Skepticism about the external world

Skepticism about the external world

I cannot know that I have hands.

I cannot know that I am standing up.

I cannot know anything about the external world.

No one can know anything about the external world.

Skepticism about the external world

I do not know that I have hands.

I cannot know that I have hands.

Skepticism about the external world

I cannot know that I have hands.

I cannot know that I am standing up.

I cannot know anything about the external world.

No one can know anything about the external world.

Barry Stroud

"... the problem is to show how or why skepticism about the external world is not correct. My aim is not to solve to problem but to understand it. I believe the problem has no solution; or rather that the only answer to the question as it is meant to be understood is that we can know nothing about the world around us." (*The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, 1)

Stroud believes:

there is a powerful argument that no one can know anything about the external world.

Our goal

To examine Stroud's argument carefully

To examine Descartes'(?) argument carefully

Note

Stroud's discussion is serious and careful.

Note

The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism

Chapter 1

Key pages: 1, 10-31

Questions inspired by Descartes

How can I know that I am holding a piece of paper? That I am standing up?

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How can I know that I am holding a piece of paper? That I am standing up?

Am I dreaming now? If I am dreaming, then do I really know that I am holding a piece of paper?

Questions inspired by Descartes

How can I know that I am holding a piece of paper? That I am standing up?

Am I dreaming now? If I am dreaming, then do I really know that I am holding a piece of paper?

How can I know whether or not I am dreaming?

Questions inspired by Descartes

How can I know that I am holding a piece of paper? That I am standing up?

Am I dreaming now? If I am dreaming, then do I really know that I am holding a piece of paper?

How can I know whether or not I am dreaming?

If I don't know that I am not dreaming, then how can I 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.

A simpler argument

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

2. I cannot know that I am not dreaming now.

3. I cannot know anything about the external world.

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: a condition for knowledge?

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

Step 1

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

I know that I am holding a piece of paper only if I know that I am not dreaming now.

Different formulations

I know that I am holding a piece of paper only if I know that I am not dreaming now.

I don't know that I am holding a piece a paper unless I know that I am not dreaming now.

In order to know that I am holding a piece of paper, I must rule out the possibility that I am dreaming now.

The goldfinch

I see a bird outside the window.
I say that it is a goldfinch.

Do I know that it is a goldfinch?

The goldfinch

I see a bird outside the window.
I say that it is a goldfinch.

Do I know that it is a goldfinch?

Only if I know that it is not a canary.

Only if I can rule out the possibility that it is a canary.

The goldfinch

I know that the bird is a goldfinch only if I know that it is not a canary.

Closure

If the bird is a goldfinch, then it is not a canary.

I know that the bird is a goldfinch only if I know that it is not a canary.

Knowledge is closed?

If

q follows from p

then

if S knows p then S knows q

Goldfinch Closure

If the bird is a goldfinch, then it is not a canary.

I know that the bird is a goldfinch only if I know that it is not a canary.

Paper Closure?

If I am holding a piece of paper, then I am not dreaming.

If I know I am holding a piece of paper, then I know I am not dreaming.

The Duke of Devonshire

The Duke of Devonshire dreamed he was speaking in the House of Lords.

He woke up and found he was speaking in the House of Lords!

Paper Closure?

If I am holding a piece of paper, then I am not dreaming.

If I know I am holding a piece of paper, then I know I am not dreaming.

Closure and the KK-principle

See handout for more complications...

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 2

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

A dreaming test?

How can I know that I am not dreaming?

Do a test! Pinch your arm!

A dreaming test?

Suppose there is a test to show you are not dreaming, and that you know what that test is.

OK. Now do the test.

Did the test show you are not dreaming?

A dreaming test?

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

So, I know that the test succeeded only if I know that I am not dreaming now.

In other words, I can't know that the test succeeded unless I already know that I am not dreaming now.

So the test is useless...