

22. Stroud 1984: Skepticism

Kevin Dorst
kevindorst@pitt.edu

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I. Skepticism

Skepticism: We don't know anything about the external world.

External world = world beyond our own (present) conscious experience.

We obviously have lots of *beliefs* about the external world. The question is whether they amount to knowledge.

Or maybe: whether they are justified.

We're used to the routine process of checking whether *individual* beliefs are knowledge.

I don't think I need gas. But then I get worried about my trip tomorrow, so I check the gas gauge.

Descartes expands this: wants to *systematically* investigate whether large classes of beliefs amount to knowledge.

Strategy? Look at the reliability of the methods (or bases, or "principles") underlying our beliefs.

Beliefs about the external world? Their basis is *perception*.

Obviously perception *can* be unreliable. Does that fact on its own lead us to skepticism?

Far-away tower; Muller-Lyer lines.

No: if we are able to distinguish the cases where reliable vs. not, then can restrict our beliefs to the "good cases".

E.g. gas light reliable so long as no "warning" light is on.
Stroud car-starting example.

To show that we don't know that p , we need to come up with a **skeptical scenario** for p —a scenario that we cannot rule out, but which is incompatible with p .

In particular, need this to be possible even in the *best-case scenario* for our belief about p .

II. The Argument

How to argue that we don't have *any* knowledge of the external world? Focus on the *best* best-case scenario—one such that if we can know anything at all, we can know that.

Let $p =$ *there is a laptop in front of me*.

But what if I'm in the Matrix? Despite all my evidence, it seems I can't rule out that possibility. (I'd have all the same experiences if was.) And this seems to threaten my knowledge.

Descartes/Stroud focus on the possibility that I'm dreaming.

How to make this into a precise argument?

We need to make sure our skeptical scenario is *incompatible* with p , so let a **laptop-less Matrix** be a scenario in which I'm in the Matrix but there are no laptops.

Stroud spends awhile worrying about whether dreaming is genuinely incompatible with p ; the simpler solution is to adjust the scenario to make it so.

The Argument:

P1 I can know that: if there's a laptop in front of me, then I'm not in a laptop-less Matrix.

P2 Therefore, if I can know that there's a laptop in front of me, then I can know that I'm not in a laptop-less Matrix.

P3 But I *can't* know that I'm not in a laptop-less Matrix.

C Therefore, I can't know that there's a laptop in front of me.

The argument is valid. So if we want to reject the conclusion, we have to reject one of the premises.

P1 is pretty much true just by (my awareness of) the definition.

P2 follows from P1 given that you can (always!) extend your knowledge via inference, i.e. come to know the logical consequences of what you know.

P3 seems to follow from the fact that my experiences would be exactly the same if I were in a laptop-less matrix.

Q: Discuss!

Definition + logic

From P1, via "Closure" of knowledge. If you know that p implies q , then if you know p , you can come to know q .

Nozick and Stine will scrutinize P2.

Lewis will reject P3. Sorta.

References