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On Scepticism Regarding Perceptual Knowledge

Anti-sceptical strategies by Barry Stroud, John McDowell and Donald Davidson

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the traditional sceptical argument about perceptual knowledge as posed by Descartes, a certain kind of response to it and its prospects of success. Those responses can be thought to have a ‘Kantian’ origin, since their starting point is human thought and experience and the way we conceive the world in general. However, the nature of the conclusions they aim to establish and their levels of ambition vary, as does the way such arguments are formulated. A related view which will be considered in this paper is the suggestion that a direct answer to the sceptic, by proving the falsity of his conclusion, is impossible; therefore, a more fruitful direction of philosophical investigation would involve tracing the sources of the sceptical challenge and the way it arises, and demonstrate that it is a question which cannot be intelligibly posed, or perhaps that it would be wiser to ignore it altogether. This paper focuses specifically on Barry Stroud’s and John McDowell’s strategies, which will be analyzed in depth, along with the contribution of Donald Davidson’s externalist theory of mental content and its implications for scepticism.

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I. Introduction

The traditional sceptical challenge

There is a variety of sceptical doubts and sceptical arguments in philosophy, concerning the existence and the possibility of possessing knowledge of an external world, other minds, and virtually every domain in which we make knowledge-claims in everyday life. The focus of this paper is scepticism about perceptual knowledge; that is, the possibility of acquiring knowledge through the senses. The starting point will be the traditional sceptical arguments as posed by Descartes in his *Meditations*: the argument from illusion, the argument from the inability to distinguish between being awake or dreaming, and the famous possibility of being deceived by an evil demon (the equivalent of the more recent brain-in-a-vat).

Such arguments initially served as starting points for the construction of epistemological theories which attempt to confront sceptical doubts. The result was the initiation of rationalism and empiricism, the dominant epistemological traditions in the 17th and 18th century. However, in more recent years there has been a tendency towards examining the sceptical arguments themselves and uncovering any non-compulsory assumptions on which they might rest. For instance, it has been noted that the above-mentioned arguments' starting point is the indistinguishability of cases in which we are in a position in which we can acquire knowledge through perceptual experience — that is, cases where our experiential input is veridical— and cases in which it is non-veridical. Beginning, then, from indistinguishability, we might be easily led to scepticism by considering the possibility that there might not be any non-misleading, veridical experiences at all.

Notable among the attempts to examine the underlying assumptions of various sceptical arguments and theories of knowledge is Barry Stroud's contribution in tracing the 'philosophical sources' of the sceptical argument. Stroud claims that most foundationalist theories of knowledge (such as the rationalist and empiricist traditions) include the assumption of the epistemic priority of something that is thought to be 'given' to us through sense-perception; 'impressions' or 'appearances' or 'sense-data', which are directly available to us. To say that things of one sort are epistemically prior to things of another sort, is to say that "things of the first sort are knowable without any things of the second sort being known, but not vice versa" (Stroud 1984, 141). The adoption of such a notion of epistemic priority concerning perception results in the conclusion that knowledge of the objects of our internal experience does not guarantee us knowledge about the external world. Therefore, we are led impressively easily to scepticism. The reason why this assumption is so hard to abandon is that it is connected to powerful philosophical intuitions and an

attempt to avoid an idealist conception of the world. We want to preserve a specific conception of our place in the world and our relationship to it: the idea of an objective world, independent of our thoughts and beliefs (Stroud 1984, 77). (This idea is not *necessarily* tied to the notion of epistemic intermediaries, however this logical leap comes about quite easily —and therefore this connection requires further clarification).

A ‘Kantian’ starting point

However, trying to begin the epistemological quest from certain, immovable grounds, which had been thought to be beyond doubt, did not prove successful in eliminating sceptical doubts. This, along with the linguistic turn in philosophy in the 20th century and a growing conviction that raw experiential intake cannot be something that justifies beliefs or can give us reasons to believe anything, enabled the emergence of another type of epistemological approach, heavily influenced by Kant’s philosophy: a reversal of the order of the investigation, from the pursuit of some elusive kind of foundations as grounds for our putative knowledge, to an examination of the conditions that would have to be fulfilled in order for us to have any experience of the world at all. Or, as Stroud has put it, instead of the ‘bottom up’ approach of beginning from epistemic intermediaries that are directly available to us and then attempting to explain how knowledge of the world is possible on that basis, we should start ‘from the top down’; that is, “from the conditions that must be fulfilled if we have any knowledge of the world and ask how what we perceive must be understood if it is to fulfill the conditions of our knowing what we know about the world by perception” (Stroud 2015, 103).

Another proposal of philosophical investigation which greatly differs from a direct attack to the sceptic by establishing unshakeable grounds of knowledge, is John McDowell’s. He has a ‘therapeutic’ sort of approach to the sceptical worries about our mind’s access to the world. Having noted the apparent urgency of the sceptical questions and the way they seem to endanger all of our knowledge about the world, he sets the goal to alleviate those worries in another way. He suggests the availability of a different conception of the relationship between our minds and the world, which will be examined in detail in the following chapters.

Lastly, although inspired by Kant’s Transcendental Deduction, the approaches mentioned above aim to surpass Kantian weaknesses —such as the continuous adherence to some sort of idealism— and they are quite different in ways that will be examined later on. However, they all share or are targeted at a specific argumentative form, that of a transcendental argument; that is, the

discussion of conditions that would have to be fulfilled in order for us to have any experience of the world at all.

Thus, in this paper, Stroud's and McDowell's approaches to the subject of scepticism about perceptual knowledge and our beliefs' justification from experience will be analysed in chapters II and III. A further analysis of their differences in employing or criticising transcendental arguments and their alleged anti-sceptical force will follow in chapter IV, along with considerations of Davidson's input and his own way of avoiding scepticism. The contributions of those approaches to scepticism and philosophical investigation in general will be evaluated in the epilogue.

II. Barry Stroud' Proposed Route

Understanding human knowledge (in general)

In everyday conversations we constantly make judgements and claims of knowledge concerning various domains of discourse, and we feel confident in most of those claims. An answer to an everyday sceptical question about a certain domain like 'how do you know that this bird is a canary and not a goldfinch?' —to use Stroud's example in his 1984 book— could involve explanations like 'the bird is yellow, and it has other characteristics that distinguish it from other yellow birds, it is sunny outside and I can see it clearly'. That would be an appropriate and adequate response. But if, like Descartes, we were to doubt more of what we usually claim to know, the sceptical question would evolve from 'how do you know that this bird is yellow?' to 'how do you know that you are not dreaming right now?', and eventually to 'is knowing anything about the world really possible?' Stroud's work revolves around such questions about human knowledge and the role of scepticism in dealing with those questions: does it actually pose that big of a threat to epistemology? Or, could it be dismissed somehow?

The first thing Stroud examines is the way sceptical questions are posed, and their goals, the kind of answers to which they aspire. As he rightly suggests, a satisfying answer to the traditional philosophical question 'how do I know that there is a chair in the room' could not be 'because I see it'. That answer might be true, and it is acceptable in the context of our everyday claims and assessments of knowledge, but it does not show an understanding of the question the way it is meant to be understood. The traditional sceptical question about the possibility of knowledge in a specified domain demands a completely *general* answer. In Stroud's words, "we want to understand with complete generality how we come to know anything at all in a certain specified domain." (Stroud 1989, 101). That is, we are not satisfied by answers about how we know something in a domain which invoke some other knowledge we are thought to have in the domain in question. That is one of the reasons why G. E. Moore's famous refutation of scepticism ('here is one hand, and here is another') does not satisfy the traditional sceptic. His proposition 'here is one hand' invokes some pre-existing knowledge in the domain of external objects, and therefore cannot establish their existence. For the traditional sceptic, this argument can easily be seen as circular and begging the question. (Certainly there is much more to be said about Moore's argument and the way we make knowledge claims in everyday life, but that discussion lies beyond the scope of this paper.)

Stroud points out that philosophers rarely reflect on or question the goal of epistemology; namely, whether questions such as 'how do we come to know this-or-that' *necessarily* mean that we

are asking for a completely general answer about the whole of human knowledge. Stroud suggests that this is so because “we feel human knowledge *ought* to be intelligible in that way. The epistemological project feels like the pursuit of a perfectly comprehensible intellectual goal” (Stroud 1989, 100, my emphasis). This is familiar to McDowell’s claim that philosophy as a whole tends to create problems because of the way it poses questions like ‘how is X possible?’; and then gets trapped by “engaging in constructive philosophy” (McDowell 1994, xxiii), that is, trying to answer those questions by building complex theories without ever doubting the legitimacy of the questions. Similarly, Stroud’s position is that we should look more carefully into the question itself.

For Stroud, it is the quest for this generality that brings into the discussion the notion of ‘epistemic priority’ of some kind of epistemic intermediaries (‘sense-data’, ‘perceptions’, ‘experiences’...), a notion he considers fatal for the epistemological project: he believes that “if we really were in the position the traditional account in terms of epistemic priority describes us as being in, scepticism would be correct” (Stroud 1989, 106). It is his conviction that once we accept the idea that knowledge of our perceptual experiences is prior to knowledge about how the world really is, scepticism seems like the only true answer. As the notion of epistemic priority suggests, it is logically possible to possess knowledge of our perceptual experiences without possessing knowledge about the true state of the world. Therefore, knowledge of our perceptual experiences cannot imply anything about the external world or provide us with essentially trustworthy insights about it. We need, then, to reexamine our position, and refrain from instinctively accepting this restrictive view of perception, if we are to explain how we come to have any knowledge at all.

The quest for necessary conditions of thought

Stroud describes his approach as a ‘from the top down’ process, instead of the ‘bottom up’ (Stroud 2015, 103) procedure that relies on the existence of some kind of epistemic intermediaries, on something that is ‘given’ to us through sense-perception alone and attempts — unsuccessfully— to find elsewhere good reasons why those intermediaries are reliable sources of knowledge about the external world. Instead, philosophers like Stroud and McDowell adopt the Kantian idea of the need for an investigation about the conditions of our having any perceptual experience in general. As Stroud writes, “we can never explain how our knowledge of the world is possible on the assumption that our perception and knowledge of things simply conform to the objects perceived or known, so we must adopt the revolutionary idea that ‘objects must conform to our knowledge’ or to ‘the constitution of our faculty of intuition’” (Stroud 1984, 148). Stroud’s idea is, then, “to start, not with what seems to come to us in experience and ask how we know things

about the world on that basis, but to start with the conditions of our even thinking about a world that perception could perhaps reveal to us.” (Stroud 2015, 103)

Stroud aims to pinpoint the conditions necessary for one to have thoughts, beliefs, and therefore conditions necessary for having knowledge. Through this process he intends to show that, if those conditions are satisfied, the traditional epistemological problem as posed by Descartes cannot coherently arise. He does not imply that his answer will be a satisfying and direct ‘yes, we can have knowledge about the world because so-and-so’ to the sceptical challenge, exactly due to his conviction that the challenge itself is not coherent. As he mentions in a conversation with Donald Davidson, “if you want to demonstrate that the question is misguided, the last thing you should do is give a positive answer to it” (1997, 1:12:25); that would contradict the very idea he is trying to demonstrate. So, Stroud proceeds to his investigation by trying to find the conditions necessary for our ordinary claims of knowledge to have the content they have. He points out that it is necessary to have beliefs in order to make knowledge-claims, and in order to have beliefs, it is necessary to have thoughts. Therefore, whatever necessary conditions for thought might be discovered in the course of his investigation, they will also be necessary for belief and knowledge.

Stroud’s anti-sceptical quest has formed another type of question, in place of the traditional ‘how is knowledge of the world possible?’: the question now is ‘what are the conditions necessary for our thoughts to have the content we understand them to have?’, or to mean what we understand them to mean. (The terms ‘meaning’ and ‘content’ in this context refer to the truth-conditions of the relevant propositions). Stroud of course wants to focus on beliefs that are not based on any other belief, but seem to be based on perceptual experience itself. After all, this is exactly the point where one might get drawn into the discussion of epistemic intermediaries and the related accounts of perception, so Stroud sets out to analyze his own account of sense-perception, using as his main example the sense of sight.

Propositional and objectual perception

Stroud, in his essay ‘Seeing What is So’ distinguishes between two kinds of perception: ‘objectual’ perception, and propositional perception. It is different, he claims, to say ‘I see a chair’ and to say ‘I see that there is a chair’. This kind of ‘objectual perception’, on his account, is non-epistemic. Being able to see a chair does not require from us anything more than having working eyes, the same way a cat or dog or any other animal can see a chair. They can, for example, distinguish it from its background, follow it while it is moving, and react to it, but they do not have beliefs about it.

The difference between humans and non-rational animals lies in human's capacity for propositional perception and propositional thought. Propositional perception is central to Stroud's attempt to understand how human thought and knowledge is possible, and he considers it a condition of thought in general; therefore, a condition of belief and knowledge. He certainly considers objectual perception necessary, as thoughts and beliefs about chairs would not be possible if we were not in a position to see chairs, to perceive them 'objectually'. But objectual perception is definitely not sufficient to explain human thought: as Stroud writes, "thinking something about the objects you see requires considerably more than just seeing them." (Stroud 2011b, 90)

And this is where Stroud detects a capacity necessary for propositional thought, for thinking about objects: propositional judgement, which requires the capacity for predication; the application of concepts to objects. In order to think about objects, one needs to have a "rich conceptual repertoire" (Stroud 2011b, 94), which means they already have to know (or at least believe) some things about the world. To bring the example of chairs again, one must know what chairs are, and how they behave in general (Stroud 2011b, 94) in order to be able to apply to them that predicate. Stroud expands more on this idea in his 2015 essay, which will be analysed later on.

It is tempting to think that judgement and propositional thought can be separated from 'the perceptual experience itself', but that is exactly the point of Stroud's argument: by suggesting that, we are returning to a notion of epistemic intermediaries and to the restricted view of perception that seems to lead us inevitably to scepticism. It could be suggested quite naturally that his concept of objectual perception might be what corresponds better to the notion of 'the perceptual experience itself', the simple awareness of the chair's existence or maybe only the awareness of the chair's qualities, its shape, colour, etc. But this is a misunderstanding of what Stroud is proposing: by saying that objectual perception is something that non-rational animals can have as well, he is suggesting that this kind of awareness is strictly non-epistemic: to simply be aware of a chair in the room, one does not need to have any beliefs and thoughts about it, so this awareness cannot serve as a source of knowledge by itself. Stroud's view is that (for humans) "to have perceptual knowledge of anything at all, the perceptual experience in which you have it must involve some exercise of conceptual capacities involving propositional or predicational thought" (Stroud 2011b, 96).

In his 2015 essay, Stroud expands on his idea that what we should do, if we are to understand how human knowledge is possible, is look into the conditions of propositional thought (which is necessary for knowledge). Knowledge itself is propositional, since "to know something is to know that such-and-such. That involves a propositional thought with a truth-value" (Stroud 2015,

103). So, for Stroud, the question now is, what exactly is needed, what capacities must one have in order to have propositional thoughts which he understands as expressing something true or false? He believes that a better understanding of this can give us a better understanding of perception; thus, this is the next step in his strategy of beginning from “the conditions of our even thinking about a world that perception could perhaps reveal to us” (Stroud 2015, 103).

A condition he identifies, then, as central and necessary for propositional thought is the capacity for judgement, for asserting or denying something. Contrary to the previous thesis that thought is necessary for belief, he seems to reverse that order by suggesting that belief is necessary for thought, or at least that they are indispensable to each other; and this expresses a requirement for the very structure of our thoughts: for Stroud, for a thought to be more than a list or collection of objects, it must have predicational structure. Part of the thought should express something which is true of an object, and another part of the thought should refer in some way to that object. This structure is what enables a thought as a whole to be something that is either true or false, and for Stroud this expresses applications of concepts, of predicates to things of some kind. Being able to say (while understanding what I am saying) “I see that there is a chair in the room” requires an application of the concept of chairs, and therefore a judgement, or in other words, a belief. Stroud concludes that “to understand perceptual knowledge, we must understand the conditions of judgement, or belief” (Stroud 2015, 104).

When Stroud brings up the difference between humans and non-rational animals in order to detect the conditions necessary for human thought, he talks in terms of the humans' capability to satisfy those conditions. He suggests that humans possess certain skills, certain cognitive capacities (which are not possessed by non-rational animals) which enable us to satisfy the conditions necessary for having beliefs. Our next goal in our epistemological endeavour should then be an attempt to understand ourselves as masters of a capacity for judgement, as competent believers and thinkers. However, it must be mentioned that a supposed capacity for judgement is not enough. One should actually make judgements and show an understanding of the thoughts one asserts, the terms involved in those, and the conditions in which a specific judgement would be appropriate. This is essential in order to demonstrate that one does indeed have the capacity for judgement.

Stroud's insistence on the necessity of appropriate or correct judgements, if we are to attribute one with thoughts and beliefs, mirrors in a way Donald Davidson's principle of charity. It definitely is similar to the claim that, to discuss the possibility of error, we should have a body of true beliefs to discern it from. The same way that having mostly wrong beliefs about an object

makes it doubtful that we are actually talking about that object, or that we understand any of the words with which we are talking about it, consistently making inappropriate judgements would also be an indication of the lack of a capacity for judgement in general or lack of an understanding of the thought which is asserted through that (so-called) judgement (Stroud 2015, 105).

About the nature of belief and responsiveness to reasons

For a better understanding of what else is involved in having beliefs in general, it is essential to point out the seemingly obvious claim that “beliefs are held for reasons” (Stroud 2015, 105). But what does this mean exactly? How do we recognise something as a reason to believe something else? And what exactly 'forces' us, when we believe a proposition, to believe another one on the basis of the first?

There is a number of responses to that. We could certainly say that we are in a ‘believing relation’ to a set of propositions, and maybe that this set contains propositions that state that some propositions are reasons to believe other propositions, all of them being members of the set. But does this characterise fully the relation of a believer to what he believes, and what he takes as reasons to believe what he does? The argument against the sufficiency of this formal characterisation is that it does not capture fully the psychological state of believing a proposition on the basis of another. Correspondingly, Stroud uses Lewis Carroll's story of Achilles and the Tortoise (Carroll 1895) to illustrate what he thinks this psychological state is *not* like, and why he thinks that the formal characterisation suggested above is not enough to explain it.

In the story, the Tortoise tells Achilles that she accepts two (Euclidian) statements: (A) Things that are equal to the same are equal to each other, and (B) The two sides of this triangle are things that are equal to the same. It seems to us that the third statement is something that can be reasonably asserted on the basis of those two, as a conclusion: (Z) The two sides of this triangle are equal to each other. The Tortoise, though, even though it claims to accept (A) and (B), does not automatically accept (Z) and asks Achilles to prove to him why it should. Achilles then provides another statement: (C) If A and B are true, Z must be true. The Tortoise then claims to accept (A), (B) and (C), but asks again Achilles to convince it to accept (Z). By always insisting that more statements like (C) are needed, the Tortoise leads him to an infinite regress.

Stroud considers this story, and specifically the Tortoise's attitude, a brilliant example of what it means to make no sense of the notion of one thing being a reason to believe something else. He questions whether the Tortoise can be said to understand (A) and (B): if it did, it would then

understand them immediately as reasons to conclude that (Z). But how can it ‘accept’ them if it does not understand them in the first place?

According to Stroud, the Tortoise “appears to think that the only way believing one thing can bear on a person’s believing something else is by the believer’s accepting some third proposition that states a relation between the two” (Stroud 2015, 106). But the story shows that this leads to an infinite regress, and cannot quite explain how we do, in fact, accept propositions on the basis of other propositions. This is why he considers this account of belief inadequate.

There is plenty of discussion around to this story and plenty of interpretations. Logicians reflecting on the rules of logical inference and their justification point out that, essentially, what the Tortoise is doing is refusing to perform modus ponens; it does not seem to understand it as a rule of inference. For logicians, in this story “it appears then that modus ponens cannot be justified to someone who is not already prepared to use that rule” (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/induction-problem/>). Stroud's position echoes that in a way -the key phrase being “already prepared to use that rule”. He suggests that if we are to understand ourselves as believing anything, we must be “responsive to reasons” (Stroud 2015, 106). He takes this ‘responsiveness’ to be an “‘active’ or ‘productive’ attitude” (Stroud 2015, 107), meaning that when one takes a proposition as a reason, one is immediately prepared to accept a second proposition on the basis of the first. In other words, we could say that we are responsive to reasons if we are prepared to use rules of inference like modus ponens, instead of only supposedly ‘accepting’ them as propositions, and falling into that infinite regress of propositions and other propositions that state relations between propositions. Stroud thus describes the Tortoise's attitude as ‘reason deaf’ or ‘reason insensitive’ (Stroud 2015, 107), and stresses that we need to be responsive to reasons if we can be understood to hold any beliefs at all.

Perceptual knowledge

Much can be (and has been) said about what we believe on the basis of other things we believe and about legitimate and illegitimate inferences. The key point here for the epistemological quest is the fact itself that most of the things we believe are based on or supported by other beliefs, and anyone who is ‘responsive to reasons’ understands that. Stroud then proceeds to examine the ‘end’ of that chain of reasons or beliefs; i.e. the most vital and challenging part of the epistemological quest: the question about perceptual knowledge, the cases in which we seem to know things about the world through sense-perception alone. Stroud, up to this point followed a process of seeking necessary conditions and pinpointing a number of cognitive capacities that one should possess in order to be

able to believe anything at all. One could ask him now, “what, then, gives us reasons to believe something like ‘there is a chair in the room’?”

Going back to his initial notion of ‘objectual’ perception, he reminds us again that this kind of perception is not something that can provide us with reasons for anything at all; it is completely and utterly non-epistemic. We don't believe that there is a chair on the basis of reasons ‘given’ to us from objectual perception —although objectual perception remains necessary, since it brings something to our awareness and makes it “available for predication” (Stroud 2011b, 94).

“Competent thinkers and believers” who satisfy Stroud's conditions, possess concepts which they can apply mostly correctly, if they can be said to possess them in the first place. They make judgements, understanding them as saying something which is true or false, and compatible or incompatible with an objective truth. They have, as Stroud puts it, a “rich predicational competence”, which “could be thought of as our carrying around with us an enormous body of open sentences that we understand” (Stroud 2015, 111). If we do have this predicational competence, Stroud claims that what happens when we perceive something is simply “we see and thereby know that such-and-such” (Stroud 2015, 111). He explains in great detail that our seeing that there is a chair in the room is not the reason for believing and knowing it, we do not know it on the basis of anything. He insists that having that predicational repertoire makes it immediate, and automatic in a way: when an object is brought to our awareness, we ‘see and thereby know’ that it is a chair.

An unsatisfying conclusion?

Stroud understands that this view does not satisfy that original goal of a general understanding of how we come to have any knowledge at all about the world around us or even about a specific domain: having mastered a relevant predicational repertoire involves knowing a great deal about the domain in question. We should also note that —as Stroud himself points out (Stroud 2011b, 99)—, we can observe in countless cases that what one sees when one is aware of an object depends on their background knowledge. What a doctor sees-and-thereby-knows when looking at an X-ray scan or what a physicist sees-and-thereby-knows when looking at the needle of a Geiger-Müller counter is vastly different from what I, a student of philosophy, see-and-thereby-know-that-such-and-such while perceiving ‘objectually’ the same thing.

Indeed, Stroud has warned us plenty in his writings about the possibility that his conclusion might leave us philosophically unsatisfied. What he provides is not a straightforward answer to the sceptic —and for very good reason, as previously mentioned. What the traditional sceptic is asking for is a reason why we can trust our senses, a reason why they are reliable sources of knowledge,

and Stroud does not give him one; instead he states very explicitly that, in his conception, perceptual knowledge is not based or supported by reasons.

Stroud acknowledges the force of the way the sceptical argument is posed, and that it is very easy to get dragged back into looking for a completely general way of understanding human knowledge that will leave us vulnerable to the sceptical challenge. That is why this poses such a threat to our understanding. Nevertheless, Stroud also acknowledges—in a meta-philosophical level—the importance of scepticism for epistemology as an indication of ‘what might go wrong’ when we insist on asking epistemological questions in that particular way. For Stroud, “it is important because it seems to be the inevitable consequence of trying to understand human knowledge in a certain way” (Stroud 1989, 100).

III. John McDowell's Philosophical Project

McDowell's way of approaching seemingly pressing philosophical questions and worries has a number of similarities with Stroud's thought and it reflects a meta-philosophical agreement—to a certain extent— about the way philosophical investigation should be conducted at this point in history. Both of them analyse how certain philosophical questions have been posed from antiquity to the present day, and both have drawn attention to the questions' underlying assumptions and philosophical sources. McDowell in particular refers to his philosophical goal as a 'diagnosis, with a view to a cure' (McDowell 1994, xvi). He proposes that, for questions of the kind 'how is X possible?' we pay attention to the question itself and attempt to develop a better understanding of it and its philosophical sources. So the question might be restated as follows: 'how is it possible for our thoughts to have empirical content and to refer genuinely to the world?' McDowell's view is that instead of trying to construct elaborate philosophical theories trying to answer to that, we should attempt to 'exorcise' (McDowell 1994, xxiv) the question itself, as it seems to be taking for granted this supposed distance between our minds and the world. There is a great deal of imagery of this sort in his writing, and in this case he describes this type of 'constructive philosophy' (McDowell 1994, xxiii) as an attempt to bridge a gaping chasm that philosophy has created itself.

Mind and World

The oscillation between 'two horns of a dilemma'

In his book 'Mind and World' McDowell does not speak at length about knowledge; rather he concentrates on the previously mentioned—and according to him, deeper— philosophical anxiety: how is it possible for our thought to genuinely refer to the world, and our beliefs to be justified by it?' McDowell considers this question more fundamental than the one about knowledge, as without an assurance of empirical content, our thoughts would be empty—our intuitions would be blind, in a Kantian terminology—, and we could not even begin to talk about knowledge.

McDowell, then, introduces his 'diagnosis' by first noting his observation that modern philosophy appears to be tormented by an oscillation between two unsatisfactory positions (McDowell 1994, 24) as far as epistemology is concerned: on one hand, a coherentism which he ascribes to Donald Davidson and which he considers a 'frictionless spin' (McDowell 1994, 11) of a body of beliefs that are not in touch with the world, and various forms of the so-called Myth of the Given on the other. McDowell agrees in part with the convictions that lead to both of those kinds of theories. When we trace back the chain of justifications of our beliefs, the last thing must be

something conceptual (a belief, according to Davidson), otherwise it remains mysterious how ‘bare presences’ or raw experiences can be rational grounds or count as reasons for holding beliefs (McDowell 1994, 14). However, if thoughts are to have empirical content, they need some kind of constraint from the world—which will establish the world’s independence from our thinking—, but a rational constraint. This is an important distinction for McDowell: in his Kantian dialect, he conceives thought as the domain of ‘spontaneity’, a place of freedom within the ‘space of reasons’ (in Sellars’ terms). In describing, then, the Myth of the Given, McDowell pinpoints its main problem as that ‘it offers us at best exculpations where we wanted justifications’ (McDowell 1994, 13). By suggesting that impingements from the world on our sensibility have only causal effects on us and are outside the scope of the spontaneity of our thought, as the Myth of the Given does, we can only say that ‘we cannot be *blamed* for believing whatever they lead us to believe, not that we are justified in believing it’ (McDowell 1994, 13, my emphasis).

The world as ‘everything that is the case’

McDowell, after examining this tension between those two positions and their respective weaknesses, suggests that there is a third option, which just has not been considered yet and can offer a way out of the dilemma. If we can conceive that ‘the world is made up of the sort of thing one can think’ (McDowell 1994, 27), we can then conceive experience as openness to the world, openness to facts. For McDowell, ‘the world is embraceable in thought’ (McDowell 1994, 33) and its structure is that of ‘thinkable contents’, such that his (and Davidson’s, partly) requirement that the last link in the chain of justification is conceptual—a thinkable content—is satisfied. He is conscious of the objection of idealism from the very beginning, but he insists that his conception can preserve the independence of the world, since what he wants to eliminate is the distance between what one can think and what is the case, if one is not misled (the problem of misleading experiences will be analysed later on). Namely, the world is such that it can be conceived in thought, but that does not imply that it has been or ever will be, as a whole. His claim is that ‘there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought’ (McDowell 1994, 27, my emphasis). As Richard Rorty has pointed out, McDowell describes the world as a sort of ‘conversational partner’. “He wants to conceive of experience as ‘openness to the world’ or ‘openness to reality’ in the same sense of openness in which a conversable person is open to new ideas” (Rorty 1998, 147). McDowell, in short, tries to provide a philosophical conception of a world to which our minds naturally belong, and diffuse the philosophical anxiety about the possibility that between them there is an unbridgeable gap .

The notion of second nature

McDowell has traced the source of this anxiety and he attributes it to the (so called) scientific revolution of the 17th century. The progress of the natural sciences at that time led to this new conception of nature, as the realm of law. What is problematic about that, according to McDowell, is that since it equates ‘something’s place in nature with its location in the realm of law’ (McDowell 1994, 75), and since we want to retain the conviction that the space of reasons is of a different kind, our using of conceptual capacities becomes mysterious: it becomes a ‘rampant platonism’, where not only the demands of reason exist independently of us, but they exist outside of nature itself; thus, our access to them cannot be explained. It requires a notion of human beings as parts of nature and at the same time able to access something outside of nature.

Hence, McDowell suggests that we rethink the notion of nature itself and refuse to equate it with the realm of law in a way that leaves it ‘disenchanted’. He looks back to Aristotle's ethics and his notion of ‘second nature’ pertaining to the forming of character and one’s initiation to practical wisdom, and uses those concepts in order to speak more generally; from the rational demands of ethics to all kinds of rational demands. For Aristotle, the moulding of ethical character through one’s upbringing opens their eyes to independently existing ethical demands, and through this process one acquires a second nature for which those demands are in plain view. McDowell then suggests that we see our natural upbringing as this kind of ‘initiation into conceptual capacities, which include responsiveness to other rational demands besides those of ethics’ (McDowell 1994, 84). The threat of a ‘rampant platonism’ would still be present, were it not for McDowell's crucial point: the autonomy of rational demands need not be distanced from anything human —otherwise, our access to them would remain mysterious. In McDowell's way, they can be conceived as something that becomes visible when one learns where to look.

By managing to perceive human beings as having on a fundamental level the potential for rationality, while being parts of nature, we can reconcile reason and nature in a way that will ease our worries about the relationship between our minds and the world. As opposed to Stroud, McDowell believes that his conception can be ‘the discovery that gives philosophy peace’ (Wittgenstein 1953, §133, McDowell 1994, 86), a sense of philosophical satisfaction that will arise when we realise that we are not trapped in the previously mentioned dilemma. Stroud, on the other hand, urges us to accept that his own analyses will not satisfy us the way a direct answer to the traditional sceptical argument would —but which as he suggests, is impossible. McDowell stays true to the spirit of trying to provide us with a ‘diagnosis and a cure’ to certain philosophical

anxieties, while Stroud seems to accept that some answers —although they might shed a light on the way of thinking that the sceptical argument presupposes and the particular way of understanding human knowledge that it is asking for— might never feel philosophically satisfying.

Dealing with the Sceptic

The highest common factor conception of experience

McDowell's main focus in 'Mind and World' is to argue in favour of his conception of the world and our place in it, in order to show that our access to it can be unproblematic and that justification of our beliefs from perceptual experience is possible. For the most part of his book he ignores the sceptic, and aims to prove that we can make sense of the idea of perceptual experience as openness to facts and able to provide us with genuine 'glimpses of the world' (McDowell 1994, 111). He insists that, for his own purposes, "the sheer intelligibility of the idea is enough. If the idea is intelligible, the sceptical questions lack a kind of urgency that is essential to their troubling us" (McDowell 1994, 113). After all, he views scepticism as the claim that the notion of direct access to facts is not intelligible, therefore the negation of this claim suffices (McDowell 2008, 378).

McDowell has expanded further on his response to the traditional sceptical questions in two other essays (1982, 2008). In his writings, in general, he has noted that the traditional sceptical arguments have attributed particular importance to the fallibility of perception, and believes that if his conception of perceptual experience as providing glimpses of the world is shown to be intelligible, the philosophical anxiety caused by scepticism and 'how possible?' questions can be alleviated.

McDowell, similarly to Stroud's talk of epistemic intermediaries, pinpoints the philosophical preconceptions about perceptual experience that seem to lead to sceptical worries: what he calls 'the highest common factor' conception of experience, which arises from the fallibility of experience but, according to McDowell, is not implied by it. According to this conception, the epistemic significance of experiential intake is a highest common factor of the two kinds of cases; misleading and non-misleading experiences, 'so never higher than what we have in this second kind of case' (McDowell 2008, 380). Therefore, even in non-misleading cases, we are granted no more stable grounds for knowledge than in the case of misleading experiences. This is certainly an intuitively attractive conception, since it accounts for the indistinguishability of misleading and non-misleading cases; one could argue that, since misleading and non-misleading perceptions can be indistinguishable —almost by definition, otherwise how could they

systematically mislead us?—, how can they be said to give us something epistemologically different? (McDowell 1982, 475)

McDowell's aim in disproving this line of thought is focused on illuminating what is our epistemic position, or what else we can intelligibly conceive to be our epistemic position, if we manage to reject the highest common factor conception. An important part of his argument, then, will be the attempt to block the inference from the undeniable fallibility of perception (and the indistinguishability of experiences) to the highest common factor conception of experience.

A disjunctive conception of experience

Firstly, McDowell points out that the argument about misleading and non-misleading experiences being indistinguishable from a subject's point of view does not, actually, explain anything, since we would not be talking of misleading cases if we could distinguish them from non-misleading cases. Therefore, this supposed argument simply restates the fact that our perception is fallible (McDowell 2008, 381). So, without further reference to indistinguishability, McDowell proceeds to propose a disjunctive conception of experience; namely a conception which specifically denies that the epistemic significance of misleading and non-misleading cases of experiential intake is the same. Even the indistinguishability of perceptions leaves open the possibility that there is an epistemically distinguished class of experiences —the non-misleading ones— which 'afford opportunities for knowledge of objective states of affairs' (McDowell 2008, 381). The suggestion is, then, that perceptual experiences can be either objective states of affairs "making themselves manifest to subjects or situations in which it is as if an objective state of affairs is making itself manifest to a subject, although that is not how things are" (McDowell 2008, 380-381, my emphasis), and that this difference remains consistent with the existence of any other commonality between the two kinds of cases; i.e. with their being indistinguishable. Naturally, this conception aligns with his analysis of experience in 'Mind and World' in which he presents it as 'openness to the world'. The intelligibility of such a conception of experience, as openness to facts and as open access to the world, suffices for his purpose: he does not wish to answer directly to the sceptical question —since he seems to believe, like Stroud, that the way it is posed does not allow that—, but to remove its apparent urgency.

There are certainly numerous objections to McDowell's epistemology and his way of addressing —or refusing to address— the sceptic's challenge. For example, as Duncan Pritchard has mentioned in his critique (Pritchard 2003), it does seem like whether we have knowledge or not is a matter of 'epistemic luck' (about the truth of our beliefs), and this is always subject to the (in part)

undetectable co-operation of the world (Pritchard 2003, 287), precisely due to the indistinguishability of veridical and non-veridical cases of perceptual experiences. Besides, McDowell himself speaks of the world as doing us the ‘favor of being the way it appears to be’, and of us as having to rely on favors from the world ‘whether we like it or not’ (McDowell 1995, 886), so it does appear that he believes that knowledge and epistemic luck are not incompatible.

Instead of focusing on various critiques of his disjunctive conception of experience per se, like Pritchard’s, what is to be examined further in this essay is the way McDowell proposes the disjunctive conception of experience can be used as material for a transcendental argument about the possibility of knowledge, and a more general analysis of transcendental arguments will follow in the next chapter.

A transcendental argument

Transcendental arguments, so called because of their Kantian origin of this type of argument, ordinarily aim to answer ‘how is X possible?’ questions by providing conditions necessary for X to be possible: they begin from premises even the sceptic is supposed not to doubt—which is usually some characteristic of our thought or experience—and aim to establish certain features the world must have, or we must conceive it to have, for our thought and experience to have that characteristic (McDowell 2008, 387). It is clear that, in general, those are ambitious arguments, especially those aiming to prove bold claims about how the world must be, and McDowell knows that, so he notes that his argument is different in that respect: his conclusion ‘is rather one about how we must conceive the epistemic positions that are within our reach’ (McDowell 2008, 387); that is, what is happening—epistemologically speaking—in different situations of our having perceptual experiences. The epistemic position whose intelligibility he wants to prove is, of course, the idea of a direct access to facts through perception.

The characteristic of experience on which he bases his argument and is not thought to be in doubt is that “experience purports to be of objective reality. [...] it at least appears to one as if things in one’s environment are a certain way” (McDowell 2008, 380). Even the sceptic can probably accept that through perceptual experience at least it *looks* like things are a certain way. Using this as a starting point, McDowell then presents the disjunctive conception of experience as necessary, as an alternative to the highest common factor conception, as he considers the second inconsistent with the claim that experience ‘purports to be of an objective reality’ in a way that his disjunctive conception is not; that is, if each and every case of veridical experiential intake has the same degree

of epistemic significance with the non-veridical cases, we cannot claim that, in general, it appears to us that things are one way or another.

Barry Stroud has criticised in depth certain types of transcendental arguments, mostly by arguing that the necessary conditions (for the possibility of X) they claim to uncover, and their bold conclusions, tend to rely on more than what the premisses by themselves imply. This will be further analysed along with his critique on McDowell's view regarding perceptual experience in the next chapter.

IV. Stroud's Critique

On the grounding of beliefs from perceptual experience

In his 2002 essay, Stroud reflects on whether McDowell in 'Mind and World' truly manages to show that "perceptual access to the way things are" (Stroud 2002, 276) is possible, by examining closely his conception of sense-experience.

Stroud certainly accepts McDowell's rejection of what he calls the 'highest common factor' conception of experience, and it is clear that he believes any conception of experience that posits epistemic intermediaries, which are directly available to us but imply nothing about how the world really is, would be fatal to the prospect of ever explaining the possibility of reasonable beliefs about the world (Stroud 2002, 282). To conclude that we have the same 'impression', in a case of veridical and in a case of non-veridical perceptual experience, would be to say that both cases have the same epistemic significance, and that in both cases "the content of the impression implies nothing about the independent world" (Stroud 2002, 282). Stroud, then, clearly agrees with McDowell's suggestion the fact that perception in general is fallible does not imply that in every case of perceptual experience what we get is something that 'falls short of the fact' (McDowell 1982, 472). Therefore, he does not seem to disagree with McDowell's disjunctive conception of experience — although whether he would accept it as 'material for a transcendental argument' is questionable.

Stroud's disagreement lies precisely in the matter of justification of beliefs from sense-experience, and the way McDowell understands 'impressions', bits of experiential intake, as what gives us reasons for holding perceptual beliefs. In his own analyses of perceptual knowledge (2002, 2009, 2011b, 2015), he has written about the notion of responsiveness to reasons and the conceptual capacities one must have in order to have propositional perception: "Seeing that *p* occurs only when there is an impact by the world on a perceiver equipped with conceptual capacities sufficient for grasping the thought that *p*" (Stroud 2002, 279). We have the ability to make those automatic 'I see-and-thereby-know that *p*' claims precisely due to the possession of background knowledge embodied in those conceptual capacities and the predicational competence that comes with it. Stroud observes that McDowell requires more than that of sense-experience in order to establish its ability to ground empirical beliefs by providing reasons for one's believing in them. He seems to believe that, in order for any judgement to be grounded in an 'impression', that impression should not involve making that judgement, while Stroud suggests that is not problematic or circular to say that an experience involving a judgement can ground that very judgement (Stroud 2002, 284-285). Besides, in his view, a perceptual experience cannot be void of judgements, it contains them itself.

So, trying to find different grounds will only lead us to the sceptical conclusion we are striving to avoid, according to Stroud (2002, 285). He intends to find out why McDowell seems to insist on that, and he concludes that what appears to be a problem for McDowell is the revisability of perceptual beliefs, in the following way: McDowell seems to want the last link in the chain of justifications to belong in ‘thinkable contents’, but to be an experience which does not contain judgements, if we are to be able to revise our beliefs in the light, e.g. of further information. Stroud presents as an example the familiar Müller-Lyer illusion in which two lines look like they have different lengths while in fact they do not. Since we know about the illusion and have examined the lines further and know that they have the same length, we do not ‘accept’ the content of perception which keeps suggesting that they have different lengths. The crucial question is, as Stroud suggests, “whether things could perceptually appear to me to be a certain way without my believing anything at all” (2002, 284), and as mentioned above, his answer to that is negative. “The passivity and absence of choice in perception, which is the mark of receptivity and ‘external constraint’, cannot be equated with the absence of all judgement or assent” (2002, 284). Which is to say that, even if I already know that the two lines have the same length, it still ‘looks as if they are of different lengths’, and ‘looks-as-if’ is a judgement which is part of the perceptual experience itself.

In his attempt to provide an account of perceptual experience and the way it provides reasons for holding beliefs, while avoiding the threat of idealism, McDowell is right to insist that thought should be grounded on something outside it. As he has put it in ‘Mind and World’, what he needs is something outside thinking and judging —just not something outside thinkable contents. (1994, 28). Stroud's objection concludes by saying that ““seeing that p’ is indeed something outside thinking, it is *seeing*” (2002, 288), and therefore it can serve as a ground for further beliefs. When we ‘see that p’ we have a certain kind of propositional attitude towards that proposition, which for Stroud is the best kind of reason experience could give us to believe that p, while still allowing us to revise that belief in light of further cases of perceptual experiences.

McDowell’s and Stroud’s disagreement boils down to the way McDowell perceives the content of experience. In his view, it gives us reasons for holding beliefs by itself (the idea of the world as a conversational partner, issued by Rorty, is a good metaphor to use here as well). Stroud, in his essays about sense-experience, has reflected on the notion of responsiveness to reasons, and he mentioned that in his 2002 essay as well:

“I think the content of an experience alone cannot give a person reason, or be a person’s reason, to believe something. The content of an experience is typically expressed in a proposition, and propositions are not reasons, nor do they make other propositions reasonable. Propositions are true or false, not reasonable or unreasonable, justified or unjustified.

Even if one proposition implies another, it does not justify, support, warrant, or make reasonable that other proposition. What is justified or reasonable or supported or warranted is a person's accepting a certain proposition, or rejecting it, or taking some other attitude towards its truth" (Stroud 2002, 287).

Therefore, Stroud rejects that conception of the world as giving us reasons by itself, and keeps his original suggestion that what we take as a reason for what stems from concepts fundamental to human rationality and the structure of thought itself.

On transcendental arguments

McDowell's 2008 essay is in part a reply to Stroud's 1968 and 1999a essays on transcendental arguments, therefore enquiring on whether McDowell's response and the transcendental argument he proposes succeed in overruling Stroud's objections towards these lines of argument would certainly be of interest.

As previously mentioned, what we have come to think of as transcendental arguments are lines of reasoning which aim to establish features the world must necessarily have, if we are to conceive it as we do. A successful argument of this type would certainly be effective against scepticism, since it would demonstrate that the world is thus-and-so beyond doubt, otherwise we would not have the experiences and thoughts that we do.

Stroud's main objection, or rather his main doubt on the prospects of a successful transcendental argument concerns precisely the difficulty of making that inference; from ways of thinking about the world to how the world really is (Stroud 1968, 14). Or, in other words, an inference from 'psychological' premisses, containing verbs like 'think' or 'believe', to non-psychological conclusions about how things are (Stroud 1999a, 210). For example, in his evaluation of Strawson's transcendental argument which aims to prove that objects continue to exist unperceived (Strawson 1959, 74), Stroud claims that his conclusion does not follow from his premisses, and that it requires a version of the verification principle as an additional premiss in order to do so (1968, 15); therefore the initial argument is indeed not successful.

Stroud suggests that there is a weaker kind of transcendental argument, which only claims to establish necessary conditions within our thought; namely that if we think in certain ways, we must also think in certain other ways (1999, 215).

Both types of transcendental arguments could prove efficient against familiar sceptical challenges. A successful argument of the less ambitious kind could perhaps show that, given that we think in certain ways about the world, we could never be faced with the sceptical threat. Namely, that some beliefs would be indispensable to our being able to think about the world at all; beliefs which we could never find to be false if held (Stroud 1999a, 216). This does not imply that they are,

in fact, true, but the fact that “we could never see ourselves as holding the beliefs in question and being mistaken” (Stroud 1999a, 218) allows the somewhat reassuring result that we could never consistently arrive at their negations.

Stroud has analysed in great detail the previously mentioned notions of indispensability and invulnerability of certain beliefs and their role in anti-sceptical transcendental arguments. He points out the existence of propositions that are impossible for one to assert truly, but could nonetheless be true; his main example being ‘I believe it is raining and it is not raining’. Indeed, the conjunction of ‘I believe it is raining’ and ‘it is not raining’ is not necessarily false, but it cannot be truly asserted by anyone. Another example of such a statement would be ‘there is no language’, since it needs a language in which to be expressed, but the existence of language is not a necessary truth (Stroud 1968, 21-22). Propositions like the negation of this (i.e. ‘there is at least one language’) could be said to belong in a ‘privileged’ class which enjoys this invulnerability, since their negations could never be asserted truly. Stroud suggests that if we were to prove that certain propositions of the kind that is questioned by the sceptic (or whose justification is questioned by the sceptic) belong to this privileged class, we could at the very least block one path towards scepticism (1968, 22-23). This would definitely be very difficult, if at all possible. And ultimately, strictly speaking, an argument beginning from the necessary conditions of language would only establish that “we must *believe* that there are material objects and other minds if we are to be able to speak meaningfully at all” (Stroud 1968, 25), and would not establish by itself that it is, in fact, so.

McDowell’s transcendental argument

Looking more closely at McDowell’s argument, it should first be understood what exactly he means by saying that his argument aims to establish how we must conceive the epistemic positions that are available to us, given that experience has ‘objective purport’ (McDowell 2008, 387); that, at least, it *looks as if* things are thus-and-so in the world. More radical forms of scepticism might doubt even that, or even our having certain beliefs, but at this point there would not be much for philosophy to do or say. So, given at least that it looks like we are provided with ‘glimpses of the world’ through perceptual experience, McDowell suggests that a necessary condition of our being able to make sense of that is that in some cases (the non-misleading ones), we do have direct access to facts through perceptual experience (and therefore the highest common factor conception of experience is false).

In Stroud’s terms, McDowell aims to establish the invulnerability of the belief that we have direct access to objective facts by claiming that it is indispensable to our thinking of experience as

we do —that at least it purports to be of an objective world. However, his attempt to show the intelligibility of his view does not demonstrate the falsity of the alternative: that experience might not afford us with real opportunities for knowledge, even if it looks like it does. This is also a weakness of his disjunctive conception of experience in general; its intelligibility does not suffice to establish its actuality. McDowell clearly insists that the mere intelligibility of his thesis is enough to remove the urgency of the sceptical challenge, but his argument, along with his subsequently ignoring the sceptic, “in the way common sense has always wanted to” (1994, 113) perhaps is not reassuring enough.

The invulnerability of beliefs and Davidson’s input

In various essays regarding transcendental arguments, their anti-sceptical function, and especially analyses about the conditions of thought and language, Stroud has mentioned plenty of times Donald Davidson’s remarks on beliefs, meaning, and his subtle way of ‘evading’ scepticism.

Having already mentioned the notion of beliefs being invulnerable due to their being indispensable to our thinking of the world as we do, we should note that while indispensability does imply this kind of invulnerability, there is no implication in the opposite direction (Stroud 1999a, 216); therefore certain beliefs could just as well be invulnerable due to some other reason, while not being indispensable to our thought of the world. Such invulnerability might be the implication of an externalist theory of mental content: according to this kind of theory, the contents of a person’s thoughts or beliefs or any other propositional attitudes are partly determined by what is so in the world. These theories are undoubtedly connected with the more ambitious type of transcendental argument, since they make claims about how the world is, based only on psychological premisses. If such an argument was successful, it would secure the invulnerability of certain beliefs without taking them to be indispensable or necessary in any way to our thinking (Stroud 1999a, 219).

Donald Davidson’s theory of belief has this externalist character, which emphasizes the role of causality in the determination of our beliefs’ contents and, therefore, it could be used to establish something like the invulnerability mentioned above. Stroud doubts that this is possible, since it includes the inference from how we think of the world to how it really is, but he does believe that a weaker reading of Davidson’s theory could still prove very useful in eliminating the possibility of a certain route towards scepticism. And this is exactly the reassuring conclusion that Davidson reaches in his 1986 essay by examining the conditions of belief-attribution and interpretation in general: that any logically consistent and intelligible set of beliefs must be largely true. He argues that “belief is in its nature veridical” (1986, 314), and that belief-ascription is in its nature truth-

ascribing. Of course, this is not to claim that no belief can be false; Davidson explicitly accepts that any belief might be false. However, he observes, in his conversation with Stroud (1997, VHS tape), that is a logical fallacy to suggest that, because *any* belief might be false, then *every* belief might be false —since that amounts to changing the order of the quantifiers. Stroud has pointed out, in the same discussion, that it would also be a fallacy to suppose that the sceptical conclusion is false, because it does not follow from this argument; but nevertheless, Davidson does believe and wants to prove that it is in fact false. What he need to show then, is, that even if any experience might indeed be illusory, we need not worry that every experience or the majority of our experiences might turn out to be illusory.

Stroud definitely understands with Davidson's unwillingness to try to answer directly to the sceptic, since he too has reflected on the conditions that would have to be fulfilled for the sceptical question itself to mean what it means (1997, 21:29—21:40), and this is what Davidson does as well by focusing on the conditions of meaning in general and its interdependence with belief.

Davidson's argument begins from his remarks on radical interpretation of a speaker from an interpreter. In this process, the interpreter tries to construct a theory of meaning and belief for the speaker's utterances, beginning by finding out to which utterances the speaker assents. We should note here that belief and meaning are interdependent in the following way: if the interpreter knew the meaning of the sentences which the speaker asserts, he would know his beliefs, and if he knew what beliefs were expressed by the utterances he assented to, he could make sense of their meaning (Davidson 1986, 315). This makes it seem like we could never move past that, but this is where the principle of charity should be employed; otherwise interpretation is not even possible: the interpreter should find the speaker to have as many as possible true —according to him— beliefs, and that is necessary in order to understand him at all; to find him intelligible. Sure enough, if we think of a person speaking about a particular thing but having mostly or completely wrong beliefs about it then we will conclude one of the following: he does not talk about that thing, after all, or he does not know the meaning of the words he is using, or he is not a rational speaker at all. Up to this point, Stroud agrees completely, as mentioned in the 2nd chapter as well, regarding his notion of 'predicational competence' people should display, if we are to think of them as 'competent thinkers and believers'. And this is exactly what Davidson means when he states that 'belief is in its nature veridical'.

But how exactly the content of our beliefs is determined? And, in the cases we are examining, what about the content of the most simple, perceptual beliefs? According to Davidson's

externalist theory, that content is determined by two factors: a present cause —something in the physical world around us—, and the situations in which we first learned, by ostension, to talk about things like it (1997, 34:20—34:40). As Stroud has pointed out, identifying what caused the content of an utterance to mean what it does is no simple task, since there are infinite causes and chains of causes that we could suppose fit that role. Davidson, then, invokes his famous notion of ‘triangulation’ or simply put, the idea that thought and meaning require a community, or at least a speaker and an interpreter, both of whom interact causally with their environment and with each other’s reactions to it. That way, the interpreter is able to locate something in the world as the cause of the speaker’s reactions, and of the speaker’s further reactions to his own reactions.

Stroud notes in his 1999b essay that it is still theoretically possible for what the speaker and the interpreter have located as the cause of an utterance, to not be its actual cause (1995, 195). What has been established so far by the conditions of radical interpretation is that no-one, by carrying out this task of interpretation, could ever consistently arrive at the conclusion that we do have certain beliefs and that those or most of our beliefs are false and that what we take to be the causes of our beliefs are not truly their causes (Stroud 1999b, 190). But still, that is not to say that we therefore know that all or most of our beliefs are true —which would be a direct negation of scepticism (Stroud 1999b, 199). We would still need to cross this ‘bridge of necessity’ (Stroud 1994, 159) , from largely true beliefs from the interpreter’s perspective to largely true beliefs in general; something which is not implied by the conditions of interpretation (Stroud 1999b, 187).

Stroud’s main consideration in examining Davidson’s theory, and his major conclusion, is the following: a ‘stronger’ reading of Davidson’s phrases like ‘belief is in its nature veridical’, that would imply that, necessarily, most of our beliefs are true in general, is not consistent; it is not implied by the conditions of interpretation. In spite of that, for Stroud “the weaker reading alone, and the conditions of interpretation as described so far, suffice” (1999b, 195). Namely, there is still an important anti-sceptical conclusion to be drawn.

If we understand scepticism as facing a body of beliefs about the world from a position outside it, and giving a negative answer to the question of whether this body of beliefs amounts to knowledge, Davidson’s consideration of the conditions of belief-attribution is enough to show that we cannot intelligibly get into this kind of disengaged position and ask that question, and still get a negative answer. That of course does not mean that the answer is positive, as it would be with a direct refutation of scepticism, but the question itself is shown not to make sense, and according to Stroud, this is exactly where the importance of Davidson’s theory lies (Stroud 1999b, 200, 202): it

shows, as Stroud himself has claimed, that human knowledge cannot be understood ‘in general’ (Stroud 1989), from a detached position outside it, in the way the traditional sceptic demands.

V. Epilogue - Conclusions

McDowell, Stroud, Davidson

Following those considerations, this epilogue will serve as an accumulation of conclusions of a metaphilosophical nature regarding the epistemological themes examined in this paper, as well as a suggestion for further philosophical investigation in certain directions.

What is, then, to be gained by the methods of analysing and responding to the sceptical questions considered in this paper? To answer this question, we should first outline the metaphilosophical stances expressed by the philosophers whose work is examined in this paper.

A suitable metaphor for McDowell's viewpoint of contemporary philosophical discourse is that of a therapist. He attempts to alleviate its worries and anxieties by pinpointing an event as the cause of its 'trauma'; the birth of modern science in the 17th century as the cause of the strict distinction between Reason and Nature, and our seeing nature as the 'realm of law'. He attempts to build a new narrative about the ways we instinctively think of ourselves and the world, by insisting that the one provided by this particular course of historical events is contingent and not necessarily true. Depending on whether we demand that McDowell proves that those instinctive ways of thinking about the world are not only not necessarily true, but actually false, we either will or will not find his conclusions reassuring. It seems, then, that it is down to the requirements we take the sceptical question to express, and therefore to its overall meaning.

Moving on to Stroud, his perspective in addressing philosophical questions has this psychological/therapeutic character as well, although in a different way. He is interested in deciphering exactly what kind of understanding a question is asking for, its goal, and what would amount to a satisfactory answer. That is, he is trying to understand its meaning, beyond the words in which it is initially expressed. Those words by themselves might allow philosophers like G. E. Moore to wave their hands in front of the sceptic's face, wondering why it is so hard for him to see that he does know plenty of things about the external world, or would allow anyone to keep walking around the room by Zeno, demonstrating their ability to do so (Stroud 1984, 139-140). This distinction between the everyday sense of the words and their 'philosophical' sense which demands a different kind of understanding, is important for Stroud, and he intends to define more precisely what exactly this different kind of understanding stands for, in order to find out if this distinction is genuine and whether this kind of understanding is possible.

Davidson's interest in questions about meaning and beliefs is the most straightforward, considering his thorough analysis of radical interpretation and the encouraging, reassuring

conclusions about our ever being faced with the possibility that most of our beliefs about the world might be false. Externalist theories of mental content, in general, aim to provide us with this reassurance, by suggesting that, since the content of our thought and experience is partly determined by what is so in the world, we could never be mistaken to the extent that worries the sceptic. This brings us back to the discussion of transcendental arguments and the claims we can make about the world from our ways of thinking of the world; and there are more questions to be posed: do the ways we think of the world mean that we cannot learn to think of the world in other ways? Is our ontology, for example, entirely dependent on our physiology, as Davidson suggests (1997, 38:50–39:05)? Another related question would be, is the progress of science and the explanations it provides (and the entities it posits) capable of changing our worldview to an extent that would surpass and overrun our seemingly instinctive ways of conceiving the world? If we were to allow for this possibility, the likelihood that ambitious transcendental arguments might result in conclusions about how the world really is, beginning from how it is conceived, is further diminished.

Metaphilosophy and method

I propose we see those ‘therapeutic’ approaches, among other ways, as bringing attention to a sort of agelessness that seems to envelop many philosophical questions (like most of the questions of metaphysics and ‘how is X possible’ questions), and suggesting that it is not, in fact, so. Therefore, a notion of anachronism is relevant in philosophy as well, mainly due to the fact that the meanings of multiple terms change throughout history, along with the kind of answer and understanding that a philosophical question seeks, in the background in which it appears. Questions posed from hundreds to thousands of years ago are still being posed in a similar way, but their content, their meaning is probably not exactly the same. That seems very likely, especially when considering the never-ending interpretations and re-interpretations of previous thinkers in the philosophical literature.

Should we try to stop posing philosophical questions in the same way, then? Or, should we forget about all kinds of philosophy and concentrate on questions of meaning and language? No, what I am proposing is not another ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy akin to a return to logical positivism. What we could do, however, is take advantage of the self-reflective potential of philosophical discourse and at the same time attach great importance to the historical and philosophical background in which a question is posed or a theory is proposed as an answer, in

order to get a better understanding of what the question is actually asking for, whether it is possible, and either try to answer or dispose of the question as misguided or illegitimate.

In my view, Stroud tries to do exactly that: he intends to clarify, in the philosophical idiom of our time, what the traditional sceptical question is asking. He concludes that the kind of understanding of human knowledge it is asking for is not possible and cannot evade scepticism, and proposes another way, which he deems more fruitful. His own quest for necessary conditions could be misunderstood as an attempt to construct a transcendental argument, but there are two important differences: true to his conclusions of the impossibility of a completely general explanation of human knowledge, his own explanation begins from within our existing knowledge. This predicational repertoire, which he considers necessary for our being able to make even simple perceptual claims of knowledge, encompasses a great deal of knowledge about the world. Therefore, Stroud's 'from the top down' method differs from transcendental arguments in the way that it matters the most: its goal is not a direct refutation of scepticism, by establishing certain facts about how the world really is from a position outside all of our putative knowledge, but it provides us with a completely different kind of understanding than what the sceptical question requires.

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