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Philosophy 610 Theory of Knowledge  
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March 15, 2012  
Updated February 2022

### **Biting the Infinity Bullet: Epistemic Infinitism**

Either the external world is lost or it is not. If the Academic Skeptic is right and knowledge of even our most basic beliefs about the external world are not possible, then the external world is irrevocably lost. In this paper I will not argue that knowledge of even our most basic beliefs about the external world is possible. Similarly I will not argue that we have not lost the external world because that might lead us to think that there is such a thing as knowledge of the external world. Rather, I will attempt to argue for a third position, that, if it is still possible to have provisionally justified beliefs, such as the Pyrrhonian Skeptic maintains, then, although the external world may not definitively be ours again, we still have very good reasons for our beliefs concerning it. If we are to admit to this, then the external world and everything contained within it will always be up for grabs, and our inquiry concerning it, though an infinite affair, is still possible.

I will mainly be drawing from the Academic Skeptical argument that casts doubt on knowledge of the external world as detailed by Barry Stroud (1984). Any mention of 'the Academic Skeptic' will be in reference to the problem of the external world as Stroud presents it, not necessarily as a characterization of Stroud himself. Similarly, any mention of 'the Pyrrhonian Skeptic' will be in reference to Peter Klein's presentation of the Pyrrhonian position concerning provisionally justified beliefs (2003). I will mainly be concerned with what both of these epistemic accounts have to say about those basic beliefs about the world that are so constituted

such that, according to Stroud, they are “representative of the best position any of us can ever be in for knowing things about the world...on the basis of the senses.”<sup>1</sup> All situations which are not typical of what can be termed a best-case scenario will not be brought under consideration then; no cases in which the perceptual apparatus of the subject, hereafter referred to as S, has been compromised to such a degree that the belief in question cannot even be considered. These types of scenarios which *do not count* can vary, but a few paradigmatic cases are of the following variety: an optical illusion of a tower appearing round in the distance or, the sound heard in the dark that is mistaken for a human voice. Similarly, abstract types of knowledge, such as mathematical truths, are not immediately going to be subject to our inquiry as they are not straight away accessible to us in the same way perceptions of the external world are.

What this means is that the evidence-e that is presented for the type of belief that we would consider to be minimally justifiable cannot be so easily doubted based on the strong degree of its likelihood, otherwise a proper investigation of the belief in question cannot even begin. This is not too much to ask for. If anything, we are attempting to be as rigorous as possible in narrowing the field to what would be the best candidates for knowledge of the external world: beliefs inferred from evidence as presented to us by the senses under optimal perceptual circumstances. As Stroud maintains, if “even the best candidates with the best possible credentials are found wanting, all those with less impressive credentials must fall short as well.”<sup>2</sup> So far I have only explained the Academic Skeptic’s minimum requirement for what

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<sup>1</sup> Stroud p.10

<sup>2</sup> Stroud p.11

constitutes evidence for a belief, a requirement that the Pyrrhonian does not necessarily deviate from.

However, in order to have a belief that can be completely justified beyond a reasonable doubt, that is, something we could call knowledge, we must first be able to distinguish between the belief and knowledge, as this will help us make sense of why the Academic Skeptic thinks that without knowledge we are completely lost. Beliefs are easy to come by, so long as one has a good reason, or evidence, for having them. Any proposition about the world that lacks justification, i.e. a good reason, cannot properly be called a belief. I can state such a proposition as, “there is a flying squid before me,” but unless I give you a reason why I believe that to be so, I am not operating under any mode that we could properly call rational. I have to be able to say something like, “I have strong evidence that the object in front of me has the features of a squid. I also have strong evidence that it is flying.” The evidence could be anything like witness testimony or a video recording, or more pertinently, perceptual evidence.

If I were to offer something like this for my belief that what I had seen was a flying squid, though that belief might still be laughable, you could not say that it was arbitrary or circular. The evidence might be suspect, the reasoning might perhaps not be rigorous enough, but at least it could be assessed on the basis of reason rather than my stating simply that I believe, on no basis, that I have seen a flying squid or that I had seen a flying squid because I had seen a flying squid. Klein is compelled to argue something similar when he admits that, “...even the religious, the wicked, or the hedonist value reason instrumentally...they believe that reasoning will assist them in achieving their goal.” In other words, even most suspect beliefs have as their

basis, reasoning about evidence that we take to be adequate for formulating and maintaining those beliefs.

But knowledge is predicated on something more than S being justified (having e) in believing p. If we want our belief about p to be knowledge, that is, to be finally and ultimately justified, rather than justified for the time being, “we must know the falsity of all those things that we know to be incompatible with [p].” Both the Academic and the Pyrrhonian agree that this closed belief, can be illustrated by the following formulation:

- (1) If S is justified (has e) in believing p then S is justified  
(has e) in not believing q (not-p).

Let us take p to be a belief such as “I am sitting by the fire.” The justification for p in the above formulation, e, can be something to the effect of “I am in a best case scenario in which all my senses are telling me that I am sitting by the fire.” Klein uses the terminology, “to any positive degree,” in place of e, but if we take e to be what we earlier called a best case scenario in which the perceptual apparatus of the subject was not compromised, then there should be no reason why e as a term cannot be used.

Since knowledge hinges on the condition that q must not be any case in which p is not the case, and the Academic Skeptic usually brings in the Dream Scenario, we can also think of q as, “I am dreaming that I am sitting by the fire.” Really, any type of proposition that signifies that I am in any hypothetical scenario in which p is not the case would satisfy a description for q, as Klein suggests, but, given that the possibility of dreaming is the most likely *real-world* candidate for a case in which I could be mistaken about p, then we will use it.

The question on whether or not S's non-belief in q obtains now turns on this according to the Academic Skeptic; are there any cases in which I could be wrong about my non-belief in q? Do I have enough evidence to justify not believing in q, which in this case is the proposition that I am dreaming that I am sitting by the fire? Because if I don't, then I don't really have justification for not believing those things which are incompatible with my belief in p.

The Academic Skeptical argument for S's non-belief in q not obtaining goes something like this: A condition, or what we can think of as some further evidence, for my being justified in not believing q is needed, given that it is possible that evidence for p could also be evidence for any scenario in which p is not the case. Stroud refers to this as the problem of being unable to distinguish, on the basis of the senses, between my dreaming that I am sitting by the fire and my actually sitting by the fire. There is actually no good way to reject this claim once we bracket out any fantastical elements of a given dream so that all we are left with are mundane sorts of dream scenarios. We can reasonably maintain that it is possible to have a very boring dream in which we are sitting by the fire and we could not tell the difference. But if I am asking for further evidence to justify my non-belief in q then this is as good as an admission that there is no evidence for my non-belief in q because if there was then I would not be asking for that evidence. This is enough for the Academic Skeptic to state the following:

*(2) S never has e to justify non-belief of q.*

And if we accept this, then the conclusion is unavoidable:

*Therefore, S never has e to justify belief in p.*

Since we had supposed earlier that S having e for p, or the belief, "I am sitting by the fire," was minimally required for any knowledge of the external world based on that belief's status as a best

case scenario of what would constitute any knowledge of the external world, then we must also admit that there is no justification that we have any knowledge of the external world. This is tantamount to saying that we have lost the external world.

Klein's Pyrrhonian analysis is mainly concerned with showing that the Academic Skeptic's argument cannot be properly be defeated based on the coherentist or foundationalist accounts of knowledge. However, for the sake of my argument, I am only concerned with Klein's "fourth alternative," which establishes a certain absurdity in the Academic Skeptic's view. And Klein's argument doesn't necessarily prove that we do have knowledge of the external world, but rather, that we do have provisionally justified beliefs and that, asking if any of those beliefs have a finality to them is what creates problems in the first place.

Klein's argument has to do with premise (2) in the Academic Skeptic's argument in which S is never justified in not-believing q. The Academic Skeptic maintains that S is never justified in not-believing q because S does not have adequate evidence for justifying their non-belief in q given that the evidence that S would need in order to be justified in not-believing q would be knowledge that q was not the case. Since the question about whether or not S has evidence for not-believing q strictly implies a denial of S having evidence for not-believing q, then it must be the case that S does not have any evidence for not-believing q and since a condition for S having justification of p hinges on their having justification for not-believing q, it is easy to see how we must be forced to admit that S's not having evidence for p, which was previously established as a bare minimum for having any knowledge of the external world, leads to us having lost the world.

But can we really admit that we have no evidence for p, that is, no perceptual evidence that we are sitting by the fire? We had accepted the proviso earlier that in order to make any sort

of inquiry about knowledge of the external world we had to accept, not on good faith, but rather on strong perceptual evidence, that we were sitting by the fire. As Klein points out, it is too much to ask of any subject that they deny that type of evidence, especially if that evidence had already been admitted as adequate for holding the belief in question.

By being forced to admit that there is a certain contradiction in affirming both premises of the Academic Skeptic's argument, the Pyrrhonian leaves it to us, as rational epistemologists, to admit that the only thing we really have that is rationally justifiable is a model of justification that looks something like premise (1) of the Academic Skeptic's argument and not much else.

The external world is not quite gained, but we are left with very good reasons for thinking that we are sitting by the fire and because of this, that we have a very good reason for not believing that we are dreaming that we are sitting by the fire. It is true that the evidence that we have for believing that we are sitting by the fire could always be brought under closer scrutiny and more evidence against it being the case could be dug up, but so far there hasn't been enough and, as Klein points out, we will, in all probability, always find a good reason to affirm that we are sitting by the fire rather than not.

The only major objection that the Academic Skeptic can make towards this picture of an infinite chain of justification is strong, only if we consider it on the grounds of being attuned to the attitude of epistemological inquiry. If the objection is not founded on that attitude, one that only considers the strength of the justifications, rather than some other rationale that is based on demands other than those that are placed on the epistemologist, then it cannot reasonably be called upon to object to any conclusions that we have made in our inquiry. The conclusions we have come to then, however objectionable they may appear to our everyday sensibilities, have to

be accepted until a better reason is found for not accepting them. Stroud's account of what happens if we accept that the external world is lost does not fit the perimeters of an epistemologically founded objection.

As Stroud maintains, if we accept that there is no final conclusive foundational belief, then, "there is no community of acting, experiencing and thinking persons I can know anything about..." and furthermore, "...there is no way of accommodating oneself to its profound negative implications."<sup>3</sup> This objection is more of a moral objection though, based on what Stroud even admits to be a natural inclination to be free of epistemic restrictions. But our epistemological inquiry, based on the only available tool to us, our reason, has shown that it is highly likely that there are such restrictions. This does not mean that we don't know the external world at all, but rather that our ideas concerning it are always up for debate, that the question is more than likely never closed. Any concerns about the ethical implications of the conclusion we have come to may have a time and place, and it might even be the case that when examined from the viewpoint of moral philosophy, the tenuous hold that we have onto our beliefs may not actually be desirable. But those concerns are not the epistemologist's concerns. The epistemologist is trying to figure out what is available and in the final analysis it might not be that much. This may not be what the Academic Skeptic wants, but by biting off more than one can chew in asking for a foundational knowledge of the external world and not wanting to settle for at least the chance to investigate it in a preliminary sort of way, then they may be starving themselves of what they do have epistemically available to them.

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<sup>3</sup> Stroud p.37

### **Works Cited**

Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. Clarendon Press. Oxford. 1984

Peter Klein, "How a Pyrrhonian Skeptic might respond to an Academic Skeptic." *The Sceptics: Contemporary Essays*, Ed. Luper Steven. Ashgate Press. 2003. p.75-94