

## MAKING SENSE OF THOMPSON CLARKE’S “THE LEGACY OF SKEPTICISM”

**Roger E. Eichorn**

Chicago, IL, USA  
E-mail: [reichorn@uchicago.edu](mailto:reichorn@uchicago.edu)

**Abstract:** Thompson Clarke’s seminal paper “The Legacy of Skepticism” (1972) is notoriously difficult in both substance and presentation. Despite the paper’s importance to skepticism studies in the nearly half-century since its publication, no attempt has been made in the secondary literature to provide an account, based on a close reading of the text, of just what Clarke’s argument is. Furthermore, much of the existing literature betrays (or so it seems to me) fundamental misunderstandings of Clarke’s thought. In this essay, I attempt to explain—concisely but comprehensively—Clarke’s overall argument in “The Legacy of Skepticism.”

**Keywords:** skepticism, epistemology, metaphilosophy, Thompson Clarke

If we attempt to examine the mirror in itself, we uncover, finally, nothing but the things upon it. If we want to seize hold of the things, we come up, in the end, with nothing but the mirror. — This is, in the most general terms, the history of knowledge.

Nietzsche, *Dawn* (§243)

— Am I understood? Have I been understood? ...  
“*Absolutely not! Dear Sir!*” — Then let us start at the beginning.

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (§3.1)

### 1 The Difficulty of Grasping Clarke’s “Legacy”

Thompson Clarke’s seminal paper “The Legacy of Skepticism” (LS) is notoriously difficult in both substance and presentation. It covers an extraordinary amount of ground in its modest 6,500 words. Twice in the opening paragraph, Clarke apologizes for the inadequacy of what follows: LS explores its topic, he warns us, “much too briefly,” and he expresses “regret” that he does not have “sufficient space to examine certain deservedly renowned doctrines which bear on these questions”

(754).<sup>1</sup> Similar remarks appear throughout Clarke's unpublished dissertation, *The Nature of Traditional Epistemology* (NTE). In the final section of the dissertation, with fewer than twenty pages to go, he writes that "I regard the preceding pages as primarily a prolegomena to the topic we now take up. Unfortunately, what I can say is only in the nature of suggestions" (NTE, 231). Presumably, Clarke did not think at the time that LS would be his final published work any more than he had thought that NTE would be. He lived another forty years and continued pursuing the topics raised in LS throughout much, if not all, of that time. Even so, none of his later work has (or, apparently, ever will) see the light of day. We can only wish that Clarke had written the book or books required to unpack his views on skepticism, the nature of philosophy, and the relation between philosophy and everyday life. As it is, anyone who wants to understand LS must try to make sense of it without the aid of whatever elaborations or clarifications Clarke might subsequently have provided.

In this paper, I attempt to explain, concisely but comprehensively, what Clarke is saying in LS. The task is made difficult by the scope and density of the material: LS is *its own summary*; any attempt to explain it must expand upon it. But it is also made difficult by the paper's systematicity. Any attempt to trace just one of LS's numerous argumentative threads inevitably requires explaining the entire article. Ultimately, nothing in the paper is dispensable to Clarke's argument. What *is* dispensable, however—at least insofar as we treat LS as an *argument* rather than as a carefully constructed piece of philosophical literature—is Clarke's own presentation of the material. I've found that any attempt to comment on LS section-by-section, to order the topics as Clarke does, leads either to madness or a monograph. Thus, I will go a different way. Indeed, I will follow a trajectory that moves, though with many forward and backward leaps, from the end of the paper to the beginning.

## 2 The Problem of the Structure of the Plain

The conclusion to which LS's interlocking parts are meant to lead is this: We must reject the traditional conception of what I will call the 'human epistemic standpoint' (HES)—what Clarke refers to in one place as "our epistemological position" (761). Rejecting the traditional conception of the HES leaves us with the problem of replacing it with a new, nontraditional conception. This "philosophical problem of the greatest magnitude" (NTE, 242) is nothing less than the problem of developing a new conception of what human beings are as knowers of the world and ultimately of what the world itself is inasmuch as it is the object of our experience, i.e., inasmuch as it is "our world," a world that may or may not turn out to accord with "the ontology of the plain man" (NTE, 99–100).

That this is Clarke's conclusion is not obvious from the text. Although he clearly thinks that the traditional conception of the HES must be rejected,<sup>2</sup> Clarke tells us at the end of LS that the legacy of Cartesian skepticism—i.e., the "new, challenging problem" with which Cartesian skepticism leaves us—is "the problem of the plain, of its structure, the character and source of its relative 'non-objectivity'" (769). It seems, then, that Clarke's conclusion is that we must develop a new conception of the *plain*, not the HES. At the end of LS, however, he links the

---

<sup>1</sup> All otherwise unattributed citations refer to page numbers in LS.

<sup>2</sup> Near the end of LS, Clarke writes that "our conceptual-human constitution can't be of the standard type" (769).

structure of the plain and the structure of the HES, albeit very quickly and without emphasizing the point. He writes: "How radically that structure [i.e., the structure of the plain] must differ from the standard type... is evident enough" (769). By "the standard type," Clarke is referring to what he calls 'the standard conceptual-human constitution.'<sup>3</sup> Why, though, does he equate the structure of the plain with the structure of the HES? The short answer is that the (actual) plain is *our* plain; as such, its structure is entwined with the structure of our epistemic relation to the world, i.e., with the HES.

## 2.1 The Plain

To begin making sense of this, we must ask what Clarke means by 'the plain.' He introduces the idea in the following passage, where he states what I will call 'the immunity thesis':

... there is a large, important domain of questions, claims, and the like, ideal for [G.E.] Moore, where a "proof" like his *is* a proving, where knowing stands in need of no argued defense because the epistemic is immune (oversimplifying slightly) from skeptical assault. The domain, of course, is the everyday, the particular questions, claims, *et al.*, occurring within specific, elaborate, contexts of everyday life, instances *par excellence* of what I shall call "plain" questions, etc. (754–5)

The "domain" of the plain, then, includes the "specific, elaborate, contexts of everyday life." As we'll see in §3.4, Clarke thinks that the plain is nearly, but not quite, coextensive with the everyday.<sup>4</sup> It follows that the vast majority of plain "questions, claims, *et al.*"<sup>5</sup> are made in "everyday circumstances" (755, 756). These "circumstances" or "contexts" provide an extra dimension of meaning to our utterances, one that is not reducible to "the meaning of words, alone or in combination," but is rather to be identified "with what *we* mean, say, or imply, *in* uttering the words (with their meanings)" (755). This extra semantic dimension is bound up with "our practices," with "elemental parts of our human nature" (761). These "[c]ontextual features... exercise control, on us and on how the language segments within the context are to be understood" (757). Beyond the plain—outside of all contexts—lies the domain of what Clarke calls 'the philosophical.'

In NTE, Clarke describes the two dimensions of meaning this way. Consider a "how much?" question, e.g., "How much of object *x* can you *actually* see?" Regarding this sort of question, Clarke writes that "the words *alone as a part of language* carry some meaning... We might say that language alone carries the *skeletal* meaning of the finished question." It is up to the "particular case" (i.e., the

---

<sup>3</sup> Clarke never uses this exact phrase. The idea is first introduced on 760, where he refers to a "conceptual-human constitution... of a 'standard' type." The term "standard type" appears throughout the rest of LS (761, 762, 765, 768, 769), and it is always, with the exception of its final appearance, explicitly tied to the standard conceptual-human constitution.

<sup>4</sup> Given the near-concordance of the plain and the everyday, I will for the most part use the terms interchangeably, though it must be borne in mind throughout that, for Clarke, "the dimensions of the circle of the plain" (756) do extend beyond the everyday

<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I will shorten "questions, claims, *et al.*" to 'utterances,' with the understanding that this category encompasses merely potential utterances, such as thoughts or inscriptions, as well as actual utterances.

context of the utterance) to “put flesh on the skeletal meaning.” Isolated from any context (i.e., when intended philosophically) “[t]he utterance is meaningful in the sense that it has skeletal meaning. The utterance is not meaningful in the sense that it does not ask a full-bodied question” (NTE, 199–200). When we examine context-bound utterances, Clarke finds, “we become aware that these cases contain a dimension [of meaning] not to be identified with the language uttered in these cases” (NTE, 172),<sup>6</sup> i.e., with “English as a system of rules” (NTE, 179). He refers to this as the “non-rule-like dimension” of meaning (NTE, 173), also as “the extra-linguistic dimension” (NTE, 181).<sup>7</sup>

For the most part, plain utterances are *embedded* in the everyday world. “[A]s plain men,” Clarke writes, “we are ‘inside the world’” (762). Plain utterances “seem to be placed *within* the world as an unquestionable context” (NTE, 179). The unquestionability of the world as such or as a whole underwrites the immunity of plain knowing to philosophical (specifically Cartesian) skepticism, understood as the denial of our knowledge of the existence of the external (mind-independent) world. Clarke agrees with commonsense philosophers that, in everyday life, our empirical knowledge-claims can be justified with reference to the following unquestionable postulates: “We can know that there are physical objects in the world. We can see (and touch) physical objects. We can know that there are physical objects because we can see (and touch) them” (NTE, 5–6; cf. NTE 68, 95, 235). Clarke identifies these as the “most important”—or “most fundamental” (NTE, 235)—“so-called common sense beliefs about empirical knowledge” (NTE, 5), and they are in some sense the bedrock of our everyday epistemic practices, at least regarding empirical matters. This is why Clarke suggests that a hallmark of plain empirical questions, no matter how general or apparently ‘philosophical’ they may be, is that they can be “settled by going and looking” (or hearing, smelling, etc.) (758).

Ultimately, the question will be *how* plain knowledge-claims can constitute legitimate, full-fledged knowledge despite treating the world as an “unquestionable context” and thereby taking for granted, without reasoned argument, the general propositions of common sense. As we’ll see, the traditional conception of the HES provides an answer to this question. But if we reject that conception, as Clarke thinks we must, then we will require a new explanation of the plain’s immunity to “outside undermining” (767).

---

<sup>6</sup> This passage is presented as a hypothetical—indeed, as part of a “day-dream.” But in the subsequent paragraph, Clarke writes that “[t]raditional epistemology is, in effect though not intentionally, the performance of this grand experiment” that he had just daydreamed about (NTE, 173).

<sup>7</sup> Clarke’s theory of perception is discussed in NTE and “Seeing Surfaces and Physical Objects” (Clarke 1965), not in LS, so I’ll have little to say about it in what follows. Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to complete the line of thought begun in this paragraph. Regarding the question “How much of object *x* can you *actually* see?”, Clarke argues that the full-bodied meaning of the question is in part a function of what the context or circumstance determines to be the *default units*: “Seeing is a function of the physical situation and the unit arrangement” (NTE, 119). Thus, “Seeing can, in a given physical situation, embrace a physical object, or half of one, or part of the surface of one, etc., depending on what amounts are fixed as the units” (NTE, 128). In everyday contexts, “physical objects” (rather than, e.g., surfaces or sense-data) are the default units for Seeing: “Sub-portions [of physical objects] are units only in special circumstances; in daily life it takes something special to remove the unit-hood of physical objects” (NTE, 190).

## 2.2 The Traditional Conception of the Human Epistemic Standpoint

How does the traditional conception of the HES—what Clarke calls ‘the standard conceptual-human constitution’ (SCHC)—explain the immunity of plain utterances to “outside undermining”?

First, what *is* the SCHC? Barry Stroud calls it “a certain conception of concepts, or what might be called ‘concept-use’” (Stroud 2000, 29), but it is more than that. The SCHC is a conception of the ‘human constitution’ as it pertains to the relations among ourselves, our concepts, and the world. Specifically, as we’ll see, Clarke argues that the SCHC is the conception of the HES that would make traditional philosophizing<sup>8</sup> possible for human beings.

We can characterize the SCHC by how it answers the following questions:

- (a) Are concepts context-bound or context-free?
- (b) How do concepts relate to their objects?
- (c) How do we relate to concepts and their objects?

The SCHC answers these questions as follows (760–1):

1. Concepts are context-free: they are “self-sufficient unit[s],” or they “retain their identity” within conceptual schemes that are themselves “self-sufficient unit[s].”
2. The objects (or domains of objects) to which concepts relate are “fully separate from concepts.”
3. Human beings “are outsiders” with respect to concepts, their objects, and the relation between the two.

(1) To say that concepts (or the conceptual schemes to which they belong) are “self-sufficient” is to say that what they mean is fully determinable even when considered in isolation from everyday contexts: “Each concept or the conceptual scheme must be divorceable intact from our practices, from whatever constitutes the essential character of the plain, from elemental parts of our human nature” (760).

(2) To say that objects (or domains of objects) are “fully separate from concepts” is to say that, just as concepts are self-sufficient with respect to objects, so objects are self-sufficient with respect to concepts. The individuation of objects (or domains of objects) in no way depends on our concepts. Concepts and objects are isolated, independent units. They retain the meaning (concepts) or being (objects) that they have for us regardless of context, circumstance, or the practices of everyday life.

(3) To say that human beings are “outsiders” with respect to concepts, objects, and their relations is to say that, though they’re responsible for “creating’ concepts,” human beings are detached “observers” who seek, “usually by means of

---

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that all general references to “philosophy” or “philosophizing” in LS are to *traditional*, as opposed to what I call ‘nontraditional,’ philosophy. For more on the traditional–nontraditional distinction, see §3.1, below, as well as Eichorn 2019, §1.3 and Eichorn 2020, §2.

[their] senses,” to “ascertain, when possible, whether items fulfill the conditions legislated by concepts.” According to this picture, human beings, “standing back detached” from both concepts and objects, attempt, “when possible,” to determine whether the concepts they have (in some sense) created succeed in referring to self-sufficient objects, that is, objects whose being in no way depends on humans, their practices, or their concepts (761).

Only the SCHC would enable us to philosophize because only such a constitution would enable us to adopt the standpoint of detached spectators with respect to independent concepts and objects. The alternative to the detached standpoint of the SCHC is an *engaged* standpoint, according to which objects and concepts are in some way bound up with us as knowers of the world and users of concepts. The worry is that an engaged standpoint would render our knowledge ultimately relative, that only the detached standpoint would allow us to ask and answer pure, absolutely objective questions—to philosophize, in other words.

Figure 1 illustrates the detached standpoint of the SCHC.

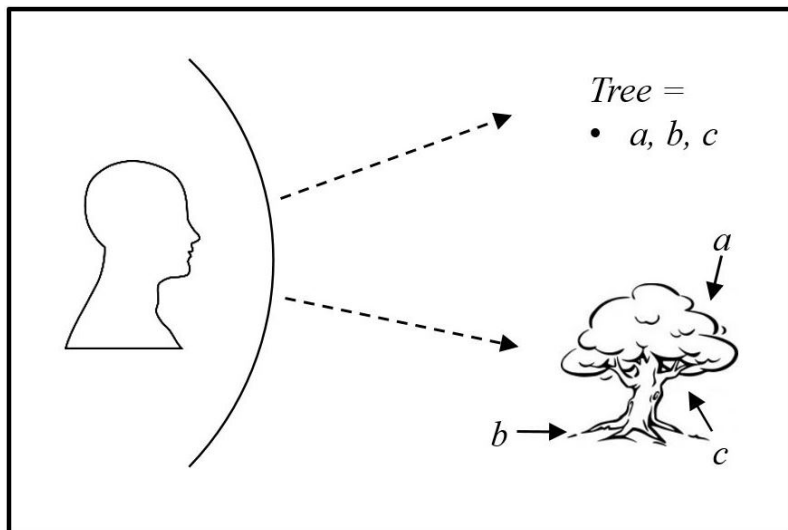


FIGURE 1: The Standard Conceptual-Human Constitution (I)

It seems that the SCHC would make it possible for us to adopt what Thomas Nagel, who was influenced in these matters by Clarke’s teaching at Berkeley, calls “the view from nowhere,” meaning a view from nowhere *within the world*. The impulse to adopt the detached standpoint arises from a commitment to absolute objectivity. As Stroud puts it,

This conception of what it is like to possess concepts, and to philosophize, expresses the traditional philosopher’s goal of complete or absolute objectivity. He wants to ask just how things are, not how we all think they are, or even how we in some sense must think they are. He wants to escape the restrictions and limitations of ordinary practical and scientific life and ask a question, so to speak ‘from outside’, about even those practical and scientific goings-on themselves. (Stroud 2000, 30)

Once properly understood, the SCHC can seem obviously correct. Though he takes issue with (1),<sup>9</sup> Michael Williams argues that “(2) and (3) seem innocuous. Indeed, they seem innocuous because almost vacuous” (Williams 1991, 198). And to quote Stroud again:

Isn’t everything said in characterizing the ‘standard’ conception obviously true? ... These remarks seem to express the very heart of objectivity, and to deny the slightest hint of psychologism or anthropocentrism. (Stroud 2000, 37)

However compelling it may be, though, the SCHC presents us with a difficult problem. It is part of our conception of the world that we ourselves are within the world. As Clarke says, some “items are aspects of ourselves,” and some concepts “hav[e] reference’ to aspects of one’s self” (761). An inability to philosophize would prevent us not only from “inquir[ing] what the objective fact really was, to raise an issue to be settled solely by the concepts and the item”; it would also prevent us from “assess[ing] our epistemological position *objectively*... The limiting eyeglasses of the restricted [i.e., the plain as traditionally conceived—more on this in §2.3] would prevent us from seeing, or even trying to see, things and ourselves and they and we really are” (761–2).

In short, it would seem that if we are to achieve absolute objectivity “we must get outside of ourselves” (Nagel 1986, 67), as in Figure 2.

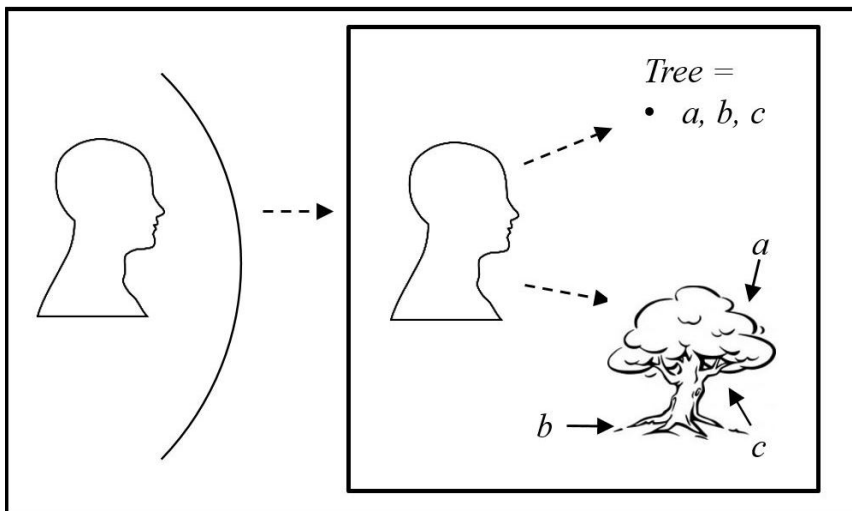


FIGURE 2: The Standard Conceptual-Human Constitution (II)

It is, to put it mildly, not at all clear that human beings can adopt this sort of detached standpoint, one that stands back not only from concepts and the world, but also from *ourselves* as users of concepts and knowers of the world.

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Williams claims that Clarke does *not* target (1) for criticism. This, however, is false. Indeed, as we’ll see in §4.3, (1) is Clarke’s principal target.

## 2.3 The Traditional Conception of Concepts

The question with which we are presently concerned is how the traditional conception of the HES explains the immunity of plain knowing to outside undermining, where the ‘outside’ source is taken to be philosophical skepticism.

As we’ve seen, according to the SCHC our concepts are inherently context-free and self-sufficient: they are independent of both human knowers and the world. To be context-free is to be, in Clarke’s terms, “pure” (760). We ask “pure questions, etc.” by “stepping back” or “standing back from our experiencing” (761). If our concepts are inherently context-free or “pure,” then what are we doing when we deploy those concepts within everyday contexts? According to Clarke, the traditional view is that to contextualize inherently pure concepts is to *restrict* their scope. On this view, “plainness is restrictedness” (760). To philosophize is “to step outside the circle of the plain... outside the nonsemantical practice [of everyday life], then, speaking simple English [i.e., taking into account *only* the ‘skeletal meaning’ of our words], ask, affirm, assess, but, as a consequence, in unrestricted, untrammelled fashion” (760).

On the traditional view of the plain, the plain man’s everyday “practice” is such that “for practical purposes he consistently ignores certain kinds of remote possibilities” (760). If they are properly understood—that is, if they are understood *as* presupposing the world—then plain empirical knowledge-claims can remain literally true *even if* they fail to accord with the absolutely objective facts of the matter. They cannot be faulted for presupposing the world and our perceptual-epistemic relation to it, for it is built into the meaning or ‘structure’ of the claims themselves that they are presuppositional in this way. On the traditional view, the immunity of plain knowing is a function of the plain’s restrictedness: by *saying* (meaning, implying) less, plain claims open themselves to fewer legitimate challenges.

Clarke makes the same point in NTE, where he frames it as an answer to the following question: What is the nature of the contribution of everyday contexts to the meaning of plain utterances? He describes the traditional view, which he rejects, this way:

The rules of ordinary usage may legislate that *every* possibility, including any questioning the reality of the object, is *always* relevant. The non-rule-like dimension may in daily life *mitigate* the severity of these rules, requiring that for a possibility questioning reality to be relevant it must be backed by a special reason. On this alternative, if this dimension were removed, then the rules would operate unchecked, requiring that we rule out every counter-possibility. (NTE, 182)

This conception of the contribution of everyday contexts to the meaning of plain utterances embodies the traditional view of the everyday as restricted by practical ends, whereas philosophy is thought to engage in pure (unrestricted) inquiries into the absolutely objective truth of things. Philosophical knowing, Clarke writes in LS, requires “*invulnerability*,” which in turn requires that “we be able to ‘rule out’ any counterpossibility” (762–3; cf. 765, 768). On this view, “[t]hese so-called ‘pragmatic considerations’ constitute the non-rule-like dimension” (NTE, 185). In §3.3, we’ll look at Clarke’s alternative account of the contribution to the meaning



of our everyday utterances of that “dimension” that he will later, in LS, refer to as “the plain.”

#### 2.4 The Airplane-Spotters

In LS, Clarke illustrates the traditional conception of philosophizing as pure inquiry and the concomitant conception of the plain as restricted by way of the analogy of the wartime airplane-spotters. Stroud develops a version of the same example in Chapter 2 of Stroud 1984. The airplane-spotters are instructed to distinguish among ten types of enemy aircraft, types *A–J*, on the basis of a “checklist of features” (759). Stroud refers to the airplane-spotters’ “manuals” (Stroud 1984, 67), and I will do the same. The identification procedure yields purely or absolutely objective facts only if the aircrafts being spotted belong to one of the ten types. If older, antiquated aircraft (types *X*, *Y*, and *Z*) are spotted, then the technique will fail to distinguish them from *any* aircraft of types *A–J*: the identification procedure “specifies features sufficient for distinguishing the ten types one from another but none from *X*, *Y*, *Z*” (759). The airplane-spotters know of the existence of these older aircraft, and so know of the ultimate fallibility of their identification procedure, but they “are instructed to ignore” this complication due to “certain overriding practical advantages” (759).

It is important to Clarke’s story that the airplane-spotters are *not* human beings like us. They “never dream or hallucinate,” and their “senses are unerring” (760). I take it that these qualifications are meant to preclude a number of familiar angles of skeptical attack. The airplane-spotters differ from us also in that they “have only the concepts presented [in the manual], plus any others needed for what the humanoids do, ask, and say in this state of affairs” (760). I take it that this qualification is meant to preclude skeptical attacks based on mundane ‘undefeated defeaters.’ In the absence of any concepts not directly required by the practice of airplane-spotting, the following type of skeptical queries would be impossible in the airplane-spotters’ “small, independent universe” (760): “But might it be that aircraft *x* is not an aircraft at all, but an aircraft-shaped balloon sent up to deceive you?”

Given these qualifications, Clarke thinks that “[t]hese creatures... are not in a skeptical position,” for “[t]hey can know several kinds of objective empirical facts.” Not only can they know what certain aircraft are according to the identification procedure, they can also know, “if they ignore the restrictions on the identification procedure, the real type of an aircraft” (760).<sup>10</sup> Given their infallible senses and the absence of any concepts that might be marshalled in an attempt to ‘defeat’ their apparent seeing of an aircraft, the airplane-spotters need only consult the deliverances of their senses and correlate those deliverances with the checklists contained in the manual. Figure 3 illustrates this everyday practice. Its concordance with the SCHC should be obvious.

---

<sup>10</sup> In fact, we must add one more stipulation if we are to conclude that the airplane-spotters can legitimately philosophize: we must, as Stroud points out, stipulate that they know that their manual is both complete and accurate (Stroud 1984, 80).

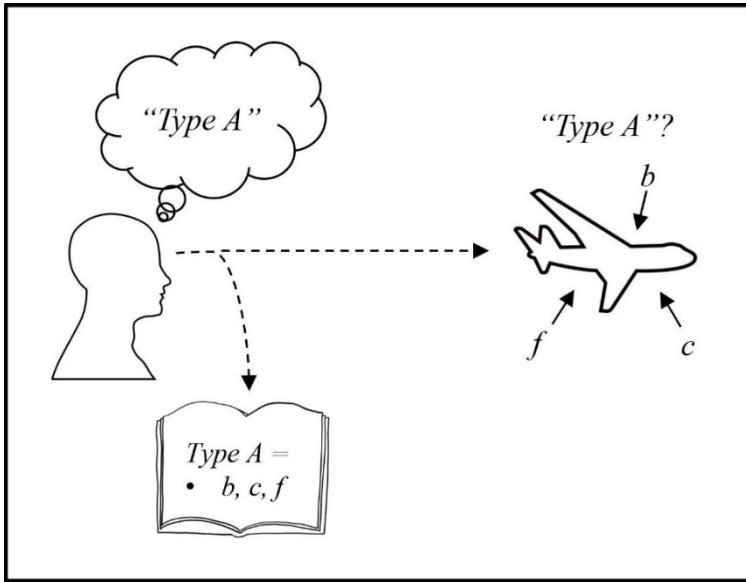


FIGURE 3: The Everyday Practice of an Airplane-Spotter

Crucially, the everyday practice does not guarantee the absolutely objective truth of the belief of the airplane-spotter in Figure 3 that aircraft  $x$  is of type  $A$ , even if the airplane-spotter has fulfilled what Robert Fogelin calls her “epistemic responsibility” (Fogelin 1994, 26 ff.) by carefully and judiciously employing the identification procedure. It guarantees the truth only of the more restricted belief that, *according to the identification procedure*, aircraft  $x$  is of type  $A$ . Understood in this way, the assertion “Aircraft  $x$  is of type  $A$ ” is both true and immune to undermining based on appeals to the purely objective facts regarding aircraft  $x$ , should those facts go beyond the limits of the identification procedure. Even if aircraft  $x$  is not of type  $A$ , it remains true that it is a type  $A$  aircraft *according to the identification procedure*.

It is important to note that Clarke never abandons the traditional conception of the philosophical as the pure: it is “a truth” that “the philosophical is the pure” (760). What he will call into question is our ability to *ask* or *answer* pure philosophical questions. Nor does he abandon the view that the everyday is context-bound in something like the manner of the airplane-spotters’ everyday practice. What he will call into question is the conception of the plain as restricted, for one thing skepticism teaches us is that we are as yet in no position to venture *any* general characterization of the plain. The conception of the plain as restricted is one that purports to view it from a philosophical standpoint, a standpoint outside the plain. Many philosophers clearly do attempt to adopt such a standpoint; indeed, when they are ‘in their studies’ they take for granted that they can succeed in the endeavor.<sup>11</sup> But from that standpoint, there is only one way the plain can look. If there is an *outside* to the plain, then the plain must be restricted in some sense. As Stroud puts it, “Once one grasps the traditional epistemological project it is difficult to see the claims of everyday life as anything other than restricted” (Stroud 1984, 127).

<sup>11</sup> Clarke writes: “How frustrating if we could ask only what the immaterial being asked concerning material objects or only what we asked a moment ago (the plain question) about dreaming! Something important would be denied us, which ‘inside our studies’ we seek, *not questioning its availability*” (759; emphasis added).

We're now in a position to understand how the SCHC explains the immunity of plain knowing to philosophical skepticism, as well as its explanation of how philosophizing is (or would be) possible. The airplane-spotters can philosophize because their concepts are fundamentally *pure* and readily *available* in the sense that these pure concepts can be deployed as easily (and in the same way) as their restricted twins. In order to engage in a pure inquiry, the airplane-spotters need only prescind their discourse from the everyday contexts that restrict the scope of their utterances. The results of such an inquiry might seem to contradict the results of context-bound inquiries; but this apparent contradiction does not invalidate context-bound conclusions. Though the airplane-spotters are capable of identifying any aircraft *x* as being (e.g.) of the antiquated type *Z*, the purely objective fact of the matter has no impact on the correctness of their (epistemically responsible) claim, within the context of the wartime practice, that that same aircraft *x* belongs to type *A*. Thus, their context-bound claims are immune from outside undermining.

In the same way, the SCHC also provides an account of the structure of the plain, "the character and source of its relative 'non-objectivity'" (769)—though here we can dispense with the square-quotes. The character of the plain's relative non-objectivity is its restrictedness; the source of its restrictedness is the pragmatic constraints imposed by everyday contexts. These pragmatic constraints constitute the structure of the plain. If the SCHC were the HES, then there would be no problem of the structure of the plain, for we would know precisely what that structure is (or, at least, we would know how to go about determining its shape in any given circumstance).

Clarke wants to convince us, however, that a close study of philosophical skepticism demonstrates that the SCHC cannot be the actual HES. It follows that we must reject the SCHC and, with it, the traditional accounts of how philosophizing is possible for human beings, how the (human) plain is immune from outside undermining, and ultimately, what the structure of the plain itself is.

### 3 Common Sense and Its Discontents

Why does Clarke think that the actual HES cannot be of the "standard type," and why does he think that a close study of philosophical skepticism demonstrates as much? These questions will occupy us for the remainder of this paper.

#### 3.1 Common Sense as Epistemic Bedrock

Let's return to the airplane-spotters. Their knowledge of aircraft types, whether plain or philosophical, is grounded in their (presumably) complete and accurate grasp of all existing types of aircraft and the marks and features that identify them. This is the justificatory foundation of their empirical knowledge-claims regarding aircraft. The concepts deployed in their utterances are inherently and (given that the airplane-spotters do not dream or hallucinate, etc.) unproblematically pure, i.e., context-free and absolutely objective. Thus, the airplane-spotters can philosophize. But they can also have plain or everyday knowledge of the sort that is common among human beings. To do so, they need only engage in a shared practice that restricts the scope of their utterances by ruling out certain counterpossibilities. In those cases, the restricted concepts are parasitic upon their pure counterparts: the airplane-spotters can make sense of 'a type-*A* aircraft (according to the

identification procedure) only because they have prior knowledge of type-*A* aircrafts *per se*. Pure concepts are fundamental; plain versions of those concepts are derivative.

But what grounds *our* knowledge? Can we make sense of ourselves on the model of the airplane-spotters? To begin with, we need to note all the ways in which human beings differ from the “humanoids” in their “small, independent universe.” Unlike them, we dream and hallucinate; our senses are *not* unerring (or at least it is not obvious that they are unerring);<sup>12</sup> and our conceptual universe is huge and open-ended. Obviously, then, any account of the SCHC involving human beings is going to be very different from, and far more complicated than, the example of the airplane-spotters.

As we saw in §2.1, Clarke maintains that, *in extremis*, our plain empirical knowledge-claims can be justified by appeal to the general propositions of Common Sense (CS).<sup>13</sup> When one is working within an everyday context, the general CS beliefs are unquestionable, which accounts for the immunity of plain knowing to outside undermining. According to CS, we dream and hallucinate—but not all the time; our senses deceive us—but not all the time; and while we have loads of conceptual resources that can be deployed to challenge our knowledge-claims, no such challenges invalidate the basic CS propositions.

What about our philosophical knowledge-claims? Here, we can divide philosophers roughly into two camps: those who think that the general CS beliefs require independent (noncircular) justification when philosophizing and those who think that they do not.<sup>14</sup> Following Clarke, we can refer to the first group as traditional philosophers or, more narrowly, traditional epistemologists. To call into question the fundamental CS beliefs is to call into question our knowledge of the external world; hence, “traditional epistemology is concerned with our knowledge of the external world” (NTE, 40). Though Clarke does not use the term, I will refer to the second group as *nontraditional* philosophers.

Perhaps the most prominent brand of nontraditional philosophy is the commonsense philosophies of figures such as Thomas Reid and G.E. Moore. Reid expresses his nontraditional orientation when he laments that “philosophers, pitying the credulity of the vulgar, resolve to have no faith but what is founded upon reason. They apply to philosophy to furnish them with reasons for the belief of those things which all mankind have believed, without being able to give any reason for it.” Alas, these “great men... have not been able, from all the treasures of philosophy, to draw one argument that is fit to convince a man that can reason, of

---

<sup>12</sup> Kant may be right that “truth and illusion are not in the object, insofar as it is intuited, but in the judgment about it insofar as it is thought. Thus it is correctly said that the senses do not err; yet not because they always judge correctly, but because they do not judge at all” (Kant 1998, 384; A293/B350). That said, it is an entirely ordinary way of speaking to refer to our senses deceiving us—namely, deceiving us *into* thinking (judging) that false things are true.

<sup>13</sup> Isn’t it correct to say that the airplane-spotters’ knowledge is also ultimately grounded in such general CS propositions? In a sense, yes. But to anticipate points I make later in this section, the airplane-spotters have no need to formulate or appeal to the general CS propositions, for they do not dream or hallucinate, their senses are unerring, etc.

<sup>14</sup> Laurence Bonjour writes that “[t]here are, broadly speaking, only two main sorts of answers” to the “basic meta-epistemological question” of how to justify an epistemology: “On the one hand, one may appeal to the deliverances of common-sense (and ‘ordinary language’), arguing that an epistemological theory is acceptable if and only if it is congruent in some specified way with those deliverances. Or, on the other hand, one may reject the appeal to Common-sense as ultimately question-begging and attempt instead the perhaps quixotic task of constructing an independent, theoretical justification of one’s epistemological theory” (Bonjour 1979, 157–8).

the existence of any one thing without him" (Reid 1892, 79). Reid proposes that the fundamental mistake of these (traditional) philosophers is that,

from a natural prejudice in [philosophy's] favor, [they] have endeavoured to extend her jurisdiction beyond its just limits, and to call to her bar the dictates of Common Sense. But these decline her jurisdiction; they disdain the trial of reasoning, and disown its authority; they neither claim its aid, nor dread its attacks... [F]or, in reality, Common Sense holds nothing of Philosophy, nor needs her aid. But, on the other hand, Philosophy (if I may be permitted to change the metaphor) has no other root but the principles of Common Sense; it grows out of them, and draws its nourishment from them. Severed from this root, its honours wither, its sap is dried up, it dies and rots. (Reid 1892, 81)

According to Reid, any attempt to call into question the general CS beliefs leads inevitably to the theoretical 'death' and 'rot' characteristic of skepticism.

Here, Reid refers to "the belief of those things which all mankind have believed." It may be true that all human beings (or near enough) have believed, say, "that there is a sun, moon, and stars" (Reid 1892, 79), but is it right to say that all human beings have *believed* "principles of Common Sense" such as "there is life and intelligence in our fellow-men with whom we converse" (Reid 2002, 482)? What about the general CS propositions that Clarke identifies? We've seen that Clarke himself refers to them, both in NTE and LS, as beliefs; yet they are not the sort of thing that we usually think or utter, certainly not in the course of everyday life. Indeed, outside of philosophical discussions, it is rare that the general CS propositions would be so much as formulated, let alone believed, except perhaps tacitly or in some other attenuated and hard-to-define sense. It seems to me that the right way to put it is that, initially and for the most part, we *take the general CS propositions for granted*. But what does *that* come down to? Stated differently, how do we arrive at the general CS propositions such that we come to see that, in some sense, we were committed to them all along?

### 3.2 The Emergence of Common Sense

The traditional view is that the general CS propositions emerge when, either in the face of a challenge to a particular empirical knowledge-claim or just out of an interest in what ultimately justifies such knowledge-claims, we engage in a kind of justificational archaeology: we dig down under our beliefs in search of the bedrock on which they rest. Briefly stated, the procedure goes as follows. We begin with a particular everyday utterance, such as "I'm certain there is a tomato there" (NTE, 42). Next, we decontextualize the utterance: we remove it from any and all everyday contexts (e.g., making a sandwich, putting together a grocery list, etc.). Finally, we restate the claim in general terms. Thus, "I'm certain there is a tomato there" becomes "We can be certain that there are physical objects" (NTE, 42; cf. NTE, 25).

Let me explain this sequence in more detail. First, not just *any* sort of particular everyday empirical knowledge-claim will do. On this point, Stroud and Cavell—both of whom were deeply influenced by Clarke<sup>15</sup>—are in some ways clearer than Clarke is. To serve the traditional epistemologist's purpose, the knowledge-claim

---

<sup>15</sup> See §1 of Eichorn 2021, which appears in this issue of *Sképsis*.

that is examined must represent, as Stroud puts it, “a best-possible case of that kind,” meaning that it must be “representative of the best position any of us can ever be in for knowing things about the world around us on the basis of the senses” (Stroud 1984, 9–10); it must be, Cavell writes, a “‘best’ case for knowing,” meaning that it is “one which we should all recognize as holding the *best* prospect of certainty” (Cavell 1979, 133). Best-cases for knowing are such that “[a] negative verdict in the chosen case would support a negative verdict everywhere else” (Stroud 1984, 10): “What ‘best case’ turns out to mean” is that “[i]f I know anything, I know *this*” (Cavell 1979, 145). It is for this reason that traditional epistemologists tend to focus on simple cases, such as seeing a tomato or a piece of paper. Such cases involve what Cavell calls “generic objects” (Cavell 1979, 52)—a bird or an animal, but not (as in J.L. Austin’s example) a goldfinch (Austin 1970, 83).<sup>16</sup>

In NTE, Clarke contrasts the sort of cases considered by traditional epistemologists to even more obviously unsuitable cases. He imagines a brilliant detective investigating a murder in which the main suspect has what appears to be an airtight alibi: the occupant of the room adjoining his (a trustworthy fellow) heard the suspect typing at the time of the murder. But, the detective points out, the suspect “is a hi-fi enthusiast with excellent equipment,” and it’s possible that he had put on “a long-playing record of typing, meanwhile sneaking out of his room and returning after committing the murder” (NTE, 30). In this way, “[t]he detective showed that we didn’t know a certain objective empirical fact,” but “[i]n showing that we don’t know that the suspect was in his room typing the detective has not shown that we can have no knowledge of *any* objective empirical facts” (NTE, 41). The crucial difference between the detective’s case and a traditional epistemologist’s case is, Clarke argues, that “every particular claim which an epistemologist examines has a special relationship to its corresponding common-sense belief: it is a particular instance of such a belief; if one of these particular claims is invalid, then its corresponding common-sense belief is invalid” (NTE, 42).

The second step is to decontextualize the suitably simple, generic knowledge-claim. To decontextualize an utterance is to expel it from the plain. To fall outside the plain is to fall into the domain of the philosophical. Thus, this second step involves turning at least potential “cases of daily life” into what Clarke calls “philosophical cases” (NTE, 197, 181). Decontextualized (i.e., philosophical) knowledge-claims are no longer bound up with our practices; they no longer enjoy immunity from outside undermining. Their sentential content remains unchanged, but their meaning has been cut free from the non-rule-like dimension of the everyday. Everyday inquiries into the truth or falsity of plain knowledge-claims “are the joint product of rules of [language] usage and a non-rule-like dimension,” but “[e]pistemological inquiries are the product *solely* of these rules” (NTE, 229). In other words, evaluations of decontextualized knowledge-claims take into account *only* the “skeletal meaning” of those claims.

The thought behind decontextualization is that “*these* [i.e., philosophical] cases are *the* ones to be worked with. These cases, as opposed to those of daily life, are primary; the cases of daily life are somehow less fundamental than philosophical cases” (NTE, 232). Philosophical cases are more fundamental than everyday ones because of the third step, in which we restate the particular knowledge-claim in

---

<sup>16</sup> Cavell adds that, in distinguishing “generic” from “specific” objects, he is trying only “to summarize the spirit in which an object is under discussion... While I do not think it accidental that such a thing as a goldfinch does not make an appearance in traditional epistemology, I do not wish to insist that one could not have appeared; but only that, if it were to, its function would be, or become, that of a generic object” (Cavell 1979, 53).

general terms. The result is the statement of a general CS proposition. In other words, decontextualizing a particular knowledge-claim transforms it into “a particular instance of” a “corresponding [general] common-sense belief” (NTE, 42; NTE, 235), and it is presumed that our plain knowledge rests upon such CS beliefs. Thus, “[t]he epistemologist’s case constitutes the *core* of cases of daily life” (NTE, 176). If our goal is to interrogate the ultimate justificatory grounds of our everyday empirical knowledge-claims, then we must bring to the surface and then interrogate the fundamental CS propositions: “If one is examining the truth of these common-sense beliefs one *must* work with philosophical cases, not real cases” (NTE, 237).

### 3.3 Philosophical Common Sense (CS<sub>ph</sub>)

In short, traditional philosophy strives, among other things, to interrogate the ultimate rational grounds of our everyday knowledge-claims. In the case of everyday empirical knowledge-claims, which are thought to rest ultimately on Clarke’s general CS propositions, this means interrogating the legitimacy of those CS propositions. This is the primary task of traditional epistemology as Clarke understands it: “The subject with which traditional epistemology is concerned is our knowledge of the world. Traditional epistemology begins its investigation of this knowledge by considering so-called common sense beliefs about empirical knowledge” (NTE, 5). In “considering” the general CS propositions, traditional epistemology treats them, at least temporarily and for methodological purposes, as mere arbitrary assumptions. Consequently, any uncritical assent to CS is deemed dogmatic. This is, of course, the most common charge leveled against Moore: that his arguments are “impotently dogmatic” (754; cf. 757).

Traditional epistemology, then, takes itself to *begin* with the general CS propositions. Clarke agrees. Interestingly, however, he also rejects a view he finds to be “[c]ommon to virtually all critiques of traditional epistemology,” namely, “that *philosophy begins after* the common-sense beliefs. On this idea what is philosophical, that is, what is suspicious, are the *examinations* of common sense. Philosophers are alleged to have repudiated common sense for (mistaken) philosophical reasons” (NTE, 239–40). A common charge is that, in their inquiries, skeptics—i.e., traditional epistemologists—are “using ‘know’ in a special sense (way), as requiring of knowing much more than is appropriate for empirical knowledge and, for this reason, denying what [so-called CS] maintains” (762). Against this, Clarke wants to convince us that “the skeptic is innocent, without an independent thought in his head concerning what knowing requires, the submissive slave of [so-called CS]” (762). By “so-called common sense”—a phrase that appears throughout NTE—Clarke is referring to what he will call, in LS, *philosophical* CS (CS<sub>ph</sub>), “those general propositions which answer general philosophical questions affirmatively” (759).<sup>17</sup> CS<sub>ph</sub> “[dictates] that knowing meet a certain requirement,” namely, “*invulnerability*,” which requires “that to know \_\_\_ we be able to ‘rule out’

<sup>17</sup> With only one clear exception—the second occurrence of “common sense” in the following passage: “Common sense has really little or nothing to do with *common* sense” (NTE, 240–1)—all or nearly all references to CS in NTE are to what Clarke often, but not always, calls “so-called common sense.” That CS in NTE just is what he will call, in LS, CS<sub>ph</sub> is confirmed here: “... there are two crucial relationships between common sense and philosophical cases. Common-sense beliefs are *completely meaningful* if and only if assertions like ‘I know there is a tomato there’ are completely meaningful in philosophical cases. And common-sense beliefs are *valid* if and only if such particular claims made in philosophical cases are valid” (NTE, 237).

any counterpossibility to \_\_\_\_, any possibility which, if it were realized, would falsify \_\_\_\_” (762–3). But why does philosophy place this requirement on knowing? We already have the beginning of an answer: to philosophize is to take into account only the rule-like dimension of language, shorn of the non-rule-like dimension of meaning provided by everyday contexts. But why should discounting the non-rule-like dimension have this consequence?

As we’ve seen, the traditional view holds that such a strong epistemic requirement is built into the rules of language. If we allow these rules to apply unchecked by contextual restrictions, then the epistemic requirement will hold. We’ve also seen, however, that Clarke rejects the traditional view. Even so, he maintains that philosophical knowing does indeed require invulnerability—or, more precisely, he argues that it is “conditionally objectively determined” that philosophical knowing requires invulnerability (cf. NTE, 206). What does this mean, and how does it relate to Clarke’s rejection of the view “that *philosophy begins after* the common-sense beliefs” (NTE, 239)?

To begin sorting this out, we need to look at Clarke’s own preferred account of the contribution of everyday contexts to our full-bodied utterances. As we saw in §2.3, the traditional view of the nature of the semantic contribution of everyday contexts holds that everyday contexts “*mitigate* the severity” of the rules of language, which, when operating “unchecked,” require “that we rule out every counter-possibility” (NTE, 182). On this view, these restrictive ““pragmatic considerations”” (NTE, 185) constitute the structure of the plain. Alternatively,

The non-rule-like dimension may... supply the *criterion* of relevancy/irrelevancy of possibilities questioning reality. On this alternative the rules for “certain” would say nothing about whether such possibilities were relevant; the rules would leave this to be determined by context in its broadest sense, according to which “daily life” would be *one* such context, mathematics another. In the philosophical case special possibilities questioning reality [e.g., dreams, hallucinations, futuristic physiologists, etc.] would be neither relevant nor irrelevant; there would be no criterion for the relevancy/irrelevancy... According to [this alternative] the philosophical case would be essentially incomplete. In daily life the non-rule-like dimension would not just *mitigate* the rules. These rules would be incomplete in themselves; they would have to be *filled in* by the criterion supplied by this dimension. (NTE, 182–4)

Note that the traditional view would be correct *if* the SCHC were the actual HES. Thus, Clarke’s alternative account of the semantic contribution of everyday contexts provides a clue as to what an alternative account of the HES might look like. On this alternative, the plain does not *restrict* meaning; it *completes* it.

### 3.4 Traditional Epistemology’s Critique of CS<sub>ph</sub>

In the absence of a criterion of the relevancy/irrelevancy of counterpossibilities, philosophical utterances are indeterminate: there is no fully objective fact of the matter regarding what we might call the ‘semantic scope’ of philosophical utterances. Possibilities involving dreams, hallucinations, or futuristic physiologists are *not* irrelevant in philosophical cases, as they are in everyday



cases;<sup>18</sup> but neither is it the case that they *are* relevant. Even so, Clarke insists that, though it is not “fully objectively determined,” it *is* “conditionally objectively determined” in philosophical cases that all counterpossibilities to *p* must be ruled out if we are legitimately to claim to know (philosophically) that *p* (NTE, 206).

What accounts for this conditional objective determination? Clarke's answer turns on “the *philosopher's assumption*” that philosophical utterances are full-bodied in meaning (NTE, 206). In this, the traditional philosopher is mistaken. But so are Austinian ordinary-language philosophers, who “have been urging for some time... that ordinary language does not make *any* sense in these [philosophical] cases.” Clarke maintains instead that “language in these cases has some meaning, viz., skeletal meaning, which conditionally objectively determines the epistemologist's inquiry” (NTE, 232). Skeletal meaning has this effect because, Clarke argues, the traditional epistemologist, assuming that philosophical utterances are fully meaningful, “*does... what is required to make [philosophical utterances] fully meaningful*” (NTE, 217). In LS, Clarke writes that “[t]he fewer the contextual features [of an utterance], the more option we have, the larger the role of our decision and resolve” (757). The traditional epistemologist *resolves* to understand philosophical utterances as fully meaningful, which requires supplying a criterion of the relevancy of counterpossibilities. Since he notes, correctly, that all counterpossibilities are equally relevant in philosophical cases—and, crucially, since the equal *irrelevancy* of all counterpossibilities would preclude philosophical utterances from attaining full-bodied meaning—he decides that it is *true*, as the tradition has assumed, that philosophical knowing requires ruling out all counterpossibilities. He does this because (for reasons Clarke lays out in great detail, but which I will pass over here) he feels that this is what he “should” do (cf. NTE, 214–5): “What the traditional epistemologist does in ‘really meaning’ his [skeptical or ‘paradoxical’]<sup>19</sup> conclusion is produce the kind of situation in which the statement is [fully] meaningful and true” (NTE, 227).<sup>20</sup> He can “produce” the “situation” because, again, the lack of contextual constraints on any utterance *p* opens up a space for “our decision and resolve” in choosing how to understand *p* (757).

Now we arrive at a crucial stage of Clarke's account of traditional-epistemological inquiry. Given that, in philosophical cases, particular utterances are to be understood as instances of general CS propositions, “we can now see” that “the philosopher's assumption that ordinary language is completely meaningful in philosophical cases is... really the assumption that the general common-sense beliefs are completely meaningful.” Traditional epistemology, Clarke notes, “examines... the *truth*, not the meaningfulness, of the common-sense beliefs; it assumes that these beliefs are meaningful” (NTE, 237). But given (a) that it is conditionally objectively determined that all counterpossibilities are relevant in philosophical cases, and (b) that such an epistemic requirement leads to skepticism (i.e., the rejection of CS<sub>ph</sub>),

<sup>18</sup> In everyday contexts, Clarke writes, skeptical doubts “are ignorable—either absurd, irrelevant, or out of place” (755).

<sup>19</sup> On the relation between ‘skeptical’ and ‘paradoxical’ in NTE, see NTE, 43, and my comments on it at Eichorn 2019, 50n1.

<sup>20</sup> With respect to Seeing, Clarke argues that traditional epistemologists perform a “mental act” that *makes it true* (for them, as long as they sustain the mental act) that they can see only sense-data (NTE, 84; cf. NTE, 98). Their mistake is to think that what they see as a result of this mental act is the same as what they (and the rest of us) see in everyday life (NTE, 138). (In an early lecture course, Heidegger reaches the same conclusions: see Heidegger 2008, 66–8.) The same is true in the case of Knowing, which is why Clarke claims that the traditional epistemologist does what it takes not just to make his skeptical conclusion fully meaningful, but also *true* (for him, for as long as he sustains the mental act). For an account of this mental act, see Eichorn 2019, §3.5.1; applied to Knowing, see §5.2.2.

then “traditional epistemology shows that common sense, if fully meaningful, is to be repudiated as incorrect” (NTE, 238).

Regarding (b): Though Clarke rarely speaks in terms of skepticism in NTE, in one place he writes that “[t]he importance of this requirement of special reasons [i.e., of *rejecting* the view that all counterpossibilities are relevant when assessing knowledge-claims] cannot be over-emphasized. It stands between the plain man and scepticism about the physical world” (NTE, 153). Given that it is conditionally objectively determined that the requirement of special reasons is suspended when doing traditional philosophy, this amounts to saying that skepticism is the conditionally objectively determined result of traditional epistemology.<sup>21</sup>

What makes CS<sub>ph</sub> *philosophical* is that its propositions require that to know them we must be able to rule out all counterpossibilities. But philosophy does not itself impose this requirement; rather, it is an imposition that results from doing “what is required” to make philosophical utterances fully meaningful (NTE, 216–7). As we’ve seen, Clarke rejects the view that philosophizing *begins* with CS<sub>ph</sub>, that “what is philosophical, that is, what is suspicious, are the *examinations* of common sense” (NTE, 240). He wants to convince us instead that “[p]hilosophizing *ends* with the common-sense beliefs” (NTE, 240). What is philosophical and suspicious, Clarke argues, is the epistemic requirement imposed on CS. In short, the general propositions of CS<sub>ph</sub> are “the product of a large piece of philosophizing about empirical knowledge done before [the skeptic] comes on stage” (754). The traditional epistemologist (i.e., the skeptic), “performing kinds of inquiries he performs in daily life,” simply draws the *correct* conclusion regarding our knowledge of the general CS<sub>ph</sub> propositions *given the assumption* that those propositions (and the skeptical questions challenging them) are fully meaningful. “There is, as I should like to put it, no philosophy in the basic traditional epistemological inquiries which examine common sense. Philosophizing *ends* with the common-sense beliefs” (NTE, 240).<sup>22</sup>

Clarke concludes that “[c]ommon sense really has little or nothing to do with *common* sense. These so-called beliefs are the product of philosophizing—though of the most natural, immediate, and compelling kind—and, in a certain respect, seem to be *a priori*” (NTE, 240–1). The idea of “a *plain* species of Common Sense (CS<sub>pl</sub>)” (757)—so central to LS—is absent from NTE. In NTE, common sense just is CS<sub>ph</sub>. What is philosophical about CS, Clarke writes, is that

there is implicit [in the general CS propositions] a conception of the nature of empirical knowledge. This conception is that empirical knowledge is *independent* of what I have referred to as the non-rule-like dimension. The common-sense beliefs are assertions that we can know and see physical objects, and these assertions are themselves independent of that dimension. (NTE, 241)

<sup>21</sup> Cf. NTE, 247: “The significance of traditional epistemology lies in its having traced out the fact that if knowing and seeing must be independent of the non-rule-like dimension [which is what imposes the requirement of special reasons] then we can know and see very little indeed.”

<sup>22</sup> It might seem that, in LS, Clarke contradicts this when he writes that “[the skeptic’s] inquisition of CS<sub>ph</sub> is philosophical” (766). But I don’t think there’s any real contradiction here. Clarke’s point in LS is that “[t]he skeptic has had one foot within the philosophical, the other within the plain” (765–6). The skeptic’s examination of CS<sub>ph</sub> is philosophical only in the sense that CS<sub>ph</sub> itself is philosophical—which is the same point he makes in NTE, though without the terminology of plain and philosophical CS.

Given how “natural, immediate, and compelling” this piece of philosophizing is—indeed, so much so that the general propositions of CS<sub>ph</sub> “seem to be *a priori*”—the philosophical conception of knowledge built into CS has a “felt necessity” (NTE, 242): “it seems *necessarily* true that *genuine* empirical knowledge, and *genuine* perception, *must* not depend in any way on this non-rule-like dimension” (NTE, 241).<sup>23</sup>

In a passage that is crucial both within NTE and for understanding the ways in which LS moves beyond that earlier work, Clarke writes: “I think that everyone succumbs to the conception [of empirical knowledge] implicit in the common-sense beliefs as soon as he begins thinking in general terms about empirical knowledge” (NTE, 243). Indeed, we may succumb even sooner, if only implicitly, for the general CS propositions represent, Clarke says in one place, “deeply ingrained beliefs about knowledge and the world which the plain man unthinkingly holds” (NTE, 62). For Clarke, what is so peculiar about Moore is that this is *not* true of him: his general CS propositions are “in general logical type” identical to everyday propositions (755). This means that the “‘general propositions of Common Sense’ that Moore sets out to uphold” (754) are *plain*, “*even though* very general and context-free” (755).<sup>24</sup> Unlike CS<sub>ph</sub> beliefs, which “are *not* talking about the claims made by the plain man *in daily life*” (NTE, 235), CS<sub>pl</sub> beliefs *are* about such everyday claims. The peculiarity of CS<sub>pl</sub> lies in the fact that its propositions are plain but *not* everyday—they are the sole exceptions that prevent us from concluding, with traditional epistemologists and ordinary-language philosophers alike, that the plain and the everyday coincide.

I will return to Moore in §4.4. Now I want to look at the conclusions that Clarke draws from his reflections in NTE. If the propositions of CS<sub>ph</sub> are fully meaningful, then the traditional-epistemological examination of CS<sub>ph</sub> is valid. But if the traditional-epistemological examination of CS<sub>ph</sub> is valid, then philosophical skepticism is correct.<sup>25</sup> Thus, if CS<sub>ph</sub> were fully meaningful, then its propositions would be false. But it is *not* fully meaningful. By the same token, philosophical skepticism is not fully meaningful. Therefore, “CS<sub>ph</sub> *and* its skeptical denial should both be erased from the books” (762), from which it follows that “the only correct answers” to philosophical questions “amount to rejecting the question” (NTE, 201; cf. Clarke 1965, 107).

What, then, has been shown? CS<sub>ph</sub> beliefs “constitute a faulty conceptualization of empirical knowledge” (NTE, 143), yet *that conceptualization is* our *conceptualization*, one that we ‘unthinkingly hold’ or (if we’re not G.E. Moore) ‘succumb to’ the moment we start thinking in general terms about empirical knowledge. We must appreciate, Clarke tells us, “the apparent inconceivability of any alternative” (NTE, 242) to this faulty conceptualization of empirical knowledge. If we do, then we will appreciate “the significance of traditional epistemology”—“the depth of truth in traditional epistemology” (NTE, 231)—which “is that we do not understand empirical knowledge” (NTE, 143; cf. NTE, 241) and “that there is no valid defense of common sense” available to us (NTE,

<sup>23</sup> Recall Michael Williams’s remark that two of the three aspects of the SCHC “seem innocuous because almost vacuous” (Williams 1991, 198) and Stroud’s rhetorical question, “Isn’t everything said in characterizing the ‘standard’ conception obviously true?” (Stroud 2000, 37).

<sup>24</sup> We can see, then, that Michael Williams fundamentally misunderstands Clarke when he claims that Clarke “argues that Moore’s propositions belong to ‘philosophical common sense’” (Williams 1991, 180). Moore, Clarke concludes, is “the inveterate plain man, for whom there *is* nothing outside the circle of the plain” (758).

<sup>25</sup> This is Clarke’s way of stating what Stroud calls “the ‘conditional correctness’ of skepticism” (Stroud 1984, 179).

239). Since “[t]here is at the present time in philosophy no answer to traditional epistemology” (NTE, 247), it is an “illusion” that J.L. Austin or anyone else has “successfully answered Scepticism and explained how we can have empirical knowledge” (NTE, 243). We must either accept that skepticism is correct or “try to make sense of how knowing and seeing can be genuine even though essentially dependent on” the non-rule-like dimension of the everyday (NTE, 248; cf. NTE, 242), i.e., on “the (yet unknown) structure of the plain” (765).

#### 4 The Skeptical Critique of CS<sub>ph</sub> and Its Legacy

The questions with which we’re presently concerned are why Clarke thinks (a) that the actual HES cannot be of the “standard type” and (b) that a close study of philosophical skepticism demonstrates as much. Given the ground covered in §3, we are now in an excellent position to understand how Clarke attempts to establish these conclusions in LS.

##### 4.1 Plain Knowing and the Appearance–Reality Distinction

First, I want to ask what, on the traditional view, would the traditional-epistemological critique of CS<sub>ph</sub> show vis-à-vis our plain knowledge were it to end in philosophical skepticism (SK<sub>ph</sub>)? Specifically, would it show that our plain knowledge-claims are simply *invalid*? How could that be, given that, as we’ve seen, the tradition holds that the plain is immune to philosophical-skeptical assault on account of its restrictedness?

In his initial statement of the immunity thesis, Clarke writes that “the epistemic is immune (oversimplifying slightly) from skeptical assault” (754). De-simplified, the thesis is that plain knowing is immune from skeptical doubts if those doubts are

... “implied,” that is, *if* [they are] raised *inside* these [everyday] contexts, without “changing the subject,” *directly* against the epistemic, to show such claims unequivocally wrong... [I]t is skeptical doubts so raised, with this intention, from which the plain is immune, for implied doubts are ignorable—either absurd, irrelevant, or out of place. (755)

The first thing to note about this passage is that it says that plain claims are immune only from “implied” skeptical doubts. As I understand it, only non-plain utterances can be ‘implied.’<sup>26</sup> Thus, only philosophical utterances can be implied. But since plain and philosophical verbal twins do not mean, say, or imply the same thing, then to imply a philosophical utterance is to *misunderstand* it, to distort its intended meaning. The plain and the philosophical are, Clarke writes, “unmixable types... [T]o raise a pure question... and allow an affirmative settlement

<sup>26</sup> I’ve found that there is significant disagreement on this point, so let me say a bit more. As I read it, “implied” is primarily a verb, like “implanted” or “impregnated.” Clarke’s adjectival use of the term is derivative. True, “implied” does specify that a particular utterance is “within the plain,” but that use of the term incorporates, I take it, the connotation that the utterance is within the plain because of the act of implying it. Thus, as I read it, the immunity thesis does *not* automatically rule-out *plain* (but not *implied*) skepticism.

by" a plain proposition "is confusing the stakes, to pay off a debt of a million dollars with a million lire" (764). So the first qualification on the plain's immunity to SK<sub>ph</sub> is that that immunity requires misunderstanding the skeptical challenge. Misunderstanding SK<sub>ph</sub> in this way tends to make it seem "absurd." But skeptical challenges might instead have the effect of "changing the subject," e.g., from science to philosophy. Short of changing the subject, however, SK<sub>ph</sub> is "irrelevant" in a plain context, since the requirement of special reasons is operative there.

Finally, the plain is immune to SK<sub>ph</sub> only if the skeptical challenge is raised "directly against the epistemic, to show such claims unequivocally wrong," i.e., wrong even *qua* plain. Such doubts are "out of place" even by the tradition's own lights, for if a claim is not intended to be understood as reflecting the absolutely objective facts of the matter, then that claim is not necessarily falsified by pointing to a possibility that, if realized, would demonstrate its failure to reflect the absolutely objective facts of the matter. Clarke writes that it is "CS<sub>ph</sub>" that "the *real* skeptic cross-examines directly" (759). Obviously, the "epistemic" (i.e., what is known or claimed to be known) referred to in stating the immunity thesis is known (or claimed to be known) *plainly*, not philosophically. Thus, even if the immune proposition being skeptically challenged is a general CS proposition, it must be a proposition of CS<sub>pl</sub> and hence is *not* what "the *real* skeptic" is examining "directly." SK<sub>ph</sub>, then, is *not* "raised... *directly* against the [plain] epistemic," and it can be construed as doing so only by being "implained." Consequently, SK<sub>ph</sub> is incapable of showing that apparently true plain knowledge-claims are "unequivocally wrong."

This does *not* mean, however, that SK<sub>ph</sub>, if successful, would fail to undermine plain knowledge-claims. Recall that, on the traditional view, CS<sub>ph</sub> is thought to be the epistemic ground of the plain. Thus, on the traditional view, if he were successful in assaulting CS<sub>ph</sub>, the skeptic would have "indirectly and partially undermined the plain also": he would have shown that "[p]lain knowing" is, when "viewed from an *absolutely objective* perspective, 'knowing' in a manner of speaking only" (767). This whole way of thinking is rooted in the idea (which is built into the SCHC) that pure concepts are fundamental while restricted concepts are derivative. *True* or *genuine* knowledge-claims are philosophical; their restricted twins can still count as knowledge, but only "in a manner of speaking."

As we've seen, Clarke illustrates the traditional conception of the plain, the philosophical, and their relation by way of the analogy of the airplane-spotters. But he also considers a human (i.e., non-fantastical) example. A scientist is experimenting with soporifics on himself. In his records, he writes:

"1:00 P.M. Taking *x* dose of drug *Z* orally... 1:15 P.M. Beginning to feel drowsy. I am not focusing clearly on... 6:15 P.M. I've been asleep but am wide awake now, rested and feeling normal. *I know*, of course, *that I'm not dreaming now*, but I remember, while asleep, actually thinking I was really awake, not dreaming..." (758)

On its face, the italicized portion of the experimenter's record seems, given that it is a legitimate (and presumably true) knowledge-claim, to answer the following question affirmatively: "Can we *ever know* that we're not dreaming?" (758). In a sense, of course, it does answer that question; but it does *not* answer "our intended philosophical question" (758). It fails to do so because, as uttered by the experimenter, the claim that she knows that she is not dreaming now is *not* being treated as an instance of a general CS<sub>ph</sub> proposition. This becomes evident if we imagine Descartes "enter[ing] into the experiment, asking *philosophically*, 'But *how*

can you *know* that you're not dreaming now? Mightn't it be that...?', and conclud[ing] that the experimenter's records were erroneous." The absurdity of Descartes's skeptical challenge indicates that the experimenter's claim is *plain*. Thus, her "records are not to be assessed in this way: Descartes's querying is out of place, a changing of the subject" (LS, 765).

But just as the experimenter's claims are immune from Cartesian skepticism, so Cartesian skepticism is left unanswered by those claims. To make sense of the relation between the two sorts of inquiries, I want to introduce a distinction between two varieties of the appearance–reality distinction: the plain and the philosophical. A claim to be awake (or not to be dreaming) is a claim to be in perceptual or experiential contact with reality, the Real (cf. 766, 768). In everyday life, we regularly distinguish between what is real and what merely appears to be real. A tower appears round from a distance, but it is really square; etc. This appearance–reality distinction is *internal* to the plain: any question about 'reality' brought up in such a spirit can be "settled by going and looking" (758), as in Clarke's example of "an immaterial being born and bred in a non-material portion of the universe" who asks "Are there really trees?" or, in general terms, "Are there material objects?" (758).<sup>27</sup> In the case of dreams, we correctly distinguish between waking-experience and dreaming-experience in everyday life all the time. It isn't always clear *how* (or on what basis) we do so, and we sometimes confuse the two, especially when we're asleep; but that we do successfully draw this distinction is, as Clarke might put it, a salient fact.

To arrive at the philosophical appearance–reality distinction, we *expand* the range of the apparent so that the everyday empirical world *in its entirety* falls on the side of appearances: even the 'real' established by "going and looking" falls into the category of appearance. Of course, philosophy might subsequently establish that, in such-and-such cases, appearances accord with reality or even that the distinction itself collapses; but *qua* appearance, the entire everyday empirical world is initially treated with suspicion. Questions about reality set within the frame of the philosophical appearance–reality distinction ask not "What is really the case according to our best everyday empirical inquiries?", but rather "What is really the case *independently* of what appears?" In Hegelian terms, such questions ask not what is really the case *for us* (what Kant refers to as *cat' anthrōpon*), but rather what is really the case *in itself* (what Kant refers to as *cat' alēthian*).<sup>28</sup>

Historically, the most influential articulation of what I'm calling the philosophical appearance–reality distinction is no doubt the one found at the end of Book VI of Plato's *Republic*, where he describes the Divided Line.<sup>29</sup> An important and potentially confusing feature of the Divided Line—and by extension of the philosophical appearance–reality distinction as I understand it—is that it does not posit real/unreal as a simple binary. As Michael Frede puts it,

Plato... ascribes a precarious intermediate status to the objects of belief or *doxa* in the *Republic*; they come between what really is, the objects of reason and knowledge, and what does not exist at all. He does not say that what we ordinarily call 'reality' is nothing but appearance, that our

<sup>27</sup> Of course, it's an open question just what "going" and "looking" would amount to for immaterial beings.

<sup>28</sup> *Cat' anthrōpon* means 'according to the human,' and *cat' alēthian* means 'according to the truth.' Kant discusses this distinction at Kant 1998, 643–4 (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A739–40/B767–8) and Kant 2000, 327 (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:462–3).

<sup>29</sup> See *The Republic*, 509d–511e.

ordinary beliefs and impressions are no better than hallucinations. Though they fail to capture true being and, thus, are not really true, this does not mean that they are simply false. (Frede 1987, 190)

For the Plato of *The Republic*, the Heraclitan flux of the sensible or perceptual realm (the realm of appearances) is not simply unreal in the sense of lacking any kind of objective reality. Nor is it any sort of 'inner' (Cartesian) realm of impressions, representations, or what-have-you. Yet it is not what is really real. What is really real transcends and underlies appearances.<sup>30</sup>

Let's apply the distinction between the plain and the philosophical appearance–reality distinction to the example of the experimenter with soporifics. The experimenter (let's call her 'Ex') can legitimately and successfully distinguish between *plain* waking and *plain* dreaming, but both of these states are located *within* the realm of appearances understood philosophically. (*Ex hypothesi*, even brains-in-vats would distinguish between dream-experiences and waking-experiences.) Thus, Descartes's metaphysical challenges will not invalidate the experimenter's plain claims *qua* plain any more than the absolutely objective fact that aircraft *X* is a type *Z* can invalidate the epistemically responsible claim of an airplane-spotter in the midst of the wartime practice that aircraft *X* is a type *A*. Even so, on the traditional view, Descartes's metaphysical challenges *can* show that Ex's plain knowledge that she is now awake is knowing in a manner of speaking only, for on the traditional view Ex's plain use of the concept 'dream' is a restricted application of the original, pure concept 'dream,' and the 'reality' to which her waking-experiences are by definition attached is a restricted application of the original, pure concept of the Real. The plain concept 'real' is relative and presuppositional. The pure, original concept 'real' is neither of these things: to know philosophically that we are 'awake' (in the pure sense of the word) is to know philosophically that we are in touch with absolutely objective reality, i.e., the really real. In *this* sense, it would seem that 'dream' might be used in such a way that it applies to *all of our experience*, both what we take to be dreaming *and* what we take to be waking experience.<sup>31</sup>

At this point, I suspect that some readers will have the feeling that something has gone wrong, that our thinking has led us astray somehow. If so, then that is all to the good, for Clarke thinks that we *should* find the pure conception of 'dream' puzzling.

#### 4.2 The Skeptic's Investigation

Let's turn, at last, to Clarke's account of the skeptic's examination of CS<sub>ph</sub>. The examination is framed as an exchange between a skeptic and a commonsense

---

<sup>30</sup> Importantly, the philosophical appearance–reality distinction does not in itself incorporate (or, it seems to me, inexorably lead to) Platonism or to any definite views or conclusions regarding what we might call the unreal, the real, and the really real. It allows, as we've seen, that philosophy might discover that the distinction itself is specious. Quoting Frede again: "For all [the skeptic] knows, it might be a mistake to distinguish quite generally and globally between how things appear and how they really are" (Frede 1987, 221). The philosophical appearance–reality distinction merely provides the initial frame for any properly 'philosophical' inquiry into reality.

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, this is a common way in which the skeptical import of dreams was understood prior to Descartes's 'subjectification' of the problem. See, e.g., al-Ghazālī 2005, 62–3 and Montaigne 1958, 451.

dogmatist. There are two rounds to the exchange. In both rounds, the dogmatist's conclusion is the same and takes the form of a general CS<sub>ph</sub> proposition. What differs is the nature of the skeptic's rejoinder to the dogmatist's avowal of CS<sub>ph</sub>.

The exchange begins with the following question:

(Q<sub>ph</sub>) "Can we ever know we're awake, not dreaming?" (767)

This question is meant to be understood philosophically. Thus, the type of knowing referred to is philosophical, not plain, knowing. Faced with this philosophical question, the dogmatist responds with an expression of CS<sub>ph</sub>.

(CS<sub>ph</sub>) "[W]e can know [philosophically] we're awake, not dreaming." (765)

Clarke doesn't specify the dogmatist's reasons for thinking this is true. The dogmatist might propose any number of reasons. Here's one: "I know *right now* that I'm not dreaming." If it's true that the dogmatist knows (philosophically) right now that he's awake (in the pure sense), not dreaming (in the pure sense), then it's also true that he knows that the CS<sub>ph</sub> proposition is true.

But this knowing must be philosophical, and the concepts deployed must be pure. Clarke thinks, however, that the dogmatist is appealing to *plain* knowing using *plain* concepts. Specifically, the proposition that he knows right now that he's awake, not dreaming, is, in terms of its logical type, identical to that same proposition made by the experimenter with soporifics. This is, for Clarke, the fatal flaw in the dogmatist's reasoning, for (as Clarke has tried to convince us) we cannot answer the philosophical question "Can we ever know we're not dreaming?" by appeal to such plain knowledge.

In the first round of the exchange, the skeptic responds to the dogmatist's avowal of CS<sub>ph</sub> by pointing out the following:

(P<sub>e</sub>) "All this now might turn out to be a dream." (764)

Clarke calls this the skeptic's *epistemic possibility*. P<sub>e</sub> is 'epistemic' because knowability—specifically, the ability to know that we're awake, not dreaming—is built into the scenario itself: the phrase "might *turn out* to be a dream" implies knowability. This becomes clear when the scenario is laid out in more detail: "I might wake up later in different surroundings, remembering what had really happened in the past, and *discover* I had just been dreaming" (764).

Even if we leave aside the plain–philosophical distinction, there is a fundamental flaw in P<sub>e</sub>, and the skeptic sees it right away. If it is true that "we might wake up later... and discover that we had been sleeping," then it *is* true that we *can* know we're awake, not dreaming. Thus, the skeptic's own scenario affirms CS. In other words, P<sub>e</sub> contradicts the skeptic's own conclusion. If P<sub>e</sub> has any force against our current claim to know that we're awake, then it will have the same amount of force against any future claim we might make to know that we're awake. In the second round of the exchange, then, the skeptic tries to reframe his scenario in such



a way that knowability drops out of it. Instead of saying that “all this now might *turn out* to be a dream,” he says only:

(P<sub>ne</sub>) “It might be that we’re now asleep, dreaming.” (766)

This is a *nonepistemic* possibility in the specific sense that it does not have knowability built into it. Despite this, Clarke thinks that P<sub>ne</sub> has a “covert but unavoidable” knowability requirement.<sup>32</sup> Why does he think so?

The answer lies in what is missing from P<sub>ne</sub>: a full-fledged scenario. Unlike P<sub>e</sub>, P<sub>ne</sub> has no context, no story; there is no *scenario* outlined to explain how or in what sense it might be true. What we need to know is the skeptic's reasons for thinking that “it might be that we’re now asleep, dreaming.” The skeptic is compelled by his own lights to provide such a reason, for *even if he's right* that “it might be that we’re now asleep, dreaming,” it does *not* follow that “we cannot know that we’re not dreaming.” Even if he's right, it still might be the case that, though we're now asleep and dreaming, we might wake up later in different surroundings and discover that we had been asleep. In other words, the scenario imagined to explain P<sub>e</sub> might still apply. Thus, there is a gap in the skeptic's argument in the second round of the exchange. In order to avoid falling right back into the problems faced by P<sub>e</sub>, the skeptic needs to forestall the very possibility that we could *ever* know whether or not we are *ever* awake or dreaming. He needs a scenario that not only takes the place of P<sub>e</sub>; he needs a scenario that renders P<sub>e</sub> *false*, one that entails that it *cannot* be the case that we might wake up later and discover (that is, come to *know*) that we had been dreaming.

At first, this seems to present no problem, for of course the skeptic has such scenarios ready to hand. Clarke considers two: the evil demon, borrowed from Descartes, and the “futuristic physiologist”—a brains-in-vats type of scenario (766–7). But even these scenarios, Clarke thinks, require knowability if they are to be conceivable.

With this, we arrive at what may be the most crucial piece of Clarke's argument in LS: the impossibility of developing a skeptical scenario to support P<sub>ne</sub> that does not incorporate knowability. Unfortunately, it is also the part of the paper most likely to be rejected as obviously false.

#### 4.3 The Knowability Requirement

Let me quote the relevant passage in full.

Could a leaner possibility P<sub>x</sub> that lacked this epistemic condition be genuine, outside knowability irrelevant? We have no satisfactory techniques for handling a question like this objectively: we are forced winetasters of the conceivable. Acknowledging this, I feel confident, nevertheless, that it is inconceivable that I could now be asleep, dreaming,

---

<sup>32</sup> Though Clarke does use the term “knowability” (766), he does not use the term ‘knowability requirement,’ preferring instead the more opaque term “epistemic requirement” (767–8) or “epistemic condition” (766). The term ‘knowability requirement’ comes from Stroud (see Stroud 2000, 34), and it has become standard in the secondary literature on Clarke.

*if* no outsider could know my real environs because in the same boat, for the same reason, because he, too, could not know he was not asleep, dreaming. Does Descartes's possibility even *seem* to make sense, if we ask ourselves how the Evil Demon, or God, could know that he, too, wasn't dreaming—and allow that neither could? (766)

There are two questions to ask regarding this passage. First, is it true that the evil demon and the brains-in-vats scenarios incorporate knowability? Second, is it possible to develop a new scenario that supports  $P_{ne}$  but does not incorporate knowability?

Regarding the first question, a common and understandable response is, "No, of course not!" Stroud, for instance, writes,

*Must* we suppose that the evil demon, or some being lurking somewhere in the wings, knows, or even could know, what is really going on? Again, it seems to me the answer is 'No'. And that is because, when the question arises of how or whether the demon or the physiologist does know what's really going on, I think I can concede that he does not, or even could not know, without in any way threatening the intelligibility of the possibility I am trying to conceive of. If *I* could be in such a situation then I don't know now that I'm not being fooled by a demon or a physiologist, and if *they* could be in a similar situation (as they could) then they don't know either. So we are all in the same boat. (Stroud 2000, 35–6)

It seems to me that this response betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of what Clarke is saying. Stroud's mistake is to think that the knowability in question is *philosophical*, despite that it is *plain* knowability that Clarke is talking about: " $P_{ne}$ , as I conceive it, is, of course, plain: *the knowability by outsiders of what's real is quite obviously so*" (766; emphasis added). He reiterates the point a couple pages later: "... it is integral to Dream's being a concept that its antithesis, the real or portions of the real, be knowable (plain) as real" (768). In reading LS, we need constantly to bear in mind the plain–philosophical distinction. Just as there is plain as well as philosophical common sense, and just as there is plain as well as philosophical knowing, so there are plain as well as philosophical versions of the concepts 'dream,' 'awake,' and 'real.' It seems to me that Stroud reads Clarke as if he were saying this: "I feel confident... that it is inconceivable that I could now be asleep<sub>ph</sub>, dreaming<sub>ph</sub>, *if* no outsider could know<sub>ph</sub> my real environs because in the same boat, for the same reason, because he, too, could not know<sub>ph</sub> he was not asleep<sub>ph</sub>, dreaming<sub>ph</sub>." If I'm right, however, then all of those PH subscripts must be replaced by PL subscripts if we're not to misrepresent Clarke.

As I read him, Clarke is *not* saying that the evil demon or the futuristic physiologist is in possession of *philosophical* knowledge about the Real understood as the absolutely objective state of the world. What the knowability requirement requires is only the possibility—the conceivability—of the demon or the physiologist having *plain* knowledge of our "real" surroundings, where "real" is itself understood plainly. In the case of the futuristic physiologist, that would entail that the physiologist has plain knowledge that we are brains-in-vats in his lab. Notice how this contention ties back to the immunity thesis. Given that such plain empirical knowledge-claims are immune from "outside undermining," they can be known on the basis of everyday criteria such as seeing or measuring. The futuristic physiologist *knows* (plainly) that we are brains-in-vats. What Clarke is saying is

that we can conceive of this scenario only because we can conceive of being in the physiologist's position and knowing (plainly) what the physiologist plainly knows.

Now let's address the second question: can we invent any new scenario in support of  $P_{ne}$  that does *not* incorporate knowability? The reason Clarke thinks we cannot is because he thinks that our concepts as we use them in everyday life are fundamentally plain, not philosophical. Here, he is rejecting the first aspect of the SCHC: that our concepts are first and foremost context-free (until and unless we 'implain' them). Clarke wants to convince us that the traditional view gets things backward. Our concepts, such as 'dream' and 'awake,' are fundamentally plain. In imagining skeptical scenarios, we take our plain concepts, which have full-bodied meaning only in everyday contexts, and try to understand them purely. In doing so, we *project* our plain concepts outward. I am borrowing the idea of 'concept-projection' from Cavell, but what I mean by it is present in LS: to project plain concepts outside of the (= *our*) plain is to "[draw] on ordinary, everyday possibilities and [judge] that they could have unusual application" (766). *Contra* ordinary-language philosophers, Clarke thinks that we *can* successfully pull our plain concepts 'dream,' 'awake,' and 'real' out of our plain. We do not thereby seize hold of those concepts in their original, context-free form, however. Rather, we discover that context-free concepts are hopelessly indeterminate: they are incomplete, skeletal. But we also discover that we can *fill in* their meaning: we can find that our plain concepts are capable of playing an "unusual" role in some alien context. In short, we discover that "outside the circle of the plain does not lie what we wished and presumed" (769): we do not discover the philosophical, but only other possible, more metaphysically encompassing plains.

For instance, if we're brains-in-vats, then our everyday distinction between 'waking' and 'dreaming' would itself be internal to the vat-experience. When we appeal to that scenario to support the possibility that we can never know that we're not dreaming, we're no longer using 'dream' in this (= *our*) ordinary, everyday sense. Instead, 'dream' now encompasses *all* of our experience: what it *means* when used in *this* way is something like "to be envatted." In this case, to 'wake up' would mean to *wake up in the vat*, or to become aware somehow of the (plainly known) 'real' surroundings of the physiologist. The only way we can make sense of the brains-in-vats scenario, though, is by projecting our plain concepts into a new conceivable context, namely, the context of the futuristic physiologist. We imagine ourselves occupying the everyday context of the physiologist, and we imagine ourselves using these concepts in the way the physiologist uses them in that context when talking about his brains-in-vats. Clarke thinks that if you were to strip away *all* plain knowability, then we would simply lose our grip on what 'dream' and 'awake' and 'real' even mean. The very concepts would no longer make complete sense.

Some have found in Clarke's insistence on the knowability requirement a problematic commitment to verificationism.<sup>33</sup> It isn't easy to assess this charge, since it isn't always clear what it amounts to.<sup>34</sup> I am inclined to think that Clarke is not committed to any form of verificationism. For one thing, it's incorrect to say

---

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Williams 1991, 196; Gascoigne 2007, 19. Arata Hamawaki ascribes to Stroud the worry that Clarke's diagnosis of skepticism depends on a commitment to verificationism (Hamawaki 2014, 211–2).

<sup>34</sup> As Thomas Uebel has recently shown, verificationism comes in many shapes and sizes even if we focus only on the versions of it developed by the Vienna Circle. One important distinction is between "verification as a theory of meaning of empirical propositions" and "verificationism as a criterion of the meaningfulness of empirical propositions" (Uebel 2019, 2). If Clarke is a verificationist, then it is in the second sense, which is also how Stroud understands it (cf. Stroud 1984, 170; Stroud 2000, 80–1, 162).

that for him verifiability or knowability is a criterion of meaningfulness full stop, for Clarke does *not* hold that our concepts are meaningless in the absence of a procedure for verifying that they apply in some case or other. When stripped from the contexts that complete their meaning, our concepts nonetheless retain skeletal meaning. Moreover, it seems to me that Clarke’s ‘knowability criterion’ of (complete) meaningfulness has a great deal in common with contemporary contrastivism.<sup>35</sup> Is contrastivism itself a type of verificationism? I don’t know—but nor am I convinced that it matters. As I’ve attempted to show, the knowability requirement is a direct consequence of Clarke’s two-factor theory of meaning together with the immunity thesis. If full-bodied meaning is plain meaning, and if plain knowledge-claims are immune from outside undermining—i.e., if plain knowledge-claims can take for granted the general CS propositions—then it follows that full-bodied empirical knowledge-claims are at least in principle knowable.

Note that none of this precludes any particular state-of-affairs from obtaining. We might be brains-in-vats, etc. All of the familiar skeptical scenarios are, for Clarke, “*plain* skeptical possibilities” (764, 767–9); as such, they are perfectly intelligible:<sup>36</sup> “It seems almost beyond question that what plain  $P_e$  and  $P_{ne}$  suggest could happen, *could*, indeed, just possibly” (768). What he’s saying, I take it, is that there appears to be a gap between our concepts and absolutely objective reality such that we can’t make sense of how to talk about absolutely objective reality as it is in itself, independent of all possible context-bound perspectives. It seems that we can speak only of how it is (or might be) *for us* or for different yet still conceivable nonhuman creatures. But short of enjoying something like the state of epistemic grace bestowed upon the airplane-spotters, these creatures will be as unable to talk about absolutely objective reality as we are.<sup>37</sup>

It is important to see that the rejection of the SCHC does not require us to abandon the traditional conception of objectivity, as if some form of metaphysical idealism had been established. But it does, I think, leave us in a position in which the most reasonable thing to do, at least until and unless the problem of the structure of the plain is solved, is to suspend judgment about absolutely objective reality and to embrace our apparently inescapable plainness.

#### 4.4 Our Most Fundamental Beliefs

Clarke begins LS by saying that it will explore the following questions: “What is the skeptic examining: our most fundamental beliefs, or the product of a large piece of philosophizing about empirical knowledge done before he comes on stage? And what do his reflections, properly construed, reveal?” (754).<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, he provides only partial answers to these questions. Regarding the first question, he tells us that “the *real* skeptic cross-examines”  $CS_{ph}$  (759); “the skeptic assaults  $CS_{ph}$ ” (767); skepticism is the “denial” of  $CS_{ph}$  (762). Regarding the

---

<sup>35</sup> According to one of contrastivism’s foremost proponents, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “A contrastivist view of a concept holds that all or some claims using that concept are best understood with an extra logical space for a contrast class” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2013, 134). This fits well with Clarke’s two-factor theory of meaning.

<sup>36</sup> This is another reason to think that Clarke is not committed to verificationism, for verificationism was supposed to foreclose the very possibility of meaningfully stating skeptical scenarios.

<sup>37</sup> In this connection, see the fascinating article by R. Scott Bakker (Bakker 2017).

second question, he tells us that “skeptical doubts... reveal that  $CS_{ph}$  and its skeptical denial should both be erased from the books” (762). But he says nothing more in LS about “our most fundamental beliefs.” In NTE, where CS just is  $CS_{ph}$ , our most fundamental beliefs—those “deeply ingrained beliefs about knowledge and the world which the plain man unthinkingly holds” (NTE, 62)—are general  $CS_{ph}$  propositions, which are “the product of philosophizing” (NTE, 241). Thus, it would seem that, at the time of writing NTE, Clarke's answer to his first question would be: “The skeptic is examining *both* our most fundamental beliefs *and* the product of a large piece of philosophizing, for our most fundamental beliefs are themselves philosophical.” I think it is clear that, by the time he wrote LS, he had revised this view. In LS, he does *not* think that our most fundamental beliefs are general  $CS_{ph}$  propositions, for those have been “erased from the books.” What *are* our most fundamental beliefs, then?

One obvious possibility is that our most fundamental beliefs are instead general  $CS_{pl}$  propositions of the sort defended by Moore. This finds support in Clarke's claim that Moore “drags [philosophers] down from our ivory towers, we reflective, ethereal beings, back to our earthly selves, and confronts us with the plainness of what we do believe as plain men” (758). As discussed above, however, it doesn't seem right to say that plain men *believe* general CS propositions, whether plain or philosophical. What we most commonly believe as plain men are particular everyday claims, such as “I know there are two bottles of milk on my neighbor's doorstep,” not general CS propositions such as “I know there are material objects” (755). But particular everyday claims also do not seem like good candidates for “our most fundamental beliefs.” Presumably, this category is supposed to pick out some small, more or less definite sets of beliefs, not an open-ended list of particular everyday beliefs. Moore, however, does seem to think that particular everyday claims are more fundamental than general CS propositions are: the truth of claims such as ‘external objects exist’ *follows from* the truth of particular everyday claims such as ‘here is a hand’ (cf. Moore 1959, 143–6). To arrive at the general  $CS_{ph}$  propositions, we single out a best-case of knowing and resolve to understand it as an instance of a general  $CS_{ph}$  proposition. Given that set-up, general  $CS_{ph}$  propositions are more fundamental than their particular instances. But general  $CS_{pl}$  propositions are arrived at in a different way.

To see how the peculiar category of  $CS_{pl}$  emerges, we must first look at Moore's attempted refutation of skepticism. On Clarke's account, that refutation proceeds as follows. First, we note that propositions that are typographically identical to general CS propositions are made in the course of everyday life. For instance, Clarke imagines “a physiologist lecturing on mental abnormalities” saying, “*Each of us who is normal knows that he is now awake, not dreaming or hallucinating...*” In contrast, individuals suffering from certain mental abnormalities each believes that what we know to be the real, public world is his imaginative creation” (756). Second, we note that, as plain, such propositions (i.e., the italicized portion of the above quote) are immune from outside undermining and are therefore legitimate knowledge-claims (756). Third, we note that such propositions, being propositions of CS, contradict the skeptical conclusion that we can never know we're awake, not dreaming. Finally, we conclude that such claims prove that skepticism is false. But something has gone wrong here, for Moore is attempting to refute  $SK_{ph}$  by appeal to a plain knowledge-claim, a move that Clarke disallows.

As we've seen, the primary difference between plain and philosophical utterances is that plain utterances are context-bound whereas philosophical utterances are context-free. Thus, Clarke concludes that Moore is *not* simply citing the physiologist's legitimate (plain) knowledge-claim. Instead, he pulls it out of its context. Unlike the physiologist, Moore (perhaps sensing the incompatibility of the

plain and the philosophical) attempts to decontextualize his general propositions. In one place, Clarke says that Moore's propositions are "context-free" (755). In another place, however, he says that they are "virtually, perhaps entirely, context-free" (757). It seems to me that Clarke was wise to hedge this claim, for Moore's propositions are not, I think, entirely context-free. Unlike Clarke's imagined 'compiler of human knowledge,' who includes the physiologist's claim in his record without any reference to the context of the utterance, simply including it as something that human beings know, Moore does not register the knowledge-claim "*purely for its own sake*," but only "*primarily for its own sake*" (757). I take this to mean that Moore *does* have a purpose for appealing to the physiologist's claim: that purpose is to refute skepticism and idealism. Thus, Moore's propositions have *some* context, though only the dialectical context of philosophical disputation, which is itself (somewhat ironically) an everyday activity. He does not use the proposition purely, but neither does he use it in a fixed context like that of the physiologist.

What all this comes down to, I want to suggest, is that the general CS<sub>pl</sub> propositions emerge as such from the *attempt* to project them outside of all contexts. This attempt fails. Moore, the inveterate plain man, is unable to entirely cut his propositions free from contexts, from the plain; yet he *has* succeeded in cutting them free from *everyday* contexts (such as the physiologist's). Thus, his propositions, as meant by him, mean neither what they mean as spoken by the physiologist nor what they purport to mean when spoken by the commonsense dogmatist. The significance of Moore's attempt to decontextualize his plain utterances lies, for Clarke, in the hints it provides as to why that attempt was bound to fail. It was bound to fail, Clarke thinks, because our concepts are fundamentally plain. The attempt to philosophize is the attempt to project our plain concepts out of all contexts, but the result is skeletal and indeterminate—not meaningless, but not meaningful *enough*.

Before moving on, I want to return to the problem of identifying our most fundamental beliefs. In the final analysis, I don't think Clarke provides us with enough evidence to solve this exegetical problem. Ultimately, it depends on what 'fundamental' means. On the traditional view, the general CS propositions are fundamental because they are epistemic bedrock. On Clarke's alternative view, the general CS propositions (now plain—but *not* implained) are derived from the epistemic bedrock of the plain. In other words, on the traditional view it is context-free claims that are most meaningful, whereas context-bound claims are less meaningful because their meaning is a restricted application of context-free claims. On Clarke's view, it is context-bound claims that are the most meaningful; context-free claims are incomplete. The general CS<sub>pl</sub> propositions, falling as they do in a peculiar space between contextlessness and everyday context-boundedness, have whatever full-bodied meaning they possess only by virtue of their being projections of everyday propositions. Thus, everyday context-bound claims serve as the epistemic bedrock of the general CS<sub>pl</sub> propositions, not the other way around. Consequently, if CS<sub>pl</sub> is the logical type of our most fundamental beliefs, it cannot be fundamental in the same way that CS<sub>ph</sub> was thought to be fundamental.

Yet one parallelism between CS<sub>pl</sub> and CS<sub>ph</sub> remains: namely, both can serve (or attempt to serve) as answers to skeptical challenges to particular everyday empirical knowledge-claims. True, Moore thinks that he can prove that the external world exists by 'proving' that he has a hand; but he thinks to refute skepticism on the basis of the general CS<sub>pl</sub> proposition, not on the basis of the particular everyday claim. In *this* sense, it may be that the general CS<sub>pl</sub> propositions are our most fundamental beliefs.

#### 4.5 The Legacy of Skepticism

The second question with which Clarke opens LS is “what do [the skeptic's] reflections, properly construed, reveal?” (754). His short answer, as we've seen, is that “skeptical doubts... reveal that CS<sub>ph</sub> and its skeptical denial should both be erased from the books” (762). The reason for this, he argues, is that the question to which both CS<sub>ph</sub> and SK<sub>ph</sub> are meant as replies—“Can we ever know<sub>ph</sub> we're awake<sub>ph</sub>, not dreaming<sub>ph</sub>?”—“can be answered neither affirmatively nor negatively” (768). In §3.4, we saw his arguments to this effect as they are developed in NTE. The extremely compact argument in LS (768) is, I think, essentially the same. Lacking full-bodied meaning, philosophical utterances are indeterminate. Moreover, if those utterances *were* full-bodied (or if, like the traditional epistemologist discussed in NTE, we do what is necessary to render those utterances full-bodied), then the skeptical response would be the one correct answer to the question. True, the indeterminacy of philosophical utterances defuses skeptical attacks on CS<sub>ph</sub>, but it also has the effect of draining CS<sub>ph</sub> of full-bodied meaning.

The indeterminacy of philosophical utterances demonstrates that the actual HES cannot be of the “standard type” (the SCHC), for if it were—particularly, if our concepts were inherently context-free—then philosophical utterances would be more, not less meaningful than everyday utterances are. A close study of Cartesian skepticism brings to light the fallacy in the SCHC on account of the following facts that it makes salient:

- (1) The plain skeptical possibilities are genuine.
- (2) *Our* concept ‘dream’ incorporates the knowability requirement.

Clarke's argument goes something like this. Given (2), if our concept ‘dream’ were fundamentally a pure, philosophical concept (one able to be determinately deployed in philosophical utterances), then it would have to incorporate *philosophical* knowability: “the epistemic requirement integral to the concept [Dream] would have to be satisfied by what is allowable as knowing within this type, viz., a knowing requiring invulnerability” (768). Such invulnerable knowing would require that we be able to discover, within experience, “features” or “marks” that make it possible to distinguish between waking and sleeping. But given (1), there are no such marks and features: “our concept Dream... is not designed along the line of marks-and-features concepts” (768). Thus, our concept Dream cannot be a philosophical concept; it is a plain concept. On the assumption that we *do* possess the concept Dream (and countless others that would fall into similar problems if applied purely), it follows “that our conceptual-human constitution can't be of the standard type; for, if it were, it would be seriously concept-impooverished” (769). If the SCHC were the actual HES, then our concepts would be fundamentally philosophical; yet if our concepts were fundamentally philosophical, then we would have few if any concepts. We would lack even concepts that we manifestly *do* possess.

It might be objected that, on my own reading, Clarke's argument for the knowability requirement is an argument for *plain* knowability. Therefore, it does nothing to establish that *philosophical* concepts incorporate a *philosophical* knowability requirement. But this objection is beside the point. What Clarke is trying to establish, or at least to begin establishing by way of the concept Dream, is that *our* concepts as *we* use them incorporate a knowability requirement. Given

that the plain skeptical possibilities are genuine, then our concept Dream can satisfy the knowability requirement only if it is plain.

And here we come to what Clarke thinks is the *real* problem: how to explain the plain's immunity to outside undermining if one rejects the traditional account. The tradition vindicated plain knowing by understanding the HES on the model of the SCHC and by restricting the scope of plain knowing within the larger domain of the philosophical. Clarke has upended this view of our concepts, yet a powerful skeptical threat remains: the threat of *plain* skepticism. The "outside" from which our plain can be undermined is no longer the philosophical; rather, it is the possible plains (such as that of the futuristic physiologist) that may metaphysically encompass—and thereby structure—*our* plain. If we are to make sense of the genuineness and legitimacy of our plain knowing, then we must develop a new account of the plain and the HES that accounts *both* for our possession of concepts such as Dream (i.e., knowable concepts) *and* the genuineness of the plain skeptical possibilities. How is it that we can plainly know *anything* about the world—indeed, what *is* 'the world'?—if it remains possible that we are dreaming or brains-in-vats? What is the contribution to the meaning of our utterances (or: what is the criterion of the relevancy/irrelevancy of counterpossibilities) provided by the non-rule-like dimension of the plain if not the restriction of the semantic scope of our utterances? Until and unless we can answer these questions, we must admit, Clarke thinks, that "we have no conception of empirical knowledge" (NTE, 241), "of how knowing and seeing can be genuine even though essentially dependent on" the non-rule-like dimension of meaning (NTE, 248). This "philosophical problem of the greatest magnitude" (NTE, 242) is the legacy of Cartesian skepticism.

## References

- AL-GHAZĀLĪ, Abū Hāmid. 2005. *The Rescuer from Error*. In: Muhammad ali Khalidi (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 59–98.
- AUSTIN, J.L. 1970. *Philosophical Papers*. Second Edition. URMSON, J. O. & WARNOCK G. J. (eds.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- BAKKER, R. Scott. 2017. On Alien Philosophy. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 24: 31–52.
- BONJOUR, Laurence. 1979. Rescher's Epistemological System. In: Ernest Sosa (ed.), *The Philosophy of Nicholas Rescher: Discussions and Replies*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, pp. 157–72.
- CAVELL, Stanley. 1979. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CLARKE, Thompson. 1962. *The Nature of Traditional Epistemology*. Doctoral dissertation. Harvard University. (NTE)
- CLARKE, Thompson. 1965. Seeing Surfaces and Physical Objects. In: BLACK, Max (ed.), *Philosophy In America*. Ithaca, NY: George Allen & Unwin, pp. 98–114.
- CLARKE, Thompson. 1972. The Legacy of Skepticism. *The Journal of Philosophy* 69: 754–69. (LS)
- EICHORN, Roger E. 2019. *Philosophy and Everyday Life: Thompson Clarke and the Legacy of Skepticism*. Doctoral Dissertation. University of Chicago.



- EICHORN, Roger E. 2020. The Elusive Third Way: The Pyrrhonian Illumination in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. *Elenchos* 41: 329–62.
- EICHORN, Roger E. 2021. The Legacy of Thompson Clarke. *Sképsis* 23: 148–67.
- FOGELIN, Robert J. 1994. *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FREDE, Michael. 1987. *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- GASCOIGNE, Neil. 2007. The Legacy of Clarke. In: *Wittgenstein-Jahrbuch* 3. Bern: Peter Lang. Available at <[https://www.academia.edu/170424/The\\_Legacy\\_of\\_Clarke](https://www.academia.edu/170424/The_Legacy_of_Clarke)>.
- HAMAWAKI, Arata. 2014. In Search of the Plain and the Philosophical: Skepticism, Transcendence, and Self-Knowledge. *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 4: 189–224.
- HEIDEGGER, Martin. 2008. *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*. Ted Sadler (trans.). London: Continuum Books.
- KANT, Immanuel. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- KANT, Immanuel. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MONTAIGNE, Michel de. 1958. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Donald M. Frame (trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- MOORE, G.E. 1959. *Philosophical Papers*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- NAGEL, Thomas. 1986. *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- PLATO. 2000. *The Republic*. Tom Griffith (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- REID, Thomas. 1892. *The Philosophy of Reid as Contained in the "Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense."* New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- REID, Thomas. 2002. *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*. Derek R. Brookes (ed.). University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- SINNOTT-ARMSTRONG, Walter. 2013. Free Contrastivism. In: BLAAUW, Martijn (ed.), *Contrastivism in Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, pp. 134–53.
- STROUD, Barry. 1984. *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- STROUD, Barry. 2000. *Understanding Human Knowledge: Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- UEBEL, Thomas. 2019. Verificationism and (Some of) Its Discontents. *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 4: 1–31.
- WILLIAMS, Michael. 1991 [1996]. *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.