

Transcendental Arguments and Prichard's Insight

This paper proposes that two quite different responses to scepticism in a particular domain are, surprisingly, made for each other. The basic idea is that each style of response can seem unsatisfying, by its own lights, and that that this dissatisfaction can be removed by conjoining the two responses.

In "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?", H.A. Prichard argued that a certain form of scepticism about moral obligation, one that finds expression in the question "why be moral?" is confused. The question demands a universally acceptable and non-question-begging reason for obeying moral requirements. Such a reason, it would seem, would have to come from outside of morality. Prichard charged that this is a mistake: the normativity of morality does not come from outside of it.

Even those who are sympathetic with Prichard's point might find themselves unsatisfied with leaving things here. That is, even if you agree that it is a mistake to ask for a non-moral reason to follow moral requirements, one might reasonably ask for some form of understanding our commitment to those requirements. Even if it is illegitimate, the sceptical question grips us, and at least one reason for this is that we are committed to the claim that one ought to act morally. And one might reasonably ask for some understanding of that commitment.

A transcendental argument seeks to vindicate a certain basic commitment (such as that there is a mind-independent world, that there are other minds, that there are moral facts, etc.) by showing that it is a necessary precondition on a form of cognition which it is safe to take for granted. Since Stroud's seminal work, it has been widely accepted that while such an argument can show that creatures like us necessarily or inescapably have those commitments, it cannot prove that those commitments constitute knowledge. It might be that we can't but take there to be other minds, say, but that doesn't show that we are justified in believing that there are other minds. Here too we have an anti-skeptical strategy that leaves us wanting more.

My suggestion is that a transcendental argument can provide the understanding that Prichard's move leaves us wanting. Such an argument can reveal the source of a particular commitment as grounded in something other than a reason that is external to the relevant domain. And Prichard's diagnosis of where the skeptic goes wrong reveals that the request for proof which the transcendental argument fails to deliver may not be needed.

Transcendental arguments and versions of Prichard's response can arise in response to sceptical challenges in different areas. The paper's modest aim is to gesture toward the advantages of marrying these two responses in the way outlined. However, I believe the response is especially helpful in thinking about response to the "why be rational?" question that has been central in the literature on normativity. After outlining the general proposal, the paper will consider how it applies to that case.