

Diagnostic Approach to Cartesian Skepticism

A Debate between Williams and Stroud

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Michael Williams insists that, in order to dismiss skepticism, we should take the diagnostic approach. The idea of this approach is not to prove the incoherence of skeptical arguments, but to critically assess their *naturalness*. 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. If so, we are not obliged to accept it.

With this approach, Williams criticizes Cartesian skepticism regarding knowledge of the external world. According to him, this skepticism presupposes the foundationalist doctrine of the priority of experience over knowledge of the external world when it claims that none of our beliefs about the external world can be justified by perceptual experience. This epistemic priority of experience is, according to Williams, a contentious theoretical commitment that we do not have to accept.

My purpose in this paper is to evaluate the diagnostic approach to Cartesian skepticism. To this end, I will address Barry Stroud's objection to Williams. According to Stroud, Cartesian skepticism belongs to the type of philosophical inquiries which investigate knowledge of the external world in general, and the epistemic priority of experience is *discovered* in the process of this skepticism. Thus, this priority is not a contentious *presupposition* but a *by-product* of the skepticism. In response to this objection, Williams argues that the notion of *knowledge of the external world in general* has already become biased by foundationalism. Stroud, in turn, contends this view. I will argue that Stroud's response to Williams is unsuccessful and that the diagnostic approach is a useful option for dismissing Cartesian skepticism.