

Diagnostic Approach to Cartesian Skepticism

A Debate between Williams and Stroud

Seishu Nishimura

1. Diagnostic Approach to Cartesian Skepticism

Among those who have tried, most epistemologists, both foundationalists and coherentists, have attempted to refute skepticism directly; i.e., they have attempted to prove that some premise (or premises) of the skeptical arguments are incoherent when taken at face value. Michael Williams, however, suggests that we take another approach, which he calls “theoretical diagnosis.”⁽¹⁾ The idea of this approach is not to prove the incoherence of skeptical arguments, but to critically assess their “naturalness or intuitiveness.”⁽²⁾ If a skeptical argument depends on some theoretically loaded presuppositions, then, even though these presuppositions themselves are coherent, this argument will be regarded as unnatural or unintuitive. If so, we are not obliged to accept it.

With this diagnostic approach, Williams criticizes Cartesian skepticism regarding knowledge of the external world. Cartesian skepticism is radical in that it maintains that we cannot have justification for *any* beliefs about the external world. According to this skepticism, our knowledge of the external world is *inferential* because our beliefs about the external world amount to knowledge only if they are justified by our perceptual experience. However, since neither a deductive nor an inductive inference can bridge the gap between experience and belief, none of our beliefs about the external world can be justified. Williams claims that this argument presupposes “the foundationalist doctrine of the priority of experiential over worldly knowledge.”⁽³⁾ In claiming that our knowledge of the external world is *inferential*, Cartesian skeptics presuppose that knowledge of perceptual experience is intrinsically certain, and prior to inferential knowledge. Williams insists that this epistemic priority of experience is a contentious theoretical commitment which we

do not have to accept.

In support of this point, Williams submits two reasons. First, in maintaining the priority of experience over knowledge of the external world, Cartesian skeptics give no persuasive account of why we must accept it. They might claim that this priority follows from the fact that our knowledge of the external world depends on our senses. Indeed, it is true that the former causally depends on the latter. But there is no cogent reason to suppose that all the senses ever really tell us is how things appear, never how they objectively are. Secondly, even if it is coherent to think that our perceptual experience does not represent the external world veridically, it does not follow that experiential knowledge is *epistemologically* prior to worldly knowledge. Rather, what it shows is at most “experience is neutral with respect to reality.”⁽⁴⁾ According to Williams, experience itself does not have any intrinsic epistemic status. What kind of epistemic status experience has is determined by the context of investigation. For example, even granting the logical gap between experience and how the world is, in the ordinary situation, it is legitimate for me to claim that I know I have two hands. To derive the alleged epistemic priority from this logical gap is, Williams says, nothing but the commitment to foundationalism, i.e., dogmatically regarding sense experience as what is more certain than and prior to worldly knowledge.

To this theoretical diagnosis of Cartesian skepticism, Barry Stroud submits an interesting objection. The upshot of Stroud’s objection is to show that the epistemic priority of experience is not a theoretical *presupposition* but a *by-product* of the skepticism. According to Stroud, Williams’ diagnosis underestimates the peculiar *generality* of Cartesian skepticism.⁽⁵⁾ Indeed, in the ordinary situation, I know that I have two hands. But such an everyday case is not what we are interested in for the philosophical understanding of knowledge. Rather, “in philosophy, we want to understand how *any* knowledge of an independent world is gained on *any* of the occasions on which knowledge of the world is gained through sense-perception.”⁽⁶⁾ This totality condition—a condition that we must search for knowledge of the external world *in general*—is what is properly imposed on the philosophical understanding of knowledge. Now, Cartesian skepticism possesses this generality.

By appealing to the possibility of systematic deception, it denies that we can know *anything* about the external world. But the situation is different for our internal experience; in the process of skeptical argument, we realize that we can still have knowledge of our experience regardless of the systematic deception. This suggests that the alleged epistemic priority of experience is not a presupposition, but a by-product of skepticism; by pursuing knowledge of the external world in general, we *discover* that experience is more certain than and prior to worldly knowledge.

Does this objection succeed in rebutting the diagnostic approach? This is the question we will focus on. Williams claims that the objection does not succeed. According to him, we should reject the very idea of knowledge of the external world in general because this idea presupposes another contentious theoretical idea: *epistemological realism*. To this criticism, Stroud replies by saying that the idea of epistemological realism is irrelevant to the philosophical inquiry into knowledge of the external world in general. Furthermore, he suspects that, even granting Williams' argument against knowledge of the external world in general, it cannot completely exclude the possibility of such knowledge. My aim in this paper is threefold: first, to explain Williams' argument against the idea of knowledge of the external world in general, secondly, to address Stroud's reply to this argument, and thirdly, to evaluate whether his reply is successful or not.

2. Epistemological Realism

First, let's clarify what exactly Williams means by "epistemological realism." This is a realist view about the epistemic status of our beliefs. The idea of this view is that there exists a metaphysically fixed hierarchy concerning the epistemic status among our beliefs. For example, Cartesian epistemology embodies this idea in the following way: a belief about my experience such that "I have an idea of redness in my mind" has an absolutely basic status, compared to that about the external world such that "there is a red apple on the table." Here, a crucial point is that this hierarchy is independent from any context of justification. According to Williams, if we accept epistemological realism, we must admit that "every belief has an inalienable

epistemic character which it carries with it wherever it goes and which determines where its justification must ultimately be sought.”⁽⁷⁾ To put it in another way, if *P* is a proposition about the external world and epistemological realism is true, then, whichever situations we are involved in, we know that *P* only if *P* has the one and the same relation with its evidence *E*.⁽⁸⁾

Williams claims that philosophical inquiry into knowledge of the external world in general necessarily presupposes epistemological realism. In order to establish this point, he specifies what is required for such an inquiry. The philosophical inquiry into knowledge of the external world in general is a sort of *theoretical* inquiry about generality. A theoretical inquiry about generality makes sense only with respect to “kinds that have interesting, non-gerrymandered properties in common and which exhibit some kind of theoretical integrity.”⁽⁹⁾ Indeed, we can make infinitely many kinds by focusing on whatever aspect things have in common. For example, we can bind the things which happened today into a kind of “what happened this Sunday.” However, it is obvious that this kind does not show any theoretical integrity. In order for a theoretical inquiry to be possible, we must avoid an arbitrary assemblage. Rather, what we need is something like a “natural kind.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Given this non-arbitrary requirement on the theoretical integrity, the only kind that is available for philosophical inquiry into knowledge of the external world in general is *epistemological*. Since our beliefs about the external world may include various topics—for example, some beliefs include scientific topics such as physics while others do more ordinary topics such as *a chair in front of me*—the only aspect that is common to all and meaningfully binds them into one kind is their *epistemic* status. But the problem is the implication of this status. In traditional epistemology, “external” has been equated with “without the mind.” This usage of “external” contrasts knowledge of the external world with that of the internal one, i.e., the world of what we are directly conscious of in our minds. Now, the hallmark of this internal world is its epistemological privilege; internal experience is regarded as more *certain* than knowledge of the external world because such inner episodes are supposed to be more accessible for us. This shows that the philosophical inquiry into knowledge of

the external world in general is tied to foundationalism.⁽¹¹⁾

According to Williams, it is this foundationalism that implies epistemological realism. As we saw above, foundationalism is committed to the epistemic priority of experience. That is to say, knowledge of the internal world is *intrinsically* certain while that of the external world is not because the latter requires *inferential* justification in terms of the former. This implies that, regarding our beliefs about the external world, every belief has an inalienable epistemic character which is *independent from* all contextual factors. This is exactly what is meant by “epistemological realism.”

But why do we have to think that epistemological realism is an implausible idea? Williams suggests two reasons. First, the very notion of epistemic priority of experience, which is the core of epistemological realism, is implausible. We have already seen two reasons for this implausibility: one is the lack of a cogent account for why we have to accept the epistemic priority, and the other is the neutrality of perceptual experience which does not imply its epistemic priority. Secondly, it is not mandatory for us to accept the alleged metaphysically fixed structure of beliefs.⁽¹²⁾ In order to make this point convincing, Williams provides an alternative view about the structure of our beliefs: *contextualism*.

Contextualism is a view to the effect that “standards for correctly attributing or claiming knowledge are not fixed but subject to circumstantial variation.”⁽¹³⁾ According to this view, whether we know that *P* or not depends on what doubts are at issue in the context. For instance, in the context of our ordinary life, it is perfectly appropriate for us to say that we know that there is a cup on the table. Of course, if there are some legitimate reasons to doubt my belief about the cup, e.g., I took a drug 30 minutes ago, we can doubt whether my belief is true or not. But otherwise, we do not have a doubt about the truth of my belief because, in the context of ordinary life, this belief is regarded as true in its default status. Here, we must notice that, in claiming that a belief about a cup is true in its default status, Williams adopts a specific model of justification: a *default-challenge model*.⁽¹⁴⁾ Traditionally, a belief is regarded as justified only if it is shown that a subject believes it on the basis of

adequate grounds.⁽¹⁵⁾ By contrast, according to the default-challenge model, we do not have to show that a belief is justified; as its default status, every belief is regarded as *prima facie* justified. Only if we encounter some appropriate “defeaters” for such a belief, must it be proved that this belief is based on an adequate ground. Williams’ contextualism assumes this default-challenge model of justification.

Given contextualism, we do not have to accept epistemological realism. Since the type of justification for beliefs differs from context to context, we do not have to assume the context-independent relation among beliefs. Here, foundationalists might raise the following objection:

“Indeed, given contextualism, we must relativise the context of justification. But this does not mean that there is no context of philosophical inquiry in which it is still legitimate to maintain that we cannot justify *any* beliefs about the external world because, here, we attempt to obtain knowledge of the external world in general, i.e., trans-contextual knowledge. Hence, once we admit the legitimacy of such a philosophical context, we must accept the skeptical result in the end.”

To this objection, Williams answers in the following way.⁽¹⁶⁾ Indeed, it is true that, in the context of philosophical inquiry, we cannot justify any beliefs about the external world. Even if so, however, it does not follow that our worldly beliefs cannot be justified in *any* context. In order to make it follow, we need one more assumption: perceptual experience is prior to worldly knowledge in an *inalienable* way. Given this assumption, since the prior relationship is supposed to be inalienable, the skeptical result will hold *trans*-contextually. Needless to say, if we merely assume this without providing any ground, it begs the question. Thus, as far as contextualism is a coherent position concerning justification of beliefs, we can reject the inalienable hierarchy between perceptual experience and the worldly belief as a contentious theoretical presupposition.

Thus, Williams rejects epistemological realism, and consequently, foundationalism. But since both Cartesian skepticism and philosophical inquiries into

knowledge of the external world in general are essentially connected with foundationalism, he can deny these as well. Therefore, he concludes that Stroud's argument from the peculiar generality of Cartesian skepticism fails.

3. Stroud's Reply to Williams

Stroud responds to Williams' criticism of his idea of knowledge of the external world in general by offering additional support for his claim that the epistemic priority of experience over worldly knowledge is not a presupposition but a by-product of Cartesian skepticism.⁽¹⁷⁾ He does this in two steps: first, by arguing that the notion of epistemological realism is implausible, and then, by arguing for the compatibility of contextualism with the generality of knowledge of the external world. In this section, we shall address these two arguments.

Let's start by looking at the first argument. The idea of this argument is to show that the notion of epistemological realism is so implausible that we do not have to accept it in philosophical inquiry into knowledge in general. Interestingly, Stroud agrees with a couple of Williams' objections.⁽¹⁸⁾ For example, he insists that we should avoid epistemological realism. He also accepts contextualism to the extent that it suggests that a proposition cannot have an inalienable epistemic character. The idea over which Stroud does not agree with Williams is that epistemological realism is a *necessary* condition for philosophical inquiry into knowledge in general.

In order to show why philosophical inquiry into knowledge in general does not require epistemological realism, Stroud explicates what exactly Williams means by "epistemological realism." He claims that Williams' formulation of epistemological realism is implausible. In particular, it is unintelligible "what 'epistemic relations' between propositions themselves are supposed to be, independently of the propositions' being believed or accepted by particular agents at particular places and times."⁽¹⁹⁾ As we saw above, Williams insists that, on the foundationalist view, each belief has its own intrinsic epistemic status. This status is determined by the content of the believed proposition, which is independent from any specific context. Stroud argues that Williams is wrong in thinking that a proposition merely considered in

itself can be a reason for another proposition. Indeed, a proposition may imply or be incompatible with another proposition. But it is *a person* that has reasons for or against believing a proposition. In other words, it is not a proposition itself but *a person's believing* that can be justified or unjustified. Epistemological realism is misleading in that it only focuses on the relation among propositions abstractly considered and overlooks *our believing* of these propositions which is the proper object of justification.

Once we realize this implausibility of “epistemological realism,” it becomes clear that we do not have to commit ourselves to it in philosophical inquiry of knowledge in general. According to Stroud, the closest thing to what Williams attempts to describe as epistemological realism is “the ‘truism’ that knowledge of an independent world comes from particular occasions on which something is known through sense-perception.”⁽²⁰⁾ At least, we must admit that knowledge of the external world depends on perceptual experience; otherwise, no knowledge of the world is available for us. But this does not mean that a proposition about the external world stands in a fixed relation with that about perceptual experience: “[i]t means only that human beings are such that, in the world as it is, they do not get any knowledge of the world without getting some knowledge through sense-perception.”⁽²¹⁾ The whole point of Williams’ criticism to the idea of knowledge of the external world in general is that this presupposes epistemological realism. If Stroud’s explication of what Williams means by “epistemological realism” is correct, we do not have to use such an implausible notion in philosophical inquiry into knowledge in general.

Next, we shall move on to the second argument. Although Stroud does not state this argument very sharply, I think we can put it in the following way: the type of contextualism which Williams vindicates falls into the following dilemma: either it has to allow a possibility of knowledge of the external world in general in the end, or it leads us into a radically different theory of meaning and truth, for which Williams should have given a more elaborated account; otherwise, his rebuttal of Cartesian skepticism remains unpersuasive.

Let’s start with the first horn. As we saw above, Williams maintains that we

should abandon foundationalism; rather, we should accept contextualism as a theory of justification. Given contextualism, a belief about the external object is regarded as *prima facie* justified, i.e., it requires justification only if we encounter some defeaters. The type of justification for a given belief is determined by context. Stroud, however, insists that this contextualism *does* turn out to imply a theory of knowledge of the external world in general. He points out that what contextualism gives is “the *general* form of an account which we could appeal to to explain how we know or justify our acceptance of any or all of the propositions we think we know about an independent world” (my italics).⁽²²⁾ That is, in the contextualist framework of justification, even if the kind and degree of justification differ from proposition to proposition and from context to context, the propositions which are justified in some way or another and judged as true or false can be grouped into those which are true *of the external world*. But this means that “we would seem to have something very much like a positive general theory of our knowledge of the world after all.”⁽²³⁾ Furthermore, this theory of worldly knowledge in general can be regarded as *trans*-contextual. Recall the reason why Williams denied that the philosophical theory of worldly knowledge in general was *trans*-contextual; it was because such a theory presupposed epistemological realism. But as noted, Stroud claims that we do not have to accept epistemological realism. Hence, if Stroud’s argument against epistemological realism is acceptable, Williams’ assault to the philosophical theory does not hold as far as his contextualism allows a “general form” of the account for worldly knowledge.

In order to avoid this problem, the only avenue that Williams can take is to deny the *general* form of the account for worldly knowledge. But this leads him into the second horn of the dilemma. To deny the possibility of generalization, Williams must claim that “what one says in using a given sentence to make a statement of knowledge itself can vary without even a common core from context to context.”⁽²⁴⁾ That is, he must claim that every particular statement about the external world is uttered in a different context: otherwise, he must admit some type of justification for the statement of worldly knowledge. In order to achieve this end in a persuasive way, however, some new theory of meaning and truth of the statement must be elaborated,

which, unfortunately, Williams does not provide. Thus, although Stroud does not state this point in a clear fashion, he could say that the solution of the second horn remains merely programmatic for Williams.

4. Is Stroud's reply to Williams successful?

Now, let's evaluate whether Stroud's reply to Williams is really successful. First, we shall assess Stroud's first argument. The core of this argument was something like this: epistemological realism is not a *necessary* condition for Cartesian skepticism because, since the proper object of justification is not a proposition itself but *our believing* of a proposition, an inalienable relation among propositions abstractly considered, which epistemological realism is supposed to posit, is irrelevant to the skepticism.

I agree with Stroud in that William's notion of epistemological realism might be somewhat misleading. Even if Stroud can set aside this misleading notion, however, I do not think he succeeds in showing that Cartesian skepticism does not presuppose the inalienable relation between experience and worldly knowledge. To show this point, let's recapitulate Stroud's argument for Cartesian skepticism. The upshot of his argument was that the alleged inalienable relation was a *by-product* of the skepticism. In the philosophical context where we search for knowledge of the external world in general, we cannot justify our beliefs about the external world in terms of worldly knowledge which we have in other contexts. Thus, by reflecting on the mere logical possibility of non-veridical perception, we inevitably *come to believe* that knowledge of experience is epistemically prior to worldly knowledge.

The problem of this argument consists in the cash value of "our believing of the epistemic priority." It is true that our believing of the epistemic priority should be distinguished from the alleged inalienable relation among propositions abstractly considered. But Stroud's argument still indicates that we believe in the existence of some fixed relation between experience and worldly knowledge as a consequence of skepticism. What kind of reasons do we have for believing it? This question brings us back to the objection from the neutrality of experience, which was mentioned in

the first section of this paper. Stroud needs to explain what kind of reasons we have for believing the epistemic priority of experience over worldly knowledge on the basis of the mere logical possibility of non-veridical perception. Given the neutrality of experience, however, there is no cogent reason for believing it.⁽²⁵⁾

For this reason, I think Stroud's first argument against Williams is unsuccessful. The idea of epistemological realism which Stroud criticizes is a red-herring. Even if he believes that, in Cartesian skepticism, he does not come up with the fixed relation among propositions themselves abstractly considered until he arrives at the philosophical reflection concerning the possibility of non-veridical perception, he has already implicitly assumed this relation in order to accept the skeptical conclusion. Once he assumes this relation, he needs to answer the objection from the neutrality of experience for vindicating the naturalness of the skepticism. He does not dismiss this objection in an adequate way.

Next, we shall assess Stroud's second argument. This argument attempts to show a dilemma such that either Williams must admit that contextualism implies the possibility of philosophical inquiry into knowledge of the external world in general, or he must provide a different theory of meaning and truth, which he does not do. In the first place, we should notice that this argument is not strong enough to rebut Williams' argument against the philosophical inquiry. For it admits that he may be able to dismiss the inquiry by providing some theory of meaning and truth in the end. Furthermore, as we have just seen, since Stroud does not reply to the objection from the neutrality of experience, he cannot successfully maintain that, in the first horn of the dilemma, philosophical inquiry into knowledge of the external world in general is trans-contextual. In addition to these defects, I think that Stroud's argument has another serious flaw.

We can find this flaw in the first horn of the dilemma. The point of the first horn is that contextualism cannot dismiss philosophical inquiry into knowledge of the external world in general. Here, I think Stroud misunderstands Williams' attack to the philosophical inquiry. For the point which Williams assaults is not that "the request for a completely general understanding of human knowledge *makes sense*" in the

context of philosophical inquiry, but that we are forced to take such a context seriously.⁽²⁶⁾ In other words, Williams *does not* deny that contextualism may entail the request for the general understanding of human knowledge. Hence, in order to rebut Williams' attack to philosophical inquiry into knowledge in general, Stroud must dismiss the point that we do not have to take the context of philosophical inquiry seriously.

Does Stroud dismiss this point in an adequate way? I do not believe he does. As we saw above, he claims that, even granting contextualism, we can obtain a type of propositions concerning the external world in the end. But how can he take each proposition in a different context—e.g., “there is a cup on the table” in the ordinary life context—to be a proposition concerning the *external* world? Of course, the answer is “only within the context of philosophical inquiry into knowledge in general.” Here, we should recall that the notion of “external” makes sense only if we accept the logical relation of “external” and “internal,” which is an element of foundationalist epistemology. In taking propositions in various contexts to be those about the *external* world, Stroud implicitly presupposes the context of philosophical inquiry. That is, he just takes the importance of the philosophical context for granted.

5. Conclusion

In sum, Stroud's reply to Williams—the epistemic priority of experience over worldly knowledge is not a presupposition but a by-product of Cartesian skepticism—is unsuccessful. The whole point of Williams' attack to Stroud consists in the idea that the epistemic priority cannot be regarded as a by-product of Cartesian skepticism because it presupposes another contentious theoretical idea: epistemological realism. Against this attack, Stroud provided two arguments: first, epistemological realism is irrelevant to Cartesian skepticism, and second, even contextualism, which Williams proposes as the substitute for the foundationalist model of justification, cannot avoid the epistemic priority of experience. Regarding the first argument, Stroud succeeded in showing that Williams' understanding of the idea of epistemological realism was implausible. But still, Cartesian skeptics must

believe the epistemic priority of experience in the end, and Stroud couldn't provide any convincing argument for why they must believe it without presupposing the very idea of the epistemic priority. Regarding the second point, *pace* Stroud, it is unproblematic for contextualism to entail the possibility of the philosophical inquiry into knowledge in general which in turn entails the epistemic priority of experience. Furthermore, Stroud couldn't show why it was plausible to accept the philosophical context in which we could group the propositions concerning the external world; he merely assumes the plausibility of the philosophical context when he identifies various propositions in various contexts as those concerning the external world.

This result shows that, so far, Williams' diagnostic approach is a useful option for dismissing Cartesian skepticism. We should note that my discussion in this paper is not the decisive defense of this approach, though. In particular, for these 15 years, more modest versions of foundationalism than the traditional Cartesian one which regard perceptual beliefs as foundational by holding the defeasibility of *prima facie* justified beliefs have been widely accepted as a viable resistance to skepticism.⁽²⁷⁾ Thus, in order to fully evaluate the diagnostic approach, we still need to argue how it can deal with these modest versions of foundationalism. I shall discuss this matter on another occasion.

Notes

(1) Williams (2001, p. 146). Williams distinguishes two kinds of diagnosis: the one is *theoretical* and the other is *therapeutic*. The latter treats skepticism as a pseudo-problem generated by misunderstanding of language while the former regards it as genuine but only given a definite background of theoretical commitment. See Williams (2001), p. 253.

(2) Williams (2001, p. 146).

(3) Williams (2001, p. 187).

(4) See Williams (1992, pp. 73-9) and Williams (2001, p. 189).

(5) Stroud defends the notion of knowledge in general in Stroud (1989) and Stroud (1996).

(6) Stroud (1996, p. 132).

(7) Williams (1992, p. 116).

(8) See Putnam (1998, p. 257). Here, we must notice that this relationship between *P* and *E* does not imply an actual existence of *E*. In fact, Cartesian Skeptics attempt to maintain that there exists no *E* for *P*.

(9) Williams (2001, p. 192).

(10) Williams (1992, p. 164).

(11) Williams distinguishes two types of foundationalism. The one is "structural foundationalism" and the other is "substantive foundationalism." Roughly speaking, while the former characterizes just the structure of foundationalism, the latter stipulates the existence of the self-evidencing beliefs in addition to the foundational structure. For the detail of this distinction, see Williams (2001, pp. 82-3). The main target of Williams' criticism is substantive foundationalism. Since substantive foundationalism is identical with the traditional foundationalism, I will simply use "foundationalism" in this paper.

- (12) See Williams (1996, pp. 370-1) and Williams (2001, pp. 193-5).
 (13) Williams (2001, p. 159).
 (14) Williams (2001, pp. 148-50).
 (15) Williams calls this “the Prior Grounding Requirement” (Williams, 2001, p. 36).
 (16) See Williams (2001, p. 196).
 (17) His response to Williams is provided in Stroud (1996).
 (18) See Stroud (1996, pp. 134-5).
 (19) Stroud (1996, p. 134).
 (20) Stroud (1996, p. 135).
 (21) Stroud (1996, p. 135).
 (22) Stroud (1996, p. 136).
 (23) Stroud (1996, p. 136).
 (24) Stroud (1996, p. 136).
 (25) Ironically, Stroud agrees with Williams’ objection from the neutrality of experience (Stroud, 1996, p. 130).
 (26) Williams (1996, p. 378). He also criticizes other contextualists such as D. Lewis, K. DeRose and S. Cohen in that they admit the plausibility of the context of philosophical inquiry into knowledge in general. See Williams (2001, p. 195).
 (27) For example, see Pryor (2005). For Williams’ criticism of these moderate versions of foundationalism, see Williams (2005).

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[Kyoto University, The 21st Century COE Program Research Fellow]