

## Response to Stelios Virvidakis

1. In a certain strand of analytic philosophy, there has been an interest in *arguments* of a kind called “transcendental”. An argument of this kind purports to establish that something is the case, on the ground that its being the case is a condition for the possibility of something whose actuality those at whom the argument is directed will not dispute. A common starting point for such arguments is experience that purports to reveal how things are in the environment. In a version I once offered, the starting point was mutual understanding on the part of speakers of a language.

Since *Mind and World*, as Virvidakis notes, I have also found it useful to attach the label “transcendental” to a kind of *philosophical activity* specified in terms of its aim. The aim is to remove supposed problems about the possibility of objective purport. Such philosophy need not take the form of transcendental arguments in the sense I have just sketched. I doubt that there is much, if any, connection between these two uses of the term, except perhaps a roughly Kantian parentage.

I think my conception of transcendental philosophy, as opposed to transcendental arguments, is pretty much exhausted by that specification of its aim, which is close to the first item in Virvidakis’s catalogue of features of transcendental philosophy. As Virvidakis in effect surmises (see his n. 24), I regret having once attached the label “transcendental” to uses of words that are supposed to gesture towards things that are somehow correct, but cannot be said (his fourth item).

It is true that I often find it helpful to be suspicious of supposedly forced choices between pairs of options (his second item). But I think of this as good philosophical practice in general, not as characteristic of transcendental philosophy, philosophy concerned with objective purport, in particular.

As Virvidakis notes, this suspicion of dualisms naturally opens into a Hegelian search for ways of thinking that preserve, in larger syntheses, insights from both sides of supposedly irreconcilable antitheses. I do not understand why he thinks this involves, in Hegel and in me, an insouciance about counterintuitive implications. An irremediably counterintuitive synthesis would be useless. There is no point in aiming at synthesis for its own sake, with no concern for things like plausibility.

2. I have claimed to find in Sellars material for a transcendental argument against a kind of scepticism about perceptual knowledge. The argument turns on a disjunctive conception of perceptual experience. The claim is that the very idea of perceptual experience requires us to make sense of the idea of experiences in which how things are makes itself manifest to experiencing subjects.

Of course Virvidakis is right that, from an insistence that we can make sense of the idea of experiences in which how things are reveals itself to experiencing subjects, we cannot infer that there actually are any such experiences. But the argument I consider is not supposed to take that inferential step. The argument is meant to show only that, from the acknowledged fact that we can be misled by experience, it does not follow that experience as such *can* never yield more, in the way of epistemic credentials for beliefs about the environment, than misleading experiences do. The point is just that when we concede that our capacity to find out how things are by, say, looking is fallible, as of course we must, that yields no reason to suppose the idea of an experience in which how things are reveals itself to us *cannot* have application. That is, the argument is not supposed to go beyond (3), in Virvidakis's regimentation.

I think Virvidakis underestimates how much headway this can make against scepticism. Why should the possibility of perceptual knowledge seem to be open to question? My answer is: because of the temptation to think the concept of experience that reveals to us how things are is *guaranteed* not to have instances.

Once that temptation is cleared away, we can recapture the significance of common-sense ways of guarding, of course fallibly, against errors in perceptually grounded beliefs.

If someone points to a determinate possibility of something that may be leading one astray, one can take steps to investigate whether one would indeed be mistaken in that way, if one formed the belief one is inclined to form. Suppose it looks as if there is water on a sunlit rise on the road ahead, and someone says: "Perhaps there is no water there, and your visual experience is due to a mirage." One can in principle go to the place where it looked as if there was water and check. If this investigation is for some reason not feasible, perhaps the possibility of a mirage should lead one to suspend judgement as to the presence of water there. A determinate ground for suspecting error has been raised, and one has not been able to rule out the possibility that the prospective belief would be wrong in the way that has been suggested.

In contrast, a bare reminder that one is fallible, in the general capacity for knowledge-acquisition one purports to be exploiting, does not point to a determinate ground for suspecting error in a particular case. It would be rational to respond to such a general reminder of fallibility, as opposed to a specific ground for thinking one might be wrong in this case in particular, by

shrugging and sticking to one's knowledge claim. Of course one would need to acknowledge that in doing so one runs, as always, a risk of turning out to be wrong. That is no more than agreeing that one's knowledge-acquiring powers are fallible.

Suppose one accepts that visual experiences *may* be cases of seeing that things are thus and so. Why should one then think that whenever one seems to see that things are thus and so, rationality requires one to suspend judgement as to whether one is seeing that things are thus and so or merely seeming to see that things are thus and so? Why should it not sometimes be rational, though admittedly risky, to suppose one's experience is a case of seeing that things are thus and so? *Ex hypothesi*, we are considering someone who acknowledges a possibility that she would be *right* if she took that risk. The scepticism Virvidakis cites from Glendinning and de Gaynesford, who offer it as consistent with the disjunctive conception of experience, is a mere refusal to run the risk of turning out to be wrong in perceptually based knowledge claims. This counsel of timidity no longer has the character of a genuinely challenging scepticism. A genuinely challenging scepticism is a line of thought purporting to establish that knowledge claims, of some particular sort, stand no chance of being true.

3. I conceive my transcendental activity as unmasking illusory obstacles that would, if not unmasked, prevent us from taking the idea of objective purport in stride. I do not purport to propound substantive philosophical theses, with a view to answering questions understood as giving expression to genuine problems.

Virvidakis doubts that this "therapeutic" stance is consistent with the way I appropriate elements from the philosophical tradition. I shall make two points about this.

First, about "minimal empiricism". (The point of the label might equally be put by stressing the lower case: "empiricism" as opposed to "Empiricism".) Virvidakis suggests that this sounds like a philosophical thesis. But I claim that if it were not for the avoidable influence of bad philosophy, there would not seem to be room for disputing the thought that experience does not merely cause empirical beliefs but provides warrants for them. To regain that piece of mere sanity is, of itself, to dissolve the apparent difficulty about the very possibility of empirical objective purport that I aim to reveal as illusory in *Mind and World*. So regaining that piece of sanity is a bit of transcendental philosophy as I aim to engage in it. When I clear away the illusory obstacles that make a minimal empiricism seem problematic, I am defending a minimal empiricism in the course of doing transcendental philosophy. The point is to make empiricism available for a transcendental purpose. But this is not, as Virvidakis suggests, offering a transcendental defence of empiricism, in a sense that would imply that the basic empiricist thought is, apart from bad philosophy, open to

dispute, so that positive arguments are required in order to persuade people to accept it. My claim is that it stands revealed as truistic when the bad philosophy that obscures its nature is cleared away.

Second, Virvidakis endorses, without discussion, Michael Friedman's version of the thought that I do not succeed in combining a "therapeutic" stance with exploiting the tradition in the way I do. This seems unfortunate. Friedman's negative verdict turns on his claim that my attempt at the combination leads to certain "historical-philosophical tangles". (See the passage quoted in Virvidakis's n. 37.) But as I have explained in commenting on Friedman, there is nothing to the supposed "historical-philosophical tangles" but a series of misreadings of me.<sup>1</sup> Friedman's argument is a poor basis for Virvidakis's judgement.

JOHN MCDOWELL

NOTE

<sup>1</sup> See my "Responses", in Nicholas H. Smith, ed., *Reading McDowell* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), at pp. 270-4.