

Lecture 5: Stroud's Argument

I. Stroud's Three Questions

Stroud asks three questions on p. 13 of "The Problem of the External World":

- i. Is dreaming incompatible with knowing things about the external world?
- ii. Must one know that one is not dreaming in order to know anything about the external world?
- iii. Is it true that one cannot know that one is not dreaming?

If all three questions have an affirmative answer, then we can construct the following argument for skepticism about the external world (where D is the proposition *that one is dreaming* and P is an arbitrary claim about the external world):

Stroud's Argument:

1. The truth of D is incompatible with one's knowing P. [*premise*]
2. If the truth of D is incompatible with one's knowing P, then one must know that D is false in order to know P. [*premise*]
3. One cannot know that D is false. [*premise*]
4. So, one cannot know P. [*follows from 1, 2, 3*]

II. Stroud on the First Question (pp. 13–15)

Some skeptical hypotheses are incompatible with the truth of a given proposition about the external world.

For example, the hypothesis *that I'm a brain-in-a-vat* is incompatible with the truth of the proposition *that I have hands*: if the first is true, then the second must be false (brains-in-vats don't have hands).

Other skeptical hypotheses are *compatible* with the *truth* of a given proposition about the external world, but are *incompatible* with *one's knowing* that proposition to be true.

For example, G. E. Moore tells the story of a Duke of Devonshire who once dreamt he was speaking in the House of Lords, and then woke up to find that he *really was* speaking in the House of Lords. In this case, it seems plausible that the Duke did not *know* that he was speaking in the House of Lords.

Some terminology:

Q is a *simple alternative to P* iff the truth of Q is incompatible with the truth of P.

Q is an *alternative to your knowing P* iff the truth of Q is incompatible with your knowing P.

(Note: since you know P only if P is true, every *simple alternative to P* is also an *alternative to your knowing P*.)

In answer to the first question, Stroud insists that *your dreaming P to be the case* is an *alternative to your knowing P*, where P is any proposition about the external world.

More precisely, what Stroud argues is that if you're dreaming P to be the case, then you don't *thereby* know P. He allows for the possibility that you might know P on the basis of things other than the experiences that you're currently having while dreaming.

III. Stroud on the Third Question (pp. 15–17)

Stroud claims that if the answer to *the second question* is affirmative (so that one must know that one is not dreaming in order to know anything about the external world), then the answer to *the third question* must also be affirmative (so that one cannot know that one is not dreaming).

He argues roughly as follows:

- Suppose there is some test T which a person can perform successfully only if she's awake.
- Then I can know that I'm not dreaming by coming to know that I've successfully performed T.
- But if I must know that I'm not dreaming in order to know anything about the external world, then I must know that I'm not dreaming in order to know that I've successfully performed T.
- So, I must *already* know that I'm not dreaming in order to use T to establish that I'm not dreaming.
- So, T is no help in coming to know that I'm not dreaming.

Two worries: First, Stroud seems to be assuming that the claim that T has been successfully performed is a claim about the external world. Second, Stroud seems to be assuming that the only way I can come to know that I'm not dreaming is by utilizing some test like T. (How troublesome are these worries?)

IV. Stroud on the Second Question (pp. 18–21)

Stroud's main strategy is to argue that an affirmative answer to the second question follows from a general epistemic principle which "we recognize and insist on in making and assessing knowledge-claims in everyday and scientific life" (p. 21). He begins by considering several examples from daily life (p. 18):

One must know *that the bird is not a canary* in order to know *that the bird is a goldfinch*.

One must know *that the witnesses were not lying* in order to know *that the suspect was in Cleveland*.

The Duke must know *that he is not dreaming* in order to know *that he is speaking in the House of Lords*.

Stroud then proposes a series of general epistemic principles that might explain the above examples:

- i. First he notes that the following seems like a "simple and obvious fact about knowledge" (p. 19):

Closure: For all propositions P and Q, if Q is a simple alternative to P, then you must know *that Q is false* in order to know P.

For example, this would explain the goldfinch case.

problem: Closure implies that you must know all of the logical consequences of anything you know. That seems far too demanding a requirement on knowledge.

- ii. Stroud then considers weakening his "simple and obvious fact about knowledge" as follows (p. 20):

Restricted Closure: For all propositions P and Q, if you know *that Q is a simple alternative to P*, then you must know *that Q is false* in order to know P.

This would make the requirement less demanding. However, there are other problems with it:

problem #1: Restricted Closure can't explain the suspect-in-Cleveland or Duke-of-Devonshire cases, since those involve *alternatives to your knowing*, rather than *simple alternatives*.

problem #2: Restricted Closure can't even explain the goldfinch case, if we stipulate that you don't know that canaries aren't goldfinches. (Surely your ignorance of this fact doesn't allow you to know that the bird one sees is a goldfinch, if we keep the other facts of the case the same.)

iii. Instead, Stroud proposes the following principle (last sentence of p. 20):

Stroud's Principle: For all propositions P and Q, if Q is an alternative to your knowing P, then you must know *that Q is false* in order to know P.

Stroud's Principle can explain the goldfinch, suspect-in-Cleveland, and Duke-of-Devonshire cases. Moreover, premise 2 of Stroud's Argument is just an instance of Stroud's Principle.

problem #1: The truth of the proposition *that you don't know P* is trivially incompatible with your knowing P. So the following seems to follow from Stroud's principle (for any proposition P):

- a. In order to know P, you must know that it is not the case that you don't know P.

This entails:

- b. If you know P, then you know that it is not the case that you don't know P.

Moreover, let us make the following plausible assumption:

- c. For every proposition R, if you know $\sim\sim R$, then you know R.

Then we can conclude the following:

- d. If you know P, then you know that you know P.

But this principle—which is known as the *KK Principle*—is *extremely* controversial. (Can you see why?)

problem #2: Stroud's Principle entails Closure, so Stroud's Principles is just as demanding as Closure.

iv. In passing, Stroud shows some sympathy for the following alternative to Stroud's Principle:

Stroud's Restricted Principle: For all propositions P and Q, if you know *that Q is an alternative to your knowing P*, then you must know *that Q is false* in order to know P.

This would avoid the second problem with Stroud's Principle. However, this principle falls prey to a version of the first problem for Stroud's Principle, and to a version of the second problem for Restricted Closure:

problem #1: Given the additional assumption that you know *that your not knowing P is an alternative to your knowing P*, Stroud's Restricted Principle can also be shown to imply the KK Principle.

problem #2: Stroud's Restricted Principle can't explain our intuitions about a version of the suspect-in-Cleveland case in which you don't realize (and hence don't know) that the witnesses' lying is an alternative to your knowing that the suspect was in Cleveland.