

## § 1

# The best case for skepticism about the external world? (Stroud, “The Problem of the External World”)

We’re all intimately familiar with what goes on in our own minds. We make plans, form opinions, experience pleasure and pain, and so on. It’s also natural to suppose that we know a lot about what goes on *outside* our own minds too, about the world around us, based on the information we get through our senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Natural as that idea may be, it’s surprisingly easy to get yourself into a skeptical frame of mind about the possibility of such knowledge. Can we really know anything about the world outside our own minds?

Barry Stroud aims to understand the attraction of skepticism about the external world, why knowledge of the external world based on sense experience poses a philosophical problem. To accomplish this, he focuses intensely on the argument presented at the

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beginning of Rene Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (published originally in 1641), the most influential work of one of the most influential philosophers of all time.

Let's note a couple important points before we proceed. First, people who reflect on knowledge nearly unanimously agree that knowledge requires truth, or as it's sometimes put, that knowledge is factive.<sup>1</sup> This means that we can know something only if it is true or a fact. We cannot know a falsehood. (We can of course *believe* a falsehood, but that's a different matter.) Now if you think that knowledge is not factive, I recommend a simple solution: everywhere we here speak of "knowledge," understand it to mean "knowledge of the truth," and every time we claim or ask whether someone "knows that so-and-so," understand it to mean "knows it's true that such-and-such." Second, something can be possible without being real or actual. Indeed lots of things are possible that aren't actual. For instance, it's possible for winged horses to exist, even though none actually do. Likewise for wizards, dragons, phlogiston, the luminiferous ether, etc. With those points in mind, let's proceed.

Imagine Descartes at work in his study on a cold night, sitting a few feet from a comforting fire. Unsure for the moment how his narrative should best proceed, he takes a break and turns his attention to the fire. He sees its colorful flames flitting and flickering; he hears it crackling and popping; he feels its heat emanating; he smells the fragrant wood burning. In light of all this, Descartes of course believes he's near a fire. But do these sense experiences enable him to know he's near a fire?

It's hard to imagine Descartes's senses putting him in a better position to gain knowledge of the external world. He is as well-positioned as any of us could ever hope to be. So if the answer to our question at the end of the previous paragraph is "No," then it seems very likely that we never know anything about the external world, at least by way of our senses.

<sup>1</sup> For some recent controversy over the "truth requirement" on knowledge, see Allan Hazlett, "Factive Presupposition and the Truth Condition on Knowledge," *Acta Analytica* 27.4 (2012): 461–478, and John Turri, "Mythology of the Factive," *Logos & Episteme* 2.1 (2011): 143–152.

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The way things look, sound, smell, and feel make it appear to Descartes as though he's near a fire, and it's this appearance that he trusts when judging that he's near a fire. But of course things might appear *exactly* the same in a perfectly realistic dream. And a perfectly realistic dream is a genuine possibility. It's certainly possible for him to have all those sensations despite merely dreaming that he's near a fire. Indeed, any sensory experience might be a mere component of a perfectly realistic dream. Thus sense experience, being equally compatible with dreaming or waking, could never enable him to know that he is awake rather than merely dreaming.

As Descartes recognizes, if he's merely dreaming that he's near a fire, then he certainly doesn't know that he's near a fire. And he also recognizes it is at least possible that he's merely dreaming. So he knows that a certain genuine possibility, the *dream-possibility* (as Stroud calls it), is incompatible with his knowing that he's near a fire. So in order to know that he's near a fire, he must know that the dream-possibility is false.

Notice that, on this way of thinking, in order for the dream-possibility to potentially threaten Descartes's knowledge of the fire, he doesn't need to know, or even so much as believe, that it is actually true. No, the dream-possibility threatens simply because Descartes recognizes that it is possibly true, and that if it were actually true, he wouldn't know that he's near a fire.

Could Descartes ever come to know that the dream-possibility is false? Sense experience itself won't enable such knowledge because, as we've already said, any sense experience is perfectly compatible with the dream-possibility. But isn't there some test he could perform to determine whether he is merely dreaming? Unfortunately not, because in order for him to learn from the test, he'd need to know that he wasn't merely dreaming that he was performing the test!

If you're wondering why he couldn't then just perform a second test to determine whether he's merely dreaming that he performed the first test, consider: he could equally well be dreaming that he's performing the second test. The same is true for a third test he might perform to determine whether he's merely dreaming that he performed the second test. And so on. No matter how many tests he

performs, the same problem recurs. And since it's not possible to perform an infinite series of tests, we find no relief in this direction.

Let's encapsulate the preceding line of thought in the following argument, broken up into two parts to enhance clarity. The main argument goes like this:

1. If Descartes doesn't know that he's near a fire, then we never know anything about the external world. (Premise)
2. Descartes doesn't know that he's near a fire. (Premise)
3. So we never know anything about the external world. (From 1 and 2)

The argument is logically valid: if its premises are true, then its conclusion must be true too. That leaves us to ask whether its premises are true. 1 is at least very plausible, and Stroud is willing to grant it. That leaves only 2 to seriously question. The following supplementary argument supports 2:

- a. Descartes knows that the dream-possibility is incompatible with his knowing that he's near a fire. (Premise)
- b. If Descartes knows that a possibility is incompatible with his knowing some specific claim, then in order for him to know the specific claim, he must know that the possibility in question is false. (Premise)
- c. So in order for Descartes to know that he's near a fire, he must know that the dream-possibility is false. (From a and b)
- d. But Descartes couldn't know that the dream-possibility is false. (Premise)
- e. So Descartes doesn't know that he's near a fire. (From c and d)

Notice that (e) is exactly the same as 2.

Should we accept this argument? Stroud wonders whether we can seriously entertain the skeptical conclusion expressed by 3, because it's allegedly either absurd or even unintelligible. But merely rejecting it as absurd or unintelligible deprives us of the opportunity to learn something potentially important about

knowledge (or at least about our concept of knowledge). Accordingly, he challenges those of us inclined to reject the conclusion to *locate the argument's flaw*. Whatever it is, it isn't obvious.

Stroud suggests that (c) is false. Yet (c) follows from (a) and (b), so rejecting (c) requires us to reject at least one of (a) and (b). (a) is obviously true, which leaves (b).

The problem is that (b) is arguably "embodied" in our ordinary procedures for "making and assessing knowledge-claims." Consider for instance a bird watcher who judges a certain bird to be a goldfinch. We ask her why she thinks it's a goldfinch. "Because it's yellow," she says. "But for all you've said," we respond, "it's possible that it's a canary – canaries are yellow too." We don't think she knows it's a goldfinch, because she knows very well that canaries aren't goldfinches, and yet she doesn't know it's not a canary. She must rule out this relevant possibility, *the canary-possibility*, in order to know it's a goldfinch.

The question then becomes whether the dream-possibility is in all relevant respects similar to the canary-possibility, so that when we insist that the bird watcher must rule out the canary-possibility, we thereby commit ourselves to insisting that Descartes must rule out the dream-possibility. Does Descartes have to rule out the dream-possibility in order to know there's a fire nearby, as the bird watcher must rule out the canary-possibility in order to know that she's looking at a goldfinch? If not, why not? Each subject knows the possibility in question is incompatible with his or her knowing the claim in question. So what *could* be the difference?

A plausible explanation of the difference, should there be any, would go a long way toward resolving "the problem of the external world." Therein lies the challenge, and potential reward, of confronting philosophical skepticism.

## References

- Allan Hazlett, "Factive Presupposition and the Truth Condition on Knowledge," *Acta Analytica* 27.4 (2012): 461–478.
- John Turri, "Mythology of the Factive," *Logos & Episteme* 2.1 (2011): 143–152.