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Transcendental Arguments in Reid? A Reply to McCraw

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Benjamin W. McCraw’s article “A Reidian Transcendental Argument Against Skepticism” (2025) constitutes an original and thought-provoking contribution both to Reid scholarship and to the discussion of epistemic skepticism.<sup>1</sup> In the following I will make a few remarks about it, focusing on the discussion of skepticism. I start with a brief historical remark on Reid and Kant (§ 1) before I explain the anti-skeptical argument in some detail (§ 2). A discussion of the premises of the argument follows (§ 3). I add some remarks about the social aspect of McCraw’s anti-skeptical stance (§ 4). I finish with another set of historical remarks (§ 5), this time about Reid and Wittgenstein, and a brief conclusion (§ 6).

### § 1: First, A Historical Side Remark

Thomas Reid and Immanuel Kant are usually seen as disagreeing on many basic philosophical questions.<sup>2</sup> All the more interesting is it that McCraw argues that we can find in Reid not just arguments against skepticism but a transcendental argument in particular—and all this when it is a complicated and controversial question whether Kant himself had a transcendental argument against skepticism. However, McCraw acknowledges that all this “sounds a bit odd” (1) and clarifies that the relevant argument is Reidian, not Reid’s, that is, is a reconstruction based on different remarks in Reid’s texts. Furthermore, no closer connection with Kant is claimed by McCraw here (1; 12, fn.1). Perhaps there is, I would like to add, a much closer relation between Reid and Wittgenstein than there is between Reid and Kant (see below).

### § 2: The Transcendental Argument Spelled Out

The anti-skeptical argument McCraw reconstructs from Reid’s text has been neglected by scholars so far (1; see Reid 1997, 168–169 and 170, in particular, for the passages McCraw focuses on). It concerns radical skepticism which is global insofar as it concerns all of our cognitive and epistemic faculties, denying or at least doubting their reliability. The anti-skeptical argument is transcendental in the following sense: “I take a transcendental argument to demonstrate its conclusion only given the possibility of some further point that one is really loathe to deny” (2). Following Scott Aikin, McCraw uses the following general template of a transcendental argument:

(Template)

“Premise 1: It is necessary that: (X is possible only if Y is the case)

Premise 2: X

Conclusion: Y” (3)

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<sup>1</sup> I will refer to passages in the article just by indicating page and footnote numbers.

<sup>2</sup> See a well-known passage in Kant’s *Prolegomena* (AA IV, 258–259) where he criticizes common sense views, perhaps even with Reid in mind; see also some related passages in the first *Critique* (A 232–233/ B 285–286; A 472–473/ B 500–501; A 783–784/ B 811–812; A 855/ B 883). In some respects, however, Reid is quite close to Kant. For example, in *Curá primá* Reid presents a list of basic categories very similar to Kant’s list (see Reid 1982, 200ff. and also Reid 2002, 41–47, 469–490, 490–512); there he also distinguishes between sensual matter and rational form (Reid 1982, 204–205; see also, e.g., Baumann 1999, 56, fn.38). But one shouldn’t go as far as Manfred Kuehn who remarked that “without the Scots there would have been no Kant” (Kuehn 1987, 248).

One can have doubts about the need for the necessity operator: It is redundant given that (according to S5) what is possible or impossible is necessarily possible or impossible.<sup>3</sup> Putting this aside as not that important I wonder whether the following might be a more (or fully) explicit form of the argument template:

(Template\*)

- (1) It is necessary that (X is possible only if Y is the case) (premise)
- (2) X is possible only if Y is the case (1)
- (3) X (premise)
- (4) X is possible (3)
- (C) Y (2, 4)

The basic idea underlying the transcendental anti-skeptical argument is that one can make skeptical arguments in a discussion with others who understand such arguments—or shorter: that such arguments are “dialectically possible” (3, fn.8) - only if skepticism is false. Hence, such skeptical arguments are self-defeating and self-undermining. Here is McCraw’s version of an anti-skeptical transcendental argument:

(Anti-Skeptical Argument)

- “Premise 1: It is necessary that: (skeptical arguments are dialectically possible only if skepticism is false)
- Premise 2: skeptical arguments are dialectically possible
- Conclusion: skepticism is false” (3)

Here, in contrast to the general template, the second premise already includes the possibility operator. Spelled out a bit more we get this:

(Anti-Skeptical Argument\*)

- (1) It is necessary that: (skeptical arguments are dialectically possible only if skepticism is false) (premise)
- (2) Skeptical arguments are dialectically possible only if skepticism is false (1)
- (3) Skeptical arguments are dialectically possible (premise)
- (C) Skepticism is false (2, 3)

I think or hope that McCraw would agree with all this; if not, it would be interesting to hear why not.

### § 3: The Premises of the Argument

McCraw gives some support for the first premise of his anti-skeptical argument which says, simplified, that skeptical arguments are dialectically possible only if skepticism is false. He

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<sup>3</sup> I read “X is possible only if Y is the case” not as saying that only if Y is actually the case are there possible X-worlds (whether the actual world is an X-world or not) nor as saying that only Y-worlds have access to X-worlds (given that there are possible X-worlds). I rather read the former as saying that it is not possible that X and not-Y are the case, - that there are no possible X-and-not-Y-worlds.

argues in more detail that if skeptical arguments are dialectically possible, then the skeptic's interlocutor (or the skeptic for that matter) can understand them; if the latter is the case, then the interlocutor has a sufficient grasp of logic; if the latter is the case, then the interlocutor's epistemic faculties are sufficiently reliable for grasping that much of logic; if the latter, then radical skepticism is false. Hence, skeptical arguments work only if skepticism is false (7). At this point one might wonder why it is necessary to include an interlocutor here. Can't one run the argument just from the more monological perspective of some subject? They could reason like this: If skeptical arguments are dialectically possible (with myself as my own "interlocutor"), then I can understand them; if the latter is the case, then I have a sufficient grasp of logic; if the latter is the case, then my epistemic faculties are sufficiently reliable for grasping that much of logic; if the latter, then radical skepticism is false. However, the fact that McCraw puts things in the more "dialectical" way might well have to do that a social aspect of the issue which will become important for him later in his article (see below).

The first premise seems pretty plausible. But what about the second premise—that skeptical arguments are (dialectically) possible? Couldn't the skeptic deny this? Couldn't they argue that we might suffer from an illusion of entertaining, understanding and discussing arguments? Perhaps some evil demon or our unreliable faculties produce that illusion? McCraw replies to this general point that the skeptic either has reasons for this denial or not. If the latter, then they are turning into a mere dogmatic which is not acceptable to the skeptic (11). If the former, then they end up arguing for skepticism and will have to affirm rather than deny the second premise. This is, according to McCraw, a bad dilemma for the skeptic (11).

So far, so good. But the skeptic might not yet give up. I wonder what McCraw would say about the following. We are all familiar with the (often unpleasant) fact that one person's modus ponens is another person's modus tollens. How about the following way of turning the tables on the anti-skeptic? Take (Anti-Skeptical Argument\*), negate (C), turn it into a premise, keep (2) as another premise, and derive the negation of (3) as a conclusion. Here is the view from the other side:

(Skeptical Modus Tollens)

(1) Skepticism is true<sup>4</sup> (premise)

(2) Skeptical arguments are dialectically possible only if skepticism is false,  
that is: not true (premise)

(C) Skeptical arguments are not dialectically possible (1, 2)

Sure, the skeptic is inconsistent if they claim that this is an argument. But they could go Pyrrhonian, couldn't they (see 7-8)? They could just not commit to (Skeptical Modus Tollens) and restrict themselves to the claim that (Anti-Skeptical Argument\*) and (Skeptical Modus Tollens) are equally plausible. One premise is shared between both arguments. They differ in the other premise they accept:

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<sup>4</sup> We can assume bivalence here and claim that if something is not false, then it is true.

Skeptical arguments are dialectically possible (Anti-Skeptical Argument\*)  
and  
Skepticism is true (Skeptical Modus Tollens).

To be sure, the anti-skeptic could use a Moorean idea (see, e.g., Moore 1959, 226) and argue that the first premise is more plausible or better supported in some way than the second premise. However, it is not easy to see how this could be done in a non-question-begging way. The Skeptic could argue that the defenders of (Anti-Skeptical Argument\*) and of (Skeptical Modus Tollens) are mutually begging the question against each other.<sup>5</sup> But if there is no reason to prefer one of the two arguments over the other, then the skeptic wins at the second order. This skeptic is cautious enough not to establish first-order skepticism and rather argues at the second order for a Pyrrhonian view which recommends suspension of belief about (Anti-Skeptical Argument\*) and (Skeptical Modus Tollens).

McCraw can, of course, object to this and argue that this way the skeptic still argues and is thus threatened by the anti-skeptical argument after all. The skeptic would turn out to be inconsistent and their attempt at first-order Pyrrhonism would collapse. However, even if one were to accept this reply on behalf of McCraw's anti-skeptic it might well turn out to be a very Pyrrhic victory for the anti-skeptic. The skeptic could retreat just a bit from their radical and exception-less skepticism to a less radical but still interesting skepticism that saves second-order arguments from the skeptical threat. Is this an arbitrary and badly motivated move? If not, then the skeptic is still in a very strong position which would be unassailable by the transcendental argument. Furthermore, how interesting is the exception-less radical skepticism anyway? I wonder what McCraw would add here in defense of the anti-skeptic.

#### § 4: Who Go Social?

McCraw adds another interesting anti-skeptical tool to the mix. He argues, following Reid (see Reid 2002, 68-70), that even if the exercise of reason (in making arguments, for instance) is not a "social operation of the mind", its acquisition and development is social, that is, it is dependent on social processes of learning from others and pre-reflectively believing others (8-9). Trusting others is necessary here (9). In order for someone to make a good argument, they must have simply trusted others before. This strikes me as a very plausible empirical claim. However, it doesn't seem to do any work for showing that and how that kind of trust is epistemically justified. Is anti-skepticism simply assumed here from the start—in the form of an assumption that trust in what others tell us is epistemically justified? On all this, McCraw briefly remarks the following: "the epistemic trust necessary for skeptical arguments entails that our cognitive position with respect to that sort of trust

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<sup>5</sup> The anti-skeptic could object that while the skeptic is using a skeptical premise and is thus begging the question, the anti-skeptic is not using any anti-skeptical premises. This is correct but the skeptic could reply that (Skeptical Modus Tollens) is not meant to establish skepticism through an argument of their own but rather to attack a premise of the anti-skeptic (that skeptical arguments are dialectically possible). So, while the skeptic can be seen as assuming without further justification that skepticism is true, the anti-skeptic can be seen assuming without further justification that skeptical arguments are dialectically possible.

must (generally and defeasibly) be proper and properly formed” (10). Isn’t this a non-sequitur? How can the fact of trust entail that it is justified? I am sure McCraw has something to say in response here.

## § 5: Finally, Another Historical Side Remark

Above I briefly mentioned some doubts about there being a strong connection between Reid and Kant (a doubt supported by McCraw himself). It seems that Wittgenstein might be a much better ally for Reid than Kant, at least as far as anti-skepticism is concerned (see, e.g., Baumann 2023, 59). Perhaps we can then call Wittgenstein’s arguments “transcendental”, too, but also in a very broad and thin sense of the word? McCraw very briefly mentions this (see 13-14, fn.12). One could, roughly, reformulate some of Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty* (see, e.g., Wittgenstein 1969, §§ 56, 115, 160-164, 310, 337, 341-346, 450, 625) in the following way:

(Transcendental Wittgenstein)

- (1) If it is possible to doubt some propositions, then there are some other propositions which cannot be doubted (premise)
- (2) It is possible to doubt some propositions (premise)
- (C) Some other propositions cannot be doubted (1, 2)

However, this form of the argument is perhaps more Reidian than Wittgensteinian. Wittgenstein was not committed to the view that there are propositions that can never be doubted, as (Transcendental Wittgenstein) suggests. Closer to Wittgenstein is something along the following basic lines:

(Transcendental Wittgenstein\*)

- (1) If it is possible to doubt some propositions in a particular context of inquiry, then there are some other propositions which cannot be doubted in that context of inquiry (premise)
- (2) In all contexts of inquiry is it possible to doubt some propositions (premise)
- (C) In all contexts of inquiry some propositions cannot be doubted (1, 2)

In the context of historical inquiry, for instance, one can doubt whether Napoleon made strategic mistakes at Waterloo, but one cannot, in this context of inquiry, doubt the reality of the past; the latter doubt is, perhaps, admissible in a context of philosophical inquiry (see for this kind of example Williams 2004, 470–471).

How convincing is this as an anti-skeptical argument? There is reason to suspect that (Transcendental Wittgenstein\*) misses the true threat of epistemic skepticism by restricting doubt to “ordinary” doubt: to doubt about specific propositions in specific contexts of inquiry. More general and less “local” skepticism attacks our reliance on our faculties in general. Even if Wittgenstein is more of an ally for Reid than Kant, there are thus still important differences between Reid and Wittgenstein. One of them is that Reid doesn’t

restrict doubt to local, “ordinary” doubt of specific propositions (see, e.g., Reid 1997, 170). Another issue is that indubitability does not entail truth; this is also an issue rather for Wittgenstein than for Reid.

## § 6: Conclusion

Benjamin McCraw’s article makes a remarkable contribution to both Reid scholarship and the discussion of epistemic skepticism. I focused on the latter here. Amongst the many topics for further discussion, I would emphasize two: first, the question whether one can deny the second premise of the transcendental anti-skeptical argument after all and defend a second-order skepticism; second, the question whether the social aspect of cognition really helps the anti-skeptic. It will be very interesting to find out what McCraw would want to reply here.

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