

Handout #1: Stroud, “The Problem of the External World”**1. The Project**

Empirical Skepticism: We cannot have knowledge of the external world.

‘Cannot’ is a modal expression. It is used to express various concepts of impossibility. For example, if I say “I cannot lift 500 lbs. over my head,” I express the proposition that it is physically impossible given my current physiology for me to accomplish this feat. But of course, it isn’t conceptually impossible or logically impossible for me to do this—there is nothing contradictory or incoherent about my doing it—and in saying “I cannot lift 500 lbs. over my head,” I don’t assert that the act is impossible in these senses. (It is logically impossible that a figure be both square and fail to be square. It is perhaps conceptually impossible for a married person to be a bachelor.)

Questions: What sense of impossibility does the skeptic express when he says that we cannot know anything about the world around us? If it is physically impossible, isn’t that something that natural science (rather than philosophy) would discover. If (as seems plausible) the skeptic means to say that is *conceptually* impossible (not logically impossible but more than just physically impossible) for us to have knowledge of this kind, what use is the concept expressed by ‘knowledge’? Why do we use this word at all when speaking of our beliefs about the physical world? Do we just not notice that the concept we express using ‘know’ is (by its very nature) *inapplicable* to beliefs about the external world?

Stroud’s Task: To assess whether or not skepticism about the world is correct. To provide reasons for and/or against supposing that it is correct.

Stroud’s Avowed Conclusion: The project of showing that skepticism is incorrect cannot be satisfactorily accomplished. “The only answer to the question as it is meant to be understood is that we can know nothing about the world around us.”

2. Descartes Method of Doubt

To doubt all of the propositions he (at this point in his life) has come to believe and then to see if he can use reason to “prove” or “establish” the truth of these propositions in a satisfactory way. He resolves that, as a rational man, he mustn’t continue to believe those propositions that he cannot satisfactorily prove in this way.

Stroud’s example: Critically examining the collection of propositions he believes about the common cold in light of one another and noting their “incoherence” (i.e. the improbability of their all being true) and suspending belief until he investigates the matter more fully.

Questions: What is it to investigate the matter more fully? What is it to prove or establish a proposition one has come to doubt? Are there universal, objective canons or principles that guide rational inquiry and proof? What are they? Must these canons be themselves established or proved? Wouldn’t we need to *use* principles of reason to prove that these are good principles and wouldn’t this induce a “vicious regress” or “circularity”?

An Initial Ambiguity: Stroud says that he examines his (apparently incoherent) beliefs about the common cold by looking into the “source” of his beliefs. But “the source” of his beliefs would most naturally be taken to describe the way in which he came to have his beliefs: i.e. the **causes** of his beliefs. But if you came to doubt your current opinions about the common cold you would most naturally investigate the common cold (by looking it up in books and on the internet; by asking doctors and the like). Though you might try to recall the history of how you came to hold your beliefs in an effort to see whether your sources are reliable (according to your current opinion of these sources) this seems an incredibly *indirect* way to proceed. Instead of looking into the causes of your beliefs you look to find **reasons** (or evidence) for continuing to believe what you do about the common cold or reasons (or evidence) to abandon those beliefs in favor of different ones. Again, these will be (purported) facts about the common cold, not facts about your beliefs about the common cold. They needn’t be the reasons for which you came to hold your beliefs and so they needn’t have any direct connection to the causes of your beliefs. (Admittedly, if the only sufficient reasons for believing the proposition that you can come up with are your original reasons for believing it, then undermining the reliability of the causal source of your beliefs will cast doubt on there being any good reasons to hold the belief and therein indirectly undermine your confidence in the proposition.)

This difference between “reasons for believing” and “causes of believing” corresponds to a difference between two questions:

- (1) Were you justified in coming to believe what you did about the common cold? Were you justified in retaining these beliefs until the present moment?
- (2) What should you (now) believe about the common cold? What is most rational (or justified) for you to (now) believe?

The first question is a backward-looking self-directed evaluation of your beliefs. The second question is a forward-looking world-directed question about the propositions you are currently considering. Once he has come to doubt every proposition he formerly believed, does Descartes ask himself question (2), question (1) or both?

3. Descartes Principles for Rational Belief

1. Generality

Descartes is looking for a fully **general** method for “rightly conducting reason and seeking truth in sciences.” By saying the method is fully general he means that it should be possible to use it to confirm or impugn those propositions one believes about the common cold, to use it to confirm or impugn those propositions one believes about the locations and simple qualities of the objects in one’s immediate environment, to use it to confirm or impugn difficult propositions about the imperceptible structure of those objects, the laws that regulate their interactions, difficult mathematical propositions, and so on.

Stroud also says that Descartes wants to be “assured in advance” that if he correctly follows the right method he *cannot* go wrong. If ‘cannot’ here again expresses conceptual impossibility then the method must be akin to the principles that guide a deductive proof of a conclusion from conceptually true premises. It is conceptually impossible that such a proof have a false conclusion. (Think of axiomatic geometry where the axioms are treated as definitions and the proofs of the theorems are all deductively valid.) But, as Stroud notes, it is **extremely**

implausible that the propositions we believe about the external world can be established in this way.

2. Classification

Nevertheless, though Descartes wants a perfectly general method, he must show that it works by applying it to different *kinds* or *types* of propositions. Why? Because it is hard to see how to show in a fully general and **direct** way that the methods one uses in doubting and then conclusively confirming or impugning a proposition can be shown to work correctly for every proposition that can be believed or doubted. Instead, Descartes examines several different kinds of proposition and generalizes from certain example propositions to the classes they exemplify.

Empirical Propositions: Propositions about the relative locations of, properties of and relations between non-mental objects and kinds of stuff.

When we're considering skepticism about the external world (as opposed, say, to skepticism with regard to reason) we are solely concerned with empirical propositions.

1st Claim: Any reasons or evidence we have to believe empirical propositions must be ultimately traced to our *senses*.

Even when a person who has never left the US believes something about, say, the location of the Taj Mahal by trusting a map, or a picture, or someone's report, the ultimate reason they must have for holding that belief (if the belief is rational) must "derive from" the operation of "the senses" of the person who made the map, or the people who made and tested the accuracy of the camera that took the picture, or the person who saw the Taj Mahal and told her about it.

Questions: Is the 1st claim right? (What about the cogito? Is your knowledge that you exist based on sense experience? Is the claim that you exist an empirical proposition?)

4. **Fallibility**

Sometimes things are not as they appear. Sometimes one comes to hold a false perceptual belief even though that belief is generated by one's senses and one's senses are working properly. Sometimes we are in this way "misled" by our senses. Given the assumption that our empirical beliefs are all generated by the senses, does the fact that the senses **can** deceive us show that we **shouldn't** continue to believe *any* empirical proposition? Does it show that we don't **know** any empirical proposition? Can one know something even if the cause of that belief is **fallible**? Can one know something even if it is physically **possible** that one is wrong about it?

Stroud's answer: Fallibility does not preclude knowledge if it is possible for us to detect the conditions under which our senses present misleading information and take measures to only believe empirical propositions when these conditions do not obtain. If we can detect and surmount the obstacles to infallibility, we can still acquire knowledge.

2nd Claim: If one sometimes finds oneself in conditions in which one's senses produce "misleading" appearances, one can only know an empirical proposition if one uses one's reason to correct for the errors that would result if one were to uncritically "trust" one's senses and believe everything that appears to be true.

The skeptic allows that we can detect normal errors using reason and conversation. But she claims to present considerations that undermine the reliability of perceptual belief even in the **best** conditions possible. The hypothesis that you are now dreaming and the hypothesis that you are a brain in a vat being stimulated by a super-computer are both supposed to cast doubt on the evidence or “testimony” of your senses in even the best conditions possible.

5. The General Skeptical Argument

- (1) You don't know that you are not a brain in a vat (BIV).
 - (2) You know that if you have hands, then you are not a BIV.
- Therefore,
- (3) You don't know that you have hands.

(3) follows from (1)-(2) if we assume the following “single premise closure” principle.

Single Premise Closure (SPC): For any subject S and propositions P and Q, if S knows P and S knows that P entails Q without any intervening argumentation, then S knows Q.

Let P be the proposition that you are a brain in a vat. Let Q be the proposition that you have hands. You know that Q entails not-P. Assume for a [reductio ad absurdum](#) that you know Q. Then, via SPC you know not-P. But (as premise 1 says), you don't know not-P. (How could you know that you are not a BIV?) Thus, you must not know Q. You do not know that you have hands.

6. The First Premise

Stroud argues that you can't know that you are not dreaming and he would presumably claim that you can't know that you are not a BIV. But this hardly seems obvious. Indeed, as Stroud admits, on a first hearing it seems positively incredible. If I ask you whether or not you're dreaming (and you're not insane or “doing” philosophy) you'll tell me unequivocally that you're not dreaming; and when we're being honest and informative, we typically only assert those things we know or take ourselves to know. So it seems we typically assume the falsity of (1) when we are not dreaming. Thus, the skeptic needs an argument to support premise (1).

Stroud's arguments for (1) center around his claim that we can't apply a *test* we know to reliably distinguish dreaming from wakefulness. But it cannot in general be true that to know p one must (a) know that x is an accurate test for distinguishing between p and not-p, and (b) one must be able to both apply x properly and (c) know that one has applied x properly. This immediately leads to a vicious regress. Let q be the proposition that x is an accurate test of the truth of p. How does one know q? If we accept Stroud's general principle, one must employ a distinct test y that reliably determines whether or not q. Let z be the proposition that y is an accurate test of the truth of q. Applying the principle again we need to know z before we can know q, and we need to know q before we can know p. But, of course, if we accept Stroud's principle we can't know z directly, and a vicious regress ensues. (This resembles the Platonic problem of the “criterion”.) Stroud's assumption (about one's needing a test to distinguish dreaming from wakefulness in order to know that one is awake) leads directly to skepticism and should be rejected if it is not itself supported by arguments.

Arguments for (1) typically don't talk of “tests,” but instead center around the first empiricist claim described above reflected in Stroud's assertion, “Anything one can experience in one's waking life can also be dreamt about.”

An Argument for (1)

(A) Any reason or piece of evidence you have for believing that you are not a BIV is ultimately constituted by your perceptual experiences and perceptual beliefs.

(B) You would have exactly the same perceptual experiences and perceptual beliefs that you actually have if you were instead a properly stimulated BIV.

Thus,

(C) You would have exactly the same reasons or evidence for thinking you are not a BIV even if you were a BIV.

(D) If there is a possibility in which you have all the reasons or evidence you actually have for believing P but P is nevertheless false, then you do not know P.

Thus,

(E) You do not know you are not a BIV.

Notice that this argument can be fairly easily generalized to *directly* derive (3) and this casts doubt on the centrality or importance of the main argument.

The Direct Argument

(A') Any reasons or evidence we have to believe empirical propositions are entirely constituted by our perceptual experiences and the perceptual beliefs to which these experiences give rise.

(B') For any empirical proposition P that you actually believe on the basis of your perceptual experiences and beliefs, if you were a BIV, you would still have all these experiences and beliefs but P would be false.

Thus,

(C') For any such P, if you were a BIV you would have all the reasons or evidence you actually have for believing P but P would be false.

(D') If there is a possibility in which you have all the reasons or evidence you actually have for believing P but P is false, then you do not know P. (Intuitively, you cannot "rule out" this alternative possibility.)

Therefore,

(E') You do not know any empirical proposition.

Comments: The two most important premises in these arguments are (B') and (D'). (Of course, this is not to admit that the other premises are beyond challenge.)

Adopting (B') means advocating a certain kind of "internalism" about perceptual belief and experience. It amounts to the claim that BIVs who have very different external environments than we do can nevertheless have the very same perceptual beliefs and experiences that we have. We'll be talking a lot more about this (and the move from (B') to (C')) when we turn to topic 2 and (with it) an examination of the epistemic or justificatory role of perceptual experience.

Premise (D') amounts to the denial of fallibilism. It denies that knowledge can be transmitted by non-deductive (or "inductive") arguments.

Suppose that every man is mortal. Now consider the following:

(*) S knows that every man so far observed is mortal.

(**) S infers from this that everyman is mortal.

(***) S knows that every man is mortal.

According to (D') this is an invalid piece of reasoning. Indeed, there is **no** good argument of this form.

Question: Should we reject D' or join the skeptic in thinking that there is no such thing as inductive knowledge?

Stroud argues for something *somewhat* like (D')—but more akin to our single premise closure principle—when he gives his example of the goldfinch and the canary.

Stroud puts it this way:

- (a) S actually believes that the bird in the tree is a goldfinch.
 - (b) If S knows that the bird in the tree is a goldfinch, then she must know that it is not a canary (because if it is a canary it is not a goldfinch).
 - (c) S does not know that the bird in the tree is not a canary.
- Therefore,
- (c) S actually does not know that the bird in the tree is a goldfinch.

Why should we believe (b)? Stroud defends this premise with the following general principle:

The Strong Exclusion Principle (SEP): “if somebody knows something, p, he must know the falsity of all those things incompatible with his knowing that p.”

SEP is not obviously true. Suppose that only one canary exists and it lives in a distant corner of the universe. S does not know this because she (like the rest of humanity) has never even heard of canaries. Is (b) still true in this case?

Stroud rejects SEP for another reason. Suppose I know the axioms of a mathematical theory. To know the falsity of all those things incompatible with the truth of a proposition is to know the truth of all those things that this proposition implies. But if I must know all the things a proposition implies in order to know that proposition, then I must know all the theorems of a given mathematical theory in order to know its axioms. And this is absurd. I only *learn* the theorems *after* deducing them from the axioms. For this reason, Stroud asks us to replace SEP with the following principle:

The Weak Exclusion Principle (WEP): “if somebody knows something, p, he must know the falsity of all those things incompatible with his knowing that p (*or perhaps all those things he knows to be incompatible with his knowing that p*).”

WEP allows greater ignorance to induce knowledge. That is, suppose that there are plenty of canaries in this world. S is a bird expert and so knows this but R has never heard of canaries. Both look in a tree at a goldfinch and come to believe that it is a goldfinch though neither can visually detect whether or not it is a canary. According to WEP S does not know that there is a goldfinch in the tree whereas (for all WEP says) R might.

For these reasons I think (D') is better than both SEP or WEP.

- (a') S actually believes that the bird in the tree is a goldfinch.
 - (b') There is a (nearby?) possible world in which S has the evidence she actually has for believing that the bird in the tree is a goldfinch, but it is not a goldfinch but a canary instead.
- Therefore,
- (c') S actually does not know that the bird in the tree is a goldfinch.

Question: Is (b') correct?