

Skepticism and beyond: A primer on Stroud's later epistemology

In *Sképsis* VII.14: 76-99.

October 2016

Jason Bridges
University of Chicago

1. Understanding the skeptical challenge

A. The initial reflections in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* purport to reveal that we are incapable of acquiring knowledge of the world around us. How is such an extraordinarily sweeping, and devastating, result supposed to be reached?

Whatever we make of the details, the general strategy, at least, seems straightforward. In the course of his reflections, Descartes raises a question that we might express as follows, "How is it possible for us to have knowledge, by means of the senses, of things located outside us?" He then brings to bear an array of related considerations on this question, and on their basis arrives at an answer that can be put as follows: "Sorry to say, but it's not in fact possible for us to have any knowledge, by means of the senses, of things located outside us."

The assessment, then, seems to be reached in an eminently familiar way: by argument. If we don't like the assessment, it falls to us to find some error in the arguments for it.

Central to Barry Stroud's approach to skepticism is a suspicion of this straightforward accounting of the skeptic's progress. Certainly it appears as if the skeptic raises a general question about our capacity for knowledge, and then argues toward a negative answer to that question. But are things as they appear?

B. I just professed to express Descartes' question, and his corresponding skeptical answer, with some familiar words of English. But in fact the words and sentences I used do not simply wear on their face the significance they need to have if they are to capture what is special about Descartes' inquiry into our capacity for sensory-perceptual knowledge. It is internal to his intended inquiry that it might end in a complete disavowal of the capacity for knowledge at issue. One might use the interrogative sentence—"How is it possible for us to have knowledge, by means of the senses, of things located outside us?"—to call for a form of inquiry that lacks that character. For example, it might be used to organize a scientific examination of the mechanisms that enable the human beings to acquire knowledge through perception. With the question taken that way, there is no prospect that our investigation will culminate in a denial that such knowledge is attainable.

What holds for Descartes' skeptical inquiry holds in other areas of philosophy as well. In a range of cases, the same words we use to voice our aspiration for philosophical understanding can be used with no such end in view. "Is this wall really yellow or does it just look yellow?" might be asked of a metaphysics seminar or a realtor, for example. As Stroud puts the point at the outset of his examination of "subjectivism" about color:

Philosophical questions can look and sound exactly like familiar ordinary or scientific questions (Stroud, 2000, p.4).

C. This observation is perhaps not so surprising. It is not, after all, unique to philosophical discourse that words and sentences are used to say and mean things in that discourse that those same words and sentences are not used to say or mean elsewhere. Quite generally, what a speaker means by her utterances depends upon the context in which she utters them, including

especially consideration of the interests and focus, intellectual or otherwise, of the speaker and her audience.

But the observation is nonetheless useful to keep in mind as we endeavor to engage with Descartes' skeptical question. It reminds us that we can achieve an adequate understanding of that question only by coming to terms with the philosophical reflections to which it belongs and which give it whatever distinctive significance it is to have. What we understand about the question simply in virtue of speaking the language in which it is couched—English, French, Latin, etc.—is very far from sufficient.

We will be aided in our interpretive endeavor by the fact that the skeptical reflections, while obviously abstruse and difficult, do not seem alien to us. On the contrary, we seem to find it quite easy and natural to follow Descartes down the path he takes in the first Meditation. His interests, presumptions and impressions—evidently they are ours, too. At any rate, they are ours until we can find a way to get beyond them or see through them. The study of epistemological skepticism is not like the study of, say, quantum mechanics. What we are trying to understand is a movement of thought that was already, if obscurely, our own.

Perhaps only certain traditions or cultures in the history of humankind have engaged in these reflections as we know them. But all of us here belong to at least one such tradition or culture, so we cannot help engaging in, or trying to come to terms with, the reflections I have in mind. (Stroud, 2008, p.124)

D. Recognizing that the significance of the skeptical question is not simply given to us by the words used to express it, and that we must rather do some serious work to ferret it out, raises the prospect that the question will turn out to have no coherent significance at all. Is it

possible that we will find, once we have made the effort to figure out what the skeptic thinks she is after, that there is only the illusion of an intelligible question here?

Indeed, this is just what Stroud thinks we ought to find. But it matters crucially how we think we find it.

There is a perennial temptation in philosophy, when confronted with the grand denials of skeptics or metaphysicians, to seek to take up an external standpoint on those claims from which we can pronounce them meaningless. Perhaps, for example, we look for a theory of language and meaning that will show that attempts to state these supposed claims are invariably “misusing” language or are disallowed by its “rules”.

This temptation is understandable. Indeed, it is insightful to suspect that there is no making sense of sweeping skeptical and metaphysical denials. Nonetheless, for Stroud the temptation ought to be resisted. Giving into it represents a defeat. We ourselves feel, or at least feel that we feel, the pull of the skeptical or metaphysical reasoning. Finding some supposed linguistic rule that blocks the entering of the skeptical conclusion—say some pragmatic or semantic principle about the use of the word “know”—will not make the feeling go away. If anything, it will make it more troubling. If we truly hope to free ourselves of the pull of skeptical or metaphysical reasoning, we have no choice but to take up and think through that reasoning on its own terms so far as it is possible to do so. We must go as far as we can in understanding and feeling the force of the reflections from which the sweeping skeptical or metaphysical conclusions are supposed to emerge, and then see where that leaves us. If the apparent force of such reflections is to be dissipated, the catalyst must come from within an engagement in those reflections themselves.

My aim is to develop from the inside a rich sense of what it takes to engage in the enterprise in the right way and to see what sorts of conclusions can be reached. That

is finally the best test of whether we can make the project intelligible to ourselves and of the validity of whatever we find in carrying it out (Stroud, 2008, p.3).

E. Stroud, then, seeks to walk a narrow path. On the one hand, we are to proceed with the awareness that we do not really understand what we are after when we, as party to a tradition of skeptical or metaphysical inquiry, seek to engage in such inquiry. And we are to be open to the prospect of discovering that we cannot, after all, satisfy the aim of this inquiry, or even assign to that inquiry an intelligible aim. But on the other hand, if we are to make this discovery, we must do so not by imposing a supposed insight about the limits of meaningfulness drawn from elsewhere, but by working “from the inside” of the very intellectual enterprise whose unintelligibility we are in the process of discovering. This is really not so much a narrow path as a tightrope, and one that dissolves into mist as we walk along it. The success of the Stroudian treatment of skepticism will depend upon the prospect of executing this vertiginous, seemingly paradoxical feat. It is not surprising that many readers of Stroud have had trouble drawing a bead on his “position” on skeptical and metaphysical issues—as in the is-he-a-skeptic-or-isn’t-he responses to *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*.

F. We find some cause for optimism, in the pursuit of this feat, in the observation that there is more than one way to fail to be intelligible. To say that we cannot make the skeptic’s question intelligible is not to say the skeptic’s words must add up to an indigestible nugget of nonsense, to be passed through our system and then expelled, leaving us unchanged. If that were so, skepticism would be of no interest. But there is room for other, intermediate possibilities.

Stroud believes that we can go far enough along in thinking through what the skeptical question is after to draw conclusions about how it would need to be answered could be it be satisfactorily and intelligibly raised. In particular, we can come to see that if the question could be satisfactorily raised, a negative answer to it would be inescapable. Were there such a thing as a fully intelligible doctrine of skepticism about the external world, in other words, it would be true. This is “the conditional correctness of skepticism” (Stroud, 1984, p.179).

On the other hand, if we can come to see that the skeptical question cannot be satisfactorily raised, then we have in a sense successfully dealt with the problem that skepticism seemed to pose to our epistemic capacities. But the problem is met by being dissolved, not solved.

It follows that whatever we learn from this exercise, it will not be the truth of some positive doctrine that might seem fit to be skepticism’s opposite number. From the conclusion that we cannot make full sense of the skeptical question,

...it does not follow that we do have the knowledge of the world that a sceptical answer to the traditional problem denies that we have. We cannot say we have found that the answer to a problem we cannot intelligibly be presented with is ‘Yes’. (Stroud, 2009, p.568)

2. The conditional correctness of Cartesian skepticism

A. How, working “from the inside” of skeptical reflection, are we to come to see that skepticism is an “answer to a problem that is not fully intelligible to us”? And how are we to come to see that, were that problem intelligible, the negative answer the skeptic wishes to give to it would have to be “correct”?

Let’s begin with the second of these questions.

B. Descartes (1996, p.12) treats the question of how we can have knowledge “by or through the senses” of “things located outside” us as equivalent to the question of how we can have knowledge of external things by means of our enjoyment of something he calls “sensory experience” or “sensory perception”. His skeptical reflections pivot on a certain general principle about the character of such “experience”. The principle is that “every sensory experience I have ever thought I was having while awake I can also think of myself as sometimes having while asleep” (1996, p.53). When I’m awake I am really seeing and hearing objects located outside me, such as fires and dressing gowns. While I’m asleep, I’m not really hearing or seeing any such objects. If I may nonetheless be having the very same “experiences” I would have if I were awake, it follows that, whether I am awake or not, my having these “experiences” does not in itself guarantee the presence of these objects in my surroundings. And so, even if my “sensory experiences” somehow “represent” to me the presence of a fire (1996, p.13fn), their doing that cannot on its own amount to my seeing that, and so knowing that, there is a fire before me. My knowing there is a fire before me implies that there is a fire before me, but my having the “experiences” does not.

This tells us something about what “sensory experiences” are not. What can we say about what they are? In the second Meditation, Descartes ventures all of the following: 1) that “having a sensory perception”, understood in the “restricted sense of the term”, is “*seeming* to see [light], to hear [noise]” (1996, p.19), 2) that this amounts to a kind of “thinking”, and 3) that one’s belief that one is thus “thinking” is invulnerable to skeptical doubt. Taken together these claims strongly suggest that the enjoyment of “sensory perception” does involve the acquisition or possession of knowledge. But this result is not in obvious conflict with the skeptical conclusion of the first Meditation, for the knowledge sensory perception is here represented as providing is evidently not of “things located outside” us. What one knows, in

having a sensory perception, is restricted to what one *seems* to see, hear, etc. In “experiencing” a fire, one thereby knows only that one seems to see a fire. Because it is possible to seem to see a fire when there is in fact no fire to be seen, linking this form of knowledge to “sensory experience” does not directly contradict the pivotal claim of the argument of the first Meditation.

C. If our aim is to explain how “sensory experience” yields knowledge of objects located outside us, and if “sensory experience” itself is to be understood as provisioning knowledge of a certain domain, then our question seems to assume the following shape: how do we derive knowledge of the former domain from knowledge of the latter? How are we to secure a ground for our knowledge of the outside world in the knowledge we are given in “sensory experience”? Since the domain of “sensory experience” is to be construed so that nothing we can know within that domain has any implications of any kind for how things stand in the domain of objects located outside us, this question seems to have an immediate and obvious answer: we can’t. If our “sensory experiences” never tell us anything about what is going on in the world outside, how could the knowledge they provision possibly ground our knowledge of that world?

D. That is the conclusion of the first Meditation. And Stroud suggests that it is a conclusion that Descartes never abandons—even as he supposedly rebuilds the “foundations” of his beliefs through appeal to the apparatus of the third and subsequent Meditations:

The senses are obviously important for knowing anything about the world. That is the undeniable point from which Descartes starts. On his view we cannot know anything about ‘things located outside’ us on the basis of perceptual knowledge alone.

But Descartes appears to assume that we can know *something* on that purely sensory basis alone. And that purely sensory knowledge, he thinks, although not itself knowledge of ‘things located outside’ us, can be combined with knowledge available from some non-sensory source to give us knowledge of the familiar world. So our knowledge of the world is a combination of knowledge from two distinct sources, not from sense-perception alone. (2009, p.563)

Descartes holds firm to his conclusion that a “sensory basis alone” cannot yield knowledge of the outside world. What is needed is to supplement the “sensory basis” with knowledge derived from elsewhere: viz., the knowledge that God created us and ensured that the restricted deliverances of our perceptual faculties will be reliable guides to how things actually stand in the world around us.

Stroud argues that this approach is hopeless (Stroud, 2009, pp.563-564). There is no prospect of finding a source of knowledge to which we human beings might plausibly be thought to have access, which, when coupled with perceptual knowledge as understood on his restricted conception, yields knowledge of things located around us. Descartes’ own version of this strategy, with its baroque theological detail, is entirely unconvincing. But more generally, it is obscure how we could have knowledge of what our perception tells us about the world that does not ultimately rest on perception itself.

It is perhaps for this reason that later philosophers who adopted a broadly Cartesian anti-skeptical strategy sometimes spoke not of our *knowing* that our restricted perceptual knowledge provides grounds for beliefs about the external world, but just of our needing to *assume* that it does. But the skeptic would be happy to grant that we make assumptions. That is just grist for her mill.

E. It is the set of reflections just briefly summarized that are to lead us to an appreciation of the conditional correctness of Cartesian skepticism. The condition upon which Cartesian skepticism's correctness depends is the legitimacy of the restricted conception of perception, according to which perception contributes only knowledge that is noncommittal on how things stand in the world around us. If we grant this conception, the question presses how we are able to transcend this restricted basis to arrive at knowledge of the world beyond. And the answer, it would seem, is that we aren't able to do that. We cannot derive knowledge of the external world solely on the basis of perceptual knowledge conceived in this limited fashion. And there is no prospect of uncovering some other source of knowledge to bulwark such derivations. The skeptical conclusion is apparently inevitable.

F. It is also ludicrous. No one can accept it at face value. So suppose you are attracted to the restricted conception of perception. And suppose you recognize that there is no obvious error in the argument that proceeds from this conception to the skeptical conclusion. You will naturally be tempted to look for an unobvious one. One appealing prospect is to look for some philosophical principle or idea that can show the argument to lack the significance or relevance it would need to have to support a genuinely skeptical assessment of our knowledge.

One option in this vein is to deploy an account of the nature of linguistic meaning to shift our sense of the import of the skeptical conclusion. An early 20th-century verificationist like Carnap or Lewis, for example, might claim the skeptical reasoning to show not that our "belief in an external world is" unjustified, but that there is no such "belief" properly speaking, only a pragmatically-motivated commitment to deploying a certain "conceptual scheme" or "linguistic framework". And a modern-day "contextualist" might grant that the skeptical conclusion is correctly asserted in the context of skeptical reflection, but hold that the context-sensitivity of

talk of what is “known” seals off this result from having any implications for the truth of our ordinary claims to “know”.

Another approach appeals to distinctive ideas about explanation or understanding to relieve us of the obligation of answering the question the restricted conception seems to pose—at least in the way the skeptical reflection seems to require. Thus a “naturalist” about epistemology maintains that we are always free, when addressing any question about the possibility of knowledge, to appeal to the very knowledge in question. And an “externalist” about justification finds in the skeptical argument an object lesson in our capacity to acquire knowledge without knowing how we got it.

Stroud has addressed all of these attempts, and others, to defang the skeptical argument without relinquishing the restricted conception of perception. In his view, all such attempts fail. Each fails for reasons peculiar to it. But there is a theme in Stroud’s reckonings of their failure. The theme is that if we grant the restricted conception of perception, it is too late to vitiate the ensuing skeptical line of thought. We may try to insist, on the ground of some philosophical theory or another, that this line of thought does not have the import the skeptic takes it to have. But the import the skeptic takes the line of thought to have is the import *we* take it have, when we trace it out and feel its apparent force. And so these stratagems, as clever as they may be, can at best leave us at war with ourselves. The specter of skepticism will continue to haunt us.

3. The unintelligibility of Cartesian skepticism

A. And so Stroud thinks a satisfying exorcism of that specter will need to go deeper. It will have to confront the conception of perception that lies at the heart of the skeptical argument. If successful, it will show us that this conception is itself spectral, that it is a fantasy.

We think we grasp the conception. But we do not. Since we cannot make genuine sense of the conception, we cannot make genuine sense of the supposed question of how we acquire knowledge of the world outside through perception so conceived. Attempts like those just mentioned to defuse the import of the skeptic's answer to this supposed question will thus be both misconceived and beside the point.

B. But how could it be shown that we do not so much as *understand* the (apparent) thought that perception, taken by itself, yields knowledge that falls short of encompassing how things stand with objects in the world around us? This thought certainly does not appear unintelligible on its face. On the contrary, there appears something to be said for it. Descartes has already told us what that something is. There's no denying that at least some of the time, we seem to see or hear things that aren't really there. This happens systematically, for example, when you are dreaming. When dreaming, you can't tell whether things really are as you seem to see or otherwise perceive them to be. Your predicament, it would appear, can be put this way: how things look and sound to you is just as they would look and sound if you were awake and actually seeing and hearing what you are really only dreaming that you see and hear. This formulation points to a domain of facts available to us in perception—namely, facts about how things look to us, sound to us, etc.—that can be held constant as we shift from supposing ourselves awake to supposing ourselves asleep and dreaming. This domain might now look like the natural locus for perceptual knowledge “strictly speaking”—for the knowledge that is available to us most immediately when we exercise our perceptual faculties.

Cognizant as we are of the conditional correctness of skepticism, we may hesitate to follow Descartes in taking this final step. But could it be said that we do not even understand what it would be to take that step? Why not?

C. Stroud suggests that we can come to appreciate our inability to grasp the restricted conception of perception by taking that conception as seriously as we can: by trying to genuinely take it up in our thinking and to see how doing so would square with other commitments and concepts we can recognize ourselves to possess. He encourages us in particular to focus on reconciling the conception with a consideration of the conditions for ascribing “psychological states” to other people and ourselves:

My suggestion is that, given the conditions of our acknowledging any psychological states, and in particular any determinate perceptions, beliefs, and knowledge, as part of the world, we cannot make full sense of perceptual knowledge as restricted only to a limited domain that includes no facts of the wider world. (Stroud, 2009, p.568).

The form of reflection Stroud is here advocating is, broadly speaking, Davidsonian. We are to synoptically take stock of the range of things we must know or think about a person in order to “interpret” her as a rational being with knowledge, beliefs, desires, intentions and so on. In the present context, we are to attend particularly to the role of a capacity to perceive within this constellation of ascriptions, considering what form the ascription of this capacity is to take, and how it integrates with other such ascriptions. Stroud suggests that if we do this accounting conscientiously, we will discover that we could never sensibly ascribe perceptual faculties to a subject without supposing their exercise to characteristically issue in knowledge of the external world. Insofar as we make room for the subject to have the kind of capacity the restricted conception allows—namely, the capacity to know what one seems to see or hear, or how things look or sound—we thereby accede to her the capacity we have found the conception to rule out—namely, the capacity to know how things actually are in the world around her by perceiving them:

We could begin to work towards overcoming [the Cartesian] restriction [on perceptual knowledge] by asking whether someone could recognize directly and without guidance or mediation that an object he sees *looks* or *seems* to be red if he did not at least understand what it is for an object to *be* red. And could someone understand that, and so be capable of having the thought that a present object is red, if he lacked the capacity ever to recognize, under any circumstances, that a present object *is* red? This is not a line of argument I will pursue further here. But I think it is the kind of (dare I say ‘transcendental’?) investigation that could take us to the bottom of, and so put behind us once and for all, the appeal of the traditional restriction of perceptual knowledge to something always less than the world around us. This is where real work is needed: on the conditions of possessing and understanding the concepts needed even to be presented with the traditional epistemological problem. (2011a, p.97)

D. Stroud hedges on whether to call the kind of reflection he envisions “transcendental”. It would not provide a “transcendental argument” in the sense of his famous paper of that name. For one thing, the envisioned reflections would not establish the correctness of anything we take ourselves to believe about things located outside us, and “transcendental arguments” are supposed to do that. On the other hand, the reflections, if successfully carried out, would clear away an apparent challenge to the legitimacy of capacities for knowledge we take ourselves to possess, and it would do so by revealing that the very intelligibility of that challenge is inconsistent with what we can come to see, through philosophical reflection, about the structure of our thought about these capacities. In playing this broadly Kantian role, such reflections can perhaps be said to be “transcendental”.

It is the intelligibility of the skeptical challenge that is at stake here. What is to be undermined is our initial presumption that we so much as grasp the skeptical question. This is critical for the strategy. Stroud's aim is not, or not merely, to encourage us to see that we cannot help but believe that other people and ourselves acquire knowledge from perception of the world around them. Suppose we became convinced that this belief is indeed ineluctable. That result would perhaps be of some interest, but its force against the skeptical challenge seems minimal. Recognizing that we must believe in external-world knowledge is consistent with still finding ourselves faced with Descartes' question about how such knowledge is possible, and still seeing no other answer possible than the skeptical one. We would perhaps be in the uncomfortable situation of Hume, acknowledging in ourselves a "natural propensity" toward "an indolent belief in the general maxims of the world", while simultaneously seeing nothing wrong in the "reflections very refined and metaphysical" that contravene these "maxims". (Hume, 2000, I.4.7).

The upshot of the course of reflection Stroud envisions is not merely that we cannot help but believe that human beings have the capacity to acquire knowledge of "things located outside" through their perceptual capacities. It is rather that we cannot make sense of the supposed possibility of human beings whose perceptual capacities do not yield knowledge of "things located outside". In understanding a human being to be a perceiver, we thereby understand her to possess a faculty for acquiring such knowledge. This is, if you like, the very nature or essence of perception, as we learn we have all along understood it and must continue to understand it. Perception is a capacity for knowledge of the perceiver's worldly surroundings.¹

¹ At least, that is so insofar as perception manifests as a capacity for knowledge. Cats and spiders have perceptual capacities, but do they know things about the world around them? There may be a principled point to withholding such ascriptions to them. We might want to hold that, while such animals are aware of aspects of their surroundings, these are forms of awareness that do not amount to knowledge properly so-called. This is an important topic, but it is to one side.

We are led to the realization that perception is such a capacity by discovering that, qua epistemic capacity, there is nothing else for it to be. Descartes' question purports to proceed from an alternative view of what perception, "strictly speaking", might amount to: a capacity for knowing only what one seems to see, hear, etc. The envisioned "transcendental" reflections show us that we cannot make sense of such a capacity. There is no understanding the subject's acquiring knowledge of what she seems to see or hear except as a deliverance of a capacity generative of knowledge of how things are in the world around one. Insofar as a skeptical challenge to our beliefs acquired "from or through the senses" purports to deviate from this understanding, it loses its subject matter.

E. Stroud has always been uncomfortable with the idea of *a priori* knowledge, and still more so with the notion of analytic truth. His discomfort stems from the uses to which philosophers have tried to put these ideas. Generally, these uses embody the hope that casting a given claim as an "analytic" or "conceptual" truth, or as "knowable *a priori*", will contribute toward some philosophical project of explaining or justifying some fundamental aspect of what or how we think. Stroud is dubious.

At the same time, Stroud recognizes that philosophical inquiry into what we think, or how we think, is special. It is not like scientific inquiry into the "mind". It is not like everyday, historical, or literary reflection on what or how individuals or groups of individuals think. If we wanted to call it "*a priori*" or "conceptual" simply to register these differences, would Stroud object?

Stroud's envisioned "transcendental" reflections concern rational, self-conscious thinking beings: these reflections are to bring us to the realization that, in the case of such beings, perception must be understood as a capacity whose *métier* is providing knowledge of what is going on in the world around the perceiver. (However, I take it that the reflections, suitably extended, will yield a corollary about the role of perception in animals that are not knowers. The corollary is that we must understand an animal's perceptual capacities to yield awareness, not of "proximal stimuli", but of objects and conditions in its "distal" environment—with our conception of that environment guided by our application, to the kind of animal in question, of what I called in *Bridges* 2006 the "ordinary conception of animal life".)

He might. At any rate, he might object insofar as the use of that label suggests that we have some independently available template of “a priori thought” or “conceptual truth” to which we can then observe the fruit of philosophical inquiry to conform. What is special about the knowledge acquired in philosophical inquiry, for Stroud, can emerge only from within engagement in particular cases of such inquiry. The point of saying that our “concept” of perception is of a capacity for external-world knowledge—if that is how we choose to put our conclusion—will depend upon the context of our engagement with the apparent skeptical challenge. It will determine the philosophical significance the conclusion has for us.

4. The immediacy of perceptual knowledge

A. Stroud implies in the passage quoted above that, on a proper understanding of our perceptual capacities, a perceiver can recognize “without guidance or mediation” that, say, an apple she sees is red. What is the significance of this denial of the need for “guidance or mediation” in our acquisition of perceptual knowledge of external things?

B. If you know that *p*, your belief that *p* is justified. It follows that there will be an answer to the question what justifies your belief that *p*. It is tempting to assume that an acceptable answer to this question must cite some *reason* you have for believing that *p*, where a reason for a belief is something else you know or believe.² As Austin (1961, p.47) points out, we don’t speak in the same sense of reasons for knowing that *p*. But we do speak of *grounds* or *bases* of knowledge. As these idioms are often used, reasons for belief and grounds for knowledge are related via the following principle: if you have a reason that justifies your belief that *p*, then,

² I intend this formulation to be neutral over the vexed, and perhaps not very important, question of whether to count as one’s “reason”: 1) *what* one knows or believes, 2) *that* one knows or believes that, or 3) one’s *believing* or *knowing* that. What *is* important to keep in view is the minimal point that one must believe or know that *p* if the “fact” or “proposition” that *p* is to play any role in providing the reason for which one believes something.

assuming that you know that p , what we cite in giving you reason for believing that p may also be cited as the ground or basis of your knowledge that p . Since knowledge implies justified belief, the assumption that all justified beliefs require reasons for them will then entail that all knowledge requires a ground or basis.

Despite its surface appeal, the assumption that all justified beliefs are held for reasons (or that all knowledge has a ground or basis) is notoriously problematic. The problem arises because it seems absurd to suppose that your belief that q could justify your belief that p if your belief that q were not itself justified. Our assumption now compels us to look for a reason that justifies your belief that q (or a ground for your knowledge that q). But even if we find it, we'll just have another belief to justify, or another piece of knowledge to ground. And the question of justification will arise again. There will be no resting place.

We might try to live with this situation, *à la* some forms of “coherentism”. But pretending that an endless regress is tolerable is an act of desperation. We'd be better off if we could become comfortable with rejecting the assumption that generates the regress. Why not deny that a justified belief must be justified by a reason for which it is held, or that all knowledge must have a ground? One acquires knowledge by properly exercising a capacity for acquiring knowledge of the relevant kind. It is true that at least one such capacity—that of inference— involves recognition of grounds. But that is not the only imaginable form a faculty of knowledge might take. And it seems an especially poor fit for one faculty of external-world knowledge of particular interest to us: that of perception.

A message of our “transcendental” reflections can be put like this: in perceiving the world around me, I can thereby know something about it to be so. To say that I “thereby” acquire knowledge is to say that nothing more need be required to, say, know that a fire is before me than for me to perceive it to be present. The belief that most proximately results from this

nexus is not readily viewed as a belief that is justified by something else I know or believe. I am justified in believing there's a fire before me simply because I perceive, and thereby know, it to be so. And this knowledge itself is not "guided or mediated" by any further ground, by any other piece of knowledge or other justified belief. It is *immediate* knowledge of the world around me.

Stroud elaborates on the idea of immediacy as follows:

When I see and in seeing know that an object present to me is red, what I see to be so is not my 'basis' or 'reason' or 'justification' for believing that the object is red. What I see to be so is that the object is red. That is all it takes to know it. There can be no better or stronger position for believing or knowing something than seeing that it is so, right before your eyes.

But I think that does not mean that *what* I see to be so is *my* reason or justification or warrant. I think there is no such thing in this case. What I see and thereby believe and know is that the object is red. I come to know that that is so by seeing that it is so. It is *because* I see what I see that I know what I know. My seeing what I see explains *why* I believe or *how* I know what I do. It is in that sense the reason *why* I believe and know what I do. But my *seeing* that the object is red is not my reason or justification or warrant for believing that it is red. It is because I see what I do that I know and in that sense am justified or warranted in believing that the object is red. But there is nothing independent that serves as my 'basis' or 'warrant' or 'reason' for believing that. (2011a, pp.97-98)

C. Knowledge, in the sense we have been interested in throughout, is "propositional" thought. My knowledge that I am in front of the fire is such a thought, and it has the unity of a

“proposition”, a unity that is displayed by the sentence that expresses what I know. It is thus helpful, in drawing a bead on the view of perception toward which we are tending, to register that English has “seeing that” and “perceiving that” forms, one of whose uses is to report knowledge gained non-inferentially from perception. These operators take sentences as complements and thus represent the seeing or perceiving as involving the apprehension of “propositional” thought. We can say that uses of “seeing that” characterize cases of “propositional seeing” to contrast this usage from ways of characterizing perception whose logical features are different (e.g., “objectual seeing”).

D. But the primary motivation for the thought that perceiving the world is knowing it does not lie in linguistic considerations. The thought is rather a moral of the “transcendental” reflections that have enabled us to see through the skeptical challenge. Descartes was not wrong to hold that our knowledge of the external world depends in general upon our capacity to perceive it, nor was he wrong to think that particular pieces of external-world knowledge have their origin in particular acts or instances of perception. But he was wrong to assume that these perceptual transactions could sensibly be viewed as mediated by some other form or forms of knowledge. If perception is to result in external-world knowledge, it must begin with external-world knowledge.

Of course, some of the things we believe about the external world we believe for reasons. But these reasons, if they are good ones, will always encompass other things we know or believe about the external world. And not everything we believe about the external world can be like that. We must have knowledge of the external world that has no grounds or bases in this sense. Perception is a faculty for such immediate knowledge of the world around us. This is something we already knew, as manifested by our competence in the application of the concepts

of knowledge, perception, belief and so on to other people and ourselves. Engagement with the skeptical challenge has brought this knowledge to philosophical consciousness.

E. Perceiving, as a form of knowing, is an immensely sophisticated capacity. We have seen (in our envisioned “transcendental” reflections) that it is intelligibly ascribed to a person only in conjunction with the ascription of a wide range of other interrelated capacities. Similarly, my knowing some particular thing about my surroundings—say, that I’m in front of the fire—requires that I know many other things about it as well. Knowledge of the world around us is not atomistic.

But the dependence on these additional capacities and reservoirs of knowledge is a dependence within a different “logical dimension”, as Sellars (1963) put a closely related point, than the dimension in which items provide grounds, justifications or bases for particular beliefs or pieces of knowledge. We can acknowledge this dependence without losing our grip on the thought that some knowledge of the outside world is, in the relevant sense, immediate:

When I say that I see and thereby know that there is a chair in this room, or that a certain object is red, and I do so not on the basis of anything I know or believe about the object, I do not mean that I could know what I know about the object even if I knew nothing else at all. I could not see and know that the object is red without having the concept ‘red’, and so without knowing what I am saying when I say that something is red. I need a rich conceptual repertoire to be able to see and thereby know that *p*, whatever the ‘*p*’ in question might be. And I think that in having the kind of conceptual repertoire we all have we thereby know, or are capable of knowing, a great many things about the world around us. Learning to understand and think certain thoughts and learning things about the world those thoughts are about go

hand in hand. So I think anyone must know or at least believe many things about the world even to be capable of seeing and thereby knowing that a certain object is red, or that there is a chair in this room. (2011a, p.98).

Some of our knowledge of the outside world has no ground: we have seen that we must acknowledge this if we are not to lose our grip on the very idea of an epistemic capacity of perception. But every bit of knowledge we have of the outside world we have only by grace of our possession of a rich battery of capacities for thought. And possession of those capacities requires in turn the possession of a great deal of knowledge of the outside world. There is dependence in both directions, but no circularity.

5. But what about “experience”?

A. For Descartes, the difference between cases in which the subject can come to know something about the world outside through perception (as when she is awake and in favorable circumstances for seeing and hearing), and cases in which her perception will fail to yield such knowledge (as when she is asleep and dreaming), need not lie in anything contributed by perception as such. Whatever it is that perception provides the subject in a good case for acquiring external-world knowledge, we can equally well imagine perception to provide her in some suitably jury-rigged bad case. This shared element is “experience”.

John McDowell has done as much as any contemporary philosopher to show that the Cartesian approach to perception is philosophically disastrous. But his writings on “experience” have not merely been negative in import. He wants to hold onto an idea of “experience”, and indeed to assign it an essential role in his philosophy. He has worked hard to delineate and promote an alternative account of its nature: the “disjunctive conception”, according to which the good cases for knowing are differentiated from the bad by the presence of an “experience in

which some aspect of objective reality is *there* for a subject, perceptually *present* to her” (McDowell, 201, p.245). When that is so, the subject’s “experience” provides “an *indefeasible* warrant for believing that things are as the experience is revealing them to be” (McDowell, 201, p. 245).

In the previous section we identified as a revelation of the “transcendental” inquiry Stroud envisions that perception is a capacity for immediate knowledge of the world around the perceiver. Suppose we use talk of “perceptual experience” as a label for exercises of the perceptual capacity so understood. Then my having a visual “experience” while sitting by the fire might simply be: my seeing, and thereby knowing, the fire to be lit. Call this the *knowledge conception* of “experience”.

Does this formulation capture what McDowell wants to say about “experience” in the good cases? Can we equate the “indefeasible warrant” for an external-world belief provided by such an “experience” with the subject’s unmediated knowledge, in perception, that what she believes is so?

B. The primary burden of *Mind and World* (1994) is to show the way toward a proper appreciation and acceptance of a certain notion of “perceptual experience”, according to which “experience” is a “tribunal” in which our thoughts are held accountable to the world they are about. So conceived, “experiences” serve for the subject as “reasons” for and against her judgments and attitudes. By responding to those “reasons” in her judgments and attitude formation, the subject manifests her self-conscious rationality.

McDowell does not use the word “reason” in accordance with the policy I suggested earlier, according to which a “reason” to which you rationally respond in believing or judging that *p* is always something else you know or believe. For McDowell, a “reason” can count as

such in virtue of being, or being provided by, an “experience”, and in such a case its status as a “reason” for you does not depend upon your believing, knowing or judging it. He writes, “In experience one takes in, for instance sees, *that things are thus and so*. That is the sort of thing one can also, for instance, judge” (1994, p.9). One can “also” judge. Crucially, there is no such judgment internal to having the “experience”. To have an “experience” that p is not itself to judge or believe that p. Judgment and the rest are exercises of the “active” faculty of spontaneity, and experience, being “passive”, is not such an exercise.³

Since “experiencing” that p does not intrinsically involve believing or judging that p, it cannot be a form of knowing that p. It follows that any “warrant” for believing that p to which one is party in enjoying a suitable “experience” is not constituted by one’s knowing that p. And so the “disjunctive conception of experience”, at least when placed in the context of the ideas of *Mind and World*, cannot be equated with the “knowledge conception” suggested above. For McDowell “experience” cannot consist in immediate perceptual knowledge of the outside world.

C. If having an “experience” in which “some aspect of objective reality is *there* for the subject” does not consist in the subject’s coming to know that this aspect is present or obtains, what contribution does the “experience” make to her coming to know this? Supposing the subject does judge that this aspect is present, how does her “experience” serve as her “reason” or “warrant” for doing so? In *Mind and World*, McDowell says that the subject exhibits her rational responsiveness to this “reason” when she “decides whether or not to judge that things are as one’s experience represents them to be”. (1994, p.11). But what does this “decision” come to? What “rational relation” (1994, p.6) to her “experience” is there exploited?

³ McDowell does say, a tad confusingly, that “spontaneity extends all the way out to the content of experience” (1994, p.11). By this he means that experience “draws on” conceptual capacities whose primary home is the “active” faculty that is spontaneity proper. But its way of drawing on them, being “passive”, does not involve judgment.

There is no satisfactory answer to these questions consistent with McDowell's commitments.

First, it's very difficult to say what it could be for an experience to "represent" things to be a certain way to you, so that you could then make a decision whether to accede to this representation, if your being thus represented to does not involve your knowing or accepting *anything* to be so (cf., Stroud, 2011b, p.284). Surely you at least need to be aware that your experience represents things as it does. How could a "decision" on the accuracy of what your experience represents to you be rational or knowledge-generating—indeed, how could it even be intelligible—if it is not informed by an awareness that you are thus represented to?

But second, it will not suffice to grant that the subject, in having an experience that represents that *p*, knows that her experience represents to her that *p*—not, at any rate, if what she thus knows has no implications for whether things in the world are actually as her experience represents them to be. The disjunctive conception of experience is meant to secure perception's role in providing knowledge of "objective reality". And it was just Descartes' point that knowledge of objective reality cannot be secured solely on a subjective basis, such as a fund of knowledge that is non-committal on whether the way things strike a perceiver is the way things really are.

Third and finally, McDowell cannot go further and grant that the subject, in having the experience that things in the objective world are a certain way, might thereby know that things really are that way. This would be to accept the knowledge conception of experience, and we have already seen why this conception cannot be McDowell's own. If it belongs to your very enjoyment of the experience that *p* that you know that *p*, then your judgment that *p* cannot proceed from a decision to accept that things are as you experience them to be. There's no room for such a decision; your mind is already made up. Nor does it make sense to suppose that you

could reassess your judgment on the basis of the “reason” your experience, so understood, provides. It would be a poor “tribunal” indeed that allowed the defendant to serve as the judge.

D. Over a series of writings that postdate *Mind and World*, McDowell’s conception of “experience” has evolved. Most recently (see especially 2008), McDowell has come to deny that an experience is properly said to “represent” something to be so. Correlatively, he no longer wants to think of an experience as having “propositional content”, content expressible as the content *that p*. Propositional content can come on the scene only in light of “discursive activity” on the part of the subject, of which the act of judgment is exemplary. When you judge that *p* you “put significances together”, in a sense that we can grasp on the model of the more literal “putting together” of significant expressions involved in using a syntactically complex sentence to articulate a judgment. But no such activity is involved in the enjoyment of a perceptual experience.

I think it is a live, and difficult question, in what sense, if any, McDowell continues to subscribe to a conception of experience as a “tribunal” providing the ultimate reasons or grounds for our beliefs about the world around us. By the same token, it is a difficult question what philosophical work is being done by McDowell’s continued insistence that “experiences” have conceptual (albeit non-propositional) content.

E. This is a topic for another occasion. But the Stroudian path of reflection we have followed in this paper points toward two related thoughts relevant to its adjudication. I will close by mentioning them.

First, we noted earlier that Descartes’ clever deployment of the dreaming hypothesis can make the restricted conception of perception seem intuitively appealing. But the hold of that

conception upon our philosophical imagination is powerful. Its grip surely has a deeper explanation. One possibility is that it promises to slake a seemingly perennial thirst that we feel when doing philosophy: a thirst for explanations of general forms of thought and knowledge that will show knowledge and thought of those forms to rest on something external to them. It may be that McDowell does not fully avoid the temptation to try to satisfy this thirst, rather than to ameliorate whatever conditions give rise to it.

Second, McDowell has contrasted a “shallow skepticism” that challenges our claims of knowledge while taking for granted our capacity to form beliefs, with a “deeper” worry that concerns our very capacity to think about the world at all (1994, p.17). There is indeed a distinction to be drawn in this vicinity, but if the reflections we have sketched here are on the right track, McDowell’s characterization is inapt. What is “shallow”, or at least mistaken, is the presumption that we can get into view a general skeptical question about our capacity to know the “external world” or “objective reality” while retaining our grip on our capacity to think about that world or reality. That is a primary moral of Stroud’s engagement with skepticism. It does not follow, however, that a “deeper” or more satisfying treatment of our difficulties in this region will involve shifting our focus from knowledge to a more general capacity for thought, representation or intentionality. On the contrary. Thought about the external world begins in our immediate knowledge of it. To recognize this is to recognize that there is nothing beneath, nothing beyond, this knowledge to which we might point to assuage worries about our capacities to think or know the world. There is no “deeper” topic in epistemology, nor in the philosophy of mind, than knowledge.⁴

⁴ Portions of this paper had their origin in a seminar co-taught with Jim Conant at the University of Chicago in 2016. Many thanks to Conant and to the participants in that seminar. Thanks also to Plinio Smith and participants in a session at the ANPOF conference in Campos de Jordão, Brazil in 2014. Finally, a few sentences of the first section are borrowed from my introduction, co-written with Niko Kolodny, to Bridges, Kolodny and Wai-hung Wang (eds.), *The Quest to Understand Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

References

- Austin, John. 1961. "Other Minds" in *Philosophical Papers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bridges, Jason. 2006. "Davidson's Transcendental Externalism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73.2:290-315.
- Descartes, René. 1996. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. John Cottingham (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hume, David. 2000. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McDowell, John. 1994. *Mind and World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, John. 2009. "Avoiding the Myth of the Given." In *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel and Sellars*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, John. 2010. "Burge on Disjunctivism." *Philosophical Explorations* 13.3:243-255.
- Sellars, Wilfrid. 1963. "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." In *Science, Perception and Reality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Stroud, Barry. 1984. *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stroud, Barry. 2000. *The Quest for Reality: Subjectivism and the Metaphysics of Colour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stroud, Barry. 2008. "The Pursuit of Philosophy." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 82.2:117-129
- Stroud, Barry. 2009. "Scepticism and the Senses." *European Journal of Philosophy* 17.4:559-570.
- Stroud, Barry. 2011a. "Seeing What Is So." In *Perception, Causation and Objectivity*, Johannes Roessler, Hemdat Lerman, and Naomi Eilan (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stroud, Barry. 2011b. "Sense-Experience and the Grounding of Thought." In *Philosophers Past and Present: Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.