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Why the Objective World Depends on Thought Dissolving Stroud's Metaphysical Aporia Using Kant's Notion of an Object

Abstract: In his final monograph, Barry Stroud argues that certain fundamental concepts, like the concept of causation, are not only *indispensable* to any thought of an objective, independent world, but that they are also, therefore, *invulnerable* to skeptical attack. Given some assumptions about thought and objectivity, this leads him into the following *metaphysical aporia*: We can neither metaphysically establish that the objective, independent world is as we must think of it nor that it is *not* that way. I will argue that the source of this aporia is a notion of objectivity in terms of the *complete independence from any relation to thought whatsoever*. This is a notion never explicitly argued for, as Stroud does not identify its origin. I then argue that a *Kantian notion of objectivity* can both be justified by tracing it to its origin in what we understand thinking and perceiving to be and dissolve Stroud's aporia. If there is a way we must think of the world, and if we conceive of this world as completely independent of any relation to thought, then it is indeed hard to see why the world would agree with the fundamental form of thought. But if the objective, independent world is instead conceived of *in relation to thought* rather than independently of it and in terms of the *independence from subjects and acts of thinking and perceiving*, then it becomes intelligible how the world in relation to thought can agree with our fundamental concepts, while the world independent of any relation to thought might not.

Keywords: Stroud; Kant; Strawson; Metaphysics; Form of Thought; Causation; Objectivity; Independent World

Dedicated to the memory of Barry Stroud

Introduction

The basic form of the story I want to tell and of the dialectic I want to develop is quite simple: it is the story and dialectic both of an aporia in metaphysics as I formulate it based on the work of Barry Stroud and of its dissolution, which I try to provide using Kant's notion of an object.

Stroud argues that a metaphysics of a broadly Kantian character gives rise to what I will call an *aporia in metaphysics*. According to a broadly Kantian

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metaphysics, there is a most general and necessary *form of thought*, consisting of certain fundamental concepts such as the concept of causation, through which we must think of the objective, independent world if we want to think of it at all. Given there is such a form of thought, Stroud argues, a metaphysical aporia arises.¹ According to this aporia, *we can neither metaphysically establish that the objective, independent world is as we must think of it nor that it is not that way*. As Stroud puts it, we can neither give a positive nor a negative metaphysical verdict concerning this form, to the effect that to the concepts this form comprises there either corresponds what they represent in the objective, independent world or not. To understand and evaluate any of this, it will be crucial to investigate what is, could, or should be meant by this objective, independent world.

I want to argue that Stroud's aporia only arises if a particular *notion of objectivity* is assumed, namely a notion of objectivity in terms of *the complete independence from thought*. If, however, this notion of objectivity is replaced by a notion in terms of, instead, *the independence from subjects and acts of thinking and perceiving*, Stroud's metaphysical aporia disappears: it is dissolved in such a way that it never even arises.² What is more, this latter notion of objectivity can, unlike Stroud's, be traced back to its source in what we understand thinking and perceiving to be, as can be shown by reconstructing the way Kant develops the notion of an object. I will thus use Kant's notion of an object to dissolve Stroud's aporia. Until I get there, I will speak of an objective, independent world as an unspecified placeholder to be filled out in due course.

Barry Stroud has held for some time that certain fundamental concepts are required to think of the objective, independent world and can be shown to be immune against skeptical or reductive challenges.³ In his final monograph on *Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction*, he tries to establish this in detail for our concepts of causation, necessity, and value.⁴ To begin with, Stroud wants

¹ I call it that, Stroud himself does not. I introduced this way of conceiving of Stroud's argument in Haag/Hoepfner (2019: 84–88) and took it up again in Hoepfner (2020: 251–252).

² I first sketched the idea of dissolving Stroud's aporia in this way in Haag/Hoepfner (2019: 84–88).

³ See Stroud (2000c: 166–172).

⁴ See Stroud (2011a). I summarize the argument in Hoepfner (2020: 251–252).

to show that these fundamental ways of thinking are *indispensable* to any thought that is of the objective, independent world and of ourselves, who are thinking of it, as part of that world.⁵ And he wants to show that they are, moreover, *invulnerable* to skeptical attack insofar as we cannot consistently deny their reality due to our own engagement in thinking of the world.⁶

In first approximation, while the *indispensability* of fundamental concepts that comprise the most general and necessary form of thought concerns their *objective purport* or our ability to even *purport to represent* the objective, independent world in thought, their *invulnerability* concerns the *objective success* of these concepts or our ability to *successfully think* the objective, independent world through them, i.e., to think it in a way that corresponds to how it in fact is. Thus, holding that there is a most general and necessary form of thought amounts to claiming that without it we could not even as much as purport to think the objective, independent world. This still leaves open the question whether the world in fact is as we must think of it, i.e., if we indeed successfully think it in this way. Closely related distinctions are those, e.g., between what is or must be *believed* about the world and what is *known or true* of it or between the *application* and the *exemplification* of our fundamental concepts.

Given the basic form of this story, the dialectical movement of my essay will be one from a broadly Kantian metaphysics and its defining idea of a most general and necessary form of thought to Stroud's metaphysical aporia and, finally, to its dissolution. In the first half of this essay, I will treat the indispensability (1.) and the invulnerability (2.) of concepts constituting the fundamental form of thought in turn. In doing so, I will use the notion of causation as my prime example, although my results should be transferable to other candidates for a constituent concept of the form of thought.⁷ In the second

⁵ See Stroud (2011a: xii).

⁶ See Stroud (2011a: 5).

⁷ The main reason for using this case rather than the other two is that the notion of causation seems to be a more plausible candidate than those of necessity and value/practical reason when it comes to investigating if anything in the world independent of thought does in fact correspond to it. After all, both necessity, when considered outside the context of causal connections, and value/practical

half, I turn to Stroud's metaphysical aporia and its origin in a notion of objectivity (3.) and, finally, to Kant's account of the origin of two contrasting notions of objectivity, both of our own and its contrast or limit (4.). Hence, in this essay, I will treat the following:

1. Stroud on the indispensability of concepts fundamental to thought of an objective world.
2. Stroud on the invulnerability of fundamental concepts to skeptical attack.
3. Stroud's metaphysical aporia and its source in a notion of objectivity.
4. Kant on the origin of two contrasting notions of objectivity.

1. *Stroud on the indispensability of concepts fundamental to thought of an objective world*

A broadly Kantian metaphysics holds that there is a most general and necessary form of thought, consisting of certain fundamental concepts, through which we must think of the objective, independent world if we want to think of it at all.⁸ The two main proponents of such a metaphysics whom Stroud refers to in the course of his investigation are its founder, Immanuel Kant, and its founding figure within the analytic tradition, Peter F. Strawson. I will do the same in this paper and use their respective views to elucidate the ideas that constitute a broadly Kantian metaphysics and the issues that confront it. Here I begin with a few short remarks on their respective accounts of the fundamental form of thought.

Both Kant and Strawson have developed views on the most general and necessary form of thought. Kant, in his so-called Metaphysical Deduction of the Categories in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, famously argues that there is a specific system of fundamental concepts of an object in general or categories, i.e., a

reason mainly seem to have their proper home in reasoning and so seem to depend on thought. For causation it appears at least possible that it does not so depend.

⁸ This tradition of a broadly Kantian metaphysics corresponds to what I describe as (the first step of) a critical metaphysics in Haag/Hoepfner (2019: 77–85).

system of conceptual abilities through the exercise of which any object must be thinkable to be a possible object of thought or cognition at all. According to Kant, we must be able to think of an object *quantitatively, qualitatively, relationally* – including through the notion of causation –, and, finally, *modally*.⁹ And Strawson, in the first half of his *Individuals*, argues for the essentially Kantian view that any conceptual scheme through which an independent world of individual objects can be thought at all needs to form a specific system of fundamental and interconnected conceptual abilities. According to him, we must be able to *identify* individual objects *demonstratively, descriptively, spatiotemporally* – or in some way that is sufficiently analogue to space –, and, finally, to *reidentify* them across time. For us, i.e., for subjects with our experience, the exercise of these abilities is made possible by the fact that the basic individual objects we experience are *material bodies*.¹⁰

Stroud himself does belong to this tradition. However, while Kant and Strawson each develop a system of conceptual abilities from the idea of a cognitive end, namely, generally speaking, from that of individuating, in thought, the individual objects of general concepts, Stroud gives three detailed case studies for the concepts of causation, necessity, and value. He argues that each of these concepts is both indispensable to any thought of an objective, independent world and, moreover, invulnerable to skeptical attack. In each case, Stroud begins by giving specific reasons to think that the notion in question is indispensable, i.e., that it is a concept we cannot do without if we want to think of the objective, independent world. I will now take a closer look at how he does this with respect to the notion of causation.

Stroud observes that the notion of causal dependence is a notion we understand as the notion of a necessary connection between various events or between various things and their features. We express this connection by

⁹ See Kant 1781/1787: A64–83/B89–113. For a comprehensive and detailed reconstruction of the Metaphysical Deduction of the Categories see Hoepfner 2021. References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* refer to the 1781 (A) and 1787 (B) edition pagination. References to Kant's other writings cite the volume and page number of the Akademieausgabe of Kants *Gesammelte Schriften*. I use common and accessible abbreviations for these writings: see Hoepfner (2021: xv).

¹⁰ See Strawson (1959), Chs. 1, 2, and 4. For a short reconstruction of Strawson's argument to that effect see Hoepfner (2020: 248–250).

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saying, in general, that ›Bs happen because As happen‹ or, in particular, that ›b happened because a happened‹. The modality of these causal connections – i.e., that they do not just concern what actually happens in the world but what could or must happen – comes out most clearly when expressed, in general, as ›If something A were to happen, something B would happen‹ or, in particular, as ›If a had happened b would have happened‹ and ›If a had not happened b would not have happened‹. In other words, to say, in general, that As cause Bs or, in particular, that a causes b is to say that, necessarily, if As happen, Bs happen or, necessarily, if a happens, b happens. Such is our notion of causation and thus the starting point of Stroud’s corresponding case study.¹¹

What is more, as Stroud emphasizes,

we regard the causal connections we believe in as holding independently of us and our responses to the world. We think the relations of dependence we believe in can hold between things independently of whether anyone thinks they hold or is aware of their holding or has any response to their holding or to anything else in the world. We think there were causal dependences between things in the world before there were any conscious beings to respond to them, and that there would have been such connections even if we had never been here, or even if there had never been any psychological responses by anyone to anything. (Stroud 2011a: 31–32)

If we think of causal dependences between events or between things and their features, we think of them as independent of any subjects who think of them and of being thought through acts of thinking. This gives us a first hint at what a notion of objectivity has to involve, namely, *the independence from any subjects of thought and their acts of thinking*. I will come back to this.

Besides calling attention to the more or less familiar fact that we require such an idea of causation to explain what happens, both in general and in

¹¹ Stroud convincingly argues that attempts at a reduction like, e.g., the regularity theory of causation, according to which causal connections are nothing but correlations of events or things of certain kinds – so that there is no difference anymore between, e.g., ›Whenever F happens G happens‹ and ›Gs happen because Fs happen‹ –, simply miss our very notion of causation as a necessary connection and thereby not only lose the idea of explanation but also, as I will reconstruct in what follows, the ideas of objectivity and perception. See Stroud (2019: 66–69; 2011a: 35).

particular,¹² Stroud sketches two fundamental ways in which we could not think of the objective, independent world the way we do in fact think of it without the notion of causation, both to do with sense perception and its objects, in particular with relations of dependence and independence between perceptions and their objects. To begin with, Stroud suggests in a dense paragraph that the notion of causation is a notion which is indispensable for the idea of the unperceived, *independent existence* we ascribe to the objects of perception or at least to the objects of those perceptions that are veridical. Such is

the fundamental importance of the idea of causal dependence in our thought about the world. To think of any such world at all requires a capacity to think of an order of things independent of our perceptions of them: of things' being as they are whether they are perceived or not. For that we need the idea of something that exists independently, not simply the idea of some feature present in our experience. Even if what we are aware of in perception are properties of certain kinds, and even if a property is thought of as an object of a certain kind, the enduring independent objects we believe in are not simply properties or collections of such perceived properties. Even a collection of properties can be thought of as an object, but that collection is not the object that those properties are properties of. To think or say of something that it has certain properties we need predication. And the object to which we ascribe properties in a predicational thought is something distinct from any or all of the properties we ascribe to it. Thought of enduring objects therefore requires thought of something distinct from whatever properties we perceive and distinct from whatever fleeting perceptions we might be aware of. It requires the idea of the independent existence of an object: something that would exist and would be as it is whether it is perceived or not. (Stroud 2011a: 24)

It is not easy to understand how exactly the notion of causation comes into this. One way it does is simply that the notion of independence can be explicated in causal terms, i.e., that it is to be understood as *causal independence*. Thus, to think that there are things that exist and are as they are whether they are perceived or not would be to think that these things do not causally depend on our perceptions of them in that *we do not ourselves cause them* through our perceptions. So to think of them as independent of our perceptions would be to

¹² Without the notion of a causal dependence we could, on the basis of observations and mere generalisations, only establish that individual objects or events of various kinds occur and regularly occur together, but we could not explain why they do so. See Stroud (2019: 66, 68; 2011a: 27–28).

think of them as not caused by these perceptions, for which we clearly need the notion of causation.¹³

But Stroud seems to argue for more than that, namely, that we need the notion of causation to even think of the objects of perception as enduring objects that possess the various properties we perceive and ascribe to them, i.e., to think of them as objects that are distinct and independent of our perceptions and can be the target of predications based on sense perception. To think of an independent world of enduring objects in this way, Stroud argues following Strawson, requires more than a mere perception of sensible qualities and their correlations, namely, perceptions of and beliefs about objects that, among other things, possess causal powers and stand in relations of causal dependence.¹⁴ Here, too, it is not obvious how exactly causation comes to play a role. But a promising line of reasoning in the background might be the following:

The requirement to think that objects possess causal powers and stand in relations of causal dependence comes out clearly in our ability and in our need for the ability to think certain modal thoughts about the objects of perception. These are the thoughts that things would, under appropriate conditions, affect us and produce in us perceptions of those sensible qualities we do perceive them as having. In other words, we do require the notion of causation to be able to think of objects of perception that *they would cause perceptions in us* in appropriate circumstances, for instance, if we were to be appropriately related to them in space. Thus, to be an object of perception does not require that something is *actually* perceived. Instead, it requires that something is a *possible* object of perception, i.e., that it is something that *could be perceived* and *would be perceived* under certain conditions. This, in turn, implies that to think of an object of perception we need to be able to think of it as something that is distinct from our perceptions of it, can exist unperceived, and would be perceived in circumstances where it causes perceivers to have perceptions of it. Since, e.g., we cannot be everywhere in space at once and are able to move through it, we need the ability to think of objects of perception that are at positions in space

¹³ See Stroud (2011a: 154).

¹⁴ See Stroud (2019: 66–76; 2011a: 24–25, 55). For Strawson's considerations see his (1966: 87–91).

we do not currently occupy, and need to be able to think of what would happen if we were in fact located in their surroundings. To think such thoughts about possible but actually unperceived objects of perception and about how they would, under appropriate conditions, cause perceptions of their sensible qualities in us, e.g., if we were in (relevantly) the same region of space as them, we are, again, clearly in need of the notion of causation.¹⁵

To be an independent object of perception thus not only is *to be causally independent of perceptions* but also to be able both to *exist unperceived* and to *cause perceptions* in perceivers under certain conditions. This is closely related to the other reason Stroud gives for taking the notion of causation to be indispensable for any thought of an objective, independent world. Thus, Stroud remarks, the notion of causation is indispensable even for the idea of *perception* in its dependence, at least in the veridical case, on the influence of independent objects, i.e., for our ability to perceive such objects and for our knowledge of their properties based on perception.

Even the idea of perceiving what goes on in the independent world requires the idea of causal dependence. To perceive objects around us is to be affected by them in certain ways. And to understand that we perceive them is to understand that we would not perceive what we do if the objects were not there, and that if they are there and the conditions are right we are affected by them in certain distinctive ways. Thought of a world of independent, enduring objects with which we are in perceptual contact would be impossible without acceptance of the idea of the special modality involved in causal dependence. (Stroud 2011a: 25)

Hence, both the idea of the independent existence of objects of perception and the idea of perception itself require the idea of causation as a necessary connection between events, specifically, between the events that perceivable objects undergo in affecting perceivers and the events of perceiving themselves. To illustrate, without the idea of causation we would not be able to think

¹⁵ This elaboration points to another fundamental way of thinking that Strawson has argued is necessary for thinking of the unperceived, independent objects of perception, namely, some notion of space (or at least some functional analogue of space). See his (1959), Chs. 1, 2, and 4. See also in fn. 10 above.

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thoughts like, e.g., >If you were to be in location l, you would perceive object α and >If I had not been in location l, I would not have perceived object α .

This yields a more lucid understanding of how Stroud understands the indispensability of the notion of causation: A thinker who is also a perceiver requires the notion of causation i) to think of the objects of sense perception as independent, enduring objects that would be perceived under appropriate conditions, and ii) to think of sense perception as something that, at least in the veridical case, depends on its objects. One cannot conceive of objectivity and perception in these ways without the notion of causation. I think the case made for this as it was made above is indeed a convincing one.

If we think of objects of perception, we think of them as independent of any subjects who perceive them and of being perceived through acts of perception. This gives us yet another hint at what a notion of objectivity (or objects) has to involve, namely, *the independence from any subjects of perception and their acts of perceiving*. I will, again, come back to this.

But what, if anything, does the indispensability of concepts fundamental to thought of an objective world mean for the objective, independent world that is thought of in this way? This is the question Stroud turns to next, namely, in his treatment of the invulnerability of our fundamental concepts. It is where I turn now.

2. Stroud on the invulnerability of fundamental concepts to skeptical attack

In the course of each of his case studies – after giving reasons to think that the notion in question is indispensable – Stroud continues to argue that it is a concept the reality of which cannot be denied consistently. I will now take a closer look, again, at how he does this with respect to the notion of causation. Stroud argues that the indispensability of fundamental ways of thinking does not mean that the objective, independent world is or must be the way we have to think of it through these concepts. The indispensability of the notion of causation, for example, does not imply the falsity of what Stroud calls a negative metaphysical verdict about causation or, in other words, it does not imply that a denial of the reality of causal dependence is false. The above considerations

about perception and its objects, as well as the requirement to explain what happens, suggest, according to Stroud,

that beliefs about causal or special modal dependences between things are indispensable to our thought of an independent world [...]. Even if that is true, it does not in itself imply that the world we think about in those indispensable ways is or must be the way we think it is. The indispensability does not directly imply that a metaphysical denial of the reality of causal dependence is not correct. This can be felt to leave the metaphysical question open. It can seem at least still possible to accept a negative metaphysical verdict about causal dependence while conceding that we simply cannot abandon all beliefs in such dependence on pain of having no thought of an independent world and no reasons to believe anything about it. (Stroud 2011a: 31)

This metaphysical question that is still open can be elucidated through the distinction between objective purport and success as it was introduced above: While the indispensability of our fundamental concepts concerns their *objective purport* or the ability to even *purport to represent* the objective, independent world in thought, the *objective success* of these concepts or the ability to *successfully think* the world through them is something different and something more. To hold that there is a most general and necessary form of thought amounts to claiming that without it we could not even as much as purport to think the objective, independent world. But this still leaves open whether the world is in fact as we must think of it, i.e., if we do successfully think it in this way. Thus, even if it is true that the notion of causation is indispensable to any thought of an objective, independent world, this still allows for the possibility that the world that is thought of in this way does not in fact include any causal connections. Again, closely related are the distinctions between what is or must be *believed* about the world and what is *known or true* of it or between the *application* and the *exemplification* of our fundamental concepts.

Some such distinction comes out in the way Kant structures the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.¹⁶ In the first conclusion he claims that '[a]ll intuitions

¹⁶ See Hoepfner (2022: 462–463, 478, 483–485). See also my first sketch of this reading in Haag/Hoepfner (2019: 81–85).

stand under the categories' (B143), while in the second and final conclusion he intends to claim, moreover, that 'all objects of our senses' (B145) do.¹⁷ To claim that *sensible intuitions* stand under the categories amounts to saying that they only as much as purport to represent their objects if they – or, more precisely, their representational unity – can be brought under the categories. This is a claim about *representations of objects*, in particular about their representational contents. But to claim that all *objects* of our senses stand under the categories amounts to claiming that we not only purport to represent objects through the categories but that we do so successfully, so that these objects do in fact fall under the categories or exemplify them. This final claim is a claim about *objects of representations*, which is something different and something more than a claim about their representations. Kant demonstrates the *objective purport* of the categories by proving that intuitions only so much as purport to represent objects when they fall under the categories. This establishes that they are not empty in a first sense, namely, as 'thoughts without content' (A51/B75). But this does not yet secure the *objective success* of the categories. Though they purport to represent objects, they might still be empty in a second sense in that they might in fact have 'no object anywhere among the appearances' (A90/B122). Demonstrating that the categories purport to be about objects by showing them to be conditions on the representational contents of sensible intuitions is not the same as showing them to be conditions on objects given through the senses or demonstrating their objective success in relation to such objects.¹⁸

Some such distinction also forms the foundation for how Stroud famously criticized the transcendental argument that Strawson gave in his *Individuals*.¹⁹ As noted above, Strawson argues there that any conceptual scheme through the use of which an independent world of individual objects can be thought at all needs to form a specific system of fundamental and interconnected conceptual

¹⁷ All translations of Kant's texts are mine.

¹⁸ Stroud distinguishes the conclusions of the two steps of the Kantian strategy as follows: '(1) Necessarily, if there is any thought and experience at all then thinkers think that P is true, think that Q is true, think that R is true, and so on. [...] (2) Necessarily, if there is any thought and experience at all then P and Q and R and so on are true.' (Stroud 2011a: 133)

¹⁹ For a short reconstruction of this exchange see Hoepfner (2020: 250–251).

abilities, namely, those of *identifying* objects *demonstratively*, *descriptively*, *spatiotemporally*, and, finally, of *reidentifying* them across time, the exercise of which, for us (i.e., for subjects with our experience) is made possible by the fact that the basic objects we experience are *material bodies*.²⁰ As Strawson argues, whoever doubts the continuous identity and unperceived existence of material bodies thereby also doubts the very spatiotemporal system within which such doubts can even make sense. This is what Strawson calls a transcendental argument.²¹ However, without assuming a highly controversial and unjustified principle of verification, Stroud objects – a semantic principle according to which we could not even as much as possess and understand the notion of a material body if it did not actually have any instances –, Strawson’s argument only shows that *we have to believe* that material bodies exist and continue to exist unperceived to even be able to think of a spatiotemporal world of objective particulars.²² But we do not, on that basis, *know* this to be true.

In this way, only relations of dependence *within our thought* can be established. Strawson later accepted Stroud’s criticism and granted that transcendental arguments like the one he had given in *Individuals* either rest on a verificationism of forbidding simplicity or can at most establish mutual relations of dependence *among conceptual abilities and beliefs* but do not establish anything about the objective, independent world.²³ For Stroud, this, in turn, means going too far in the other direction.²⁴ While the indispensability of fundamental ways of thinking does not imply that the world actually is or must be the way we have to think it through these concepts, so that their indispensability indeed does not imply the falsity of a corresponding negative metaphysical verdict, there is still more that can be established than just relations of dependence among conceptual abilities and beliefs, or so Stroud goes on to argue. Indeed, it can be shown, Stroud claims, that such a *negative*

²⁰ See in fn. 10 above.

²¹ See Strawson (1959: 35–36, 40).

²² See Stroud (2000b: 13–16). See also Stroud (2000c: 161–165). For Strawson’s use of the principle of verification see his (1959: 35).

²³ See Strawson (1985: 21–22).

²⁴ See Stroud (2000a: xvi; 2000c: 162–167; 2011a: 136–137).

metaphysical verdict is *unacceptable* and that the fundamental ways of thinking are, in effect, *invulnerable*, as any attempt to give a negative metaphysical verdict concerning these concepts ushers us into *inconsistencies*.

The denial of the reality of causation, for instance, leads us into two inconsistencies. On the one hand, this denial would mean both to accept that we believe in objective, causal dependences that are independent of us – which is nothing other than taking to be true that the objective, independent world contains causal dependences – and to accept that this belief is false. Thus, we would have to say in the form of Moore’s Paradox:²⁵ »I believe that there are causal connections in the world, but there are no causal connections in the world«. ²⁶ Since the fundamental beliefs we describe here are our own, we cannot simultaneously believe both this description and the negative metaphysical verdict. This is *the first inconsistency*.²⁷ One might be tempted to reply to this argument that it still seems possible just to give up the belief. But once this belief is seen as an essential part of our ideas of *sense perception and its objects*, as was indeed established above, i.e., if it is seen as part of ideas so fundamental to us that we will not be able to give them up under any circumstances, it becomes clear that giving up the belief in causal connections cannot really be considered an option either.²⁸ On the other hand, Stroud continues, whoever wants to give a negative metaphysical verdict concerning causation must be able to explain why we believe in causal dependences that are independent of us although there are none. Such an explanation, however, would have to make essential use of the idea of causation. This is *the second inconsistency*.²⁹ It follows from the more general point only alluded to above, namely, that the idea of causation is indispensable to explain what happens, both in general and in particular. If it is indeed required in this way, it will also be required to explain why we believe

²⁵ See Stroud (2019: 65–69; 2011a: 137).

²⁶ Stroud (2019: 69).

²⁷ See Stroud (2011a: 31–32).

²⁸ I take it that it is an indispensable part of the way we conceive of ourselves that we do have sense perceptions.

²⁹ See Stroud (2011a: 32–34).

what we believe, e.g., that there are causal connections in the world even if that is not the case.

The denial of the reality of causation is thus inconsistent, and our belief in it is invulnerable. Nevertheless, Stroud goes on to argue, it does *not* follow from this that it is possible to instead give a *positive metaphysical verdict* about the relation of our indispensable and invulnerable beliefs to the objective, independent world, e.g., through the judgment »There are causal connections in the independent world«. According to Stroud, ‘no [...] positive metaphysical verdict about the status in independent reality of causal dependence [...] follows from the impossibility of consistently accepting a negative verdict’.³⁰ There is thus nothing, or so Stroud argues, that metaphysics can add to what we believe anyway. Given our metaphysical investigations, we do not know whether the positive metaphysical verdict is true or the negative false – we only know that we cannot consistently accept the negative one.³¹ This acknowledgement of the inability to give a satisfying metaphysical verdict about our fundamental ways of thinking in relation to the objective, independent world, be it a negative or a positive one, expresses what can be labeled Stroud’s *diagnosis of an aporia in metaphysics*.³² In his review of Stroud’s book, Thomas Nagel even speaks of ‘Stroud’s proof of the impossibility of metaphysics’.³³ I will now take a closer look at this aporia and try to identify its source.

3. Stroud’s metaphysical aporia and its source in a notion of objectivity

Why, according to Stroud, do we fall short of a positive metaphysical verdict about our fundamental ways of thinking of the world – for instance, through the notion of causation – even if we can neither think of the objective, independent world without them nor consistently deny their reality? What exactly hinders us from judging, on that basis, that there are, e.g., causal dependences in the

³⁰ Stroud (2011a: 158). See also Stroud (2011a: 143–144).

³¹ See Stroud (2019: 69, 72).

³² See in fn. 1 above.

³³ Nagel (2011: 12).

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objective, independent world? Here is how Thomas Nagel puts this question to us at the end of his review of Stroud's final monograph: 'Why isn't the demonstrable impossibility of reaching a negative metaphysical verdict tantamount to a positive metaphysical verdict on the concept in question?'.³⁴ I think that the answer to this question and the source of our inability, according to Stroud, to give a positive metaphysical verdict about our fundamental ways of thinking in relation to the world is to be found exactly in his way of understanding this *objective, independent world*: in what is part of his *metaphysics* of that world, if you will. To quote just a few passages on this understanding of the independence of the world: Stroud speaks of, for example, 'a satisfactory metaphysical understanding of ourselves and our thought in relation to an independent world',³⁵ 'a conception of what the world is really like on its own, independent of all human thoughts and responses',³⁶ and 'the world as it is completely independently of us and all our ways of thinking of it'.³⁷

The key to understanding any notion of an objective, independent world is to answer the question: *independent of what, exactly?* Stroud's descriptions seem to remain neutral between at least two answers. According to the first and weaker answer, the objectivity of the world we think consists in its *independence from the existence of subjects and their acts of thinking and perceiving*; according to the second and stronger answer, the objectivity of the world we think of consists in its *independence from any relation to thought whatsoever*, where the world we think of is independent not just of subjects and acts of thinking and perceiving but even of the fact that *thought possesses the most general and necessary form it does*, for instance, as comprising the notion of causation. At least the third and final citation from above seems to point more in the direction of the second and stronger notion of objectivity. Another indication that Stroud indeed uses this stronger notion is the fact that he consistently rejects Kant's view – a view that emphatically opposes the stronger notion of objectivity –,

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Stroud (2011a: xii).

³⁶ Stroud (2011a: 9).

³⁷ Stroud (2011a: 61).

which Stroud accordingly describes, for example, as ‘the greatest attempt there has ever been to prove that the truth about the way the world is cannot come apart in general from our thinking and perceiving in the ways we do’³⁸ (in his *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*) or as implying that the objects in the world we think and experience ‘are not objects that are as they are independently of their fulfilling the conditions of being thought of and experienced by us’³⁹ (in his late paper on Kant’s Transcendental Deduction).

I want to suggest that it must indeed be the use of the second and stronger notion of the world’s independence that ultimately prevents Stroud from giving a positive metaphysical verdict about the form of thought and, accordingly, about those concepts, both indispensable and invulnerable, that it comprises. It is precisely this notion of the world – of its objectivity and independence – that makes it seem impossible to judge that the form of thought agrees with it, even though we cannot think of the world without this form and even turn out to be unable to consistently deny its reality. This notion of the world’s objectivity is the notion conceived of in terms of the complete independence from thought that I have alluded to at the outset of this essay.⁴⁰

The thought standing in the background that makes perspicuous how this notion of objectivity leads Stroud into his aporia, although never made explicit, must be something along the following lines: If there is a most general and necessary *form of thought*, a form that is such that without it we cannot think of an objective world at all – for instance, a form that comprises the notion of causation –, we cannot judge that *the world as it is completely independently of thought* corresponds to it. Thus, if the world to be thought about is conceived of not only as distinct but as essentially and absolutely separate from thought, it clearly remains possible and even seems plausible that it does not correspond

³⁸ Stroud (2011b: 99).

³⁹ Stroud (2018c: 164).

⁴⁰ In an e-mail exchange, Thomas Nagel agrees that while Stroud would not accept that our notion of objectivity is Kantian, if he did, his problem – what I call his aporia – would not arise, so that the fact that Stroud accepts the stronger notion does seem to constitute an answer to the question from Nagel’s review. He does add, however, that he is inclined to agree with Stroud against Kant. In the remainder of this essay, I will try to give reasons to think, with Kant, that as a matter of fact our notion of objectivity is indeed Kantian.

to the form of thought. To put it in the form of a question: *Why would the world as it is essentially and absolutely separate from thought correspond to the form of thought, i.e., to the way we have to think of it?*⁴¹ This is how the second and stronger notion of objectivity in terms of the independence from any relation to thought whatsoever – in conjunction with the idea that there is a most general and necessary form of thought – brings about Stroud’s aporia. If certain concepts are that fundamental to thought as to even make possible any thought about an objective world at all, i.e., if they in fact constitute the very form of thought, it is indeed quite hard to see why a world that is completely independent of thought would still agree with them.⁴²

That Stroud himself does see such a connection between various notions of an objective world and the prospects of achieving the positive results aspired to in metaphysics comes out in a slightly different, if related, context, namely, in his refusal to accept Kant’s view of the world as a satisfying response to the epistemological problem of the possibility of knowledge of the world in general. This comes out most clearly in a self-profile that appeared only shortly before his final monograph did: The ‘encouraging conclusion’ that knowledge of the world is possible, Stroud says there,

could perhaps look reachable on Kant’s own view of the world as ‘empirically real’ but ‘transcendentally ideal’. But on any more reasonable conception of a world independent of us and our responses it was difficult to explain how a necessary connection could be found, or forged, between our thinking of the world in certain ways and the world’s actually being, and being knowable as being, any of those ways. (Stroud 2018b: 56)

For my purposes, what it means to conceive of the world we think of and perceive as ‘empirically real’ but ‘transcendentally ideal’ can (minimally) be understood as follows: While the world, according to this conception, is indeed *independent of subjects and their acts of thinking and perceiving*, it is not, at the

⁴¹ I assume that neither putting forward chance nor some sort of preestablished harmony would constitute giving satisfying answers to how this correspondence could come about.

⁴² This bears some resemblance to a thought Stroud does make explicit in his book, namely a thought regarding analytic truths: ‘The idea is that there can be no a priori insight into how things are or must be in a world completely independent of us.’ (Stroud 2011a: 64)

same time, *independent of any relation to thought whatsoever*.⁴³ In the remainder of this essay, I will try to give reasons to think that such a Kantian notion of objectivity is in fact the most reasonable notion we have.

There might be a line of thought to the effect that Stroud has, against this background, set himself what amounts to an impossible task or a task we cannot even make sense of. Hence, it seems as if Stroud tries to *relate, in thought, to a world as it is independently of its relation to thought and its very form*, i.e., independently of it being thinkable at all. But it would seem as if *the world in relation to thought and its form* simply is the only intelligible object of thought for thinking beings, even if the kind of thinking they are doing is metaphysics and consists, among other things, in rendering metaphysical verdicts. But even if Stroud did in fact set himself an impossible task, I find that quite hard actually to establish. That is why I will choose a different path and argue instead that Stroud is *not justified* in assuming this stronger notion of an objective, independent world, a notion he does seem to use as a default but without giving sufficient reasons for doing so.⁴⁴ Thus, short of arguing that the idea of the world Stroud uses ultimately makes no sense, I will argue that it is not and cannot be justified as the proper notion of the world we are trying to think about. This, in turn, is to be established by looking at its origin or source. *So where does this notion come from, exactly?*⁴⁵

⁴³ See Haag/Hoepfner (2019: 86–88).

⁴⁴ A reason Stroud does give for the idea that the world we think of is to be independent is that thinking (or believing) something does not make it so or is distinct from it being the case or true. See esp. in Ch. 2 of *The Quest for Reality*, (2000d: 21–24). But for this logical independence of p and thinking (or believing) that p to be captured it does seem to suffice, again, that what we think is independent of subjects and acts of thinking. It does not require that the world we think is completely independent of any relation to thought whatsoever, i.e., even of any relation to the very form of thought.

⁴⁵ Here is how Stroud himself puts the demand to identify the origin or source of philosophical problems in his essay “What is Philosophy?”: “What philosophical theories or theses are, or what the answers to philosophical problems say or mean, can only be as clear and as well understood as the questions they answer or the phenomena they are meant to account for. But those problems, or the conceptions that give rise to them, are themselves the results of thought – of thinking of things in certain ways. And to understand those problems, even before trying to answer them, we have to identify and understand those ways of thinking, and assess them. But those ways of thinking are also at least in part the product of previous philosophizing, and that too we have to identify and

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Consider the notion of objectivity as it originated above (in section 1) from considerations about how we think of causal connections and objects of perception. It is quite a different notion. What emerged in these contexts was that we want to think of the world as it is *independently of the existence of any subjects and their acts of thinking and perceiving*⁴⁶ – or, more generally, of subjects and their acts of representation –, but *not* as it is *independently of its relation to thought and its very form*, i.e., to being thinkable at all. It is one thing to construe objectivity in terms of the independence from subjects and their acts of thinking and perceiving. It is quite another thing to construe it in terms of the independence from any relation to thought whatsoever. And if one indeed construes objectivity as the independence from subjects and acts of thinking and perceiving, this does remain compatible with a world as it relates to thought and is thinkable through the form of thought.

It seems that if there is indeed a *form of thought*, i.e., a form without which no objective, independent world can be thought of at all, and if the world to be thought of in this way is conceived of as *the world in relation to thought*, nothing stands in the way of maintaining that the world that is thought through the form of thought must and does, in fact, agree with it. It would just be what it means for the world to be thinkable; conversely, to think of the world through the form of thought would just be to think of it. Hence, given the most general and necessary form of thought involves thinking in causal terms, and given the notion of causation is not only indispensable to thought of an objective, independent world but also invulnerable to skeptical attack, one can reasonably render the verdict that *the world as it relates to thought* must and does in fact

understand. Only in this way, I think, can we come to know what we are doing in philosophy. We have to get at the sources of the so-called problems, to see where they come from and why they take the forms that they do.” (Stroud 2018a: 18) See also *ibid.*: 20. I take it that the notion of objectivity is just another result of thinking things in certain ways: a result we have to identify, understand, and assess, which is exactly what I am trying to do in this essay.

⁴⁶ Strawson, too, uses this weaker notion of objectivity in his *Individuals*: “The limit I want to impose on my general question is this: that I intend it as a question about the conditions of the possibility of identifying thought about particulars distinguished by the thinker from himself and from his own experiences or states of mind, and regarded as actual or possible *objects* of those experiences. I shall henceforth use the phrase, “objective particulars” as an abbreviation of the entire phrase, “particulars distinguished by the thinker &c.” (1959: 61)

contain causal connections, where the occurrence of any particular causal dependences is still objective in the (weaker) sense of being independent of subjects and their acts of thinking and perceiving. This also allows for the possibility that *the world as it is independently of any relation to thought* might not in fact contain such causal dependences, i.e., that the world only does so in its very relation to thought.⁴⁷ It seems to me that this distinction of worlds is able to give Stroud's (stronger) notion of the objective, independent world its proper place. It is to be understood *exactly in contrast* to the world that we think of objectively.

While the first notion of the world, where it is conceived of in relation to thought, is able to avoid Stroud's aporia, the second notion – which Stroud seems to treat as the only possible one –, where it is conceived of independently of any such relation, is exactly what leads him into it. If objectivity is construed in terms of the independence from any relation to thought at all, as it appears to be in Stroud, then it is exactly this construal that answers Nagel's question as to '[w]hy [...] the demonstrable impossibility of reaching a negative metaphysical verdict [isn't] tantamount to a positive metaphysical verdict on the concept in question'.⁴⁸ But if this stronger notion of objectivity is dropped as the proper notion of the world we are trying to think of and, instead, replaced with a weaker notion in terms of the independence from subjects and acts of thinking, *the impossibility of reaching a negative verdict does seem to be tantamount to a positive verdict after all*, given that Stroud's notion of objectivity was indeed what hindered him from making that transition in the first place. Hence, *while it seemed possible and even plausible for the world conceived of independently of any relation to thought that it does not agree with the form of thought, for a world conceived of in relation to thought it does in turn seem possible and even plausible that it does*. This can even do justice to a requirement Stroud states on any positive metaphysical verdict about our fundamental concepts and beliefs:

⁴⁷ To be sure, there will be a sense in which the way the world is in relation to thought depends on the way the world is independently of any such relation. See Haag/Hoepfner (2019: 86–88).

⁴⁸ Nagel (2011: 12). See in fn. 40 above.

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A positive metaphysical verdict [e.g., about causation] must differ in some way from everything we believe that is expressed in causal [...] terms. It seems possible to hold beliefs of those kinds with no metaphysical opinions one way or the other. What then would a positive metaphysical verdict add to what is already expressed in those beliefs? How would it contribute to our understanding of the world? (Stroud 2011a: 158)

What is added – and what was added unwittingly by Stroud himself – is a metaphysical conception of the world: a conception of its objectivity and independence. A positive metaphysical verdict thus comes into reach for us if we metaphysically understand the world we judge about as the world in relation to thought and its form, i.e., as thinkable at all, in the same way as it came to be out of reach when Stroud tried to think of the world as it is independently of any relation to thought whatsoever. It thus is *a conception of the world as it relates to thought* that metaphysics can add to what we believe anyway, thereby even giving some metaphysical grounding to what we believe through the form of thought. Of course, I have only sketched the very idea of such a conception here.⁴⁹

If it can now be established, in addition, that Stroud's stronger notion of the world and its independence cannot be considered the default, and that instead the weaker notion has to be so considered because it alone can be justified as the proper notion of the world we are trying to think about, then Stroud's notion should be given up as capturing what we want from objectivity. Hence, it is important to note that it is not just the appearance or dissolution of an aporia in metaphysics that speaks in favor of or against any of these notions of objectivity: It is not only the fact that a notion of objectivity in terms of the independence from any relation to thought leads into an aporia in metaphysics that speaks against it; and it is not only the fact that a notion of objectivity in terms of the

⁴⁹ Towards the end of his review, Nagel helpfully suggests: 'Stroud's general point is that the metaphysical project is doomed because it begins with an unsustainable separation between ourselves and our thoughts, on the one hand, and the world, on the other.' (Nagel 2011: 12) While Stroud in fact still perpetuates such a strict separation with his notion of objectivity, I propose that instead of giving up hope that the metaphysical project could ever lead to any satisfying results because of this, we should rather give up the separation between thought and world in the strong and absolute form that Stroud takes for granted with his notion of objectivity, which is exactly what dooms the metaphysical project from its very beginning, as Nagel convincingly notes.

independence from subjects and acts of thinking and perceiving avoids this aporia that speaks in its favor. Rather, *the latter notion does have its origin or source in the way we conceive of thought and perception, while the former does not.*⁵⁰ This is why the notion in terms of the independence from subjects and their acts of thinking and perceiving can be justified as the proper notion, while Stroud's notion cannot be so justified. To support this, I will now present how Kant – convincingly, to my mind – accounts for the origin of *both* these notions of objectivity, whereby one is shown to be *our own* and the other, by contrast, as *exactly not*. This brings me to the final section of my essay.

4. Kant on the origin of two contrasting notions of objectivity

Kant explains the origin of our notion of objectivity in terms of the independence from subjects and acts of thinking by giving an account of what it means to relate to an object in thought and perception (*a.*)⁵¹ And he explains the origin of a contrasting notion of objectivity in terms of the independence from any relation to thought at all by giving an idea of how other possible beings beyond the limit of thought would relate to their objects, in contrast to us (*b.*)⁵² I will take these two origin stories in turn. Thus, I will begin with what objectivity amounts to for us, to then treat its contrast. In this way, I try to show that Stroud's notion of objectivity is not our own but rather its very limit or contrast.

a. Our objectivity

Kant analyzes our capacity to think by investigating what representational abilities and acts are required to realize the end of the understanding or what he calls a 'cognition through concepts' (A68/B93, A69/B94), by which he means

⁵⁰ See in fn. 45 above.

⁵¹ For a detailed and comprehensive reconstruction see Hoepfner (2021: 96–104, 110–117, and esp. 211–245). I have reused, in modified form, some material from Hoepfner (2021: 231–38 and 2022: 465f, 470–472, 479–480) in parts of this section (*a.*). I thank de Gruyter for permission to do so.

⁵² I have reused, in modified form, some material from Hoepfner (2021: 70–75) in parts of this section (*b.*). I thank de Gruyter for permission to do so.

a reference of general concepts to individual objects. (Bear with me through some specificities of Kant's view, it should become clear in due course why and how I use them here.) It is only in *judgment*, Kant opens his argument, that concepts are referred to objects since judgments are the only context in which other representations of objects can mediate their reference.⁵³ Due to the *generality* of concepts – the fact that they can apply to several objects –, their reference to objects is always only *mediate*, i.e., essentially mediated by other representations.⁵⁴ Thus, concepts are general representations in that they stand for kinds or general features of objects, namely, for what is common to individual objects.⁵⁵ This means that if they are referred to objects, they are always referred to them mediated by the representation of a kind or general feature of those objects. They never pick out an individual object directly. It is because their reference requires mediation by other representations that concepts are essentially 'predicates of possible judgments' (A69/B94).

Now, if the mediating representation in a judgment – i.e., the logical subject that mediates the reference of the predicate – is itself another concept, then it only *specifies* that reference and its own reference will require mediation in turn. As a concept, it can again only mediately refer to objects, mediated by the representation of a kind or general feature of objects. Purely conceptual representation would thus lead to an infinite regress of mediated reference. The only way to stop this regress is to, at some point, refer concepts to representations that are not themselves concepts: representations that *immediately* refer to and thus *individuate* objects. For Kant, the only such representations are sense perceptions or *sensible intuitions* of objects.⁵⁶ As a cognition through concepts, every judgment therefore needs to contain some reference to an immediate representation of the object as its ultimate subject – namely, to a (possible) empirical intuition – to refer concepts to objects.⁵⁷

⁵³ See A68/B93.

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*

⁵⁵ See A320/B376–377; *Log* 9: 91; *FM* 20: 325.

⁵⁶ See A19/B33, A68/B93, A155–156/B194–195; *V-MP-L2/Pölit* 28: 546.

⁵⁷ See A68–69/B93–94; *FM* 20: 273; *Br* 11: 38. – In a reasoning closely related to Kant's, Strawson argues that for any purely conceptual descriptive reference to individual objects to be possible it is

Since the mediate reference of concepts to objects ultimately requires sensible intuition, what is still needed at this point is an explanation of how sensible intuitions represent their individual objects. According to Kant, it is a so-called *act of synthesis* through which we bring about the ‘unity of intuition therethrough an object is given’ (B144n), i.e., ‘that unity [...] which must be encountered in a manifold of cognition insofar as it stands in relation to an object.’ (A109) The unity of intuitions is that by which they represent individual objects of the senses or have their singular content. Correspondingly, Kant introduces his account of a synthesis of intuition as an attempt to explain representational content, stating that ‘the synthesis alone is that which properly collects the elements for cognitions and unifies them to a certain content’ (A77–78/B103). An account of synthesis is thus motivated by a need to explain how our mind can ‘relate to objects’ (A97). While the form of a representation is the way it represents its objects, its content is ‘its relation to the object’ (A55/B79),⁵⁸ namely, the representational relation in which it stands to its objects.

What specific acts of synthesis do we need to exercise to constitute representational content? Kant’s account of synthesis takes the shape of an enumeration of representational abilities and acts that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for constituting the unity of intuition and, thereby, representational content. The act types of synthesis are called apprehension, reproduction, and recognition.⁵⁹ The token exercises of these act types combine a manifold of sense impressions given independently of acts of representing through the understanding⁶⁰ in receptivity (for us humans: within the forms of time and/or space),⁶¹ which is the passive ability to even have sense impressions, i.e., presentations of simple sensible qualities such as color, weight,

required that corresponding demonstrative references to these objects on the basis of sense perception are possible as well. See his (1959), Ch. 1. See also in fn. 10 above.

⁵⁸ See also A58/B83, A62–63/B87.

⁵⁹ See A97–110.

⁶⁰ See B129, B145.

⁶¹ See A19/B33, A50/B74.

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etc. brought about by objects of sensibility.⁶² According to Kant, representing individual objects in sensible intuition requires

- i) *apprehending a manifold* of sense impressions ‘as such’ (A99) by ‘running through the manifold and then taking it together’ (A99), i.e., to apprehend it as the representation of a manifold of sensible qualities, which is responsible for *representing the perceivable qualitative features* of an object of sensible intuition, e.g., the color, weight, etc. of a tree;
- ii) *reproducing homogeneous parts* of an intuition (spatial and/or temporal parts), i.e., ‘to grasp one of these representations [of parts] after the other’ (A102) and ‘reproduce them while going on to the following’ (A102) so that ‘a whole representation’ (A102) can originate, which is responsible for *representing the formally homogeneous whole* of an object of sensible intuition, e.g., the extension and shape of a tree;
- iii) *recognizing the unity* of the above acts of apprehension and reproduction as partial acts of the very same act of synthesis, i.e., to have ‘consciousness of that unity of synthesis’ (A103)⁶³ and thus recognize that ‘what we think is the very same [...] in the series of representations’ (A103), which is responsible for *representing the unity of individual objects and their features* as they are represented through these acts, say, the unity of a substance and its features, e.g., the unity of a tree and its qualitative and formal characteristics.

Leaving aside the specificities of Kant’s account of synthesis – which, by the way, form the foundation for his account of the categories⁶⁴ –, it is with the synthesis of recognition that the origin of our concept of an object is explained, which is what I am primarily interested in here. ‘Without consciousness that what we think is the very same [...] in the series of representations’ (A103), Kant

⁶² See A20–21/B35, B44; FM 20: 268f.; V-MP/Schön 28: 482f.

⁶³ See A108, B138.

⁶⁴ In short: the act of *apprehension* explains the categories of *quality*, *reproduction* explains *quantity*, and *recognition* explains *relation*. See Hoepfner (2021: 245–292). See also Hoepfner (2022: 469–474).

argues, each of these acts would constitute a new and separate representing. Only if I consciously refer the qualitative and formal features represented in apprehension and reproduction to one and the same objective unity do my acts of synthesis cohere as acts of representing objectively. Being conscious of the numerical identity of what is represented throughout synthesis allows me to represent, on the one hand, qualitative and formal features as features of unitary objects that are distinct from us and our acts of synthesis⁶⁵ and to grasp, on the other hand, the identity of the act of synthesis. Kant thereby essentially links *the consciousness of an object to the consciousness of the act of thinking of it*. Only if I recognize the various acts of my thinking as partial acts of the very same act am I able to understand the object of these acts as one and the same object. ‘For this concept [i.e., the concept of an object] consists only in the consciousness of that unity of synthesis.’ (A103) The concept of an object is thus, at its very core, the consciousness of the unity of synthesis through which we represent the object. To the one object of various representations in this way corresponds the one act of representing it.

It is in this connection that Kant asks the fundamental question: ‘What is meant by speaking of an object as corresponding to cognition and thus distinct from it?’ (A104) And he answers

that our thought of the relation of all cognition to its object carries something of necessity since it [the object] is regarded as that which is against our cognitions being determined at random or arbitrarily rather than a priori in a certain way: since insofar as they are to refer to an object they also necessarily agree in relation to it, i.e., they must have that unity which constitutes the concept of an object. (A104–105)

This ‘thought of the relation of all cognition to its object’ (A104) includes, first of all, the very distinction between *a representation* and *its object*. They are distinguished as *that which represents* and *that which is represented*, where what represents, the representation, is supposed to agree with what is represented, the object. This in turn includes the idea that a representation is successful – what above was called *objective success* – just in case it agrees with its object.

⁶⁵ See A103–105.

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This is what Kant speaks of as the ‘necessity’ or ‘non-arbitrariness’ in relation to the object: representations must agree with their objects if they are to refer to them successfully. This claim to represent an object at all – what above was called *objective purport* – is only raised by representations if they possess that unity through which they refer to an object at all: ‘that unity which constitutes the concept of an object’ (A105). And representations do possess this unity, again, just in case they are partial acts of one and the same act of representation through which they all represent the very same object. An object thus is what its representations have to agree with if they are to be successful.

Accordingly, the object of thought, in general, is just the other side of the act of thinking of it. Against this background, Kant is able to explain the consciousness of the object by reference to the consciousness of the act of representing it. The consciousness of the act of representing an object already contains the consciousness of its object – and *vice versa* – in that it is thought of as what the act purports to be about. In this way, the basic consciousness of the distinction between a representation and its object is first of all obtained, allowing us to understand our states, abilities, and acts as representations of objects in the first place.⁶⁶ In the consciousness of the act through which we think of an object we also have, at the same time, a consciousness of the object we think in that very act by distinguishing it from the act of thinking of it, namely, as what is thought of through that act. This is where our notion of objectivity originates, conceived of as a feature of representations that are about something distinct and independent of them. And this notion not only *allows* for a relation to thought, it even *essentially contains* it. *To be an object thus means to correspond to a (possible) act of thinking, i.e., to be the other side of an act of thinking of it.* In this way, Kant’s account of an object turns out to be a sophisticated version of what already resulted from Stroud’s concise remarks on

⁶⁶ Stroud himself emphasizes the importance of ‘some such fundamental distinction between a person’s thoughts and what those thoughts are about’ (2011a: 132) for Kant’s reasoning: To be capable of judgment, for Kant, ‘requires a capacity to think of things’ being so or not so independently of the thinking of it. And that requires making sense of a distinction between a thinking subject with his or her thoughts and experiences on the one hand and something or other that is independent of a thinking subject on the other—the truth or falsity of what the thinker thinks or experiences to be so.’ (*ibid.*)

how we think of causal connections and objects of perception. At its very core, objectivity consists in the distinctness and independence of what is represented, i.e., the object, from subjects and their acts of representing it.⁶⁷

b. Other objectivity

Kant introduces our understanding or our capacity to think as a *discursive* as opposed to an *intuitive* understanding.⁶⁸ (Again, bear with me through some specificities of Kant's view.) He thereby elucidates our cognitive capacity by delineating its limit and thinking of the other side of that limit.⁶⁹ Hence, to say of what kind our cognitive capacity is also means to say, by negation, of what kind it is *not*. Kant does this concerning both our *understanding* and the *intuitions* we are able to have. Our understanding is *discursive* and *not intuitive*; our intuitions are *sensible* and *not intellectual*.

To say that our intuitions are sensible means, in the first place, *that objects are not given to us just by being thought by us*. After all, we are able to think of objects that do not exist or are different from how we think of them. Our understanding is *not* of the kind that objects are given to us just by being thought by us. In this case, the role of the intuitions we have, namely to give us individual objects, and the role of the understanding we have, namely to think of them, would simply coincide. An understanding through which that would be possible is an *intuitive* understanding whose representations are *intellectual* intuitions. The intuitions we can and do have are, by contrast, *sensible* intuitions that are dependent on the fact that our senses are influenced by their objects.⁷⁰ For us,

⁶⁷ 'Object is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united. Now, every unification of representations requires unity of consciousness in the synthesis of representations. Consequently, the unity of consciousness is that which alone constitutes the reference of representations to an object, thus their objective validity, consequently, that they become cognitions [...]' (B137) See also B139 and A250. For Kant's notion of objectivity in terms of the distinctness and independence from subjects and acts of representing see B141-142; *Prolegomena* 4: 298-299; *Br* 11: 515. See Hoepfner (2021: 58-62).

⁶⁸ See A67-68/B92-93.

⁶⁹ See *Prolegomena* 4: 352, 360-361.

⁷⁰ See B72.

the role of intuition to give us objects and the role of the understanding to think of them essentially fall apart. *We are not able to produce intuitions just through thinking; we only have intuitions of objects as a result of the fact that these objects are given to our senses.*

In general, an understanding is the capacity 'to produce representations or the spontaneity of cognition [...]' (A51/B75) Kinds of understanding are distinguished from each other by the kinds of representations that can be produced through them. A *discursive* understanding is the capacity to produce *concepts*; an *intuitive* understanding is the capacity to produce *intuitions*.⁷¹ Our understanding is of the kind that through it we can have no intuitions but only concepts: it is a *discursive* understanding or a capacity for a 'cognition through concepts' (A68/B93, A69/B94). To have a discursive understanding is to depend on sensible intuitions for the givenness of objects. We possess, as Kant remarks in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, a 'discursive understanding in need of images [i.e., intuitions]' (5: 408). To be able to produce intuitions spontaneously would be the same as not being dependent on the influence of objects for intuitions but to be able to bring to existence these objects just through their representation. Thus, to have an intuitive understanding would mean to be able to produce objects through intellectual intuitions.⁷² An intuitive understanding is 'an understanding through the representation of which at once existed the objects of this representation [...]' (B139) An understanding 'that would intuit by itself' would thus be one 'that would not represent given objects, but through the representation of which the objects themselves would be given or produced [...]' (B145).

The concepts of an intuitive understanding and of intellectual intuitions are *limiting concepts*, as Kant calls them, i.e., concepts through which we think of the other side of our cognitive capacity by negation.⁷³ Such concepts are 'only of negative use' (A255/B311) in that they do not allow for any positive determination of their objects. That our understanding is *discursive* describes

⁷¹ See V-MP-L1/Pölitz 28: 328; V-MP/Mron 29: 888.

⁷² See A256/B312; V-Lo/Philippi 14: 361; V-MP-L1/Pölitz 28: 241; V-MP/Mron 29: 880.

⁷³ See A254-255/B310f.; KU 5: 401-404.

the nature and the limit of our capacity to think: we have an understanding through which we can produce concepts – but no intuitions. If we think of the other side of that limit, we think of an understanding that can, unlike ours, produce intuitions and their objects, namely, an *intuitive* understanding. That our intuitions are *sensible* describes the nature and the limit of those representations through which objects are given to us: we have intuitions that can only give us objects if these objects influence our senses – and not just by being thought. If we think of the other side of that limit, we think of intuitions the objects of which, unlike those of our sensible intuitions, are given just by being thought, namely, *intellectual* intuitions.

According to Kant, we even *have to* think of the other side of the limit of our cognitive capacity in this way if we are to understand it as a *particular kind* of cognitive capacity, specifically, as the kind that is dependent on the sensible givenness of objects. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant explicitly says this about the concept of an intellectual intuition. Retrospectively, he says there that ‘we had to have another possible intuition in mind in the *Critique of P[ure] R[eason]* if ours was to be deemed as of a particular kind [...]’ (5: 405) For the intuition that we can have to be a particular kind of intuition it in turn suffices, according to Kant, that one be able to think of another kind without contradiction (i.e., one that is logically possible): it suffices that the concept of an intuition does not already contain that it is sensible. It is in this sense that Kant can say in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: ‘one cannot claim of sensibility that it is the only possible kind of intuition.’ (A254/B310)

And exactly because a kind of intuition other than sensible intuition can be thought, so can so-called *things in themselves* as its objects.⁷⁴ The concept of things in themselves, like the concept of an intuitive understanding, is a limiting concept in Kant.⁷⁵ Things in themselves are conceived of as *the objects of an intuitive understanding*, i.e., as the objects of that capacity through which intellectual intuitions can be produced. Through that capacity, objects can be known as they are in themselves, independently of both receptivity and its forms

⁷⁴ See B72, B310; FM 20: 267.

⁷⁵ See B310–312; KU 5: 405.

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and of the form of thought and its constituent concepts (the categories).⁷⁶ Since they are no objects of sensible intuition, things in themselves are, at least with respect to their positive features, unknowable to us.⁷⁷ We can only judge negatively that they do not possess any features that go back to the form or synthesis of intuition (i.e., space, time, and the categories).⁷⁸

Leaving aside, again, the specificities of Kant's account, it seems that Stroud's notion of objectivity in terms of the complete independence from any relation to thought corresponds to Kant's notion of things in themselves or can be seen as what it really comes to when explicated in terms of Kant's notion. If we are to think of the world as it is independently of thought and, accordingly, independently of the most general and necessary form of thought, we are to think of a world that we, as thinking beings who have to think according to the form of thought, simply cannot think objectively. *To relate to the world as it is completely independently of any relation to thought would only seem possible for beings who do not relate to the world through the form of thought*: beings that are neither dependent on sense perception for their reference to individual objects nor on the form of thought that is required, among other things, exactly because we are both thinkers and perceivers.⁷⁹ Thus, while we might be able to make sense of Stroud's notion of the world in terms of the complete independence from thought after all, if only negatively and indeterminately, there remains little doubt that this notion of the world, of its objectivity and independence, is not our own: that it is not the proper notion of the world we are trying to think about. It instead is its very contrast or limit. But if that is indeed accepted as

⁷⁶ See A249; B307, B311–312; FM 20: 267.

⁷⁷ See B45, B59, B332–333, B522.

⁷⁸ See B56, B59, B61, B164, B306–309, B312, B520–521; A251–252, B358.

⁷⁹ In all of Kant, Strawson, and Stroud, the fact that the respective candidate for most general and necessary form of thought is required to think of the objective, independent world goes back, among other things, to the fact that we are thinkers who are also perceivers, or that we are beings who are in some way or other dependent on sense perception in their thought of an objective, independent world. See section 1 above.

true, then Stroud's metaphysical aporia, which depends on this notion, never even arises.⁸⁰

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