and so do not constitute a transcendental argument at all. For example, to deny the possibility of metaphysics is to make a metaphysical claim, so scepticism about metaphysics is self-contradictory. This may be a good way to refute metaphysical scepticism, but there does not seem to be anything *transcendental* about it, as it is not clear there is any *transcendental claim* involved or required. That is, it does not seem to hinge on the idea that making a metaphysical assertion is some sort of transcendental condition for denying metaphysics, but rather they turn out to be *one and the same thing*: to deny metaphysics *just is to do* metaphysics, as it is to purport to say something about the fundamental nature of the world, which thus amounts to doing metaphysics.

And this seems true of many arguments against the sceptic that involve appeals to contradiction. For example, to completely doubt your own reason just is to reason, so you cannot do the former without self-contradiction, as to do the one just is to do the other. Or: to say all meaningful statements must be empirically verifiable is to make a statement that it not itself empirically verifiable, so verificationism is a self-contradictory position. However, as these arguments from self-contradiction do not employ any transcendental claims, I do not think we should count them as transcendental arguments.

So, for the retorsive approach to constitute a *transcendental argument*, it must do more that convict the sceptic of self-contradiction – it must do so on the basis of using a *transcendental claim.* So, to take a simple example of such an argument used against the sceptic who claims to doubt we have free will:

1. To doubt is to take oneself to operate in the "space of reasons" rather than the realm of causes
2. One cannot take oneself to operate in the space of reasons unless take oneself to possess free will
3. Therefore, to doubt is to take oneself to possess free will
4. Therefore, to doubt one has free will is to contradict oneself

Here, then, we have a transcendental argument that uses a transcendental claim (premise 2) to convict the sceptic of self-contradiction, and so have what appears to be a retorsive transcendental argument. In response, it seems, the sceptic can either give up doubting she is free, in which case she does not trouble us as we have hereby "silenced" her; or she can accept that her position is internally inconsistent, and so we can reject it.

However, there is a difficulty that then seems to emerge from this argument: namely, that it seems to establish the impossibility of doubts about freedom, without establishing that the doubting person actually *is* free – just that she cannot deny she is without contradicting herself by being committed to the opposite belief. But arguably this possibility itself amounts to a serious sceptical concern, as it seems to leave open the troubling possibility that a being could be unfree without being able to become conscious of this fact, as bringing it into consciousness would involve it in a self-contradiction, for the reasons outlined above.

I think this sort of worry is behind the following passage from Thomas Nagel, where he is responding to Putnam's famous refutation of brain-in-a-vat scepticism:

> Second, although the argument doesn't work it wouldn't refute skepticism if it did. If I accept the argument, I must conclude that a brain in a vat can't think truly that it is a brain in a vat, even though others can think this about it. What follows? Only that I can't express my skepticism by saying, "Perhaps I'm a brain in a vat." Instead I must say, "Perhaps I can't even *think* the truth about what I am, because I lack the necessary concepts and my circumstances make it impossible for me to acquire them!" If this doesn't qualify as skepticism, I don't know what does. (Nagel 1986: 73)

A similar sort of worry would seem to apply to the retorsive argument for free will: A being cannot express its scepticism or think that it is unfree, because to do so it must take itself to be free – but it seems that instead it could say "Perhaps I can't even *think* I am unfree, because to think this is to violate certain conditions on so thinking", where it does not seem to follow from this that the limits on my thinking will reflect the nature of the world. We have silenced the sceptic, but in a way that would seem to intensify the troublesomeness of her position, not to assuage it.

Now, an obvious response here is to say we need to look more closely at what it is that really *drives* the sceptic into self-contradiction, where one objection to what has been said could be that we are talking about *rational commitments* that the sceptic must accept, where this is what forces them into the self-contradictory position at the end: This is not just a psychological pressure that pushes the sceptic to hold two competing beliefs, but a strongly normative one, governed by the possession conditions for certain concepts, or the linguistic conditions for certain utterances.

Nonetheless, it is not clear this first response can be sufficient. For, the sceptic could allow that to think of oneself as doubting p, one must see oneself as in the space of reasons not merely causes, as a condition of seeing one's attitude to p as that of doubt: But still, by itself this does no more than tell us how our various concepts are structured, which may not reflect the world, unless we already presuppose verificationism or idealism, as Stroud suggested. Likewise,

the norms governing meaning or speech may equally fail to reflect how things are.

We could, however, offer a more robust response: Namely, we could claim that the reason the sceptic falls into self-contradiction is that doubt requires the *actual ability* to operate in the space of reasons, which in turns requires actual freedom, so that no gap between the world and our conceptual scheme can be opened up.

But at this point, the retorsive transcendental argument would seem to have collapsed into a deductive transcendental argument, for now it would seem that convicting the sceptic of self-contradiction does not really need to play a role: instead, we can just re-formulate the argument as a deductive transcendental argument as follows:

1. You doubt that you are free
2. A necessary condition for doubt is operating in the space of reasons
3. A necessary condition for operating in the space of reasons is that you are free
4. Therefore, you are free

Here, the claim that the sceptic's position is self-contradictory seems to do no real work, as what establishes the conclusion is just the deductive transcendental argument.

It then seems that the only way to avoid this fate is to abandon the transcendental claim that plays a role in such arguments, and just argue straightforwardly for a contradiction in the sceptic's position, along the lines of the argument for the possibility of metaphysics sketched above. But, even if such an argument could be found, we would of course no longer have a transcendental argument of any sort – which was the second horn of the dilemma we started with in this section.

The only other option I can see, is to bring in the coherentist considerations we also mentioned earlier in relation to modest deductive transcendental arguments: namely, what the retorsive argument shows is that giving up a belief would greatly reduce the coherence of our belief-system, which gives us reason to hold it. This does not refute the sceptic in any strong sense, but does provide warrant for our belief provided we take coherence to be a test

for truth. However, while I would be sympathetic to this response, it would seem to greatly reduce the ambitions of the retorsive approach, and bring it into line with the modest approach sketched previously.

Finally, it might be said that I am being too conservative in my conception of retorsive transcendental arguments by assuming that they should be judged by the criteria of theoretical philosophy, but where it could be suggested that the whole point of the use of such retorsive arguments is within a context where *practical reason* has been given a priority over *theoretical reason*, which amounts to the claim that if we must make certain assumptions as agents, this should be sufficient to satisfy us. Thus, as people sometimes say of Kant's arguments for freedom, if he can establish that freedom is something we must assume from "the practical standpoint" or "from the practical point of view", it is only a hankering for something more theoretically robust than this that can leave one dissatisfied, where "the priority of practical reason" over theoretical reason is meant to show this is a mistake.

An approach of this sort can be found in the following passage from Henry Allison:

> But while Kant does not preclude such a state of affairs [that our belief in freedom is illusory] on theoretical grounds, he does deny the *practical* possibility of accepting any such thesis on the grounds that it is not a thought on which one can deliberate or act. To take oneself as a rational agent *is* to assume that one's reason has a practical application or, equivalently, that one has a will. Moreover, one cannot assume this without already presupposing the idea of freedom, which is why one can act, or take oneself to act, only under this idea. It constitutes, as it were, the form of thought of oneself as a rational agent. (Allison 1997: 92)

However, this response seems to me to just raise the same problems but at a higher level: If theoretical reason leaves it open that free will could be an illusion, the fact that I must nonetheless assume that I am free as a precondition of seeing myself as a rational agent, seems the worst kind of sceptical nightmare: Either there is some argument from my rational agency to my freedom that will also satisfy the norms of theoretical reason, in which case there is no special or peculiar priority for practical reason here; or there is not, in which case if

practical reason is nonetheless somehow forcing me to accept it, then I think we should view the priority thesis in this form with great dismay, and so do not think the proponent of a retorsive transcendental argument should take this path in their defense. (For an alternative view of the priority thesis, see Stern 2016).

5. Conclusion

Let me briefly finish with a passage from the work of C. S. Peirce, where he reflects on his relation to Kant:

> I do not admit that indispensability is any ground of belief. It may be indispensible that I should have $500 in the bank—because I have given checks to that amount. But I have never found that the indispensability directly affected my balance, in the least… when we discuss a vexed question, we hope that there is some ascertainable truth about it, and that the discussion is not to go on forever and to no purpose. A transcendentalist would claim that it is an indispensible "presupposition" that there is an ascertainable true answer to every intelligible question. I used to talk like that, myself; for when I was a babe in philosophy my bottle was filled from the udders of Kant. But by this time I have come to want something more substantial. (Peirce 1902 in Peirce 1931-60, vol 2 para 113)

Ironically enough, within the contemporary German tradition of using transcendental arguments in practical philosophy pioneered by Apel, Kuhlmann and others, Peirce is something of a hero and inspiration. However, as I think the quotation above suggests, Peirce seems to have shared some of the misgivings that I have expressed in this paper: that is, his concern is that arguments from indispensability of the retorsive kind, which show that we must base our thinking or inquiries on presuppositions, are not enough to establish the truth of those presuppositions, and so are not sufficient to warrant belief in them, but rather just their use as regulative ideas or "intellectual hopes". It seems clear that to try to do more, and argue from this indispensability to some sort of certainty regarding the truth of the belief, simply because we find we must assume it, is to go too far and make the mistake of one of those "transcendental apothecaries"

who erroneously call for "a quantity of big admissions, as indispensible Voraussetzungen of logic" (Peirce 1902: 2.113). This does not mean that a modest form of retorsive transcendental argument, like a modest form of deductive transcendental argument, turns out to be valueless: for these presupposition arguments can show that if the sceptic, like us, wishes to engage in certain kinds of investigation and inquiry, she must accept certain positions as a starting point just as we must. But we should not fool ourselves into thinking (Peirce would argue) that we thereby get a kind of certainty regarding the truth of those presuppositions that otherwise we would be lacking.

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