

The Metaphilosophical Significance of Scepticism

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to contribute to an appreciation of the *metaphilosophical* significance of scepticism. It proceeds by investigating what the differing characterisations of the sceptical threat reveal about the *kind* of understanding that is being sought; and specifically, what this envisaged understanding connotes concerning how epistemological inquiry is itself conceived. An investigation, that is to say, into how these characterisations support or help constitute that conception of inquiry by attempting to keep a relationship with ‘the sceptic’ going on their own terms.

Keywords: Metaphilosophy; Epistemological scepticism; Stroud; Sosa; Ancient scepticism.

...scepticism is a resting place for reason, in which it may reflect on its dogmatical wanderings, and gain some knowledge of the region in which it happens to be, that it may pursue its way with greater certainty; but it cannot be its permanent dwelling-place. It must take up its abode only in the region of complete certitude, whether this relates to the knowledge of objects themselves, or to the limits which bound all our knowledge.

Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (A760/B788)

I

When the Hellenistic empiricists averred that all knowledge was derived from experience, it seemed natural to their ancient Sceptical opponents to wonder how they *knew* that to be the case. Since this was an assertion made by groups who had otherwise wildly divergent theories about the nature of existence and the form of the good life, it seemed equally natural to those Sceptics to ask how, on any particular occasion, the Dogmatist *knew* that an impression amounted to a genuine cognition. The Stoic Zeno made a game attempt to pre-empt certain developments in contemporary epistemology by claiming that a cognitive impression was such that it wouldn't *be* the sort of perception it was, had it not arisen from what was clearly and distinctly taken *as* its object. Disdaining the Stoic's internalism, Arcesilaus deployed examples to show that there didn't appear to be a class of impressions that issued a

guarantee to the percipient that they *couldn't* have arisen from any other object. Without a criterion of truth, the Stoics were left with no philosophical guide to the knowledge that would constitute the good life, and no obvious way of keeping the wolf from the porch. The significance of philosophical scepticism was that philosophy discovered its self-negating justification as an activity orientated towards the pursuit of the good life in its very failure to achieve that end through the acquisition of knowledge.

Moving forwards a couple of thousand years, the motivation to understand *human* knowledge has undergone a certain modulation, and so has the perceived significance of philosophical scepticism. In his book of that name, Barry Stroud offers a picaresque account of 20th century philosophy's failure to ward off the spectre of scepticism, ranging from Moore's Quixotic gesticulations, through Carnap's dismissively verificationist talk about idealist geographers, to Quine, threateningly brandishing the 'big stick' of naturalism. The significance of philosophical scepticism is the dilemma it poses:

(SD) *If global sceptical doubt is rooted in a rather traditional and intuitively appealing concept of objectivity, and nothing the naturalistically-inclined philosopher has to say counts against it, then we cannot conclude that scientific epistemology exhausts the problem of knowledge. If, however, naturalism is right, then we cannot even formulate the sceptical problem, and that traditional conception must be rejected as erroneous.*

Perhaps more than anyone, Stroud has contributed to the sense that the epistemologist's relationship with the sceptic is paradoxical: he can't live with her, but it seems he can't live without her either. As we all know, in such relationships the customary outcome is a growing desire on the part of one or other of the partners to want to *change* the other—a sure sign that things just aren't going to work out in the long run. Counselling aside, there is a genuine diagnostic point here. Its significance can be missed, however, because that way of expressing the paradox threatens to

miss part of the story: it makes it appear as if scepticism is just a formal challenge to a particular sort of *theoretical* enterprise, one which has a figure like Descartes or Kant insulating itself from its Hellenistic forebears in the knowledge game¹. From this perspective, the failure to understand human knowledge in general might be likened to the failure to come up with a unified theory in physics—an intellectual disappointment to some, but hardly likely to make much impact on common life.

Nevertheless, the feeling lingers that this isn't quite right; that despite its technicalities, epistemology is engaged in a *different sort* of inquiry, the failure of which betokens more than a mere disappointment with theory. Stroud's response to Michael Williams' (1991) theoretical diagnosis evokes this intuition:

The enterprise I find most interesting really amounts to reflection on a certain kind of human reflection... what goes on when humans reflect on themselves in the ways we have become familiar with in Western philosophy[?].... how are the absurd or paradoxical conclusions of those reflections to be understood? ... If we cannot accept them... we must find some way in which the philosophical reflection goes wrong or misleads us... I think reflection on this kind of reflection can be expected to reveal something interesting and deep about human aspirations... (Stroud 1996: 347-8)

On this understanding, then, philosophical scepticism does not pose a merely formal problem but roots itself in the phenomenological or perhaps even existential features of (at least historical; at least 'our') human experience. Not everyone will share Stroud's intuition here, and Stroud is himself not very clear about its import. Nevertheless, at least one element of it is widely acknowledged these days, and that despite a general decline of interest in therapy-cum-quietism; namely, that *some* account of how aberrant, pathological or non-ordinary thinking takes place has to be given if we are to come up with a satisfactory response to the sceptic. A second

¹ See Burnyeat and Frede 1997 for the significance of the debate about the differences between modern and ancient scepticism.

element is related but more contentious. In the form of a (longish) question one might ask just how extensive or fundamental *is* this experience; and what implications does it have for understanding human beings in general *and* for an individual's self-understanding? It is this sort of concern that, if it persists, links the contemporary significance of philosophical scepticism to what it had for the Greeks.

If we think about the theoretical/formal and the phenomenological/existential as two axes along which to locate possible interpretations of the challenge of scepticism it helps make a little sense of the fact that philosophers who collectively claim to be interested in it can find themselves in stark disagreement about what exactly *it* is. Michael Williams, for example, repeatedly warns us against confusing philosophical scepticism with scepticism about philosophy. The former presents a radical challenge to our “self-image as (potentially) rational animals” (1999: 143) by questioning the legitimacy of the concept of *justification*; the latter merely serves to remind us that if our epistemological *hubris* carries us too far away from the concerns of common life, we'll cease to find the sceptic's doubt about *knowledge* causes us any anxiety. By way of contrast, in the mid-1990s Ernest Sosa published a number of articles in which he defended the possibility of a “fully general theory of knowledge” against what *he* calls philosophical scepticism (1994: 263). For Sosa, the failure to oppose this leaves our—presumably philosophically informed—worldview vulnerable to the debilitations of modern culture, with its irrational cults of ethnocentrism and relativism (*ibid.*: 290).

We will return to Sosa in section four of this paper but it's worth remarking the lip service both pay to the idea that scepticism is related to philosophy through the latter's association with a desire for some sort of understanding. This could of course relate to an individual's reflective self-understanding; or to the understanding 'we' philosophers have of what creatures like 'us' (and *through* that ourselves) are or

are not capable of; or indeed, to either of these applied not to the individual but to ‘our’ culture as a whole. In that light, the aim of this paper is to investigate what the differing characterisations of the sceptical threat reveal about the *kind* of understanding that is being sought; and specifically, what this envisaged understanding connotes concerning how epistemological inquiry is itself conceived. An investigation, that is to say, into how these characterisations support or help constitute that conception of inquiry (how some epistemological theories attempt to keep a relationship with the sceptic going on their own terms). In doing so, the aim is to contribute to an appreciation of what might be called the *metaphilosophical* significance of scepticism.

In the next section I’ll dramatise sceptical doubt in terms of a paradox that aims to capture something of the phenomenological appeal of sceptical thinking. Against this background I’ll then introduce three variations on the all-too-familiar closure-based argument for scepticism and relate them to an insight central to Thompson Clarke’s ‘The Legacy of Skepticism’ (Clarke 1972). This is intended to provide a context, as it were, for a discussion of some familiar externalist responses to the sceptical argument in section three. My purpose here will be to show what these approaches reveal about the motivation behind and likely success of restrictively characterising the sceptical threat; and in the penultimate section I’ll apply the insight gained thereby to Sosa’s attempt to address what he understands as the unrestricted challenge of scepticism. Surprisingly, that will take us back to the ancient Greeks.

II

When we left our Stoic empiricist he was aiming to establish a criterion that would allow him to distinguish between a genuine cognition and one that merely appeared

to arise from its purported object. The contemporary philosopher, who believes that at least our knowledge of spatio-temporal objects comes from the use of the senses, likewise examines a particular occasion when the conditions attending such use might be thought optimal and as a consequence that what we (for example) *see* justifies our perceptual knowledge. In the first *Meditation* Descartes has us run through a number of ancient sceptical possibilities to the effect that particular things might not be as they appear before introducing alternative possible explanations that are in-principle ineliminable from the standpoint the percipient takes themselves to occupy in common life. Against the backdrop of this concern with justification, the contemporary problem emerges; namely, that since these possibilities are ineliminable from that standpoint, it is difficult to see how, on this evaluation of the status of what we experience, we could know what we think we know.

This is not the end of the matter of course, for once these possibilities have been introduced it is not obvious what sort of evidence might be offered in response. Clearly nothing derivable from experience could suffice, but a non-empirical conception of evidence suggests a domain of discourse that is to some degree or other distinct from the empirical. This bumps the problem of justification up a level and leaves us with a further problem; namely, that whilst practical doubt can trouble us precisely because it is naturally limited by the exigencies of life, philosophical doubt carries no conviction whatsoever from the standpoint of our practical dealings with the world, and so the latter offers no constraint on possible responses to the former.

This apparent tension between the philosophical standpoint that leads to sceptical doubts and the engaged standpoint of common life that is seemingly insulated from them can be expressed in the following propositions:

(T1) In common life we are able to reflect on a particular empirical belief and ask

if we are justified in believing it.

(T2) Sceptical doubts arise naturally when we take up a philosophical standpoint on common life and ask how our knowledge is possible.

(T3) Philosophical doubt carries no conviction from the standpoint of common life and yet this does not warrant its rejection, which leaves us with the suspicion that scepticism does after all reveal something about our ordinary epistemic practices.

(T3) expresses what I'll call the *Original Sceptical Paradox*. It captures the phenomenological pull that characterises the apparent naturalness of the transition from (T1) to (T2). This confronts the non-sceptic with two related concerns—the *Intuition Problem* and the *Quietist Dilemma*. The *Intuition Problem* relates to the requirement that one demonstrate that there's something illusory about the suspicion that the transition from (T1) to (T2) reveals something important about our cognitive predicament. The *Quietist Dilemma* draws attention to the fact that however that demonstration proceeds, it cannot impose a settlement that is less intuitively appealing than the thinking that leads to the problem in the first place.

Although the problem of scepticism is not always posed in these phenomenological terms, the *Quietist Dilemma* and the *Intuition Problem* give us an axis along which to evaluate the varying strategies that have been advanced to 'deal' with it. The logical positivist, for example, can directly dissolve the tension in (T3) by adverting to a semantic theory that stipulates that the 'engaged' standpoint of practical 'verification' provides the sole criterion of meaningfulness. In *Skepticism and Naturalism* Strawson (1985) draws upon the lack of conviction to set 'natural' limits on the movement of thought from (T1) to (T2), and thereby prevent our having to address the conflict in (T3). Similarly, Rorty glosses 'carries no conviction' as "makes no difference to practice" (1998: 19), and sanctions an outright dismissal of (T3) on the grounds that only someone who has read too much Descartes would find the transition from (T1) to (T2) compelling in the first place.

The failure of the positivist approach is a good illustration of the challenge posed by the *Quietist Dilemma*. At the same time, many would sympathise with McDowell’s observation that debunking philosophical problems fails because it does not ease our sense of “philosophical discomfort” (1994: 142, fn. 17)². The discomfort comes in part because ‘we’ want to understand for ourselves the solution to the Intuition Problem, not simply be told that it isn’t a *real* problem if we take up one or other of these metaphilosophical recommendations. Indeed, they seem far less appealing intuitively than the problem they are contrived in response to. And one reason we want a response to the Intuition Problem is that it makes a very familiar argument seem unavoidable. Instead of one version, here are three:

V1. The plain argument³	V2. The philosophical-plain argument	V3. The philosophical argument
S doesn’t know _{pl} that $\sim sp$	S doesn’t know _{ph} that $\sim sp$	S doesn’t know _{ph} that $\sim rmt/\sim sp$
If S knows _{pl} that q /material objects exist then S knows _{pl} that $\sim sp$	If S knows _{pl} that q /material objects exist then S knows _{ph} that $\sim sp$	If S knows _{ph} that material objects exist/ q then S knows _{ph} that $\sim rmt/\sim sp$
S doesn’t know _{pl} that q /material objects exist	S doesn’t know _{pl} that q /material objects exist	S doesn’t know _{ph} that material objects exist/ q

The argument is presented in this way in order to schematise the suggestion that the metaphilosophical issue is how the *epistemologist* conceives of the sceptical possibilities; specifically, with the sort of ‘knowing’ that is associated with them. As such it draws on Thomson Clarke’s seminal ‘The Legacy of Skepticism’ (1972). Given

² McDowell is commenting specifically on Rorty’s work here.

³ Where *ph* and *pl* are short for *philosophical* and *plain* respectively, *q* stands for any empirical proposition, *sp* refers to the usual sceptical possibilities, and *rmt* to a revisionary metaphysical thesis like being a monad.

its influence on Stroud and the renewed interest in Moore⁴ that seems doubly appropriate. In ‘Legacy,’ then, Clarke aims to defend Moore by arguing that his proof can indeed be regarded as non-circular if there is a genuine doubt motivating the claim that one does not know that external objects exist—a doubt that Moore can eliminate when he holds up his hands. To that end Clarke introduces the distinction between the *plain* and the *philosophical* possibility that one might be dreaming. The upshot of his argument⁵ is that built into the plain possibility that each of us right now might be dreaming is a commitment to knowledge of the external world. When the philosophical possibility is entered, however, the sceptic characterises perceptual knowledge in a specific way—one that assumes in effect that there is some ‘mark’ or ‘feature’ of experience (some *criterion*) that would allow us to rule out *all* the alternative possibilities to a knowledge claim. According to this picture the plain is restrictively characterized by the need to ignore certain distant possibilities on pragmatic grounds; knowledge *per se*, however, is the infallibilist’s invulnerability of belief to doubt. However, this philosophical possibility is held to be reflexively unstable because it presupposes the intelligibility of something—a criterion in experience—the possibility of which it denies (since one’s experience is taken by hypothesis to be such that one could never come to know that one is not dreaming)⁶. As a consequence Clarke draws two important conclusions: *firstly*, that the philosophical possibility doesn’t make sense; and *secondly*, that since the plain dream possibility clearly does make sense, perceptual knowledge cannot be understood on the ‘mark’ and ‘feature’ model presupposed by the sceptic.

⁴ For a summary of Neo-Moorean thought see Pritchard 2007.

⁵ For more on Clarke see Gascoigne 2007.

⁶ As Clarke has it, “The Philosophical possibility therefore, of necessity, calls in question (negates) the very knowing it presupposes” (ibid.: 765).

It should be clear from the foregoing how Clarke's neo-Moorean strategy relates to the Original Sceptical Paradox and to the above classification of arguments. The implication is that the transition from (T1) to (T2) that generates the Intuition Problem depends on an unwarranted and ultimately self-defeating restriction of the plain *from* the philosophical standpoint—the standpoint of the philosophical sceptical possibilities. Having eliminated these possibilities we are can resist the temptation to be drawn from version (V1) to version (V2) of the argument and are free to take our knowledge that external objects exist as an item of *plain* knowing. To repeat, this will not be plain knowing as it was conceived of in *opposition* to the philosophical knowledge promised by the philosophical possibility—it would be plain knowing according to which the plain sceptical possibility is known to be false—though *not* in the way that was originally conceived (on the 'criterial' model⁷).

Although this is not the time to trace the influence of Clarke's work, it is worth noting how it relates to (SD). Consider the following conditional:

(CC) *if* the traditional concept of objectivity is fully intelligible, *then* philosophical scepticism is correct (and we can't show how knowledge is possible).

Clarke denies the consequent and concludes that the plain must be rethought in such a way that the traditional epistemological project makes no sense; Stroud rejects Clarke's verificationist dismissal of the meaning of the philosophical possibility and thus keeps open the possibility that one can consider the traditional epistemological project both philosophically possible and plainly impossible.

If it is indeed the case that the philosophical possibility is not meaningless, we cannot in that way prevent the seemingly destructive transition from version (V1) to

⁷ In this respect there are clear parallels between Clarke's conception of knowledge and disjunctivism. For an evaluation of the latter see Haddock and Macpherson 2008.

version (V2) of the argument. Nevertheless, Clarke gives us a hint as to how we might go about doing this, and that suggestion coheres nicely with the turn that epistemology was taking around that time. The hint, then, is that perceptual knowledge is not to be understood on the model of the plain that is stipulated *from* the standpoint of philosophical doubt—an internalist model according to which there has to be a criterion in experience that would allow us to rule out all the alternative possibilities to what we take to be the case. The challenge is to *limit* those possibilities—and thus insulate the plain from the philosophical—while learning the apparent lesson neglected by Clarke; namely, that since the philosophical possibility cannot be rejected as meaningless, version (V2) of the argument cannot be straightforwardly avoided. The task, then, is to formulate a conception of the sceptical threat that underwrites the possibility of some version of the traditional epistemological project without at the same time making it seem impossible to complete. So let's see if that can be done.

III

At first blush it might appear that this talk of philosophical sceptical possibilities is an odd way of putting it because in contemporary epistemology the sceptical possibilities are rarely thought of in this way—after all, it is naturalistic epistemology we're talking about, and the last thing such an epistemologist wants is a *supernatural* opponent. Dretske's well-known relevance-invariantism (1970), for example, aims to motivate the failure of closure by claiming that the alternatives relevant to knowing that something is not a painted mule are disjunctive from those relevant to knowing that something is a zebra. On this account, the sceptical possibility is clearly envisaged as a plain possibility, not a philosophical one. With Clarke's piece in view we might say that Dretske has learned the lesson that if one is to avoid scepticism

one cannot stipulate a criterial (internalist) model of knowing—one consonant with the Stoic's search for a cognitive impression. One is not required to have to be able to discriminate in one's experience between a zebra-experience and a painted-mule-experience. There are of course well-known criticisms to the effect that closure *does* hold here—that an agent's grounds for believing that something is a zebra are grounds for believing it's not a painted-mule. And from a Clarkean perspective one can see why this would be the case: the limit of plain knowing is *not* actually characterised by the non-necessity of being able to discriminate between a zebra and a painted-mule. Rather, it is characterised by the requirement that one *can* discriminate between a painted-mule-experience, a zebra-hologram, zebra-animatronics and the like (though not of course just by looking). In other words, an internalist requirement for evidence or a criterion in experience frames the externalist restriction on plain-knowing.

The significance of this structural problem becomes clearer when we turn to how the case against closure is intended to work against real sceptical possibilities. Imagine that in Vatland there is a long-established and regular and widespread practice of envatting brains for brief periods of time. Usually people do it when they plan a break from the intramundane, but one can imagine that from time to time some jokester thinks it a wheeze to have his friend find himself naked on stage at Covent Garden, and certain government agencies might have more malevolent intentions. If this were an empirical practice one wouldn't use the threat of it to call into question the possibility of perceptual knowledge; nor fail in general to know that one was not an envatted brain—though one would not of course know it because on any occasion one merely inspects a perceptual experience and sees that it does or does not clearly and distinctly arise from the object it is taken to be of. Indeed, this is simply the brain-in-a-vat equivalent of Clarke's plain dream; the question is, is it

what Dretske has in mind? I think the answer has to be no—the denial of closure only works if the alternatives relevant to being a brain-in-a-vat differ from cases of plain knowing and it is not at all clear that this is the case here. Moreover, the alternatives form disjunctive classes precisely because of the stipulation that one would not know that one was not a brain-in-a-vat. That is to say, the assumption is that there could be a criterion but that it is in principle denied us in experience—which is how Clarke characterises the *philosophically* restricted plain.

On this account, then, being a brain-in-a-vat is not a plain possibility but a philosophical possibility and the alternatives relevant to that sort of knowing include any sort of revisionary metaphysical claim like—say—being a monad! This suggests that when one offers a restricted conception of the plain from the philosophical, one introduces a kind of knowing—the kind that would constitute the knowledge that sceptical possibilities are false—that requires an internally accessible criterion. And yet it seems impossible to imagine possessing such a thing from the standpoint of the plain. Indeed, to possess it would presumably constitute a philosophical understanding of how knowledge is possible. The problem this raises is that if we can indeed imagine what a criterion of this sort would look like, it is not clear why we should deny its relevance to plain knowing. After all—as Descartes might point out—if we do have an a priori demonstration that god would not allow our clear and distinct ideas to mislead us how could we then regard that as irrelevant to our plain knowing? Restricting the plain is such a way that no response to the sceptic is possible whilst simultaneously keeping open the fact that it is nevertheless intelligible seems purpose made to reinforce the grip of the Intuition Problem and the Original Sceptical Paradox. That is to say, one finds that version (V1) of the argument collapses into version (V2) and thence (V3).

The lack of resources that relevance-invariantism gives us for dealing with the

Intuition Problem is itself a strong motivation for what is regarded by many as a successor theory; namely relevance-contextualism. In its attributive form this allows that the transition from (T1) to (T2) does indeed have a phenomenological foundation in a natural feature of language use but denies that this has implications for our plain knowing⁸. The point then is that since the context in which sceptical possibilities are raised is one in which we don't in fact plainly know, the apparent tension in (T3) is dissolved. Since intra-contextual closure is retained but inter-contextual closure denied, we have version (2) of the argument. That is to say, the disjunction is between the set of alternatives relevant to plain knowing and that relevant to the denial of sceptical possibilities.

What then are we to make of these sceptical possibilities? As we saw with the relevance-invariantist, empirical possibilities like confronting a painted mule are not analogous to those associated with philosophical scepticism. By retaining intra-contextual closure and thereby acknowledging that one can non-criterially know the denials of (plain) sceptical hypotheses, the relevance-contextualist extends the realm of the plain along the lines indicated by Clarke. That is to say, in plain knowing we know the plain sceptical possibility to be false, and our knowledge is not dependent on the identification of a criterion in experience. As Stewart Cohen (2000) for one admits, there is of course a concern with this sort of knowing—it has the hallmark of contingent *a priori* knowledge. Putting that to one side for just a moment, the more immediate problem is that like Dretske (and unlike Clarke) the relevance-contextualist cannot or at least does not stop here: this account of plain knowing is contrasted with the type of knowing that characterises the denials of *non*-plain

⁸ Perhaps in its purest form one can simply recall the changing evaluation one makes of one's own epistemic position as one runs through the arguments of the first *Meditation*.

sceptical possibilities—a sort of knowing that suggests the possibility of a criterion that experience could never in principle furnish.

Clearly, then, the experience of shifts within empirical contexts is as disanalogous in relation to the contrast between philosophical doubt and plain doubt as the painted-mule possibility. Again, the externalist account of plain knowing is bought at the expense of an implied criterion, the satisfaction of which would constitute an (internalist) understanding of how human knowledge is possible. While this stands so does the suspicion that the failure to eliminate the philosophical possibilities exposes something about plain knowing. With this in mind we can return to Cohen's invocation of that strangely-familiar category of knowledge (the contingent *a priori*) and offer advice in the form of a variation on a familiar gnome: only the transcendental idealist can be a relevance-contextualist.

What the shift from relevance-invariantism to relevance-contextualism shows, I think, is the need for what the neo-Moorean Clarke wanted all along: an understanding of plain-knowing that is not formulated from a position outside it. Otherwise the sceptic, as he says, will continue to “have one foot within the philosophical, the other within the plain” (Clarke 1972: 767-8)—and what better way of describing the contingent *a priori*? The problem is that by keeping the philosophical possibilities open we retain the possibility of a view of the plain from something contrasted with it and that induces the temptation to want to see ourselves as knowing what we think we know—having a philosophical understanding of human knowledge. To put it in less Clarkean terms, the desire to formulate an externalist theory of plain knowing seems to merely relocate the problem of scepticism at the level of philosophical knowledge—at the level of scepticism about philosophy.

What is noteworthy about this is not the failure of externalist attempts to deal

with scepticism but the thought that they might succeed in the first place, and here I have a rather speculative diagnosis. What makes the traditional argument appear compelling is that seemingly we cannot *justify* our plain beliefs because experience affords no criterion that allows us to discriminate between being awake and—say—being envatted. That is what motivates the claim that we don't *know* that we're not brains-in-vats. At the end of section 2 reference was made to the turn epistemology was making around the time of Clarke's piece; that is to say, to the attempts, post-Gettier, to formulate an externalist account of knowledge—an account that in Clarke's terms would not suppose the criterial model of experience that seems to make scepticism unanswerable. Internalist objections aside, then, an analysis of knowledge that resolved Gettier problems promised to offer simultaneously the key to a solution to scepticism. And that coincidence seems particularly rewarding since the constructive epistemologist needs some criterion for success. Offering a solution to scepticism has the weight of tradition on its side, and is certainly preferable to waiting around in fear of yet another counterexample!

The promise, then, was an analysis of knowledge that did not suppose internalist justification and consequently allowed that we know that we're not brains-in-vats. But in order to know that we're not brains-in-vats there has to be the possibility of not-knowing—there has to be an alternative. In the traditional sceptical story that alternative is formulated in terms of the philosophical possibilities, which rest on our ability to see ourselves both from the inside and from the outside—have one foot within the plain and the other within the philosophical. But that opposition is not open to us if we are externalists since that makes our not knowing a question of not being internalistically justified. If the opposition between knowing and not-knowing is to be retained an alternative standpoint is required.

Now what Gettier-style examples do is use a story to set up a situational

asymmetry in order to tap into one's intuitions about when it is rational to attribute knowledge to someone. As such, they depend on one's capacity to think oneself into a situation whilst remaining reflectively or self-consciously aware that that is *not* one's 'real' situation. Despite the fact that 'we' conclude that Smith does or does not know, the fact that Smith in general possesses knowledge is never in doubt; and neither is the knowledge of what we might call the *Gettier Interpreter* (since they are both ourselves).

Now recall that what motivates Dretske's response to scepticism is an analogy with painted mule cases. Likewise, the relevance-contextualist is impressed by the way mere conversational factors can alter our willingness to attribute knowledge to a subject. The opposition between the knower and non-knower in these cases appears to have the same structure as for the *Gettier Interpreter*. Accordingly, the externalist response to scepticism imposes a structure of knowing/non-knowing that is derived from the *Gettier* examples and which characterises the relationship between the epistemologist and the sceptic in strictly theoretical or formal terms. In the case of relevance-invariantism and relevance-contextualism, however, this gives rise to a certain ambiguity: the sceptical possibilities cannot be dismissed as meaningless because they cannot even be formulated in externalist terms and so we have the residual need for an internalist criterion of philosophical knowledge. In both cases we feel the residuum of the existential interpretation of the relationship between scepticism and human knowledge⁹.

To conclude this section, then, one might say that if the attempt to restrict the sceptical threat is successful, it leaves epistemology 'hovering', to use Edward Craig's

⁹ In its purest neo-Moorean form, externalism embraces the idea that the sceptical possibilities have no bearing on plain knowing but leaves us unable to meaningfully raise the question of how we know –the philosophical question.

phrase—“not submitting itself to enough constraints to count as really being about anything much” (2000: 665). Although motivated by different interests, Sosa (2000) makes a similar complaint about relevance-contextualism:

Supposing epistemic vocabulary to be correctly applicable in contexts that set a different threshold from that of epistemological inquiry, how relevant can that be to epistemological questions about the nature, conditions, and extent of human knowledge? (ibid.: 2)

Now I’ve proceeded on the basis that the naturalistically-inclined philosopher is inadvertently dependent on an internalist criterion in order to formulate their externalism—that is to say, that a commitment to some sort of non-empirical/philosophical knowledge or understanding of human knowledge is required. This is to understand the philosophical significance of scepticism in a different way. Accordingly, a philosophical understanding of human knowledge is relevant to ordinary claims, as suggested by the transition from (T1) to (T2), and as such is linked up with the existential dimension of the sceptical threat. Of course one response here would be to accept that to avoid scepticism we need a philosophical understanding of ‘the nature, conditions, and extent of human knowledge’ but deny that this presupposes that the criterion of such knowing must be construed internalistically. Can externalist be understood in this way? This question brings us back to Sosa, so let’s see if he continues to ‘hover’ or comes crashing down to earth.

IV

In ‘Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity’¹⁰ Sosa takes up the question whether an externalist theory of knowledge could reasonably explain its own status as a knowledge claim. The implied problem adverts to a form of scepticism that predates the version of the argument we’ve been officially considering; namely, to the

¹⁰ This is a response of sorts to Stroud 1989.

Modes of Agrippa and the seemingly devastating conclusion that any attempt to justify a claim that q threatens a regress of reason-giving. Since the demand for reasons presupposes their availability to the putative knower, epistemological externalism offers a by-now familiar way out. A theory of knowledge that presented a satisfactory analysis of Gettier problems and hopefully answered the sceptic would prevent the regress from unfolding. Since this is a constructive solution, however, the problem now shifts to the next level—the status of the theory of knowledge that shows that knowing doesn't require access to reasons. Recalling the structure of Gettier problems, one has to divide-and-unify oneself in a particularly novel way—be able to see oneself as one's own Gettier Interpreter. In doing so, one squeezes out as it were the desire or possibility of raising for oneself the question of the justification of one's own theory—the possibility that there might be *relevant* ineliminable alternatives.

This is how Sosa lays out his bold (“Radical”) argument:

- (A1) Any theory of knowledge must be internalist or externalist.
- (A2) A fully general internalist theory is impossible.
- (A3) A fully general externalist theory is impossible.
- (C) From (A1)-(A3), philosophical scepticism follows. (ibid.: 93-94)

Where philosophical scepticism is defined as:

There is no way to attain full philosophical understanding of our knowledge. A fully general theory of knowledge is impossible. (ibid.: 93)

Defining internalists as those who hold “that a belief can be justified and amount to knowledge only through the backing of reasons or arguments” (ibid. 94), Sosa claims that they can only conceive of a ‘fully general theory of knowledge’ as a legitimating account of knowledge. According to such a conception, justification must be in terms of reasons and arguments that do not fall foul of circularity or regress. However:

It is impossible to attain a legitimating account of absolutely all one's knowledge... since it rules out circular or endlessly regressive inferences, such an account must stop with premises that it supposes without explaining how one is justified in accepting them in turn. (ibid.: 96)

Since it suggests (A2) is true, the only way to resist Sosa's sceptic is to show that (A3) is false; namely, that a fully general externalist theory is possible. The assumption, then, is that a 'full philosophical understanding of our knowledge' can be achieved without being a legitimating account of knowledge.

Before continuing it's worth noting a couple of things. *Firstly*, Sosa's argument is the sort of preliminary that would lead to the formulation of version (3) of our original argument. Just as our failure to be able discriminate—to find a criterion—in experience warrants the conclusion that we don't know that we're envatted, so the conclusion of Sosa's argument warrants the minor premise in (3)¹¹. *Secondly*, despite the familiarity of the setting, Sosa's sceptic is not an ancient Sceptic. She would never be so vulgar as to draw the conclusion that a fully general theory of knowledge is impossible—on the contrary, her role would be restricted to pointing out inconsistencies in and conflicts between Dogmatic theories of knowledge. No successful theory has yet been forthcoming but hey-ho! we can nevertheless go on searching. *Finally*, by Sosa's own lights, if the externalist account of knowledge does not amount to a 'full philosophical understanding', Sosa's sceptic is correct—again, a conclusion the ancient Sceptic can note dialectically.

How then to proceed? Ruling out internalism, the externalist has three possible way of accounting for how a belief acquires the status of knowledge: Coherentism, Foundationalism of the given, and Reliablism. Dispensing quickly with the first two, Sosa concludes that the latter is the only runner:

¹¹ I.e. that we don't know_{ph} that philosophical scepticism (in this case an epistemological position) is false.

When a belief is epistemically justified, it is so in virtue of deriving from an epistemically, truth-conducively reliable process or intellectual virtue of belief acquisition. (ibid.: 96)

Since Sosa's paper is being evaluated with a specific question for the externalist in mind, we can skip the details of his account and recall it, suitably adapted to his presentation: Could Sosa have good reasons for thinking that his reliabilist theory is true without being able or wanting to legitimate it in the light of that desideratum? Well, in an obvious sense, yes. Sosa has good reasons to believe that his reliabilist theory is true if he came to acquire that belief in accordance with the details of his theory. It should be noted that no one has come up with such a theory and internalists have offered Gettier-type examples that demonstrate the difficulty of formulating one. Nevertheless, if such a theory **R** were finally arrived at it would presumably be because someone had—finally! After 2500 years!—acquired the necessary 'intellectual virtue'. As Sosa states—and here the Sceptic would be churlish (not to say Dogmatic) to disagree:

there is no obstacle in principle to our conceivable attaining rationally coherent belief in some general account of our own epistemic faculties and their reliability... [and] attain thereby a general understanding of how we know whatever we know. (ibid.: 108)

In his response to Sosa's paper, Stroud (1994) accepts the foregoing (in principle) and suggests the following. Whilst we can understand how S knows that **R** is correct, what are we to make of our *own* position? Surely our sense of ourselves as knowers must play a role in any attempt at a philosophical understanding of knowledge. Imagining ourselves in S's position, we could reach the following conditional:

(SC) If **R** is true and I acquired my belief that **R** in accordance with **R** then I have good reasons to believe that **R**.

Of course, I do believe **R** is correct, and because I believe it is correct I do hold myself to have good reasons for believing it—reasons provided by **R**. But, observes Stroud, is this the kind of philosophical understanding we aim for? Is it not reasonable, or even

responsible, of me to ask myself over and above this whether I really do understand how knowledge is possible? And this despite the fact that, viewed from the third person, if as I believe **R** is true then I have the all the reasons there are? For Stroud what's missing is the fact that:

the goal of understanding how we know what we do does require that the successful account be 'legitimizing' at least in the sense of enabling us to understand that what we have got is knowledge of, or reasonable belief in, the world's being a certain way. (ibid.: 302)

The way in which this seems particularly pressing is precisely when it comes to reflecting on the status of our *philosophical* accounts—the results of so much intellectual labour; especially when we are confronted not only with the contemporary disagreement of our peers, but with that impressive history of what the externalist can only judge as the 'failure' to have acquired the reliable intellectual virtues. We can therefore extend Stroud's criticism and suggest that the recognition of legitimation is indeed present in Sosa's view—though not in a way he'd find conducive. Since in order to know there has to be the possibility of not knowing, let's return to *S*'s perceived lack and ask a further question: what would lead *S* not to reflect in the above way?

A very brief excursus may be in order here. When we left our Stoic, Arcesilaus had suggested that no perceptions appeared such that one could discount their not having arisen from something other than their purported object. Now the Stoic did have a response to this; namely, that only the *ignorant* would make such a mistake. The Stoic Sage has acquired the discipline-cum-wisdom required to ensure that he only ever assents to impressions that are genuinely cognitive. What supports this is the distinction between knowledge proper—*episteme*—and mere cognition (*katalepsis*). Cognition relates to being in the right epistemic context; *episteme*, on the other hand, relates only to those who exercise the maximal level of cognitive

responsibility by having brought their own nature into accord with nature as a whole. Let's say that anyone who possesses knowledge proper satisfies the *Full Competency Requirement*. Any *S* can claim that *if* I am a Sage, then I satisfy the Full Competency Requirement and have knowledge proper; but only a Sage would know that the antecedent were true.

With that in mind, let's return to the question—why *wouldn't* *S* believe that they might be mistaken? The answer is that *S* would have to satisfy the Full Competency Requirement. Only someone who had acquired the intellectual virtues that enabled them to recognise **R** as accounting for the process by which they came to believe **R** would *not* reflect in the way Stroud suggests, and find the account legitimating. Equally, anyone deficient in those virtues would lack good reasons to believe **R** and detect an absence of legitimation by their ability to consider alternative theoretical possibilities. Indeed, given that the processes by which those who believe **R** with good reasons are the same processes that enable them to have knowledge *per se*, maybe only the externalist heir of the Stoic Sage and who satisfies the Full Competency Requirement would have knowledge at all. Let's call anyone in such a position of cognitive legitimation the Sosa-Sage!

V

I began by linking Stroud's sceptical dilemma to a tension between two ways of construing the sceptical threat—the formal or theoretical and the existential. This paper has attempted to dramatise a retreat from the attempt to restrict scepticism to a merely theoretical problem by trying to show that what makes it possible is an implicit commitment to a different way of understanding of human knowledge—an understanding that one might regard as philosophical in character, and which has been associated with the existential interpretation of scepticism. With Sosa we found

an acknowledgement of this obligation; albeit one structured by the same externalist approach to naturalising our understanding of human knowledge. The association of Sosa with the aspirations of the Stoics wasn't merely to afford the opportunity for a bad pun—by raising the question of the reflexive stability of an account of philosophical knowledge Sosa echoes the concerns of those ancient Dogmatists, and it seemed only apt to return to the contemporary stage their Sceptical foes.

Whatever changes the significance scepticism has for philosophy has undergone, a tenuous link remains with what is common to the thought of the ancient Sceptics, Descartes and Hume—the role it plays in the articulation of a certain sort of reflective understanding—an understanding of what 'we' are; or at the very least what we are not. If the 'we' no longer refers to 'we' philosophers, let alone 'we' Westerners or we human beings then that link disappears. Let's therefore end on Sceptical note. If Sosa has indeed achieved the state of being a Sage he should of course be wished well—there are few enough signs of wisdom in this age of ours. But what is clear is that if he has the understanding of human knowledge that consists in being in that state it won't be by virtue of his knowing a theory. And so like Socratic wisdom it therefore won't be directly communicable to others.

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