

STROUD, AUSTIN, AND RADICAL SKEPTICISM

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Abstract: Is ruling out the possibility that one is dreaming a requirement for a knowledge claim? In “Philosophical Scepticism and Everyday Life” (1984), Barry Stroud defends that it is. In “Others Minds” (1970), John Austin says it is not. In his defense, Stroud appeals to a conception of objectivity deeply rooted in us and with which our concept of knowledge is intertwined. Austin appeals to a detailed account of our scientific and everyday practices of knowledge attribution. Stroud responds that what Austin says about those practices is correct in relation to the appropriateness of making knowledge claims, but that the skeptic is interested in the truth of those claims. In this paper, we argue that Stroud’s defense of the alleged requirement smuggles in a commitment to a kind of internalism, which asserts that the perceptual justification available to us can be characterized independently of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. In our reading of Austin, especially of *Sense & Sensibilia*, he rejects that kind of internalism by an implicit commitment to what is called today a “disjunctive” view of perception. Austin says that objectivity is an aspect of knowledge, and his disjunctivism is part of an explanation of why the alleged requirement is not necessary for a knowledge claim. Since both Stroud and Austin are committed to the objectivity of knowledge, Stroud may ask which view of perceptual knowledge is correct, whether the internalist or the disjunctive. We argue that by paying closer attention to what Austin says about our practices of knowledge attribution, one can see more clearly that it is grounded not only on a conception of objectivity, but also on a conception of ourselves as information agents, a conception that is as deeply rooted as that of the objectivity of

knowledge. This gives us moral and practical reasons to favor the disjunctive view of perception.

Keywords: *Barry Stroud, John Austin, skepticism, internalism, disjunctivism, information agents.*

1. Introduction

The study of skepticism, both historical and philosophical, grew substantially over the last four decades, and Stroud's *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* played an important role in that renewing. Much of the work done in that period, however, assumes that external world skepticism is not to be taken seriously. Contradicting those views, Stroud's work not only shows how it can be interesting academically but also at an existential human level. Stroud does not see skepticism primarily as a doctrine to be 'defended' or 'refuted', but as something to be *understood*. His aim is to find out its 'significance', rendering explicit what skeptics are trying to say and the kinds of problems they raise for creatures like us. A good deal of his work attempts to reveal philosophical assumptions that underlie skeptical conclusions. Some of those assumptions are not easy to shrug off without also giving up a view of human knowledge which has been sought throughout most of our philosophical tradition.

The goal of this paper is to shed light on this matter through an assessment Stroud's reading of Austin. Stroud often contrasts an engaged, internal view in which knowledge is part of our daily lives, with an objective or detached view in which human knowledge is assessed from the outside. It is the latter that is linked to skepticism. Whereas in our daily lives we only take into account mistakes we are likely to make, from a detached and objective point of view – when only knowledge matters – other possibilities of error also deserve consideration. Stroud lays out these issues in Chapter 2 of *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, which is on Austin. Against Stroud's reading, we argue that the objectivity of knowledge (the factual aspect of knowledge) is an ideal assumed by Austin and that (1) the conclusion that all our knowledge claims are false if we fail to eliminate all hypotheses incompatible with them is too strong and does not follow from having objective knowledge. On this point, Stroud seems to adopt a

version of *epistemic internalism*, which asserts that the perceptual justification available to us can be characterized independently of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We will argue that Austin is not committed to that kind of internalism. Stroud's argumentative strategy can be conveyed by a second-order question: how do we know whether that kind of internalism is correct? We argue (2) that Austin is justified in rejecting that version of internalism. Our various uses of the verb 'to know' seem to reveal that the view we have of ourselves as giving and receiving information is as important as objectivity for the ordinary concept of knowledge. We shy away from a part of our lives when we try to understand knowledge only as a matter of getting things objectively right from the perspective of the individual thinker. That from which we shy away in philosophy is also what brings about in the minds of non-philosophers the feeling that skepticism is somehow strange or even outrageous. The rejection of skepticism that follows from this analysis is not epistemic and theoretical but practical and moral. The core of the argument here is stronger than merely saying that skepticism is senseless in practical life but acceptable in theory. Rather, what we intend to show is that trying to put oneself in the perspective of a solipsist thinker contradicts a deeply rooted view we have of ourselves as agents, and for that reason that it is outrageous – though not impossible or epistemically unreasonable – to undertake the enterprise, even if only “theoretically”.

2. Stroud, objectivity, and radical skepticism

Stroud claims that to philosophize is to try to see ourselves and our place in the world from an external, detached point of view. In his book on Hume, he wrote that “to philosophize is perhaps inevitably to try to see the world and oneself in it ‘from outside’ or *sub specie aeternitatis*” (1977, p. 249). Philosophy appears here as an activity or enterprise that we undertake, and whose exercise gives us philosophical understanding. According to Bridges and Kolodny (2011, p. 8), Stroud maintains that we have a certain way of seeing the world, and the task of ‘a philosophical understanding’ is try to articulate our view from the outside, in order to know what is true or could be true:

We see ourselves as related to the world in certain ways. We take ourselves, for example to know certain things, to refer to objects, to perceive colors, to

witness evil doing, and so on. Philosophical understanding seeks, distinctively, to explain how the content of this conception of our place in the world can be true, or to determine whether it is true, *without relying on any elements of the conception itself*. To put it figuratively, we would achieve philosophical understanding only by somehow bringing our conception into view from a standpoint outside of it. Only then would we understand knowledge, or meaning, say, “in general”, or “as a whole” in the relevant sense (Bridges & Kolodny, 2011, p. 8).

This view of ‘philosophical understanding’ underlies his understanding of knowledge in *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, where Stroud says that a view of objectivity is embedded in our ordinary view of knowledge (p. 78 ff.). Similar claims appear in his paper “Understanding human knowledge in general”:

[W]hat we seek in the philosophical theory of knowledge is an account that is completely general in several respects. We want to understand how any knowledge at all is possible – how anything we currently accept amounts to knowledge. Or, less ambitiously, we want to understand with complete generality how we come to know anything at all in a certain specified domain. (1989, p. 101)

These passages indicate that Stroud takes “philosophical understanding of knowledge” to be an objective and detached affair. In fact, Stroud distinguishes sharply a practical approach to knowledge from a theoretical approach. Contrasting the two without always fully endorsing either makes it difficult for the reader to find out exactly what is the detached or external perspective that Stroud is willing to accept. This analysis, however, has consequences for the conclusions he draws from skepticism, especially in the chapter on Austin.

Austin is well known for having claimed that if someone asks us, “how do you know?”, not all possible mistakes are relevant. The objective fact of being mistaken turns on the circumstances in which a claim is made. The context usually indicates one or more ways in which one might be wrong. Under ordinary circumstances, if I see a bird in my backyard that looks like a goldfinch, it is reasonable to assume that it might

be a similar looking bird, but it is unreasonable to assume that it is a stuffed goldfinch or a goldfinch illusion. That kind of doubt would only come up if we had some kind of “special reason” for bringing it up. This strategy allows us to distinguish a domain of remote doubts from a domain of ordinary doubts grounded on the context or motivated by “special reasons”. By laying out the conditions that have to be in place so that reasonable challenges to a knowledge claim might come about, Austin presented an effective response to radical skepticism, such as that of Descartes’s dream argument. Not all cognitive contexts allow for radical skepticism. This conclusion contradicts Descartes’s assessment of our knowledge. He maintained that to know that p one would have to have sufficient evidence that all alternatives to p that are incompatible with it are false. Knowledge is in Descartes’s view a state that entails the absence of all possible error and mistakes. In other words, even if there were no special reason for thinking that I might be wrong, even if nothing leads me to consider the possibility that I might be dreaming, if it is true that I can be wrong, then I don’t know. Discussing the dream argument, Stroud formulates the point thus:

Descartes’s reasoning imposes a condition on knowledge of the world which must be fulfilled in every case, whether there is any special reason to believe one might be dreaming or not. The weaker requirement [Austin’s requirement] says that that condition must be fulfilled only in some cases, when the ‘special reason’ condition is also fulfilled, but that otherwise the dream-possibility is not even relevant to our claims to know things about the world around us. (1984, p. 54)

On this matter, Stroud admits that radical skeptical hypotheses are strange and unlikely. But he maintains that when we contemplate the knowledge we have of the external world and ask ourselves if there is something that could threaten it, skeptical hypotheses become legitimate and plausible. They reveal that our ordinary ways of accepting and rejecting beliefs – such as the ones discussed by Austin in “Other minds” – can be an outcome of the limitations of our ordinary investigations.

Austin’s strategy would thus be found lacking: admitted the ideal, factual goal of knowledge, we are forced to accept that even without special reasons skeptical doubts may still be legitimate. What a philosopher seeks is “a certain kind of understanding of

our state or our relation to the facts – what might be called an objective understanding of our position” (Stroud, 1984, p. 79). This notion of objectivity introduced by Stroud near the end of his chapter on Austin allows him to characterize Austin’s epistemology as having that same limitations found in airplane-spotters that ignore mistakes in the manual for identifying airplanes. Our epistemic condition could be that of someone who literally knows nothing of the world and yet meets all the requirements for saying that one knows laid out by Austin. This is due to the fact that Austin does not acknowledge that skeptical hypotheses can be true, even if they are unlikely.

The sceptical philosopher’s conception of our own position and of his quest for an understanding of it is parallel to this reflective airplane-spotter’s conception. It is a quest for an objective or detached understanding and explanation of the position we are objectively in. What is seen to be true from a detached ‘external’ standpoint might not correspond to what we take to be the truth about our position when we consider it ‘internally’, from within the practical contexts which give our words their social point. Philosophical scepticism says the two do not correspond; we never know anything about the world around us, although we say or imply that we do hundreds of times a day. (Stroud, 1984, p. 81)

Stroud’s view of the objectivity of knowledge legitimizes skeptical doubts, which is something they lack from the point of view of our ordinary cognitive practices. Hence, if “a certain conception of the relation between the philosophical problem of the external world and what goes on in everyday life were correct”, then Austin’s linguistic facts would not have “the anti-sceptical consequence” that Austin sees in them (Stroud, p. 55):

If the philosophical sceptic’s conceptions of everyday life is intelligible, everything that goes on in everyday life and in science would be compatible with the literal truth of the conclusion that no one knows anything about the world around us. (Stroud, 1981, p. 55)

The detached and external point of view of philosophy thus reveals that the conditions for everyday knowledge lack objectivity or are not totally committed to

truth. Henceforth, we will argue that is not necessary ruling out every logical possibility against a knowledge claim in order to satisfy the objective conception of knowledge. Thus, based on our assessment of Stroud's reading of Austin, we will offer reasons against Stroud's epistemic internalism.

3. Austin's conception of objective knowledge

In this section we give some reasons for interpreting Austin as no less concerned with the objectivity of knowledge than Stroud. What Austin has to say about our practices of attributing knowledge is not meant to entail that skeptical hypotheses are irrelevant to the truth of a knowledge claim. Austin does not deny that knowledge has an objective aspect or that having knowledge excludes the possibility of being mistaken. The objective view of knowledge discussed by Stroud is one with which Austin certainly agrees. In "Other minds", he states that "'when you know you can't be wrong' is perfectly good sense. You are prohibited from saying 'I know it is so, but I may be wrong'" (Austin, 1970, p. 98). Stroud and Austin disagree, however, on what constitutes a good reason for thinking that one is mistaken. For Austin, a mere logical possibility against a knowledge claim isn't a good reason for thinking that one is mistaken, neither is the fact that we are fallible beings. "The human intellect and senses are, indeed, *inherently* fallible and delusive, but not by any means *inveterately* so." (Austin, 1970, p. 98). Human fallibility is not a sufficient reason for retracting the phrase "I know". Austin's orientation is that we have to be mindful of the circumstances in which that phrase is used. If we have knowledge, mistakes are ruled out. However, we don't need to be infallible to have knowledge. The ruling out of mistakes that characterizes a knowledge state can be due to particular circumstances and not the outcome of an alleged human infallibility.

We sustain that it is not true that Austin has no interest in the truth of a knowledge claim or that he does not have it in mind when commenting on our practices of attributing and claiming knowledge. Austin can relax the conditions for attributing and claiming knowledge precisely because he draws himself apart from the kind of internalism about knowledge that Stroud seems to assume. But this does not mean that he subjects knowledge claims to a normative regime that is more practical than epistemic. Stroud maintains that Austin takes knowledge to be an evidential state

committed to practical purposes, such that one's knowledge of something may be obtained with higher or lower degrees of evidence depending of the purposes sought. On Stroud's reconstruction of Austin reasoning, one is left with the impression that Austin would construe knowledge claims are mere *actions* (Stroud, 1984, p. 74-75) adequate for certain practical ends, as if they were not aimed at epistemic ends¹. Against that interpretation, we argue that for Austin the legitimacy of a knowledge claim, while aiming at the truth, turns on the circumstances in which it is made. If it isn't the case that the subject must be able to reflectively rule out any logical possibility directed against a knowledge claim, if what the individual should be able to do can be alleviated, it is compensated by the circumstances in which she finds herself (Austin, 1962, p. 114). This entails holding that Stroud's epistemic internalism is an excessive demand for knowledge.

Based on these considerations, at least one move by Stroud in defense of the correction and legitimacy of skeptical doubts reveals itself problematic. Stroud claims that a condition for the truth of a knowledge claim is that one must be able to eliminate all incompatible alternatives. However, this condition is not entailed by the objectivity of knowledge *alone* nor by the fact that knowledge excludes error. Although we have not yet made explicit how the objective circumstances we find ourselves in can contribute to making a knowledge claim a case of knowledge, the fact is that if that contribution exists, then it is true that so as to have knowledge one does not have to reflectively eliminate all incompatible alternatives against one's knowledge claim. Stroud cannot arrive at that demand without some kind of internalism. What he needs is a particular version of internalism, which describes the perceptual evidence accessible to a person without any reference to the objective circumstances in which that person finds herself.

So as to describe adequately Austin's view of knowledge, we have also to consider what he says in *Sense & Sensibilia*, especially in section X. We think that that

¹ This is clear in the Stroud's discussion of the airplane-spotter. According to Stroud, everything that Austin says about what renders a knowledge claim appropriate can be met without the knowledge claim being true. Learning the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate knowledge claims would not entail learning the distinction between knowing and not knowing. The airplane-spotter can appropriately claim to know that a plane is an F and still not know that the plane is an F. The whole practice of pointing to planes and classifying them by making knowledge claims can serve well the warfare effort even if the claims made are false (Stroud, 1984, p. 75).

section contains elements that were not completely addressed by Stroud, and they are especially important for understanding Austin's view of perceptual knowledge. We maintain that Austin's discussion of perceptual cases of knowledge is the right place for approaching his treatment of skepticism and the objectivity of knowledge.

4. The disjunctive conception of perception

In this section we argue that our perceptual capacity is constitutively determined by the objective circumstances in which we normally find ourselves, and if we take this into account, the skeptical argument from ignorance directed to perceptual knowledge can easily be blocked. A knowledge claim, if true, must exclude the possibility of error. The argument from ignorance uses this feature of knowledge to arrive at the skeptical conclusion that we do not know that p , where p is any proposition about the external world, if we cannot exclude all skeptical doubts. The difficulty becomes harsher because some skeptical hypotheses – e.g. that one might be dreaming or might be a brain in a vat – are such that the evidence we have for a knowledge claim would be the same if they were true. Therefore, we cannot rule out a contrary skeptical hypothesis based on the evidence available; hence, we do not know that p .

This skeptical conclusion relies upon the internalism mentioned above. The true nature of internalism is a matter of discussion between epistemologists², but here we assume that internalism is mainly motivated by the evil demon or brain in a vat scenario. If S were a brain in a vat, although S might be inclined to say that she now sees a computer in front of her, S would in fact not be seeing any such thing. At best, she would experience seeing a computer. Facts about what appears to S , without any commitments to the independent existence of that which appears, would make up – so the argument goes – all the evidence or justification available in skeptical scenarios. Because experiences in a normal and skeptical scenarios are introspectively indiscriminable, the perceptual evidence available to the subject should be the same in both cases. So only facts about what appears to a subject make up the perceptual

² See Pritchard (2011), who points to three different intuitions that are central to internalism: (i) MENTAL, the intuition that two subjects with the same mental states have the same epistemic justification for their beliefs; (ii) ACCESS, the intuition that if two subjects know by reflection alone the same facts, then they will have the same epistemic justification for their beliefs and (iii) DISC, the intuition that if two subjects have introspectively indiscriminable experiences, then they will have the same epistemic justification for their beliefs (2011, p. 238). It seems to us that Stroud, at least while discussing Austin, is committed to DISC and ACCESS. We argue that Austin rejects DISC.

evidence available to her in any scenario. It is in this situation, conceived as something completely detached from the world, that one has to be able to answer skeptical challenges so as to make a legitimate knowledge claim.

This picture of the available evidence as something independent of the circumstances in which we find ourselves is rejected by Austin in *Sense & Sensibilia*. In section X, Austin questions Ayer's claim that sentences reporting experiences are by themselves indubitable³. This debate between Austin and Ayer is not directly about how we should characterize the available perceptual evidence or how we should conceive perceptual states, but about whether kinds of sentences or utterances can be indubitable. Austin assumes a view about how our perceptual capacity should be conceived, i.e. as constitutively determined by the objective circumstances in which we normally find ourselves.

Ayer claims that we should distinguish sentences reporting experiences, which he calls 'experiential sentences' (Ayer, 1967, p. 119), from sentences about material objects. The latter report what appears to us without reference to something independent of the mind. Because they describe precisely the content of our sensory experiences, they are indubitable and serve as evidence for sentences describing material objects. According to Ayer, sentences reporting experiences convey both the ordinary evidence that we have in a non-skeptical scenario and the evidence we have in a brain in a vat scenario. Sentences about material objects always state more than what the available evidence attests, they are risky and likely false in a brain in a vat hypothetical situation. Therefore, there would be an asymmetric epistemic relation between the two. Experiential sentences might offer reasons for material object sentences, because they are safer, but the opposite would not hold. Austin rejects that picture claiming that *individual* claims and utterances, due to the circumstances in which they are made, can be indubitable, whereas *kinds* of sentences as such cannot. This means that the alleged epistemic asymmetry between experiential sentences and material object sentences does not obtain. There are circumstances in which a material object sentence can be a reason for accepting or rejecting an experience sentence. And if this is so, as we will argue, it is false that we can characterize the perceptual evidence we have independently of the

³ According to Ayer (1940, p. 83), the only mistake someone can make when reporting her experience is a verbal one. A person says "this is green" before a blue color patch while what she means is that this is blue. The sentence that correctly expresses what she meant by "this is green" is indubitable.

circumstances we find ourselves in. Depending on the circumstances, both experience statements and material object statements can be free from errors:

For if, when I make some statement, it is true that nothing whatever could in fact be produced as a cogent ground for retracting it, this can only be because I am in, have got myself into, the very best possible position for making that statement – I have, and am entitled to have, *complete* confidence in it when I make it. But whether this is so or not is not a matter of what *kind of sentence* I use in making my statement, but of what *the circumstances are* in which I make it. If I carefully scrutinize some patch of colour in my visual field, take careful note of it, know English well, and pay scrupulous attention to just what I'm saying, I may say, 'It seems to me now as if I were seeing something pink'; and nothing whatever could be produced as showing that I had made a mistake. But equally, if I watch for some time an animal a few feet in front of me, in a good light, if I prod it perhaps, sniff, and take note of the noises it makes, I may say, 'That's a pig'; and this too will be 'incurable', nothing could be produced that would show that I had made a mistake. (Austin, 1962, p. 114)

Why is it that the latter case cannot be questioned in a skeptical scenario? We might have thought to have seen, prodded, sniffed and heard an animal, when in fact there was nothing there: we are brains in a vat misled by an evil scientist. Austin does not deny the obvious fact that we can hallucinate. His point is that the claim "It's a pig" in those objective circumstances would be incorrigible. To be sure, in other circumstances – e.g., a skeptical scenario – the claim would not be incorrigible. This is because circumstances in which one finds oneself are *constitutive of one's perceptual capacity*. Austin seems to assume here some version of perceptual disjunctivism, insofar as disjunctivism says that veridical perceptual states and states of illusion or hallucination are not of the same nature⁴. The experiences we have when we are in those

⁴ Disjunctivism as an explicit position emerged only with the publication of Hinton's classic paper (1967). Ascribing disjunctivism to Austin as a philosophical thesis about the nature of perception isn't appropriate (Snowdon, 2008, p. 38, n. 6). Officially, he defends no doctrine about perception in *Sense & Sensibilia*. Rather, he thinks of his book as "unpicking, one by one, a mass of seductive (mainly verbal) fallacies, of exposing a wide variety of concealed motives – an operation which leaves us, in a sense, just where we began" (Austin, 1962, pp. 4-5). However, his way of resisting to the argument from hallucination can be seen as disclosing the possibility of disjunctivism (Fish, 2009, p. 34), especially when he holds that the objects of veridical perception and hallucination may be of different kinds, even if they are introspectively indiscriminable. "For why on earth

states can be very similar and even introspectively indiscriminable, but their contents are not the same. Furthermore, perceptual disjunctivism is a thesis about how to conceive our perceptual capacities, which says that it is impossible for all exercises of that capacity to be mistaken. The reason is that our perceptual capacities are constitutively determined by external and objective circumstances. In the circumstances mentioned by Austin, the exercise of our perceptual capacities yield a state of seeing a pig. If the pig were not there, the exercise of those perceptual capacities would yield a different kind of state: that of hallucinating a pig. In order to warrant one's perceptual knowledge it suffices that the person is in a situation in which one *sees* a pig and has no good reason to think one is not seeing one.

[T]he situation in which I would properly be said to have *evidence* for the statement that some animal is a pig is that, for example, in which the beast itself is not actually on view, but I can see plenty of pig-like marks on the ground outside its retreat. If I find a few buckets of pig-food, that's a bit more evidence, and the noises and the smell may provide better evidence still. But if the animal then emerges and stands there plainly in view, there is no longer any question of collecting evidence; its coming into view doesn't provide me with more *evidence* that it's a pig, I can now just *see* that it is, the question is settled. (Austin, 1962, p. 115)⁵

We are not always mistaken, neither is our evidence always fallible. Given one's discrimination capacities and conceptual resources, in some circumstances it is the case that one just *sees* that it is a pig. The crucial premise of the ignorance argument is thus

should it *not* be the case that, in some few instances, perceiving one sort of thing is exactly like perceiving another?" (Austin, 1962, p. 52). If our perceptual states are separated in kinds in virtue of its kinds of objects, and if we are *prima facie* entitled to take paradigmatic cases of perception – like the case of seeing a pig narrated by Austin and which are going to be quoted below – as veridical, then what Austin says can inspire a kind of perceptual disjunctivism, and we can say that he assumes or is committed to disjunctivism in the sense that it is pre-theoretically embedded in our ordinary language. Taking perceptual disjunctivism as a commonsense position and the assumption of a common element shared by veridical perceptions and hallucinations as a revisionist position is not unusual: see Pritchard (2012, p. 17).

⁵ We have been using 'perceptual evidence' or 'perceptual justification' as the evidence we have in virtue of perceptual states, so a perceptual state of seeing something should count as a piece of perceptual evidence. In the passage above, Austin uses 'evidence' more narrowly as a kind of non-conclusive evidence in favor of a claim, so a perceptual state of seeing a pig would not count as evidence in favor of the claim "it is a pig". Here we are interested not in his use of 'evidence', but in his considerations about how the objective circumstances are constitutive of our perceptual capacity.

rejected. Although the experience of that person might be introspectively indiscriminable from the experience she would have in a skeptical scenario, the evidence or justification available to her in those situations are not the same. It is not the case that the available justification is the same in both scenarios. In a skeptical scenario, she *hallucinates*. In the non-skeptical scenario, she *sees* a pig. It is not the case, therefore, that all our perceptual knowledge claims could be false. If someone says that it's a pig when the circumstances are such that a pig is seen, then there's very little room for error. Austin thus rejects the internalist intuition that seems to be operating in the skeptical reasoning as Stroud reconstructs it.

If one grants that, then two reasons can be given for thinking that the requirements for a reasonable knowledge claim are those pointed out by Austin. The first is that a case of seeing such as the one described by Austin in the citation above would not be acknowledged as such by the person who sees the pig if that person had to rule out all incompatible alternatives. William James had already noted that we do not only aim at avoiding mistakes, but also at finding truths (James, 1912, p. 5). A fair balance between these desiderata is needed so that one may acknowledge episodes of seeing, which is necessary for one to claim some knowledge based on what one sees. A second reason is that if we were to accept that a mere logical possibility could be raised against any case of a putative veridical perception, then we would be accepting that we have perceptual capacities whose exercises can all be defective. So, if we accept that our perceptual capacities are constitutively determined by objective circumstances of our environment, then we cannot allow at the same time that any logical possibility against an exercise of those capacities count as a *reason* against the non-defectiveness of that exercise.

We only offered perceptual disjunctivism as a possible explanation for perceptual knowledge, a kind of disjunctivism that by default is embedded in our ordinary language. Stroud clearly could ask why he should accept perceptual disjunctivism instead of his epistemic internalism. In the next section, we will address this question. We will argue that for Austin the view of ourselves as information agents is as entrenched in our thought as the view of knowledge as objective. Because of that, Austin can give moral and practical reasons in favor of his implicit commitment to a disjunctive conception of perception. So Stroud's internalism appears to be unmotivated.

5. Objective knowledge and information agency

Near the end of his chapter on Austin in *The Significance of the Philosophical Skepticism*, Stroud argues that skepticism might have its roots in our view of objectivity. We think the world exists independent of our beliefs about it. A claim about the world is true or false in virtue of how the world itself is, not in virtue of what we think about it. A skeptic makes use of this same view of objectivity when raising the question about whether we know something: this too is an objective fact. Again, the beliefs we have are irrelevant for the truth of a knowledge claim. Stroud illustrates this view with the airplane spotter example. In the story told by Stroud, *we know* that the manual for identifying airplanes is unreliable, *but the person using the manual does not*. At least some of his knowledge claims might therefore be false. A more reflective user of the manual might go on using it for practical purposes while at the same time asking himself whether the manual is reliable. He could ask himself if there could not be airplanes different from those specified in the manual but indistinguishable by known characteristics. If this possibility were to obtain, then claims of the type “I know that the airplane is of the kind F” would be false. The reflective airplane-spotter would then be questioning his epistemic relation to the world. That relation seemed nonproblematic in virtue of his implicit commitment to the reliability of the manual.

We have already given a reason for thinking that if the circumstances we find ourselves in are relevant for the truth of a knowledge claim, then even if we assume that view of objectivity, it is not trivially true that any possibility incompatible to that claim needs to be ruled out. If what we are told in Stroud’s story is false and the manual for airplane spotting is reliable, then the knowledge claims adequately made based on it are true. Mere logical possibilities are not strong enough to cancel out knowledge in those circumstances. At this point, however, we might want to examine an objection.

The skeptic might concede that these considerations, if true, place an obstacle to the stronger conclusion that we do not have any cognitive relations with the world, but he might still hold that they do not answer his doubts: can we know that we have that relation? The skeptic does not need to claim that any relation of this kind exists, but merely question how we could know that it holds. This would require an answer to the effect that circumstances are relevant to the truth of a knowledge claim. Without that,

we would have to acknowledge that we do not know whether we know. Knowledge of the reflective instructor might not be lost when he or she begins to question the reliability of the manual, but knowledge of whether he or she has that knowledge is surely challenged. The understanding of ourselves and of our epistemic relation to the world is, after all, what matters to the skeptic philosopher, and not so much whether we know this or that. As Stroud says, “coming to terms with it (the sceptical reasoning) would eventually involve a great deal more than simply deciding whether somebody knows something in a particular case, or even whether anybody knows anything about the world around us” (1984, p. 76). The skeptic is actually challenging not whether we know this or that in particular, but whether we know that disjunctivism is the right way to conceive our perceptual capacities.

What might Austin then want say to the skeptic? Austin’s remarks about our ordinary and scientific uses of “knowledge” seem to imply that they are not only rooted on a given view of objectivity, but also on how we give and receive information to and from one another. The point here is not a refusal to admit the objective and factual nature of knowledge. Rather, it is that Stroud’s philosophical goal of understanding our epistemic position involves more than merely acknowledging that knowledge states are objective and determined by our relation to the world. It should also involve acknowledging that knowledge states are responsive to our agency as informants. Stroud claims that the view underlying the skeptic’s reasoning is a view of the objective world, and that knowledge turns on facts and not on what we believe about the world (Stroud, 1984, p. 77). “We seek a certain kind of understanding of our state or our relation to the facts – what might be called an objective understanding of our position” (Stroud, 1984, p. 79). However, despite Stroud’s reasoning for the idea that we want to have an objective understanding of our epistemic condition, knowledge has a practical dimension, i.e. a dimension in which not only our objective credentials are relevant but also our roles as cooperating members of a community. In the following passage, Stroud seems to point out that the view we have of ourselves is as important as our view of objectivity: “[t]he idea of *ourselves* and of our relation to the world that lies behind the skeptical reasoning seems to me deeply powerful and not easily abandoned” (Stroud, 1984, p. 76, emphasis added). However, he does not draw from this view the same consequences Austin draws.

This is an important point because if we are right in thinking that the idea of ourselves as information agents is as fundamental for an adequate understanding of knowledge as our view of objectivity, then the skeptic – by exploring only the latter – may be accused of detaching him or herself significantly from our ordinary understanding of knowledge. Stroud rejects that the skeptic is committed to that detachment but perhaps he is mistaken insofar as he sets aside Austin's remarks on agency. We agree with what Stroud says in the passage just quoted, that the idea we have of ourselves cannot be easily given up, but precisely because of its entrenchment, it places limitations to what we can reasonably extract from our equally entrenched view of objectivity. If we put the agency dimension of knowledge in the forefront, then the internalism necessary for making a good case for skepticism loses his attraction. According to Austin, we see ourselves as agents in a shared world, where giving and receiving information plays a crucial role. Austin points this out in "Other minds", in at least two passages.

First, when Austin compares "I know" with "I promise". In both cases, by uttering the words we commit ourselves to others. Internally the expectation of acting on an intention might not differ in a case of promising and in a case where I say I expect to do something. Yet they are two different kinds of actions. When I promise, I commit myself and become accountable for what I do or fail to do. By analogy, when I say that I know, the feeling of assurance I have might not differ from the one I have when I am quite sure that something is the case. "I know" is a cognitive deed stronger than saying I am quite sure, just as "I promise" produces a stronger expectation than saying I have a strong desire to do something. By saying, "I know", I commit myself to others, "I give others my word: I give others my authority for saying that 'S is P'" (Austin, 1970, p. 99). If I utter those words irresponsibly, "I may be responsible for getting you in trouble" (Austin, 1970, p. 100). I place my reputation as an informant at risk if I make knowledge claims without thinking them through. Promises do not describe someone's actions, but ritual words that in an appropriate context *do* something, they commit someone to doing something. In many uses of "I know" something similar occurs. "I know" authorizes a line of action. If we do not act according to what others claim to know, it is as if we did not accept the authority of his or her words, or did not trust them. It is this practical and social dimension that Austin points out as part of our concept of

knowledge, and which Stroud's analysis leaves out. To know means being able to give useful and meaningful information. Hence, "I know" not only describes a purported cognitive relation to the world that may or may not hold, but is also a particular way of giving out information, not the way a thermometer informs temperature, but as an agent that is accountable for the truth of what he says. "We don't talk with people (descriptively) except in the faith that they are trying to convey information" (Austin, 1970, p. 82-83). This leads us to thinking that "I know" has a role in our lives in virtue of a conception we have of ourselves as agents that give and receive information. We have good reasons for retaining our ordinary view of knowledge as an epistemic relation to the world; at the same time, we also have good reasons for retaining the idea of the agent as someone who is capable to give and receive information. Because Stroud doesn't integrate equally well the agential and the objective dimensions of knowledge into his project of articulating a philosophical understanding of our human condition, his defense of skepticism as a predicament our human cognitive condition is problematic.

The second passage is at the end of that same paper, when Austin tackles skepticism about other minds directly. When someone says he or she is angry, this should not be taken as an additional sign or evidence for the conclusion that it is plausible that he or she is angry. *Prima facie*, the claim is an expression of his or her anger. Unless contrary evidence can be raised, we will take what the person says at face value. But why should we believe it? Austin denies that it is because we have tracked down inductively the frequency of true claims made by that person. Rather, belief in someone else's words is an irreducible, non-eliminable part of our experience:

It seems, rather, that believing in other persons, in authority and testimony, is an essential part of the act of communicating, an act which we all constantly perform. It is as much an irreducible part of our experience as, say, giving promises, or playing competitive games, or even sensing coloured patches. We can state certain advantages of such performances, and we can elaborate rules of a kind for their 'rational' conduct (as the Law Courts and historians and psychologists work out the rules for accepting testimony). But there is no 'justification' for our doing them as such. (1970, p. 115)

In both passages, the view we have of ourselves as agents seems something of which we cannot rid ourselves. We would not say “I know” if there were no other agents to whom we could commit, and we would not perceive other people as agents if we did not in at least believe some of what those people say. The skeptic might reply that this only forces us to view ourselves as agents, but not to assuming there are other agents out there. This is disputable. Austin’s first point was that we view ourselves as agents that give and receive information. If this is true, then there must be someone else capable of receiving information. Furthermore, it is necessary that we have a capacity to get information about the world. The agent conception favors disjunctivism as the right way to conceive our cognitive capacities. This kind of consideration also explains, according to Austin, why skeptical scenarios sound silly and outrageous. They are possibilities that undermine the view we have of ourselves as information agents. The reflective airplane spotter would be unable to inform his fellows if he were to question the reliability of the manual based on a mere logical possibility. He would cause disruption if, instead of saying, “I know it is an F”, he said, “I think it is an F”. Even if he kept saying, “I know that it is an F” for practical purposes, he would be lying to his peers. So, his failure would be practical or moral. Nothing prevents the skeptic from raising those possibilities. Ultimately, as Austin says at the end of that paper, we do not have a justification for believing in others or for viewing ourselves as informing agents. However, if the skeptic holds his ground, he will produce in us a practical and moral chill.

Along with Stroud, we would say that objectivity is fundamental for knowledge, but that this alone does not yield radical skepticism. Just as fundamental as objectivity is the view we have of ourselves as agents who give and receive information. In favor of Austin, we can say that this conception of ourselves works as a kind of practical and moral reason in favor of his implicit disjunctivism. This leaves us wondering whether Stroud might not want to recognize that this conception of ourselves, no less than the conception of objectivity, seems “deeply powerful and not easily abandoned”.

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