**Stroud, Hegel, Heidegger: a Transcendental Argument**

**Abstract:** This paper presents an original, ambitious, truth-directed transcendental argument for the existence of an ‘external world’. It begins with a double-headed starting-point: Stroud’s own remarks on the necessary conditions of language in general, and Hegel’s critique of the ‘fear of error’. The paper argues that the sceptical challenge requires a particular critical concept of thought as that which may diverge from reality, and that this concept is possible only through reflection on situations of error, in which how things are thought (or experienced) to be diverges from how things really are with independent items in an objective world. The existence of such a world is therefore a necessary condition of the possibility of scepticism: such scepticism is therefore false. I defend the argument against objections from Stroud’s sceptic and others. Drawing on Heidegger, the paper concludes by indicating that the chain of necessary conditions includes practical engagement with the world, and that transcendental arguments have a significant future.

**Key words:** Transcendental argument; scepticism; skepticism; external world; Stroud; Hegel; Heidegger; epistemology; metaphysics; necessary conditions; the possibility of language; the possibility of error.

**1 Introduction**

The history of transcendental arguments (henceforth ‘TAs’) against scepticism about the existence of an ‘external world’[[1]](#footnote-2) is long and rich, but of debatable success. In the wake of Barry Stroud’s seminal paper on TAs (Stroud 1968) and its successors (see the papers collected in Stroud 2000a) there has grown a consensus that ‘ambitious’ TAs, those that aim to establish a ‘bridge of necessity’ between our thought or experience and truths about the world beyond, fail, and solace must be taken in more modest responses to the sceptic[[2]](#footnote-3). There is however a philosophical cast of mind for which such responses - such as establishing that we must *believe* there to be an external world, or that we could not come to see ourselves as mistaken in this belief, or that this belief maximises the consistency of our belief system – are deeply unsatisfying: they fail to provide an effective response to scepticism and to Kant’s scandal ‘That the existence of things outside us … must be accepted merely on *faith*, and that if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof’ (Kant 1965, Bxl). This paper attempts to avoid this ‘wimpy disappointment’ (Brueckner 2010, 110) by presenting a new ambitious TA drawn from resources in Stroud himself and Hegel. Heidegger then provides hints for further development.

The basic structure of an ambitious, truth-directed TA is this: begin from a starting point that the sceptic must accept, trace the necessary conditions of the possibility of the starting point, then show that these conditions include the truth of the claim challenged by the sceptic[[3]](#footnote-4). Beyond this basic structure there is a wide range of TAs, with different starting points, different arguments concerning their necessary conditions and different conclusions. This paper takes as its target the claim that the thought or proposition that there is an external world may be false[[4]](#footnote-5), and aims to show that the truth of that thought or proposition is a necessary condition of the possibility of the sceptical claim itself.

After assessing the dilemma posed by Stroud for ambitious TAs, I identify for the new TA a general and a specific starting point, drawn from Stroud and Hegel respectively, both of which must be accepted by the sceptic. I then argue that the sceptical challenge can have meaning only if it is false, and that there is an external world containing 'things outside us'. In addition to dealing with objections to the argument, the paper uses ideas from Heidegger to indicate further directions in which the argument may be pursued.

If successful, the argument will clearly justify belief in the existence of an external world and thereby obviate the need for recourse to the approaches of Wittgenstein (Private Language Argument and 'hinge propositions')[[5]](#footnote-6), Moorean 'common sense', contextualists (e.g. DeRose 1995), semantic relativists (e.g. Unger 1984), semantic and epistemic externalists (e.g. Putnam 1981, Burge 1979), and others, some of whom may be interpreted as offering TAs of their own[[6]](#footnote-7). Furthermore, the paper is in the tradition of those which separate out the possibility of TAs from the Kantian context of transcendental idealism (cf. Strawson 1966, Stroud 1994, Stern 2000, Westphal 2004).

**2 Stroud’s Dilemma**

Stroud argues that an adequate TA would need to show that the propositions that the sceptic questions are members of a ‘privileged class’ (henceforth PC) of propositions ‘which must be true in order for there to be any language’ (Stroud 1968, 21-23). But for any attempt to show that such a proposition ‘S’ is a member of the PC Stroud famously argues that ‘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’ (24)[[7]](#footnote-8). This ‘deflationary challenge’ (Brueckner 2010, 109) then faces the TA proponent with a dilemma: either the TA requires the support of the verification principle, in which case the TA itself is redundant as the verification principle will do the anti-sceptical work on its own, or the TA establishes at most a conclusion about how we must *believe* things to be (e.g. that there is an external world of material objects) and not a conclusion about how things actually *are.* In subsequent papers Stroud generalises his critique thus: ‘The truth of something does not follow from everyone in the world’s believing it, even fully reasonably believing it, or their being completely unable to avoid believing it’ (Stroud 1999, 196). Stroud’s critical achievement is to show that the ambitious TAs of Shoemaker, Strawson (in *Individuals* and in *The Bounds of Sense*) and Davidson cannot succeed in crossing a ‘bridge of necessity’ between the ‘psychological facts’ from which the proofs begin and ‘truths about the world’ (1994, 159; also 2000b, 210-211). The TAs succeed at most in establishing how we must think things to be, and can move to valid conclusions about how things are only by relying on principles (the verification principle, Strawson’s ‘principle of significance’ or the strong version of Davidson’s conditions for successful interpretation) which are themselves questionable, and if valid would in any case render the TAs themselves irrelevant. At most then we must ‘be content to follow the advice of E.M.Forster’s motto: “only connect”. And the connections now are only within our thought’ (1994, 164).

Stroud never completely excludes the possibility of an ambitious TA. He states his grounds for pessimism, and calls for a ‘convincing explanation ... of how the whole thing is possible’ (1994, 159), but in principle the logical space remains open (cf Brueckner, 2010 Chapter 6)[[8]](#footnote-9). Indeed it is in Stroud’s own comments about what is required for a successful ambitious TA that we find our initial starting point.

**3 Beginning with Stroud: The Necessary Conditions of Language in General**

Stroud introduces his ‘privileged class’ of propositions as propositions which must be true in order for there to be any language and which consequently cannot be truly denied: for example ‘There is some language’. If we can show that the propositions which the sceptic claims can never be adequately justified are members of this class, then from the fact that what the sceptic says makes sense, Stroud argues that it would follow that those propositions are true. Can we make any interesting headway here, or must we accept the pessimistic claim that talk about ‘language in general’ is just ‘so vague that there seems to be no convincing way deciding what it covers and what it excludes’ (Stroud 1968, 23-24 )? As a first step, it would seem that any language must have at least some terms which relate to something other than language itself. Statements must be statements *that* something or other: they must have some specific content. Similarly, Stroud notes that ‘to believe is to believe *that* something or other is so’ (Stroud 1999, 179).

It seems clear that without some such relation then linguistic terms could have no meaning, with the consequence that the sceptical challenge itself would itself be meaningless[[9]](#footnote-10). The corresponding parallel can be drawn for the thoughts expressed in language: they must be thoughts *that* something or other and possess a specific content which again requires a relationship to something other than thought itself. Thus I may claim that I am sitting at a desk, or that there exists nothing but a fleeting series of experiences, or that unicorns are mythological creatures. But in order for a thought or statement to be about something in this way, there must be some kind of relationship between the thought or statement and what it is about. That is, in order to *be* a particular thought or statement, the thought or statement must relate to something beyond itself. To do this in a particular way, and so to be a particular thought, the thoughts must have a particular relationship with what is beyond it. Let us call this ‘something other’, this provider of content, an ‘extra-conceptual realm’ (henceforth ‘ECR’). Furthermore, insofar as a thought is structured (in that it comprises certain components, which can also be components of other thoughts) we can say that each component concept must be linked with a realm beyond itself in a way which differentiates it from other concepts. These links may be with other thoughts or statements (the sentential connectives, for example), or with other concepts (a unicorn is a fabled horse-like creature with a horn on its head), or more directly with features about which such thoughts, composed of such concepts, are. We, and the sceptic, have to accept that thoughts and concepts must be somehow linked with something other than thoughts or concepts. Otherwise they would not be thoughts or concepts at all - there would be nothing for them to be 'about' - and the sceptical challenge would have neither content nor meaning[[10]](#footnote-11).

To ease the discussion which follows, I will label this link between thoughts, their component concepts, and the ECR a ‘semantic’ link (often using scare quotes). I will also use the term ‘meaning’ when speaking of the content of concepts. This both parallels the relationship between propositions, words and the ECR - just as words are meaningless without a link with a realm ‘beyond them’, so concepts lack content without a link with an ECR - and is less cumbersome than ‘content-providing link’. Nothing hangs on this issue.

The following proposition therefore seems to express a necessary condition of thought and language in general:

**(A): Any thought or statement requires the existence of concepts which are differentially linked with something beyond the concepts themselves: an extra-conceptual realm (ECR).**

At this stage the notion of an ECR has no further specification and carries no specific ontological commitments. It cannot be taken as equivalent to the notion of an ‘external world’ at stake in discussions of scepticism, but is rather a provider of conceptual or semantic content in the manner described above. At this stage in the argument the only ontological feature of the ECR is to be something other than the concepts, thoughts and propositions in relation with which it provides their content and meaning: other candidates for the ECR might include complexes of sense-data, Lockean ideas and Cartesian *cogitationes*.

Furthermore, the sceptic cannot deny the existence of an ECR altogether, as the sceptical challenge itself would then be rendered meaningless and be justifiably ignored. Nor is this a case of meaningful language requiring that we merely *believe* that there exists such an ECR: if *in* *fact* there were no content-providing ECR, even one consisting entirely of ‘internal’ items such as sense-data, then our thoughts and statements would have no meaning, and we would have no meaningful beliefs at all. This implies an attenuated realism concerning the existence of an ECR, but one that falls far short of the realism about the existence of ordinary objects in an external world.

Moreover, none of this requires a commitment to a particular semantic theory or foundational theory of meaning. We do not have to choose between externalist theories, language games embedded in forms of life, or even Lockean ideas theory. Any theory will do at this stage as long as it provides for the semantic link between concepts and an ECR. The current argument is thus independent of the attempts to use semantic and/or content externalism against the sceptic[[11]](#footnote-12) Nor does it rule out a 'non-referential' Wittgensteinian approach to language: the argument merely requires that, however it is established (e.g. through linguistic practices embedded in forms of life), there must be a link between language/thought, and something beyond.

We have now reached a conclusion about a ‘world beyond’ thought (Stroud 1994, 164), even if we can say nothing as yet about its character or whether it is the kind of ‘external world', knowledge of whose existence the sceptic seeks to challenge.

Nevertheless, if all we can come up with as a necessary condition of meaningful language or thought in general is the existence of this non-specific ECR it may seem to justify Stroud’s pessimism. In order to gain anti-sceptical traction we need to apply the very general conclusions here to a specific starting point identified by Hegel and crucial to the sceptical challenge.

**4 Beginning with Hegel: the Possibility of Error**

Many Kantian-style TAs begin with features of thought or experience whose existence is held to be unassailable, and continue to draw conclusions about how the world is or must be. Let us assume that Stroud is right, and that such arguments fail[[12]](#footnote-13). For Hegel there is a reflection which takes priority over the focus on thought and experience, and leads us to the heart of the sceptical challenge:

If the fear of falling into error sets up a mistrust of Science, which in the absence of such scruples gets on with the work itself, and actually cognizes something, it is hard to see why we should not turn round and mistrust this very mistrust. Should we not be concerned as to whether this fear of error is not just the error itself? Indeed, this fear takes something – a great deal in fact – for granted (Hegel 1977, 47).

Hegel's concern here is to criticise the subject-object distinction which he finds at the core of the Kantian enterprise, but to understand what for our purposes is being 'taken for granted' consider again Stroud’s key argument, quoted in Section 2 above[[13]](#footnote-14). Here the central idea is that however much we may believe that S is true, or however much it looks as if S is true, S may be false. Other phrases Stroud uses in this way include ‘how things seem’, ‘as far as we can tell’, ‘how we think of the world’ (Stroud 1968, 25, 25, 14). Elsewhere he discusses the apparently intractable problem of drawing valid conclusions about how things are from statements such as ‘We...experience things in certain ways’ (Stroud 1994, 159).

There are clearly distinctions to be made between the above concepts, but at the heart of each of them is the possibility of an epistemic gap, between how things seem or look, how things are experienced as being, or how things are believed or thought to be, and how they really are. In the light of the possible disparity between how things are and how things are thought/believed/experienced to be, the question of the justification of claims to knowledge emerges. Without the recognition of this possible disparity, this epistemic gap, the interrogation of knowledge claims which is central to sceptical, and indeed all critical, philosophy would not be possible.

Let us use the term ‘thought’ for this core concept, understood in as minimal a way as possible[[14]](#footnote-15). Its philosophical role in the current context lies in its articulating the epistemic gap between how things seem, look, are experienced or thought as being, and how they are. These locutions can only play the role allotted to them by Stroud and by sceptics if at their heart lies a claim or thought about how things are. Furthermore, in order to play its part, this core concept must be the *critical* concept of thought as possibly false: if thoughts had an unquestionable match with reality, no sceptical questioning could be possible[[15]](#footnote-16).

In sum:

**(B) Scepticism is possible only through employing the critical concept of thought as potentially diverging from how things really are.**

Note that the fact that the sceptic must use the critical concept of thought as stated in (B) above does not give us the fully-fledged independent reality we are looking for, for at this stage in the argument we can say nothing definite about ‘how things really are’. Perhaps there are no material objects but only experiences or sense-data[[16]](#footnote-17). More important to note is that this critical concept of thought takes up the core of the philosophical interest which guided the process which brought us to scepticism, Stroud, and critical philosophy in general. All such enquiry is guided by an interest in truth and the justification of claims to knowledge, in the light of the possibility that how things are thought, believed or experienced to be may differ from how they are. The critical concept of thought is therefore established not by intuition, linguistic analysis or by fiat, but through an understanding of the role it is required to play in sceptical inquiry, thus taking David Chalmers’ (2011) advice on avoiding merely verbal disagreements, and avoiding also the mere *assumption* of conceptual unity that is the target in Kuusela (2008).

Even so, it might be objected that we can avoid this commitment to using the critical concept of thought by understanding the sceptic as merely challenging us to provide a justification – *tout court* - for the claim, for example, that there is an external world. However the bare concept of justification is inadequate here: there may be moral, prudential, aesthetic, political or legal justifications for beliefs[[17]](#footnote-18). The sceptical challenge is to justify our claims in the light of the fact that claims can be false, and it is this challenge to provide epistemic justification which requires the critical concept of thought as possibly diverging from reality.

It may seem that by starting with the *concept* of thought or experience rather than with thought or experience itself we are a taking a further step away from the ‘external world’. Yet it is this combination of the core concept required by the sceptical challenge, together with the general requirements of thought and language, that provides the motor for the TA and accounts for the chain of necessary conditions it traces. We can now approach the question of the conditions under which the critical concept of thought or experience, and therefore the scepticism which employs it, is itself possible.

**5 The Necessary Conditions of the Possibility of the Concept of Thought**

The guiding thread to the argument now is to use Proposition (A) concerning the possibility of language or thought and apply it to the core concept of the sceptical challenge expressed in Proposition (B), so we arrive at:

**(C) The critical concept of thought is itself possible only by virtue of a semantic link with an ECR.**

If the concept of thought had no such link, however indirect, then neither the concept of thought nor any thought or proposition in which it is employed could have any content or meaning. The issue now is to understand this link, and the implications it carries for the nature of the ECR.

Consider three suggestions concerning the nature of this ‘semantic’ link: understanding the concept of thought via the concept of reality; via intermediate concepts; and via direct ostension. First: if the critical concept of thought involves a central reference to reality as that from which thought may diverge, then perhaps the concept ‘thought’ can achieve its semantic link with an ECR in just this manner. ‘Thought’ is ‘that which may diverge from reality’; with the concept ‘reality’ having its own semantic link with an ECR. But hitching a ride with a concept of reality which has its own independent link with an ECR cannot work. Certainly we have concepts of reality (or perhaps aspects of one total concept) which are apparently independent of the concept of thought. For example, the concept of that which *is* the case, as against what *should* be the case, or against what *could* be the case. But neither of these is the *epistemic* concept of reality which we need, in order to make possible the critical concept of thought as possibly diverging from reality. This epistemic concept of how things really are cannot, however, have any sense – it cannot *be* a concept – unless it is grasped in its possibly divergent relationship with how things are thought to be. The reference from the concept of thought to that of reality must be reciprocated, or neither concept is possible. Neither the concept of thought, nor that of reality, can be ‘semantically’ linked with an ECR independently of the other concept. The sceptic must work with this conceptually interdependent pair. The necessary ‘semantic’ link must then be made between the interdependent *pair* of concepts and an ECR. This idea will be developed below, but we must note that it cannot be achieved by virtue of each concept being understood in terms of the other. If thought were understood merely as that which may fail to match up with reality, and reality were understood merely as that with which thought may fail to match up, then we would have merely an empty circle.

Second: can we find concepts which mediate between the concept of thought and an ECR? For example, could we not talk of thought as a mental state of persons? The sceptic’s problem here is that the everyday use of such concepts will carry everyday ontological commitments, in this example to the existence of persons, and thereby to an ‘external world’. Now as Stroud says, the sceptic may argue that all that is needed is for us to *believe* that these objects (in this case people) exist or for it to look as though they do, or for us to think they do, in order for the ‘semantic’ link to be made. But this move is not available to the sceptic at this point. For the notions of ‘belief’, or ‘looking as if’ can only play their intended role if they already have at their core the critical concept of thought as that which may be false; and it is precisely this concept whose possibility we are trying to account for. If the concept of thought is only possible by virtue of its relationships with concepts of ordinary everyday entities, then the commitments they carry cannot be later recast in terms of the concept of thought, for we will have cut adrift the semantic link with an ECR which provides that concept with content.

Third: can we try to establish one or other of these concepts – ‘thought’ and ‘reality’ - independently, by providing a direct ostensive link with an ECR (for example, with a case of how things really are, or of how they are thought to be), and then giving an understanding of the other in terms of the first? No: for two reasons. First, for the ostension to succeed in establishing the content of the concept of thought or reality, the item ostended must *already* be understood asan example of thought or reality rather than, say, the object being thought about: the ostensive approach thus presupposes the understanding it was intended to account for.[[18]](#footnote-19) Second, this approach ignores the fact that, as argued above, each concept is what it is only by virtue of its relationship with the other. If we were in possession of a concept of thought, or of reality, which did not *already* contain this internal reference to the other, then it could not be the concept we require. Neither concept can be established independently of the other and then pushed into a relationship with that other: they come together, or not at all. The conclusion we are drawn to is that the required ‘semantic’ link between the concept of thought and an ECR is possible neither by means of direct ostension, nor of mutual definition in terms of the concept of reality, nor of definition in terms of other concepts. The prospect looks bleak: none of these suggestions can work. We can hardly conclude that the concept of thought, and so the existence of critical philosophy itself, is not possible at all. But where is the alternative?

We can get out of this corner only in this way. We must recognise that the conceptual pair – ‘thought’/’reality’, or 'experience'/'realty', can avoid being vacuous only by being semantically linked, *as* a pair, with an ECR. But the relevant feature of this ECR cannot be *just* an instance of how things are thought to be, or *just* an instance of how things really are, nor even their mere juxtaposition. For if this pair of concepts is to have content then the salient feature of that ECR must be a situation within which how things are, and how they are thought to be, are distinct but interrelated aspects. In order for a link with such a situation to make possible the critical concept of thought there must be a distinction to be made, within that situation, between how things are and how things are thought to be. As long as there is no such distinction to be made - that is, as long as thought and reality just match up - then there is an unquestioned and unquestionable harmony, and nothing for the concepts expressed by the terms ‘thought’ and ‘reality’ to latch on to. To get the required purchase on an ECR the concepts ‘thought’ and ‘reality’ must be semantically linked with the kind of situation in which how things really are actually diverges from how things are thought to be. These are situations of error, where how things are thought to be is rejected as false on the basis of a presumed awareness of how things really are[[19]](#footnote-20). Only by being semantically linked with such situations is the concept of thought possible. Without such a link, therefore, scepticism itself would not be possible.

We therefore arrive at:

**(D) The semantic link between the concept of thought and the ECR is possible only as a direct link with situations of error, where how things are thought to be diverges from how things really are.**

**6 The Possibility of Error and the Sceptical Challenge**

To see how proposition (D) helps us meet the sceptical challenge, consider the potential scope of error. Suppose I believe that there is an oasis before me in the desert. Potentially, my belief may be false in at least three ways: first, it may be that this is a mirage, and walking towards it I see that there is only bare rock and sand. Second, it may be that there is no desert at all, let alone an oasis, but only experiences which are induced by changes in the inputs to my brain which is immersed in sustaining liquids in a vat[[20]](#footnote-21). In this case the existence of an external world is still presupposed, albeit vastly different from how I have supposed it to be. Thirdly, and this is the possibility posed by the Cartesian sceptic and radical empiricists such as Hume and Ayer, perhaps there is no populated external world at all, but only thoughts, sense-data or experiences with no corresponding reality[[21]](#footnote-22). Nevertheless, in each of the above cases, for error to occur the salient thought must be articulated by concepts of items such that how things are with them may differ from how they are thought to be**[[22]](#footnote-23).** If thought were, instead, only about items such that no distinction could be drawn between how they were, and how they were thought or experienced to be (for example, Hume’s impressions of sensation, or sense-data) then there would be no possibility of error. This epistemic independence of the intentional object of our thought or experience requires in turn its ontological independence: for if the existence of the intentional object depended constitutively on the awareness of it then any further, different, awareness would be of a different item – there would be no possibility of it revealing that the previous awareness, thought or experience was erroneous. Thought must be, at least in part, of items such that how things are with regard to their existence and operations is independent of how they are thought to be. That is, thought must be, intentionally, of an ‘external world’ in the sense we want, even if judgement as to the actual existence of that world must be at this stage suspended. This necessary conceptual structure of thought now has implications regarding the conditions of possibility of error.

In the first two cases of error, how things are thought to be is rejected on the basis of a (presumed) awareness of how things are.This is not a bare awareness that how things are differs from how they are thought to be. It is a determinate awareness of how things positively are, which excludes how things are thought to be from being the case. Thus when I reach the place where I thought the oasis was, and see that there is only sand and rock and no water, then that excludes how I thought things were from being the case. In the second case, if I become aware, by convincing messages transmitted to my brain by the lab technician[[23]](#footnote-24), that I am a disembodied brain in a vat, then it cannot be the case that I am walking about in the desert. Furthermore, because, as argued above, how things are thought or experienced to be must be articulated in ‘concepts of the objective’, it follows that the recognition of how things are thought or experienced to be, as differing from how they really are, is based on a (presumed) awareness of how things are with certain independent items in an objective world.

Now each of these first two kinds of error can be re-evaluated. Perhaps the oasis was there all along but became obscured behind a large rock while I was walking and shielding my eyes from the sun, or I discount the apparent message from the lab technician as a hallucination. None of the presumed awarenesses has any privileged position, any guarantee of veridicality. There could be an endless series of such ‘undeceptions’, but at any stage the semantic link between the critical concept of thought and instances of error which help provide its content requires the existence of an objective reality with actual independent items. Without the existence of this 'external world' there could be nothing in comparison with which how things are thought to be could be deemed not to be the case, and therefore no situation of error, semantic linkage with which makes possible the critical concept of thought.

Turn now to the third case of error, where thought about how things are is rejected as false on the basis of an awareness that there is no ‘external’ reality: there is thought and experience but nothing else. This is the core of the radical scepticism stemming ultimately from Descartes. Now the notion of an awareness that there is no ‘external world’, or that there is nothing beyond thought or experience, is hard to grasp (perhaps some kind of ‘intellectual intuition’ brought about by the normal sceptical route is a possibility), but a response is required to block off this escape route for the sceptic.

Look at some everyday examples of judgements that there is nothing. a) My daughter wants something to drink; I look all over the house, in and out of cupboards, but find nothing. b) A teacher has been told that a certain child may be a bully. She observes her behaviour in school activities, play and work, but finds nothing to confirm the suggestion. In each case the ‘nothing’, of which awareness is reached, is determined with reference to a particular concept (which governs the search). Thus in case a), I do not find nothing *at all*, but nothing to drink – or to specify it further, nothing suitable for my daughter to drink. In case b), the teacher does not find nothing *at all*, but no evidence of bullying. They are determinate ‘nothings’.

In the third kind of error introduced above the awareness of nothing may seem to be undetermined with respect to any particular concept: it is just a bare or absolute nothing. However, such a (presumed) awareness of absolutely nothing could not provide the basis for dismissing how things are thought to be as false. For this dismissal involves acceptance that there is not absolutely nothing – there is, at the very least, how things are thought or experienced to be. An awareness of absolutely nothing could not accommodate thought itself, and so could not provide for the account of error which is required here. This awareness that there is absolutely nothing requires qualification if it is to serve its intended purpose.

The qualification it needs – which provides the concept with respect to which the ‘nothing’ is found – must be this: there must be awareness that there exists absolutely nothing *other than thought itself*. It is on this basis that any positive claim about independent items is any objective world would be rejected, thus making possible instances of error. Semantic linking with such instances would then putatively make possible the concept of thought. But this will not do. This qualification of the awareness of nothing does indeed save us from the wasteland of an absolute, unconditioned non-being. But it does so only at the cost of presupposing exactly that which it was to provide for, namely, the concept of thought. This proposed awareness that there is nothing other than thought must, if it is to do its job, *itself* employ the concept of thought. It cannot then, on pain of circularity, provide part of an adequate account of the possibility of that concept, and so cannot provide the semantic link which is required for the meaningfulness of radical scepticism. The kind of error required must involve a determinate (presumed) awareness of how things positively are with independent items in an objective world.

Suppose this is right: then cases of error must, if they are to provide for the semantic link with the critical concept of thought, be situations in which how things are thought to be diverges from how things really are with independent items in an objective world (items that fall under ‘concepts of the objective’). If there were no such world then no such cases of error would be possible, and so there could be no semantic link that would provide content to the critical concept of thought. Consequently, use of the critical concept of thought necessarily presupposes the existence of such a world as a necessary condition of its possibility[[24]](#footnote-25).

What is the status of this necessary presupposition?[[25]](#footnote-26) It is important to understand it as follows: it is not just that we must assume the existence of the external world as a matter of natural or psychological necessity, but rather because without that existence there could be no cases of error, semantic relation with which makes possible the meaningful sceptical challenge. Furthermore, it is an absolute necessity, required by any use of the critical concept of thought, rather than a requirement only of particular areas of discourse. Lastly, this is not just a requirement for ‘our’ categorial framework[[26]](#footnote-27), but for all and any framework which employs, as scepticism must, the critical concept of thought. Understood in this way, we have therefore arrived at:

**(E) A necessary condition of the ‘semantic’ link between the critical concept of thought and an ECR is the existence of an objective world containing independent items.**

That is, the concept of thought is possible only by virtue of a semantic link with instances of error, where how things are with actual independent items in an external world differs from how they are thought to be. So the existence of such items and such a world is shown to be presupposed as a necessary condition of the very possibility of the concept of thought, and so of scepticism itself. We have arrived at the main conclusion of the argument:

**(F) Scepticism about the existence of an external world is false, since it necessarily presupposes the existence of such a world as a condition of its possibility.**

The link between thought and world has been established by applying very general conditions of ‘the possibility of anything’s making sense’ to the central concept of sceptical discourse. We have shown that a proposition – that there exists an external world - which the sceptic claims can never be adequately justified, must be true if what the sceptic says makes sense. In Stroud’s own words, if the sceptic either fails to understand or be convinced by the argument ‘the proper reply would be to go through the argument again’ (1968, 23). In the current context, the challenge to the sceptic is to explain how the critical concept of thought or experience which is central to sceptical discourse is possible without undermining that discourse itself by necessarily presupposing the existence of the ‘external world’.

To be clear that we have indeed established the existence of an external world as the outcome of series of necessary conditions stemming from a starting point which must be accepted by the sceptic, we need to test the argument.

**7 The Comeback: Stroud’s Sceptic and Modal Objections**

There are at least three kinds of objections that can be made to TAs: failure to establish the starting point; failure at any stage of the argument to rule out alternative accounts of the possibility of the starting point; and failure to explain the nature of the modalities with which TAs operate. I have already argued that the sceptic must accept that all thought and/or language must have a relationship with an Extra-Conceptual Realm, and that at the heart of the sceptical challenge lies the critical concept of thought. This provides the twin starting point of the argument. Let us now focus first on Stroud’s (sceptic’s) own critique as articulated in Section 2 above. How does the current TA escape the objection that the connections established by TAs are only ‘within our thought’, and that such connections provide an alternative account of the possibility of that starting point?

To begin with, recall a difference between the structure of the arguments Stroud focuses on, and that of the current argument. Stroud criticises arguments that make a claim about how we must think of things, a necessary conceptual and doxastic core, and then move, via the principles of verification, significance or radical interpretation, to the conclusion that things really are as they are necessarily thought to be: ‘belief is in its nature veridical’ as Davidson claims (1983, 432). The present argument has a different structure: it begins by asking for the necessary conditions of the possibility of the *concept* of thought, rather than of thought or experience itself. It then moves from the claim that all thoughts and concepts require a link with something that provides them with content to the conclusion that the critical concept of thought required by the sceptic is possible only if it is linked ‘semantically’ with situations of error in which the existence of an objective world of independent objects is necessarily presupposed. The sceptic therefore, in using the critical concept of thought necessarily presupposes the existence of the ‘external world’ s/he casts doubt on. Scepticism is meaningful only if false.

The arguments employed by Stroud do not therefore have the same purchase on this argument as they have on the earlier ambitious TAs. But could Stroud’s original objection not be reformulated thus: Just because certain situations, in relation to which the term ‘thought’ has its meaning, must be conceived of as cases where a thought about independent items in an objective world is rejected on the basis of an positive awareness of how things really are, we are not entitled to conclude that such items, in such a reality, actually exist. For it will do just as well for the *meaning* of the term, if there just *seem* to be such cases of error, involving the awareness of how things are in an objective world. We do not need the actual *existence* of these cases, and so do not need the actual existence of an inhabited objective world. What can we say to this objection?

Consider first an apparently similar case: that of the term ‘material object’. Let us accept that for a direct ‘semantic’ link to hold, that with which it holds must be *conceived of* or *understood* as a material object. But that does not license the conclusion that such an object actually exists (cf Rorty 1971, 5). It will be enough to establish the meaning of the term if it just *seems* as if there are material objects, or if this is how things are *believed* to be, or *thought* to be, or *experienced* as being. For all we know the relevant ECR is provided by complex regularities obtaining between series of experiences. The sceptic is thus justified in claiming that we cannot bridge the gap between how we think of things and how they actually are in the case of ‘material object’, but this is only because we presuppose that terms such as ‘seem’, ‘believe’, ‘thought’ and ‘experience’ have their required meaning. With these terms, and particularly the critical concept of ‘thought’ which lies at their core, the sceptic cannot adopt the same strategy. The semantic link which makes it possible for ‘thought’ (or ‘experience’) to have its required meaning is with a situation in which how things are thought to be is at variance with a positive awareness of how things are with certain items independent of thought. If the sceptic then attempts to cast doubt on the presupposition of a populated external world, e.g. by claiming that all that is needed is that it ‘seems’, or is ‘thought’ to be the case that such a world exists, then the necessary conditions of the meaningfulness of the term ‘thought’ are severed. The sceptic must accept the existence of a populated external world as the price for being able to speak sceptically or critically at all. No attempt to recast this presupposition of a populated external world using concepts (such as ‘seem’, ‘believe’, ‘experience’) which have at their core the critical concept of thought can succeed, as success would deprive those concepts themselves of meaning[[27]](#footnote-28). The meaningfulness of sceptical discourse about the external world presupposes that on which it seeks to cast doubt: the sceptical challenge is either meaningless or false.

More generally, any attempt to kick away the ladder and dispense with the necessary conditions of the possibility of the concept of thought, by using the concept itself to recast those conditions (in particular the existence of an external world) must fail[[28]](#footnote-29): the semantic link between the concept of thought and cases of error is not merely a causal, historical condition of the possibility of the concept of thought. It is a formal atemporal condition which applies whenever the concept is used[[29]](#footnote-30). If the sceptic attempts to sever this link, they should be reminded that their use of the concept will be vacuous, and the sceptical enquiry will not be meaningful. The existence of an external world is placed beyond question, as the questioning itself presupposes that existence as a necessary condition of its own meaningfulness. The argument of this paper has thus established that the proposition that there is an external world (an objective reality populated with thought-independent items) is a member of Stroud’s ‘privileged class’. That is, it is a contingent, non-analytic proposition which cannot be denied truly by anyone. Hence, by Stroud’s own argument, if what the sceptic says makes sense then the proposition is true.

Let us now consider the third kind of objection which concerns the source and nature of the necessity of the conditions of sceptical thought which has been discussed here. The issue is at the heart of Kantian and much post-Kantian philosophy and is too large for the current discussion: nevertheless some form of response is called for.

All TAs involve modal claims which go beyond both natural and analytic necessity: an example is provided by proposition (D) above to the effect that the semantic link between the concept of thought and the ECR is possible only as a direct link with situations of error. For the extreme sceptic it may seem that such statements of necessity are no more, and perhaps less, justified than our everyday beliefs about the external world and its population: they may represent no more than the limitations of our imaginations and cognitive capacities. Let us consider this challenge in stages. To begin with, the sceptical challenge must accept basic logical principles and valid argument structures. From at least Aristotle’s time it has been clear that the cost of denying the Principle of Non-Contradiction is that anything or nothing follows from anything else and meaningful thought or language is impossible. In the current context, the sceptical claim that our thoughts could be false would not exclude the claim that our thoughts are necessarily always true, and so no sceptical challenge would have been mounted. So much is relatively non-controversial, but it means that the sceptic is then in no position to challenge *in general* the necessities borne by logical principles and arguments: specific objections to specific TAs (such as that attempted in this paper) must be provided. However it is the modal claims which are neither a matter of logical, analytic or natural necessity that present the main problem.

One line of argument here is to say that the modal sceptical challenge is itself committed to relying on modal intuitions when claiming that sceptical scenarios (such as the Brain in Vat story) are metaphysically possible, and so ‘must grant the reliability of modal intuitions as a method of justification’ (Grundmann and Misselhorn 2003, 211). We can then show that our modal intuitions speak in favour of a claim like ‘necessarily, perceptual beliefs about the external world are largely true’, which can then be used as a premise of a transcendental argument. Now whether this move is successful is open to criticism (cf Stern 2007), but it provides an important clue: we need to examine the sceptic's own commitment to modal claims, in particular the two modal claims which have driven the argument of this paper forward. First: the claim that the sceptical challenge requires the critical concept of thought, that is, the notion of thought such that it is possible for thoughts to be false. The need for a critical concept of thought seems best understood as a conceptual necessity: if it were not possible for thoughts to be false, there would be no potential for error, and so no possibility of the sceptical challenge which is founded on that potential. Second: the claim that thoughts and concepts must have a ‘semantic’ link with an extra-conceptual realm. This also may best be regarded as a conceptual necessity, an implication of the notion of a thought as being 'about' something, and is required if the sceptical challenge is meaningful. The source of the necessities in each of these claims lies in the requirements of the meaningfulness – and hence existence – of the sceptical challenge itself. Suppose this much is right: what of the further necessities claimed at different stages of the argument, for example the claim that the conceptual pair ‘thought’/’reality’ must be semantically linked, *as* a pair, with an extra-conceptual realm. Here we should note that this claim is the conclusion of what is presented as a valid argument, and that the sceptic is not entitled to cast doubt on valid argument *in general* since the sceptical challenge itself relies on such argumentation (e.g. if we are capable of error, then we are in need of justification of our belief in an ‘external world’). Instead, particular objections need to be made to the specific stages of the TA (perhaps, for example, there is a ‘neglected alternative’ to the position I have advanced), and here the ball is in the sceptic’s court. There is much more to be said on these issues, but for present purposes it seems that the transcendental necessities claimed in this TA are the outcome of the conceptual requirements of the sceptic’s own position together with (purportedly) valid argument. Objections should be made to specific claims rather than to modal claims *en masse*.

**8 Disappointment, Worry and Further Development**

Assume for now that there is something to the foregoing argument: where does it leave us? Perhaps, for a start, with a certain sense of disappointment. For although the conclusion of this TA - that the existence of an external world, populated with items whose nature and existence is independent of us, is a necessary condition of the possibility of scepticism – settles Kant’s scandal, it is of limited scope. The argument does not deal with the possibility that the external world is very different from how I take it to be, as in Putnam’s brain-in-a-vat thought experiment, which itself assumes the existence of an external world. Instead the argument, by focusing on the most general kind of external world scepticism and the critical concept of thought at its core, provides the basis for further development. For if TAs can be understood as ‘indispensability chains’ (Taylor 1978, 159), then the necessary conditions of the possibility of scepticism which we have patiently uncovered will themselves have necessary conditions which we can go on to trace, thereby uncovering a succession of necessary conditions of the possibility of the critical concept of thought. Each step will thereby immunise itself against sceptical challenge, since it provides necessary conditions of the possibility of such a challenge. This will help to allay any sense of anti-climax at having succeeded only in establishing the existence of that which no-one other than philosophers had thought to question.

An illustration of such further development may also help us deal with the following worry. So far we have not presented a constructive account of the possibility of the critical concept of thought. The absence of such an account may then be thought to cast a shadow over the conclusion of the argument: for if no such account is available there may after all be something wrong with the TA itself. A full account of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, and there may be reasons to believe that a non-circular account of the sufficient conditions for the concept of thought is in principal unavailable, but we can at least indicate the direction of travel[[30]](#footnote-31). Two related ideas in particular can help us here. The first is the thought that we can grasp the elements of a totality only through reflection on a breakdown in that totality. In a well-known illustration of this point Heidegger (1962, 102-107) discusses how an interruption in the totality of our everyday practical involvements, due for example to a damaged tool, enables us to explicitly grasp the nature of the tool *as* a piece of equipment which serves our purpose in the context of our worldly concerns. The second idea is that we cannot adequately reconstruct our grasp of the totality itself by attempting to yoke together the elements which have been grasped through reflection on a breakdown in that totality. In his discussion of ‘Being-in-the-World’ Heidegger claims that, although it has several constitutive items in its structure, this 'unitary phenomenon ... must be seen as a whole ... [it] cannot be broken up into contents which may be pieced together’ (Heidegger 1962, 78).

To see how these ideas help with our current concerns, consider again the intermediate conclusion that the epistemic concepts of thought and reality are possible only through reflection on situations of error, where how things are thought to be fails to match up with how things are. The primary grasp of such a situation as one of error cannot be via a direct comparison of how things are with how they are thought to be, as this already presupposes the very concepts at issue. The primary grasp of error cannot be composed from a grasp of its constituents, but only as a totality from which the understanding of those constituents (thought and reality) can be reflectively abstracted. This implies that the primary grasp of error must be non-conceptual. It takes the form of a non-conceptual registration of a rupture in the normally presupposed and unquestioned cognitive harmony which informs and makes possible my everyday engagements with the world[[31]](#footnote-32). For example, I run to kick a ball in the long grass: on contact with the marble top of a ruined gatepost I register not only pain but a breakdown in the cognitive harmony on which my action was predicated. Such practical engagement with the world is thus a further necessary condition of the possibility of the critical concept of thought and hence of scepticism and critical thought itself. The same will be true of the necessary conditions of that practical engagement itself. This in turn suggests the kind of analysis of our ‘Being-in-the-World’ found in Heidegger (1962), and indeed provides a transcendental foundation for such an analysis[[32]](#footnote-33).

How far can this process take us? There is no obvious limit to the chain of necessary conditions, but the claim that this transcendental programme has implications concerning embodied cognition, language, communication and temporality can only have the status of an advertisement here. Even so, the discussion so far shows how insights from post-Kantian continental traditions can aid the development of robust transcendental argument and point towards a significant future.

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1. The term ‘external world’ is unhelpful insofar as it seems to privilege a corresponding ‘internal world’ and presuppose a Cartesian standpoint unsupported in this paper. For convenience it is used as shorthand for ‘an objective world with independent items’ in the sense explained in Section 6 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. A view championed especially by Stern (1999, 2000, 2007, 2015), and by Stroud himself and his development of a notion of ‘invulnerability’ (1999, 2000b). Early adopters of Stroud’s view of TAs include Rorty (1971), Bennet (1979) and Taylor (1978). Strawson (1985) also comes to accept Stroud’s conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Cf. Weintraub (1997: 51) ‘If a condition, X, is necessary for experience (thought, language, etc.), then one could argue from the (very minimal) assumption that there is experience (thought, language) to the truth of X’. There are various ways of characterising TAs, e.g. Taylor 1979, Bell 1999, Virvidakis 2006, Kuusela 2008 and Stern 2000 and 2015, but their distinctions do not impact on the current argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This is a specific example of what Nagel (1986: chapter 5) calls the most abstract form of sceptical possibility, namely that we can conceive of the possibility that the world is different from how we believe it to be in ways that we cannot imagine, and that there is no way of moving from where we are to beliefs about the world that are substantially correct. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Wittgenstein is often seen as offering arguments, sometimes interpreted as *transcendental* arguments (e.g. Coliva 2010), to show the incoherence of radical scepticism and of Cartesian doubt. For an argument that the Private Language Argument succeeds only against classical sense-data theorists, rather than more sophisticated radical empiricists (such as Husserl), and so does not rule out radical scepticism, see [Author, Publication A, withheld]. Stroud’s critique therefore seems to hold with respect to the Private Language Argument. The remarks in *On Certainty* (1969) concerning the ‘logical exclusion’ of doubt with respect to so-called 'hinge propositions', and on the importance of an inherited background 'picture of the world... against which I distinguish between [what is] true and [what is] false' (§94), seem likewise to fall victim to Stroud's critique, since it would suffice for my practice of distinguishing the true from the false if I merely *believe* that there is a world which accords to my picture. There is in any case space for an argument which aims to establish which of these 'hinge propositions' *necessarily* 'hold fast' for me, or for any thinking being, especially as some of Wittgenstein's examples (e.g. no one has been to the moon') are now false. Pritchard's (2012: 267) notion of an 'überhinge', namely ‘that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one’s beliefs’ parallel’s Davidson’s claim that ‘belief is in its nature veridical’ (1983:432) and seems similarly to fall to Stroud’s (1999) critique. For further work see e.g. Coliva (2015) Pritchard (2015), Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock (2016), Schönbaumsfeld (2016). For the purposes of the current paper I begin by holding to the *prima facie* commonsense view that the sceptical challenge to the belief in an 'external world' makes semantic sense and is capable of being either true or false (neither aspect of which would gain agreement from Wittgenstein). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Each of these references is associated with a significant literature. The relationship between TAs and scepticism is discussed at length in Stern (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. This latter claim can itself be challenged (e.g. Cassam 1987), and Thomas (2014) develops such a challenge in his reworking of McDowell (2008) to argue for the explanatory priority of the notion of ‘wide content’ over that of ‘narrow content’. There is no space here for my argument that these challenges are interesting but ultimately unsuccessful in pre-empting Stroud’s contention. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Stroud himself (1999, 2000b) moves to a position which adapts Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation (Davidson 1983, 1984, 2001) to claim that while this theory cannot negate scepticism, it can show that it is impossible for us to consistently believe that all, or even the majority, of our beliefs are false. This position is discussed in detail by Brueckner (1986, 1991, 1995, 1996, 1999): here I note his comment that ‘This is not a promising approach, because the [sceptic] will not grant the assumption that there is a plurality of language users who know what each other means and believes’ (1999, 91). Further discussions of the transcendental use of Davidson’s argument can be found in Genova (1999), Nagel (1999) and Sosa (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Some forms of scepticism may attempt to question the meaning of our terms, or whether they have any meaning at all, nevertheless this very attempt has to have meaning in order for it to *be* such an attempt. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Stephen L. White (2007, 2) puts the point as follows: ‘What are the most fundamental conditions for our having a meaningful language? Certainly among them is the condition that language be grounded in a connection to the world. We can see what this means by reflecting that there could not be an infinite backward regress of lexical definitions, of words defined in terms of other words. That is, there could not be an infinite backward regress of merely word-to-word connections. If we are to have a meaningful expression, such a regress must terminate in a connection to the world—an ostensive definition, a demonstration, a word-to-world connection.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. E.g. Putnam (1981), Burge (1982, 1986), Davidson (1983, 1984). See Brueckner (1999) for a discussion of their limitations). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Westphal’s (2004) insightful account of Kant’s transcendental argument differs from the argument presented here in at least the following respects: a) it is the outcome of ‘epistemic reflection’ on our human cognitive capacities and on human, rather than universal, necessities (17, 261) ; b) the argument begins from the premise of self-conscious human experience rather than of the critical concept of thought (18, 260); c) he apparently accepts the truth of Stroud’s view that ‘everyone’s fully reasonably believing’ that X does not entail that X is true, but rejects it as an example of Cartesian infallibilism and deductivism (258-261) and concludes that Kant’s own ‘lingering aspirations’ to ‘apodictic’ proofs in metaphysics must also be rejected (267). Even so, the force of Stroud’s critique seems to apply to the key argument here: perhaps it is only necessary for self-consciousness that the distinction between one’s subjective order of apprehension and the objective order of events in space and time be made *within* experience, without entailing the actual existence of the objective order. (See Kannisto 2012 for a critique of Westphal’s core arguments). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. While this helps us with the beginning of our own TA, there is no need to take sides on whether or not Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is itself a sustained TA. See e.g. Taylor (1975) and Westphal (2003) for this view, and Houlgate (2015) for a contrasting interpretation.It is worth noting that Royce (1885) explicitly uses the notion of error as a springboard for a TA, but few will follow him to his conclusion that a condition of the possibility of error is the existence of an Absolute Knower. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. This minimal concept enables us to abstract from the more entrenched psychological connotations of the term ‘belief’, and any immediate implications concerning believers, or the existence of any actual ‘external world’ language. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. We should note that much of the philosophical tradition in this area, from Descartes to the current day, concerns the notion of experience rather than that of thought. However, what must be at the core of the concept of experience used in critical or sceptical philosophy is that it at least implicitly carries with it a certain claim, thought or belief about how things are. It is this claim – the propositional character of experience - which can come into conflict with how things really are, opening up the potential epistemic gap between experience and reality, and providing the basis for the critical questioning of knowledge claims. As with thoughts, if experience had an unquestionable match with reality, no sceptical questioning could be possible: the sceptical challenge thus *requires* the critical concept of thought or, in its radical empiricist form, the critical concept of experience. I shall therefore refer to the critical concept of thought or experience where it helps to keep this parallel in mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. This view at least appears to be held at various stages by both Hume and A.J. Ayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Cf. Schmitt (1992: 2-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. This point about ostension presupposing an understanding of the entity ostended echoes those made by Hegel (1977: 58-66) and Wittgenstein (1958: 2, 1953: § 258). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. A ‘presumed’ awareness, because the supposed awareness of how things really are may itself turn out to be non-veridical. It might be for example that I reject the thought that there is a mat on the floor on the basis of touching the object and becoming aware that it is a furry animal. This would provide an instance of error which would provide a semantic link between the concept of thought and ECR. Nevertheless, closer inspection may reveal that there is no animal, only a warm fur coat. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. This is not the place to enter into, or even attempt to summarise, the vast literature spawned by Hilary Putnam’s (1981) discussion of ‘brains in vats’ (see Brueckner 2016 for a recent assessment). It does however seem that the semantic externalism Putnam relies on already begs the question against radical scepticism by presupposing the existence of causal chains in the world which give rise to the possibility of meaning. It is hard to see why, even if the general idea of semantic externalism were sound, it would not be sufficient for it to *seem* that such chains existed. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. John McDowell (2008) in his discussion of someone apparently perceiving a red cube allows the possibilities that what is perceived is not a red cube, or that there is no cube there, but does not discuss the notion that there is nothing beyond experience there *at all*: it is this last possibility however which seems to be the point of radical Cartesian scepticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Strawson’s term is ‘concepts of the objective’, elaborated further as concepts of objects ‘conceived of as distinct from particular subjective states of awareness of them’ (Strawson 1966, 90). For an argument that experience must be articulated by ‘concepts of the objective’ in order to be of interest to critical philosophy, and that Strawson’s version of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction is therefore redundant, see [Author, Publication B withheld]. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. For a fuller description of such a possibility see Rinard (2013, 197). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Further discussion of the modal character of transcendental claims follows in Section 7 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Cf Stern’s discussion (2000, 80-89). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Cf Körner (1967). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. The sceptical use of the notion of ‘sense-data’ deserves a mention in this context. The claim that we have no reason to believe that anything exists besides our own sense-data necessarily presupposes the necessary conditions of the possibility of the concept of sense-data. The history of the idea and its relatives, e.g. ‘percepts’, is complex and often confusing (see Ayer 1973: 69-73, and Huemer 2011, for summaries) but the approach taken by Ayer (1956, 1973, 1979) is helpful for present purposes. For Ayer the belief in ordinary objects in the world goes beyond what is entailed by a strict description of our experience (1976: 81) thus revealing a deductive and inductive gap between experience *as of* physical objects and the actual existence of such objects. Both the ordinary realist view of the world, and the sceptical challenge to it, can agree that it at least seems that the material world exists. Sentences which report how things seem can then, if desired, be transformed into sentences about seeming-objects, or sense-data, as long as we say nothing about sense-data that cannot be translated back into the terminology of seeming (Ayer 1956: 104). The notion of sense-data thus depends on that of seeming, which itself has the critical concept of thought at its core: a necessary condition of the possibility of the concept of sense-data is therefore the existence of a populated external world, this condition being ‘inherited’ as a necessary condition of the possibility of the critical concept of thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. An example here would be the attempt to recast error as a case where one thought fails to fit in, or cohere, with the main body of other thoughts. This thought is therefore to be rejected as false. Where error is understood in terms of a lack of coherence among thoughts, truth is correspondingly grasped as coherence. We do not then need the concept of how things really are, the response continues, since the distinction between how things are thought to be, and how they are, can be provided for in terms of the concept of thought alone. This response, however, presupposes the availability of the concept of thought, and so cannot account for its possibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. The issue of the temporality of concept formation is beyond the scope of this paper. However it is clear that the necessary conditions of the possibility of the concept of thought must obtain at least contemporaneously with the existence of the concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. As with Hegel, Heidegger is invoked here only as a source of insights helpful for the current argument, without a general endorsement of his thinking. There is a substantial literature on the apparent transcendental arguments to be found in *Being and Time* which cannot be explored here. A useful critical account can be found in Philipse (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Such disruption of our habitual actions allied to a failure in our stable beliefs provides for Peirce (1877) a stimulus to scientific enquiry, but he does not pursue the line of argument indicated in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. A foundation, it should be noted, which Heidegger neither provided nor thought it necessary to provide. See for example: ‘’The ‘scandal of philosophy’ is not that this proof [of an external world] is yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again*’’ (Heidegger 1962, 249). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)