Topics in Analytic Philosophy
13 September 2006
Handout

Stroud, **On the Significance of Philosophical Skepticism**, chapter 1

What is skepticism about the external world?

Let us say that skepticism about the external world is the following thesis:

> No one can know anything about the external world.

We will also discuss weaker theses:

> I cannot know anything about the external world.

> I cannot know that I am holding a piece of paper.

A version of Stroud's argument

1. I know about the external world only if I know that I am not dreaming now.

2. If 1 is true, then I cannot know that I am not dreaming now.

3. I cannot know anything about the external world.

Step 1: Knowledge and closure

Stroud thinks that everyday cases support Step 1. Suppose I see a bird outside the window.
Do I know that it is a goldfinch? Well, if it is a goldfinch then it is not a canary. So it seems that
I know that it is a goldfinch only if I know that it is not a canary.
This seems to reveal a *closure principle* about knowledge:
If q follows from p, then if a person S knows p then S knows q.
But, even if this closure principle is true, that is not enough to support Step 1.
Can you understand why?

Step 2: A test that I am not dreaming?

Suppose that there is a test which, if performed successfully, would show that I am not dreaming,
and I know what that not-dreaming test is.
Can I successfully perform the not-dreaming test to show that I am not dreaming? It seems not.
For Step 1 says that I know about the external world only if I know that I am not dreaming now.
That means that I know that the not-dreaming test is performed successfully only if I know that I am not dreaming.
In other words, I can't use the test to show that I am not dreaming unless I already know that I am not dreaming.
So, it seems, the test is useless to me.
(Can you explain why it seems the test is useless in more careful detail?)

Other questions to think about

Do the Duke of Devonshire and the goldfinch examples show what Stroud thinks they show?

Would Stroud's argument be weakened if Step 2 is changed to "I cannot know that I am not dreaming now" ?

What does Stroud mean when he says "The consequence of accepting Descartes' conclusion as it is
meant to be understood are truly disastrous." (38) ? Is he right about this?

Suppose that I cannot know anything about the external world. Does it follow that no one can
know anything about the external world?

We will not have time to fully discuss the following in class. But you may find this interesting if you wish to think more carefully about Step 1 of Stroud's argument.

It is sometimes suggested that knowledge is **closed under entailment**:

(1) **If a person S knows that p, and p entails q, then S knows that q**.

(Here p entails q if and only if: if p is true, then q must be true.)
Stroud first states principle (1) in a different, although equivalent, form (see pp 27-8):

(2) **If S knows that p, and p is incompatible with q, then S knows that NOT-q**.

Stroud rejects (1) on the grounds that your knowledge "does not extend to everything that follows from what [you] now know." (p 28) For example, you can know some mathematical postulates without knowing every theorem which follows from those postulates.

In reply to this objection, (1) could be weakened:

(3) **If S knows that p and p entails q, then S can know (or is in a position to know) that q**.

However, Stroud suggests a different way to weaken (1); knowledge is **closed under known entailment**:

(4) **If S knows that p, and S knows that p entails q, then S knows that q**.

But (4) is not enough for Stroud's skeptical argument. As Stroud notices, that you are dreaming does not mean that what you are dreaming is false.
You can dream that you have hands, and yet have hands.
The Duke of Devonshire dreamed he was speaking in the House of Lords, while speaking in the House of Lords. (See p 29)
In general, where p is a proposition about the external world, it is not the case that

(5) If S is dreaming that p, then p is false.

The possibility of dreaming differs in this respect from other skeptical possibilities.
If you are a brain in a vat then you are not speaking in the House of Lords (brains in vats don't speak), nor do you have hands, and so forth. Unlike the possibility you are dreaming, the possibility that you are a brain in a vat *is* incompatible with many propositions about the external world.
So the possibility that you are a brain in a vat can perhaps be used in a skeptical argument relying on principle (4).

Thus, Stroud needs a different principle than (4). He agrees that dreaming that p is not incompatible with p. However, he suggests, dreaming that p is incompatible with *knowing* that p.
More precisely, he claims on pp 14-16, dreaming that p is incompatible with *thereby* knowing that p:

(6) If S is dreaming that p, then S does not (thereby) know that p.

Stroud ends up defending a principle like this:

(7) **If S knows that p, and S knows that knowing that p entails q, then S knows that q.**

Finally, note that principle (7), the principle Stroud relies on, is equivalent to principle (4) combined with the controversial KK-principle:

(KK) **If S knows that p, then S knows (or can know) that she knows that p**.