CATEGORIES AND TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS

Philosophers have long claimed the existence of a kind of argument which can establish the existence of primitive concepts in our conceptual scheme. What makes a concept primitive has not been stated precisely by philosophers purporting to offer transcendental arguments. Kant says that a primitive concept is a principle of the understanding; and, more recently, Strawson has identified such concepts with what he calls the massive central core of human thinking. There are, indeed, properties which primitive concepts have; but both characterizations are defective, and for the same reasons. To say either that a concept is a principle of understanding or that it belongs to the massive core of human thinking is merely to say that a concept is a means by which we think of something. And this is true of primitive and ordinary concepts alike. To say, on the other hand, that certain concepts are principles or that they are parts of a core is merely to repeat the distinction to be clarified. I offer the following as a characteristic which will distinguish primitive from other concepts: A concept is primitive if it is instantiated when any other concept is instantiated. An argument is transcendental if it establishes which concepts have this property. Thus if there are transcendental arguments, we are in possession of a means of solving a perennial metaphysical problem. We will be able to distinguish between which of our concepts are empirical and which are concepts of generic or categorial features of the world. And this will be no mean accomplishment. To have a way of distinguishing between categorial and empirical concepts is to show that there is a proper domain of metaphysics not reducible to any other domain.

There are two things that should be noted at the outset. One concerns the adequacy of my provisional criterion for primitiveness of concepts; the other, the relation between the theory of transcendental arguments and the theory of concepts. I take them in turn. My criterion is vacuously satisfied by so-called analytic concepts. Thus the concept of something that is either F or \(-F\) is instantiated when any other concept is instantiated. An analytic concept can be constructed out of any concept whatever if that concept is only supplemented by a disjunction and the contradictory concept; and it would seem to follow that any concept whatever can thus be made to be
primitive. This fact does not, however, vitiate my criterion. For that criterion can be defended by saying that it is vacuously satisfied by analytic concepts while it can be significantly satisfied only by concepts that are nonanalytic. What is important here is to note that the restriction just placed on my criterion is not \textit{ad hoc}. Analytic concepts are, to be sure, instantiated by every conceptual framework; but they are also compatible with the existence of any such framework; hence, the idea of an analytic concept is too broad to recover the sense in which the notion of primitiveness is used in metaphysics and epistemology.

One more thing should be noted at the outset: Arguments purporting to show that there are primitive concepts can be formulated independently of the distinction between concepts and the things which instantiate them. To prove that a concept is primitive is to show that the things instantiating them are primitive; hence, to show that a concept is primitive does not depend upon characteristics which are peculiar to concepts. Any argument which undertakes to show that there are primitive concepts whose instantiations need not be primitive would not count as a transcendental argument. For all such an argument would show is that we \textit{choose} certain concepts as primitive. It would not show that they in fact are primitive. The success or failure of a transcendental argument cannot, therefore, depend upon any characteristic peculiar to concepts; thus any reference to the theory of concepts can be safely omitted in asking about the possibility of transcendental arguments.

I do not believe that there are any transcendental arguments. I do not, that is, believe that there is a specific kind of argument the conclusion of which shows that a concept must be primitive. I shall argue to this conclusion in two stages. First, I shall consider the conditions which philosophers have laid down for such arguments, showing that these conditions do not distinguish a transcendental from any other kind of argument. Secondly, I shall examine several specimens of transcendental arguments in order to ask whether they satisfy these conditions. And I shall argue that no argument can fulfill the conditions which philosophers have set down for transcendental arguments.

\textit{1. The Kantian Heritage}

Kant lays down two conditions for transcendental arguments. I propose to separate them from his doctrine of \textit{synthetic a priori} propositions and his