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To Reply, or Not to Reply, That Is the Question

Descriptive Metaphysics and the Sceptical Challenge

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1. Introduction

Since Barry Stroud (1968) articulated his influential criticism of transcendental arguments a consensus has grown that the choice between refuting scepticism by invoking a robust Kantian notion of the synthetic a priori and disregarding the sceptical challenge in the manner of the Humean naturalist is too stark. There are more options available than is suggested by what is often (rightly or wrongly, possibly wrongly) taken to be Strawson's intellectual trajectory from *Individuals* and the *Bounds of Sense* to *Scepticism and Naturalism* (Stern 1999a). One need not choose between a robust form of transcendental argument that seeks to defeat the sceptic head on and conceding defeat altogether: there is an intermediate logical space between these two extremes (Stern 1999b, 2000). This chapter locates Strawson's descriptive metaphysics in the debate concerning the scope of transcendental arguments, how much or little they can achieve, and how they position themselves vis-à-vis the sceptical challenge. I argue that descriptive metaphysics occupies an intermediate logical space between the confrontational posture assumed by the sort of transcendental arguments which were the target of Stroud's criticism and the quietist stance of the Humean naturalist, but also that descriptive metaphysics claims this logical space in a very distinctive way, one that differs from the way in which this middle ground has recently been appropriated by advocates of modest transcendental strategies. Modest transcendental strategists accept the sceptical challenge as meaningful and partially (but only partially) rebut it by developing transcendental arguments with modest epistemic goals that curb the ontological ambitions of truth-directed transcendental arguments. They distinguish between the (justification) sceptic who claims one has no good reason to hold certain structural beliefs (e.g. in the existence of the external world or in causal connections) and the (knowledge) sceptic who claims that one

cannot know whether such justified beliefs are true. Having drawn this distinction, modest transcendental strategists argue that transcendental arguments can answer the justification sceptic but not the knowledge sceptic. This chapter argues that although descriptive metaphysics has a great deal in common with modest transcendental strategies, there are small and yet very significant differences in the way in which the modest transcendental strategist and the descriptive metaphysician position themselves in relation to the sceptical challenge. In particular, the distinction between internal and external reasons/justification, which is invoked by modest transcendental strategies to distance themselves from ambitious truth-directed transcendental arguments (arguments that seek to address the knowledge sceptic), does not play a role in the descriptive metaphysician's 'response'[1] to the sceptic. Rather than distinguishing (as modest transcendental strategies do) between the sceptic who claims there is no justification to believe, for example, in the existence of the external world, and the sceptic who claims that we cannot know whether our justified beliefs in the existence of the external world are true (and therefore amount to knowledge of the external world's existence), descriptive metaphysics seeks to show that the sceptic has cornered herself into a position from which she can make no reasonable contribution to debate and is therefore not a genuine partner in conversation.

C9P2   Section 2 considers Barry Stroud's original criticism of transcendental arguments and how modest transcendental strategists have revised the goals of transcendental arguments in the wake of this criticism. Sections 3 and 4 discuss what I take to be the descriptive metaphysician's strategy, how it differs from the modest transcendental strategy, and whether it ultimately collapses into a form of Humean naturalism. I argue that the descriptive metaphysician neither *replies* to the sceptic in the manner of the modest transcendental strategist nor concedes unqualified defeat to the sceptic in the manner of the Humean naturalist. Unlike the modest transcendental strategist, the descriptive metaphysician does not espouse the distinction between internal and external reasons/justification on which the divide between modest and ambitious transcendental arguments rests. Unlike the Humean naturalist, the descriptive metaphysician takes scepticism to be idle, *not* because the sceptical challenge has no influence on the way in which we are inclined to think and what we are inclined to believe, but rather because in denying the conditions for any reasoned argument to occur, the sceptic has placed herself outside the space of reasons. Scepticism should be ignored not because it is powerless to affect the way we think and what we believe, but because it undermines the conditions of the possibility for rational argument. Section 5 illustrates how the ambitious transcendental strategist, the modest transcendental strategist,

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[1] I use the term 'response' rather than 'reply' to signal a form of engagement which does not necessarily require a reply in the standard sense in which, for example, Descartes is deemed to be 'replying' to the sceptic.

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the Humean naturalist, and the descriptive metaphysician would engage with the sceptic through a concrete example.

C9P3   My view is that the characterization of the intermediate logical space occupied by descriptive metaphysics offered here captures the spirit of Strawson's project (to some extent, if not in every respect), but if I were to be mistaken about ascribing this conception of descriptive metaphysics to Strawson, I would be content with advancing this reconstruction as a normative claim about how the descriptive metaphysician should position herself vis-à-vis the sceptical challenge.

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2. The Parting of the Ways: Modest and Ambitious Transcendental Arguments

C9P4   Transcendental arguments are often classified according to whether their goal is to establish conclusions about an external, mind-independent world, or about the belief structures of the epistemic subject. Those transcendental arguments which aim to establish ontological conclusions concerning the necessary structures of reality are said to be 'ambitious' and transcendental arguments which aim to establish claims concerning the necessary structures of our beliefs are said to be 'modest'. Both kinds of argument make necessary claims, the former about the nature of reality, the latter about the nature of experience. This external/internal divide between so-called 'ambitious' or 'truth-directed' and 'modest' or 'belief-directed' transcendental arguments (Stern 2000, 10) is largely the legacy of Stroud's attack on what *he perceived* to be Strawson's attempt to defend a robust Kantian notion of the synthetic a priori in his earlier work (*Individuals*, 1959 and especially *The Bounds of Sense*, 1966).

C9P5   Stroud (1968) mounted an important challenge to what have since come to be known as 'ambitious' or 'truth-directed' transcendental arguments. Transcendental arguments, he argued, aim to establish anti-sceptical conclusions. They try to do so indirectly by arguing from a fact of experience to the conditions of its possibility. It is a fact of experience, for example, that we make a distinction between inner and outer objects; space is a condition of the possibility for making the distinction between inner and outer objects. Therefore, space must be real, or one would not be able to distinguish between inner and outer representations. Of course, this is not the conclusion that Kant drew in the Transcendental Aesthetic. Kant thought that space is a form of representation which is transcendentally ideal. Stroud was concerned with the ways in which transcendental arguments are appropriated to develop robust anti-sceptical conclusions concerning the nature of things, rather than the nature of our representation of them. Having construed transcendental arguments as establishing substantive claims about the nature of reality rather than idealist conclusions about the nature of our experience, Stroud objected that transcendental arguments leave open a gap between what must be believed to be

the case for certain claims or distinctions to be possible, and what must be the case. Exposing the conceptual connection between the ability to distinguish inner from outer objects and the conditions that make it possible (space), for example, has no implications for the way things are independently of how objects have to be represented in order to be experienced as external. The sceptic, he argued, 'distinguishes between the conditions necessary for a paradigmatic or warranted (and therefore meaningful) use of an expression or statement, and the conditions under which it is true' (Stroud 1968, 255). One cannot, therefore, defeat scepticism by invoking the conditions of the possibility of meaningfulness or intelligibility (as transcendental arguments do) without covertly presupposing the ability to verify the claims arrived at transcendentally, thereby rendering the oblique way in which transcendental arguments reach their conclusions effectively superfluous. If one could verify the conclusions of transcendental arguments by checking them against a mind-independent reality, then one would not need to appeal to transcendental arguments in order to vindicate our entitlement to make certain distinctions. Transcendental arguments are therefore either redundant, because the conclusions they establish could be arrived at by other means, or they deliver only meagre epistemic conclusions (for a discussion of Stroud's criticism see Stern 2000, 44; Stern 1999a, 6).

C9P6   Stroud's original criticism took all transcendental arguments to be ambitious, truth-directed arguments intent on refuting the knowledge sceptic by establishing synthetic a priori claims which, in his view, cannot be arrived at by means of conceptual analysis. This criticism prompted a reconsideration of the goal of transcendental arguments which resulted in the establishment of a distinction between 'ambitious' or 'truth-directed' and 'modest' or 'belief-directed' transcendental arguments, a distinction that had played no role at the time of Stroud's original 1968 criticism of Strawson.

C9P7   Modest transcendental arguments, like ambitious ones, address the matter of our entitlement or right to hold certain beliefs, the *quid iuris* question, but they take the task of validation to be directed at beliefs rather than knowledge. They tell us what structural beliefs one must necessarily hold in order for some less structural beliefs to be possible but stop short of making the further inference that such structural beliefs are true. They do not, therefore, seek to close the gap between what one is justified in believing and genuine knowledge. On the contrary, they deliberately remain epistemically humble: modest transcendental strategies accept that the gap between justified belief and knowledge (justified true belief) cannot be closed and that, while it remains open, the sceptic can exploit this gap to raise doubts concerning our ability to provide external validation for our justificatory practices.[2] The divide between modest and ambitious transcendental

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[2] Stern describes the kind of sceptic who doubts our beliefs are justified as the Humean sceptic and the sceptic who doubts whether the norms of justification are true as the Cartesian sceptic.

arguments may therefore be said to hinge on a distinction between internal justification (a notion of justification that invokes the coherence of our beliefs) and external justification, which requires more than mere coherence between beliefs.

C9P8   Advocates of modest transcendental arguments tend to concede Stroud's criticism but argue that transcendental arguments can succeed in the more modest aim of vindicating the epistemic right or entitlement to have certain structuring beliefs. One need not give up hope of answering the normative question of one's entitlement to hold certain beliefs (the *quid iuris* question) and thus espouse a naturalism with a Humean flavour, as the later Strawson (allegedly) did in *Scepticism and Naturalism* (1985), in order to heed Stroud's renewal of Hume's admonition that no ontological conclusions follow from conceptual analysis. What needs to be done instead is to acknowledge that the necessary conclusions arrived at by means of transcendental argumentation concern only the structure of our beliefs about reality. For the modest transcendental strategist, the later Strawson's naturalistic turn is therefore an unwarranted overreaction to Stroud's criticism of his earlier work: the thing to do is to concede a partial defeat to the knowledge sceptic in order to claim a partial victory over the justificatory sceptic (Stern 1999b).

C9P9   While modest transcendental strategies avoid Stroud's criticism, the contrast between an internalist and externalist notion of justification that they invoke to distance themselves from ambitious transcendental strategies ultimately raises the worry that too much has been conceded to the sceptic. For example, Robert Stern's claim that all that remains of Kant's idealism in the modest transcendental strategy 'is a kind of epistemological humility characteristic of this purely justificatory claim, that though our beliefs are warranted and rational in this "internal" sense they may still fail to correspond to how things really are in themselves, so that scepticism is still viable at that level' (Stern 1999b, 58) concedes precisely that our justified beliefs do not amount to knowledge because they lack 'external' validation. It is therefore not altogether surprising to find that modest transcendental arguments are sometimes described as articulating a strategy of 'sophisticated capitulation' (Sacks 1999, 67) to the sceptic, a criticism that echoes the charge of subjective idealism and higher-level scepticism that Hegel raised against Kant's transcendental idealism.[3]

3. Descriptive Metaphysics and Modest Transcendental Strategies

C9P10   Stroud's criticism of transcendental arguments was influential in establishing a distinction between truth-directed and belief-directed transcendental arguments

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[3] Only echoes as modest transcendental strategies are not committed to transcendental idealism in Kant's sense.

which has since become canonical. It is unclear, however, that the argument
Strawson developed in *Individuals* was obviously aimed at rebutting the sceptic
in the manner of ambitious transcendental arguments, as Stroud assumed (Hacker
2003, 52ff.). At the beginning of *Individuals* Strawson makes it clear that descrip-
tive metaphysics differs from conceptual analysis not 'in kind or intention, but
only in scope and generality' (Strawson 1959, 9). The difference is one of scope
rather than kind because descriptive metaphysics aims to expose the most general
features of our conceptual system. By characterizing the difference between
descriptive metaphysics and conceptual analysis as one of scope, rather than
intent or kind, Strawson distances himself from the view that the task of concep-
tual analysis in metaphysics is to advance empirical knowledge by making factual
claims. This of course is a statement of intent, and many philosophers have failed
to live up to their stated goals, but what it signals is that Strawson did not envisage
the sort of conceptual analysis practised by the descriptive metaphysician to be
advancing factual claims about reality; descriptive metaphysics does not aim at
delivering the kind of synthetic a priori knowledge which, by Stroud's light, is
sought by ambitious transcendental arguments. If anything, Strawson's statement
of intent may give rise to the opposite suspicion, namely that descriptive meta-
physics is epistemically humble in the manner of modest transcendental argu-
ments and, for this very reason, does not even try to provide the sort of
'metaphysical' knowledge which Stroud thought transcendental arguments aim
(but fail) to provide without having to exceed the bounds of experience.

C9P11   In the following I consider whether the sort of transcendental argument that
Strawson adopts in *Individuals* may be regarded as a modest transcendental
strategy. I argue that while descriptive metaphysics has much in common with
modest transcendental arguments it differs from them in one crucial respect.
Rather than taking a position on either side of the modest/ambitious fence,
descriptive metaphysics rejects the contrast between internal and external justifi-
cation on which the distinction between modest and ambitious transcendental
arguments hinges. Rejecting the divide between internal and external justification
therefore enables Strawson's descriptive metaphysics to circumvent the need to
choose between modest and ambitious transcendental arguments. I begin by
outlining the Kantian-inspired transcendental strategy that Strawson develops in
Individuals to uncover the conditions of the possibility for the reidentification of
particulars, and then consider how Strawson addresses the Carnapian framework
question, which Stroud claims transcendental arguments cannot answer. I argue
that when Strawson addressed this question, in 'The "Justification" of Induction'
(Strawson 1952), he answered it in a way that suggests descriptive metaphysics
does not pursue a strategy of epistemological humility.

C9P12   Strawson's discussion of the conditions for the identification and reidentifica-
tion of particulars in *Individuals* takes its cue from Kant's discussion of the
representation of space in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1985 A 23/B 48). In the

transcendental aesthetic Kant argued that the representation of space is necessary in order to make the distinction between inner and outer objects and between objects which are qualitatively identical and yet numerically distinct. Without the representation of space, Kant argued, we would be unable to distinguish between, say, the *representation of a chair* and *the chair*; we would also be unable to distinguish numerically objects that are qualitatively indiscernible, such as two qualitatively indiscernible copies of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. For objects can be said to exist independently of me only if they occupy a portion of space other than mine; and qualitatively identical objects can be said to be numerically distinct from one another only if they are thought of as occupying different portions of space. Having argued that the representation of space is a condition of the possibility for making such distinctions, Kant inquired into the status of the representation of space and claimed that it is a transcendentally ideal form of sensibility, a feature of *our* way of representing objects. Strawson's discussion focuses on how claims concerning the numerical identity of objects which are not continuously perceived are possible. Consider, for example (not Strawson's example), Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Is the painting of the *Mona Lisa* that I am looking at now the *same* painting that was in the Louvre yesterday? When we ask questions of this kind, we assume that what is meant by 'same' is not *qualitatively* same but *numerically* same. In doing so, we invoke a distinction between qualitative and numerical identity that cannot be read off the nature of our experiences of the *Mona Lisa* (assuming, for the sake of argument, that there is nothing that would differentiate our experience of the *Mona Lisa* today from our experience of the *Mona Lisa* yesterday from a qualitative point of view). If the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity cannot be read off the appearances, Strawson asks how such a distinction is possible:

C9P13   Where we say 'the same' of what is not continuously observed, *we think* we can as clearly make just this same distinction [between numerical and qualitative identity, my note]. But can we? Since spatio-temporally continuous existence is, by hypothesis, observed *neither* in the case where we are inclined to speak of qualitative identity *nor* in the case where we are inclined to speak of numerical identity, by what right do we suppose that there is a fundamental difference between these cases, or that there is just *the* difference in question?

C9P14   (Strawson 1959, 34)

C9P15   This distinction is possible, he claims, because we operate with the idea of a single spatio-temporal system. That we operate with the conceptual scheme of a single spatio-temporal framework is confirmed by the fact that we are committed, at least in some cases, to claims concerning the numerical identity of objects which are not continuously observed (such as the case of the *Mona Lisa*). As Strawson says:

C9P16   There is no doubt that we have the idea of a single spatio-temporal system of material things; the idea of every material thing at any time being spatially related, in various ways at various times, to every other at every time. There is no doubt at all that this *is* our conceptual scheme. Now I say that a *condition* of our having this conceptual scheme is the unquestioning acceptance of particular-identity in at least some cases of non-continuous observation.

C9P17   (Strawson 1959, 35)

C9P18   The conceptual scheme of a single spatio-temporal system is entailed in a Carnapian way (Carnap 1950) by a commitment to the identification of objects as numerically the same at least in *some* cases. By Strawson's lights one cannot simultaneously hold (a) that there are some cases of numerical identity and (b) reject the conditions (the conceptual scheme) that makes the reidentification of particulars as *numerically* the same possible.

C9P19   Strawson further claims that sceptical questions concerning the numerical sameness of temporarily unobserved particulars, questions such as 'Is the *Mona Lisa* that I am admiring now numerically the same as that which was in the Louvre yesterday?' invoke the conceptual scheme of a single spatio-temporal framework. For he claims:

C9P20   There would be no question of *doubt* about the identity of an item in one system with an item in another. For such a doubt makes sense only if the two systems are not independent, if they are parts, in some way related, of a single system which

C9P21   includes them both.   (Strawson 1959, 35)

C9P22   Doubt concerning the numerical identity of this or that particular could not arise independently of the possession of the conceptual scheme of a single spatio-temporal system. Strawson's transcendental argument asks two questions. The first is: 'How are claims concerning the numerical identity of particulars which are not continuously observed possible?' The second is: 'How can the (sceptical) question "how do you know that this is a case of numerical identity rather than mere qualitative sameness" arise in the first instance?' His reply to the first question is that the distinction between qualitative and numerical identity is possible against the background assumption of a single spatio-temporal scheme. His reply to the second is that the sceptical question could not arise unless the sceptic invoked the framework of a single spatio-temporal system that allowed him to conceive of the distinction between qualitative and numerical sameness in the first instance. The very possibility of sceptical doubt concerning the numerical identity of particulars therefore presupposes possession of the criteria for making the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity which is being put into question:

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This gives us a more profound characterization of the sceptic's position. He pretends to accept a conceptual scheme, but at the same time quietly rejects one of the conditions of its employment. Thus his doubts are unreal, not simply because they are logically irresolvable doubts, but because they amount to the rejection of the whole conceptual scheme within which alone such doubts make sense . . . . For the whole process of reasoning only starts because the scheme is as it is.   (Strawson 1959, 35)

This reminds us of the rejoinder often given to the sceptic in the first Meditation of Descartes, namely the sceptic who claims that it is not possible to distinguish between dreaming and waking experience. Such a doubt seems to be self-defeating because the very fact that one is making such a distinction (between being awake and being asleep) implies that one is in possession of criteria for making the distinction. Of course, unless these criteria are deemed to be infallible, replying to the sceptic in this way cannot show whether or not we have got things right in this or that case, whether one can know, in any specific instance, that one is not dreaming, or, in Strawson's case that the reidentification of a temporarily unobserved particular as numerically the same was in fact successful. Is the *Mona Lisa* that I saw in the Louvre yesterday the same *Mona Lisa* I am looking at now? It is conceivable that a thief could have broken in the museum overnight, evaded all the alarm systems, and replaced it with a qualitatively identical copy that occupies the very same spatial coordinates, and that I may be none the wiser. Strawson's claim that the sceptical question is hypocritical, however, shows two things. First, that arguing one way or the other, providing reasons for one scenario rather than the other, requires endorsing the conceptual scheme of a single spatio-temporal framework (just as being able to identify certain experiences as waking experiences requires criteria for so doing). Secondly, that the question which the sceptic claims cannot be answered ('is this the numerically same *Mona Lisa* as opposed to one that is qualitatively identical to the one that was here yesterday?'—'is this particular reidentification true/correct?') could not arise if one did not operate with the framework of a single spatio-temporal system that the sceptic puts into doubt. Without the framework in place, the conceptual distinction between qualitative and numerical identity which the asking of the question implies could not be made.

The sceptic, however, could go a step further. She could renounce the commitment to a single-spatio-temporal framework altogether. What would Strawson say to the sceptic who is willing to forfeit the commitment to a single spatio-temporal scheme? Since operating with the background assumption of a single spatio-temporal framework is the condition of the possibility for reidentifying temporarily unobserved particulars as numerically the same, forfeiting the commitment to a single spatio-temporal framework entails abandoning the assumption that there are at least *some* cases of successful reidentification and accepting the more

radical possibility that there are no cases of successful reidentification, not merely that particular reidentification is imperfect and not infallible. This kind of consistent sceptic questions not individual cases of particular reidentification, but the criteria that make such individual reidentifications possible by renouncing the commitment to a single spatio-temporal framework, the very framework that enables the asking of the question 'is the particular I am observing now numerically the same one I saw yesterday?'

C9P27   Strawson considers this consistent sceptic in 'The "Justification" of Induction' (Strawson 1952),[4] where 'justification' is aptly placed within quotation marks. Strawson suggests that doubt concerning whether induction is a justifiable procedure may seem to have sense but is not a meaningful doubt. For, he says:

C9P28   . . . it is generally proper to inquire *of a particular belief*, whether its adoption is justified; and, in asking this, we are asking whether there is good, bad, or any, evidence for it. In applying or withholding the epithets 'justified', 'well founded', &c., in the case of specific beliefs, we are appealing to, and applying inductive standards. But to what standards are we appealing when we ask whether the application of inductive standards is justified or well grounded? If we cannot answer, then no sense has been given to the question. Compare it with the question: Is the law legal? It makes perfectly good sense to inquire of a particular action, of an administrative regulation, or even, in the case of some states, of a particular enactment of the legislature, whether or not it is legal. The question is answered by an appeal to a legal system, by the application of a set of legal (or constitutional) rules or standards. But it makes no sense to inquire in general whether the law of the land, the legal system as a whole, is or is not legal. For to
C9P29   what legal standards are we appealing?   (Strawson 1952, 257)

C9P30   The question makes no sense because to ask whether induction itself is either justified or reasonable is like asking 'whether it is reasonable to proportion the degree of one's convictions to the strength of the evidence. Doing this is what "being reasonable" *means* in such a context' (Strawson 1952, 257). Rather than conceding that one's reliance on inductive inferences cannot be externally validated, Strawson argues that it makes no sense to seek the sort of external validation that would enable one to move from the claim that our inductive inferences are justified by the inductive principle to the claim that the inductive principle itself is justified because reality is uniform and amenable to being known inductively. The rationality of induction, he claims, 'is not a fact about the constitution of the world. It is a matter of what we mean by the word "rational" in its application to any procedure for forming opinions about what lies outside our observations' (Strawson 1952, 261–2).

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[4] This the second part of chapter 9, 'Inductive Reasoning and Probability' in Strawson (1952).

C9P31   Once the assumption that it is meaningful to ask whether rules of inference such as induction or deduction (Strawson only discusses induction) could be justified is set aside, it no longer makes sense to speak of the kind of connective analysis that descriptive metaphysics engages in as providing *merely* internal justification, i.e. reasons for *merely* believing something to be the case in contrast to reasons for something being the case. Reasons can be dismissed as *merely* internal, as providing *merely* coherentist justification, only if one assumes there is a different (and superior) kind of justification that is exempt from operating against certain background rules of inference. To illustrate: consider the contrast between good and bad friends. If a true friend is a good friend, then there is no such thing as a bad friend. And if the contrast between 'good' and 'bad' does not apply to friends, then we should speak of friends *simpliciter* for, when we talk about good and bad friends we are not really distinguishing between kinds of friends, but between people who are friends and people who are not. Analogously, if all reasons operate against the background of certain rules of inference, then the distinction between internal and external reasons/justification is spurious. We should treat the distinction between internal and external reasons in the same way in which we treat the distinction between good and bad friends and speak of reasons *simpliciter*.

C9P32   This explains why descriptive metaphysics does not make heavy weather of the distinction (invoked by the modest transcendental strategist) between the challenge posed by the (justification) sceptic who doubts whether our beliefs can be justified, and the (knowledge) sceptic who doubts whether our justified beliefs are true. Rather than responding to Stroud's criticism by conceding to the sceptic that one must remain agnostic about whether the structuring beliefs that are justified transcendentally are true, descriptive metaphysics rejects the suggestion that the question 'are the fundamental rules of inference justified?' can be meaningfully asked. Since the demand for validation cannot be legitimately extended to the structures which make knowledge claims possible, the question concerning the validity of the framework which Stroud claims transcendental arguments cannot answer without going beyond a form of connective or conceptual analysis does not arise. And if it is actually asked, then it is a nonsense question, like asking 'is the Law legal?' (Strawson 1952, 257). Strawson advances these considerations in the context of his discussion of scepticism concerning induction, but they could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to his claims concerning the 'justification' of a single spatio-temporal framework which enables the reidentification of particulars in *Individuals*. Such a response to the sceptical challenge suggests that the distance between the modest transcendental strategy and Strawson's descriptive metaphysics is at once minimal and very significant. It is minimal because both approaches agree that the task of transcendental arguments is to trace the entailment relations holding between our putative knowledge claims and the conditions which make them possible. They agree that any validation of

the structures of knowledge is backhanded. Where they disagree is in where they stand in relation to the sceptic's demand that the structures of knowledge could receive more than a coherentist/backhanded validation. The modest transcendental strategist thinks that it is not possible to go beyond coherentist justification to produce a transcendental argument to the effect that 'coherence yields correspondence' (Stern 1999b, 59) and holds that transcendental arguments fail to answer the sceptic, at least in that respect. The descriptive metaphysician goes a step further and casts doubt on the legitimacy of the demand that a justification for the norms which govern our inferences should be provided in order to invoke them in argument. Strawson might therefore agree that the demand that one should check whether the criteria of knowledge are adequate before deploying them is, as Hegel would put it, 'as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus, not to venture into the water until he has learned to swim' (Hegel 1975, §10).

C9P33   Both the descriptive metaphysician and the modest transcendentalist hold that the connections which transcendental arguments establish have modal force and are not merely psychological connections. But unlike the defender of modest transcendentalism, the descriptive metaphysician does not characterize the kind of connective analysis which exposes the necessary connections between the different parts of our conceptual scheme as *merely* internal. For, as we saw earlier, reasons can only be articulated against the background of certain rules of inference so that the expression 'internal reasons' is permissible only as a pleonasm which adds nothing to what it means for something to count as a 'reason'.

C9P34   Descriptive metaphysics therefore responds to the sceptical stance in a very distinctive way, one that differs from the sort of reply articulated by ambitious and modest transcendental strategies alike. Descriptive metaphysics neither seeks to defeat the sceptic in the manner of ambitious transcendental arguments, nor endorses a form of epistemic humility which concedes partial defeat to the knowledge sceptic while claiming partial victory over the justification sceptic, as the modest transcendental strategy does. Rather, descriptive metaphysics endeavours to show that by doubting the criteria which enable knowledge claims to be made the sceptic silences herself and that rejecting the conditions that make knowledge claims possible leaves one with no place to argue from. This response closely resembles what Ralph Walker calls transcendental arguments in the second personal stance (Walker 1999, 20). To take an argument in the second personal stance 'is to place it in the context of trying to convince an interlocutor of something'. The second personal stance enables transcendental arguments to catch the sceptic red-handed in the act of a performative self-contradiction where they simultaneously seek to make a claim and reject the very conditions which make the claim possible. To illustrate (not Walker's example), consider the case of the climate change sceptic who questions the idea that global warming is

a man-made phenomenon. This sceptic could be doubting either of two things. She could be doubting whether the claim that global warming is caused by anthropogenic emissions is true. Or she could be doubting the authority of the scientific criteria by which such claim is established. If the former is the case, the sceptic is engaging in a debate by advancing a claim, albeit a negative one and, in so doing, she will be invoking some form of inference through which such claim could in principle be corroborated. If the latter is the case, then she is not advancing any claim of her own. If the first kind of sceptic, the one who advances a claim, albeit a negative one (global warming is not caused by . . .), denies the authority of science, she is caught red-handed covertly invoking this authority to establish the claim, for example, that global warming is a cyclical phenomenon and not one affected by human activity. Transcendental arguments in the second personal stance expose the hypocrisy involved in denying the very criteria one deploys in argument. They do not address, on the other hand, the framework sceptic who is willing to forfeit the framework and is consistent in refusing to advance any claim of her own. This kind of sceptic, as Walker argues, cannot be defeated, but they should not be taken seriously either, because they do not advance (and cannot advance on pain of hypocritically invoking the criteria whose legitimacy they deny) any claims whatsoever and are therefore not genuine partners in conversation:

C9P35   Such people cannot be argued with. Anyone who refuses to rely on modus ponens, or on the law of non-contradiction, cannot be argued with. If they insist on their refusal there is therefore nothing to be done about it, but for the same reason there is no need to take them seriously. From a third-personal stance we can argue that unless they do have experience, and accept some elementary kind of inference, they cannot frame intelligible thoughts, and we may find that sort of argument convincing. It will not however convince them, since they are not open

C9P36   to conviction by argument.   (Walker 1999, 20–1)

C9P37   There is a difference between stating that the knowledge sceptic remains undefeated because one can never obtain external justification for the framework one adopts to advance one's knowledge claims and stating that since there is no knowledge independently of the adoption of some form of inference or other, the knowledge sceptic is not a genuine partner in conversation. It is this subtle difference that tells the descriptive metaphysician apart from the modest transcendental strategist.

C9P38   In the next section I turn to the question as to whether the project of descriptive metaphysics as pursued by the later Strawson in *Scepticism and Naturalism* (1985) marks a break with the earlier conception of the task of descriptive metaphysics and the way in which the descriptive metaphysician positions himself in relation to the sceptical challenge.

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C9S4 ## 4. Descriptive Metaphysics and Naturalized Epistemology

C9P39   Both ambitious and modest transcendental arguments address the question of our entitlement either to hold certain beliefs (modest strategies) or to make certain knowledge claims (ambitious ones) and both approaches see themselves as providing a reply to the sceptic, either the sceptic about justification (in the case of modest strategies) or the knowledge sceptic (in the case of the ambitious strategy). They share a conception of the nature of epistemology as a normative inquiry that stands in sharp contrast to the one advocated by Hume. The Humean naturalist gives up altogether on the search for justification that characterizes normative epistemology. The question we should ask for Hume is not 'what justification do we have for holding beliefs in the external world or causation?' but rather 'what disposes us to have these beliefs?'. Philosophers should stop asking (and answering) the question of our right or entitlement to hold certain beliefs and dedicate themselves to a descriptive inquiry into human nature and the principles of association that govern the imagination. Hume's descriptive epistemology does not seek to answer the sceptical challenge by justifying certain structural beliefs. It turns instead to asking (and answering) a different question, namely, why are foundational beliefs in the existence of the external world or of causal connections so resilient in the face of the repeated failure of philosophy to provide adequate proof for the existence of the external world or of causal connections? Although for Hume the sceptical challenge cannot be met, it remains idle nonetheless because nature is too strong for it. As Strawson puts it:

C9P40   According to Hume the naturalist, sceptical doubts are not to be met by argument. They are simply to be neglected (except, perhaps, in so far as they supply a harmless amusement, a mild diversion of the intellect). They are to be neglected because they are idle; powerless against the force of nature, of our naturally
C9P41   implanted disposition to belief.   (Strawson 1985, 10–11)

C9P42   Strawson's rapprochement of the project of descriptive metaphysics with naturalism may appear to be signalling a departure from his earlier conception of descriptive metaphysics with its emphasis on the idea that metaphysics engages in conceptual analysis. Yet 'naturalism' is a potentially misleading label that Strawson attaches to his later views because the naturalism the later Strawson aligns himself with is very different from Hume's own brand of naturalism. In *Scepticism and Naturalism* Strawson continues to be committed to a notion of transcendental argumentation as a form of 'connective analysis' that characterizes his earlier conception of the task of metaphysics (Glock 2003, 40). He points out that the 'transcendental arguer' will always be faced with the challenge that:

C9P43   . . . even if *he* cannot conceive of alternative ways in which conditions of the possibility of a certain kind of experience or exercise of conceptual capacity might be fulfilled, this inability may simply be due to lack of imagination on his part, a lack which makes him prone to mistake sufficient for necessary

C9P44   conditions.   (Strawson 1985, 18)

C9P45 But adds that, this notwithstanding:

C9P46   . . . these arguments, or a weakened version of them will continue to be of interest to our naturalist philosopher. For even if they do not succeed in establishing such tight or rigid connections as they initially promise, they do at least indicate or bring out conceptual connections, even if only of a looser kind; and, as I have already suggested, to establish the connections between the major structural features or elements of our conceptual scheme – to exhibit it, not as a rigidly deductive system, but as a coherent whole whose parts are mutually supportive and mutually dependent, interlocking in an intelligible way – to do this may well seem to our naturalist, the proper, or at least the major, task of analytic philoso-

C9P47   phy. As indeed it does to me.   (Strawson 1985, 18)

C9P48 Then Strawson adds in parenthesis: 'Whence the phrase, "descriptive (as opposed to validatory or revisionary) metaphysics"'' (Strawson 1985, 18).

C9P49   Strawson acknowledges (in a nod to Stroud's 1968 criticism of ambitious transcendental arguments) that by means of transcendental argumentation one cannot rule out that there may be different conceptual schemes. This acknowledgement is however immediately qualified by the claim that transcendental arguments, even in a naturalistic key, do not cease to trace conceptual connections between the different parts of our conceptual scheme. It is clear from this, therefore, that Strawson's descriptive metaphysics, even in the later work, is not 'descriptive' in the same sense in which Hume's epistemology is 'descriptive'. For Hume the question one should ask is not the normative question of what entitles us to have certain beliefs, but the genetic question concerning why we form certain beliefs:

C9P50   The subject . . . of our present enquiry is concerned with the causes which induce us to believe in the existence of body. We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* But 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or*

C9P51   *not?*   (Hume 1740, I.4.2)

C9P52 In Strawson's naturalism, unlike Hume's, the task of philosophical analysis is to understand how the elements of our conceptual system hang together, not what disposes us towards certain beliefs. For this reason, when in *Scepticism and Naturalism* Strawson says that he is about to consider 'a different kind of response

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to scepticism—a response which does not so much attempt to meet the challenge as to pass it by' (Strawson 1985, 3), he cannot mean that transcendental arguments, even in a naturalistic key, position themselves in relation to the sceptical challenge in exactly the same way as the Humean naturalist does: if transcendental arguments (even in a naturalistic key) engage in a form of connective analysis, then the sense in which the sceptical question is 'passed by' in Strawson's own naturalistic reply cannot be the same sense in which it is said to be idle for the Humean naturalist. For the Humean naturalist the sceptical challenge is idle because 'nature is too strong for it'; for the earlier Strawson, by contrast, the sceptical challenge is 'passed by' or not addressed head on because by refusing to accept the conditions of knowledge the sceptic has silenced herself and is therefore not a genuine partner in conversation. If the later Strawson still thinks of descriptive metaphysics as a form of connective analysis, then there seems to be no reason to think that Strawson fundamentally altered his views of how descriptive metaphysics positions itself vis-à-vis the sceptical challenge. If (a) Strawson's earlier conception of descriptive metaphysics is not 'validatory' in the sense of providing an ambitious transcendental argument (as in Stroud's reading of the earlier Strawson), and if (b) the sense in which Strawson's later metaphysics is 'descriptive' is not the same sense in which Hume's epistemology is 'descriptive', then there is less of a gap between the project of descriptive metaphysics as described in *Individuals* and in *Scepticism and Naturalism*. Nor perhaps is there such a gap in the way in which descriptive metaphysics positions itself vis-à-vis the sceptical challenge. In *Individuals* Strawson's emphasis is on the claim that the sceptic denies the conditions of the possibility for certain doubts to be raised; in *Scepticism and Naturalism* Strawson's emphasis is on the claim that scepticism should be passed by. But if the reason why scepticism should be passed by is not the Humean consideration that 'nature is too strong for it', then Strawson's stance on how descriptive metaphysics positions itself in relation to the sceptical challenge may not be fundamentally different from the earlier view that, having silenced herself, the sceptic cannot make any moves in the game of asking for and giving reasons. Since Strawson continues to be committed to a conception of descriptive metaphysics as conceptual/connective analysis, his use of the term 'naturalism' must be idiosyncratic and, as such, does not signal a radical conversion to Humeanism, but rather an attempt to claim an intermediate logical space between naturalism proper and robust transcendental arguments. I think that Stern is right in saying that one need not construe transcendental arguments in a naturalistic key in order to ascribe weaker conclusions to them (Stern 2003, 232). Yet, if the argument of this chapter is correct, descriptive metaphysics claims this intermediate logical space in a different way, since it rejects the distinction between internal and external justification and does not pursue a strategy of epistemic humility (D'Oro 2019).
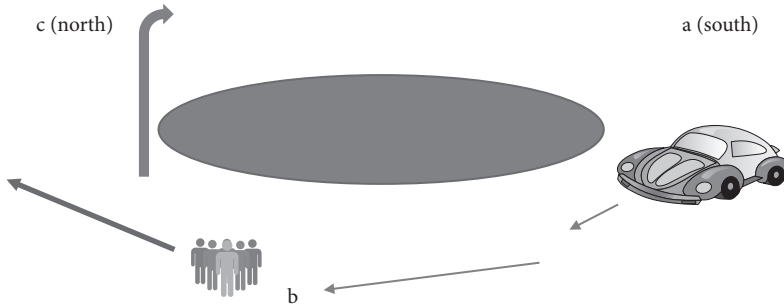
C9P53   This chapter has explored the way in which descriptive metaphysics positions itself vis-à-vis the sceptical challenge in the epistemic context. But the interpretative suggestion it makes has broader implications and could be pursued in the practical context to clarify the nature of Strawson's argument in 'Freedom and Resentment' (Strawson 1962/2008). Benjamin De Mesel (2018) has recently extended the distinction between (a) claiming that a framework cannot be externally justified against the framework sceptic, and (b) denying that the notion of justification is applicable to the framework, to the moral context to undermine the claim that in 'Freedom and Resentment' Strawson deploys a modest transcendental strategy against the moral sceptic. De Mesel argues against Justin Coates (2017) that Strawson's strategy is not to develop a modest transcendental argument which concedes the moral practice of holding people responsible cannot be (externally) justified. Rather Strawson denies that the notion of justification can be legitimately applied to the moral practice/framework of holding people responsible, i.e. Strawson questions the very notion of external justification. The interpretative suggestion defended here may therefore have broader applicability and pursuing it across the epistemic and the moral context might have the added bonus of uncovering a coherent metaphilosophical vision.

C9P54   In the next section we will consider how advocates of ambitious transcendental arguments, modest transcendental arguments, Humean naturalists, and our descriptive metaphysician might respond to the sceptic's challenge in a concrete scenario.

C9S5   ## 5. On a Walk with the Ambitious Transcendental Strategist, the Modest Transcendental Strategist, the Humean Naturalist, and the Descriptive Metaphysician

C9P55   Once upon a time I went for a walk with a group of people. We parked the car in the car park at position **a** on the map (Figure 9.1) and started to walk heading north in direction **c**, walking along a cucumber-shaped lake with the shore of the lake on our right-hand side. As it started to get dark, we decided that we'd better get back to the car. This decision was made as we reached the northern tip of the lake at position **b**.

C9P56   One member of the group suggested that we should take the path to the right and make a U-turn, circling the lake on the other side with its bank on our right-hand side but in the opposite direction, heading south. All but one agreed. This dissenting member of the group objected that we should not do that, but should continue straight (heading further north) in direction **c**. The rest of the group explained that after parking the car we headed north in direction **c**, coasting the lake even if the lake was not always visible because of the thick vegetation so that, if we wanted to return to the car, we could do so either by simply turning back on

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C9F1   **Figure 9.1** The Map

ourselves or by circling the lake as suggested. Since this particular group member insisted that we should continue heading north, a map was produced, which showed the lake, where we were in relation to it, and where the car was. This particular member of the group was not persuaded because they did not 'care' about the map and insisted that one should head in direction **c** irrespective of the map. What happened next? We did what I would take to be the sensible thing to do. We turned right and coasted the lake on the opposite bank heading south with that particular member of the group grudgingly following us and refusing to acknowledge the authority of the map, even when we reached the car just before dusk. On the way back we treated the protestations and moaning of this member of the party the way one treats a child's tantrums: by ignoring them. Were we right in doing what would seem to be the sensible thing to do? Was this response insufficiently philosophical? How would our philosophers, the ambitious transcendental arguer, the modest transcendental arguer, the Humean naturalist, and the descriptive metaphysician have responded?

C9P57   The advocate of ambitious or truth-directed transcendental arguments might argue that it is in principle possible to persuade this person to accept the authority of the map by arguing that reality is as the map represents it to be and thus persuade them by means of argument that circling the lake is the correct thing to do. They would therefore stop the party in its tracks and spend as much time as needed arguing with the map-sceptic that the map is a true representation of reality. Being the transcendental philosophers that they are, they would argue not directly, by comparing the map with the reality it depicts, but indirectly by suggesting that the ability to discriminate between north and south presupposes that reality is as the map represents it. Their goal would be to persuade the map-sceptic that the map is a correct representation of reality and that they are not justified in dismissing the map as a potentially false or inaccurate representation of where the walking party stood in relation to the car and the lake. The modest transcendental strategist, unlike the ambitious transcendental one, would not be so adamant that the map is a true representation of reality and so would not set

out to persuade the dissenting member of the group by arguing that reality is map-like. There is no way of knowing whether reality is indeed as the map represents it to be because our belief in the distinction between north and south cannot be externally validated by accessing reality independently of how the map represents it. No matter how carefully the members of the group read the map, they could be wrong in suggesting that the party should either turn back on itself or circle the lake heading south on the opposite bank, not because they had been guilty of careless map-reading, but because the map may be a systematically misleading representation of reality. They might add that they are nonetheless justified in believing in the map's ability to guide us because independently of a commitment to the way in which reality is represented by the map, they would not be able to navigate their way round the world, distinguishing between north and south, east and west and so forth. Yet, since there can be no way of checking whether what must necessarily be believed to be the case to navigate the world is actually the case, the modest transcendental strategist could at best dismiss the awkward member of the party as being unreasonable, not as being wrong or incorrect. Since modest transcendental strategies cannot rule out that reality may not be as the map depicts it to be, the suspicion of the dissenting member of the party that the map is an inaccurate representation of reality might actually be correct even if this appears unreasonable and unjustified by any supporting argument. Unlike the ambitious and the modest transcendental strategist, the Humean naturalist would not bother much with arguing. Any internal justification for believing in the map of the kind that the modest transcendental strategist might produce, would be circular and therefore question-begging. The Humean sceptic might agree with the modest transcendental strategist that one would not be able to distinguish between north and south, one direction and the other, without appealing to the authority of the map. But if one then tried to justify the map internally, by saying that one should accept its authority because it makes possible the distinction between north and south, one would simply be arguing in a circle (just as anyone attempting to justify the principle of induction by invoking specific inductive inferences would be). At the end of the day, however, all this would not really matter because (for the Humean naturalist) the belief in the map, held by the majority of people in the group, is not grounded in reason or argument; the map is just something that they are compelled to believe in by their nature and such natural dispositions are not open to refutation by rational argumentation. Perhaps the dissenting member of the party was not wired up to believe in the map, but there is little one can do about that faulty wiring because reasons are motivation-ally inert and they would be ignored even if they could ex-hypothesis be backed by sound rather than circular argument. The ambitious transcendental strategist, the modest transcendental strategist, and the Humean naturalist position themselves in different ways in relation to the sceptical challenge. The ambitious and modest transcendental arguers think of epistemology as a normative enterprise and they

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both take its task to be that of providing a justification for our beliefs against the sceptic, even if they differ as to how far justification can reach. The Humean naturalist, by contrast, abandons the search for justification altogether. Since reasons have no motivational power there is no point in trying to persuade the dissenting member of the group who has not been wired up to believe in maps. The dissenting member of the group (the sceptic) is ignored rather than engaged in rational argument.

C9P58   Now, if the descriptive metaphysician had gone on a walk with the ambitious transcendental strategist, the modest transcendental strategist, and the Humean naturalist, how would she have handled the dissenting member of the group? The descriptive metaphysician, like the Humean naturalist, would not give the map-sceptic too much airtime but, unlike the Humean naturalist, would have reasons for dismissing the sceptic. For the descriptive metaphysician, the person who rejects the authority of the map is either caught red-handed invoking the map whose authority she ostensibly denies or she is silenced. If she suggests that one should move in direction c rather than a or b, then she is caught invoking the very criteria that she dismisses as dubitable and she can be argued with by consulting the map. If on the other hand she is consistent in her rejection of the map and any other criteria on the basis of which one could make any knowledge claims, then she can say nothing. And if she insists that one should go in direction c irrespective of the map, then she *should* be ignored for her claim is *not an argument but a mere assertion*. Just as the person who does not play by the rules of chess cannot be said to accomplish checkmate, so the person who claims one should go in a given direction, but rejects the conventions that enable us to determine whether one is moving north or south, *cannot truly be said to be disagreeing* with the remaining members about what direction to take because in order to genuinely disagree (or indeed to genuinely agree), they would have to accept that which they ostensibly reject: the authority of the map. The descriptive metaphysician, like the Humean naturalist, declines to reply. But unlike the Humean naturalist the descriptive metaphysician explains why we are *entitled* to ignore the sceptic, not why we are *inclined* to ignore him. Where the Humean naturalist explains what disposes us to ignore the sceptic, the descriptive metaphysician explains what grounds or reasons we have for declining to engage with the sceptical challenge.

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