

THE LEGACY OF THOMPSON CLARKE

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1 Clarke and the “New Skepticism”

Thompson Clarke’s “The Legacy of Skepticism” (LS) is remarkable for both its brilliance and its near-impenetrable density. It is, as Alexander Nehamas has said of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, “a work of dazzling obscurity” (Nehamas 1988, 46): individual ideas or passages dazzle, many suggesting elaborate lines of thought, yet the paper as a whole is shrouded in obscurity, frustrating attempts to recover from it a clear picture of Clarke’s views. Bits and pieces of it are often cited and used as jumping-off points for discussions or even for entire books (as with Michael Williams’s *Unnatural Doubts* and Duncan Pritchard’s *Epistemic Angst*), but I am the only person who has undertaken anything like a thorough statement of what Clarke himself was getting at in LS.¹ Unfortunately, Clarke published only one other article that relates to the topics discussed in LS. That paper is “Seeing Surfaces and Physical Objects” (SS), which is a reworked fragment of his unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Nature of Traditional Epistemology* (NTE).² Furthermore, the close relationship between the respective subject matters of SS and LS becomes apparent only when both are viewed in the broader context provided by NTE, his one book-length work. Given that NTE has never been published, readers of LS have had virtually nowhere to turn to supplement what Clarke has to say in LS.

In a sense, however, the opposite is true. In addition to the inherent quality of his work, Clarke is of interest because of the depth of his influence on a wide range of fellow philosophers, both students and colleagues. As Jean-Philippe Narboux notes, “Clarke’s new forays into the question of ‘the nature of traditional epistemology’... were made indirectly available through the writings of other philosophers, often personally acquainted with Clarke, and for whom Clarke’s reinterpretation of the legacy of traditional epistemology was definitive.”³ The most prominent of the ‘Clarkeans,’ as I will call them, are Stanley Cavell and Barry Stroud, both of whom make no bones about the extent of their debt to Clarke, their friend and longtime colleague. Cavell writes that it was Clarke, whom he refers to as one of the two “finest philosophers of my generation” (Cavell 2010, 490), “from whose thoughts on skepticism ours [i.e., his and Stroud’s] had both begun” (Cavell 2010, 496). In addition to dedicating his *Claim of Reason* to Clarke (and J.L. Austin), Cavell writes in that book’s “Introduction” that “[m]y indebtedness to Thompson

¹ See Eichorn 2019 for a book-length study of Clarke. For an attempt to “summarize” LS, see Eichorn 2021, which appears in this issue of *Sképsis*.

² Clarke’s only other publication, “Reflections on Likeness of Meaning” (1952), amounts to a critical notice on a then-recent article by Nelson Goodman (“On Likeness of Meaning”). As far as I can tell, it has no substantive connection to any of his later work.

³ I would note that Narboux’s claim that Peter Unger’s *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* was “directly influenced” by Clarke is almost certainly false (Narboux 2014, 154n2). It does not seem that Unger was influenced by Clarke at all, either directly or indirectly. To begin with, I’m unaware of any evidence to support Narboux’s claim; furthermore, Stroud told me in conversation, when I suggested (following Narboux) that Clarke influenced Unger’s work, that this was a misapprehension on my part.

Clarke is so systematic and of such long standing that I want to give a little specification of it, particularly in view of his having to date published just two extracts from the work of his I have profited so much from”—those extracts being SS and LS (Cavell 1979, xxiv). Cavell goes on to explain that Clarke not only helped to guide his approach in Parts 1–3 of *The Claim of Reason*, much of which was initially worked out as early as Cavell’s dissertation (submitted to Harvard in 1961), but that he also played a crucial role in inspiring the “fresh start [Cavell] needed in order to get on with Part Four” (Cavell 1979, xxv). Cavell’s work on skepticism is to a large extent an attempt to come to terms with Clarke’s rejection of ordinary-language solutions to skepticism, particularly those advanced by Austin in his paper “Other Minds.”⁴

Clarke’s influence on Stroud ran if anything even deeper. In the “Preface” to his watershed book *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, Stroud writes,

In a quite special relation to this book stands my friend and colleague Thompson Clarke. It is simply impossible for me fully to identify and acknowledge my debt to him over the years... I have been too close to his work over the last twenty years to measure what I have got from him... It is no exaggeration at all to say that my whole way of thinking about philosophy... has been affected by him in untold ways, and I am happy to have the chance to acknowledge that here... I would be pleased if what I have presented here of our shared conception of the subject helps make his own quite special contributions to these questions more available to the philosophical world. (Stroud 1984, xiii–xiv)

Stroud makes a point of specifying Clarke’s relation to or influence on each chapter of Stroud 1984 individually.

Clarke is of interest, then, not only on his own account, but also because of the extent of his influence on the contemporary philosophical conversation surrounding skepticism, philosophy, and their relation to the ‘ordinary’ or the ‘common’ or the ‘plain’—what I will usually refer to as ‘the everyday’ or ‘everyday life.’ These are issues that strike to the very heart of the philosophical enterprise, and I believe that we still have much to learn about them from Clarke. To be sure, Clarke’s work is difficult, but it amply rewards the effort required to come to grips with it.

Who was Thompson Morgan Clarke?⁵ Born in 1928, he received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard in 1962. By that time, he had already spent a year teaching at the University of Chicago (1957) and had found a home for himself in the philosophy department at Berkeley, first as a Visiting Assistant Professor (1958–9), then as a full member of the faculty (1960 onward).⁶ Though he would live in Berkeley for the rest of his life, he withdrew more and more from academia over the course of the 1970s and ’80s. Stanley Cavell writes quite eloquently of Clarke’s impatience or dissatisfaction with professional philosophy and the demands of academic life in general.⁶ In conversation, Barry Stroud told me that Clarke “hated teaching”—although he was apparently quite good at it, as evidenced by the testimonials quoted in notes 9, 10, and 13–15, below. Though he continued to pursue his philosophical interests, Clarke stopped working with students entirely

⁴ See Cavell 1979, xvi; Cavell 2010, 306, 357–367.

⁵ See Stroud 2012. Besides Stroud 2012, most of the biographical information I have on Clarke derives from Stanley Cavell’s memoir (Cavell 2010). See also Wolff 2010.

⁶ See Cavell 2010, 368, 415, 491.

in 1987 and grew increasingly reclusive—at least when it came to other philosophers—as the years went by. He passed away in 2012, having published nothing for forty years.

Alongside Stroud and Cavell, Clarke stood at the forefront of what has been called, misleadingly, “the New Skepticism of the 1970s” (Lycan 2001, 35).⁷ That movement has rightly been said to have had “a serious impact on the philosophical scene” (Johnson 1978, 276), an impact that remains very much in evidence today. I say that the term ‘New Skepticism’ is misleading because the majority of the so-called ‘new skeptics’ did not endorse skepticism—or, at least, they did not see themselves as doing so. Neither Cavell, Stroud, nor Clarke were or have ever been, by their own lights, skeptics. The same is true of Keith Lehrer, despite that he published an influential article in 1971 entitled “Why Not Skepticism?”. Nor, I believe, is John Kekes a skeptic, despite that he published an article in 1975 entitled “The Case for Scepticism.” The most prominent self-proclaimed skeptic among this first wave of ‘new-skeptical’ philosophers is Peter Unger, who published “A Defense of Skepticism” in 1971 and would unveil his *Ignorance: A Case For Scepticism* four years later.⁸

Properly understood, the “New Skepticism of the 1970s” was not so much an outbreak of skepticism as it was a movement within analytic philosophy toward a renewed engagement with and appreciation of the power and importance of traditional skeptical challenges to knowledge. Articulating this appreciation, Keith Lehrer writes,

The theory of justification we shall ultimately defend may strike some as closely aligned with skepticism. We shall examine this charge, but even here it should be noted that our sympathies with the writings of the philosophical skeptics of the past are strong. Too often contemporary writers seek the most effective method for liquidating the skeptic without asking whether his teaching may not be of more importance than his mode of burial. Since the most brilliant philosophers of past and present have been skeptics of one form or another, it would behoove those who study skepticism to consider whether these skeptics have some truth in their grasp. We claim they do. (Lehrer 1990, 15; cf. 179–81)

As this passage suggests, many of the non-skeptics among the ‘new skeptics’ are, as we might put it, *halfway-skeptics*. Halfway-skeptics think that full-blown skeptics “have some truth in their grasp.” There is, as Cavell says, a “truth of skepticism” (Cavell 1979, 48) or a “moral of skepticism” (Cavell 1979, 241). Clarke makes much the same point when he speaks of “the depth of truth in traditional epistemology” (NTE, 231). Of the halfway-skeptics, many belong to what Brian Ribeiro calls “the half-true tradition,” which “[finds] skepticism to be, in a manner of speaking, *half-true*” (Ribeiro 2004, 715). According to the half-true tradition Ribeiro has in mind, “[s]kepticism is right, *but only from some perspective, AND*”—here we get the part that distinguishes this brand of halfway-skeptic from others—“the perspective from which [skepticism] is right is *not our ordinary perspective*—the perspective from which it is right is *nonordinary* or *unnatural*” (Ribeiro 2004, 717). The insight into

⁷ Michael Williams has also described this movement as a “New Scepticism,” a characterization he takes to be synonymous with calling its members “New Humeans” (Williams 1991, xiv). For a statement of Clarke’s importance to that movement, see Burnyeat 1984/7, 93, who refers to “the paper which has contributed more than any other single factor to keeping alive an interest in scepticism during these days of exact philosophy, Thompson Clarke’s famous paper ‘The Legacy of Skepticism.’”

⁸ See also Rozeboom 1967, Oakley 1976, Johnson 1978.

the ‘nonordinariness’ or ‘unnaturalness’ of the skeptical—really, the traditional-philosophical—standpoint is at the root of this segment of the half-way-skeptical tradition’s anti-skeptical strategy. Tellingly, the ‘half-truthers’ Ribeiro identifies are: Cavell; Stroud; Thomas Nagel, who was strongly influenced by Clarke⁹ and who, as Ribeiro points out, may well think that “scepticism is *much more* than half-true” (Ribeiro 2004, 716); Marie McGinn, who was likewise influenced by Clarke;¹⁰ and Michael Williams, who in the “Preface” to *Unnatural Doubts* thanks both “Thompson Clarke for his challenging account of scepticism’s deep sources” and Stroud for “his penetrating discussions of the significance of scepticism” in Stroud 1984, which “made me see my erstwhile approach to the problem as facile, and so forced me to rethink my position from the ground up” (Williams 1991, xxii).

Though Clarke is best known for having had something interesting to say about skepticism, it is misleading to think that skepticism was his central philosophical concern. Rather, his interest in skepticism grew out of a more general interest in the nature of philosophy itself. This progression is signaled in the titles of his two major works: *The Nature of Traditional Epistemology* and “The Legacy of Skepticism.” As its title suggests, NTE is a work of metaphilosophy, that is, the theory or ‘account’ of philosophy itself. What is philosophy, and how is it pursued? What do we hope to gain by philosophizing, and what lessons should we learn from our perennial dissatisfaction with the outcome? Published a decade after NTE was submitted to Harvard, LS combines Clarke’s metaphilosophical concerns with a sophisticated view of the power and importance of skepticism.

Clarke was driven out of philosophy proper, as it were, and into metaphilosophy by concerns about the nature and status of ‘everyday life.’¹¹ He was particularly concerned (as were his main targets of criticism, J.L. Austin and G.E. Moore) with the status of the knowledge-claims we make in the course of our everyday lives. There are two central contentions running through NTE and LS. The first is that what I will call ‘nontraditional’ philosophers,¹² such as ordinary-language philosophers (exemplified for Clarke by Austin) and commonsense philosophers (exemplified for Clarke by G.E. Moore), fail to appreciate not only the nature of traditional philosophy (and traditional philosophy’s doppelgänger, skepticism), but also the nature of the ‘common’ or the ‘ordinary’ itself. The second central contention is that it is because of their failure to understand traditional philosophy, everyday life, and their relation to each other that the ‘refutations,’ ‘dissolutions,’ or ‘diagnoses’ of skepticism offered by earlier nontraditional philosophers miss the mark, thereby failing in their attempts to vindicate everyday knowledge-claims.

Clarke’s influence extends far beyond the philosophers I’ve mentioned. His

⁹ In addition to the acknowledgements, Clarke is mentioned—together with Stroud—in Nagel 1986, 73n5. In an earlier book, Nagel writes, “I am aware that skepticism about the external world is widely thought to have been refuted, but I have remained convinced of its irrefutability since being exposed at Berkeley to Thompson Clarke’s largely unpublished ideas on the subject” (Nagel 1979, 19n1; cf. Nagel 1979, 27).

¹⁰ McGinn writes, “I first became interested in the problem of scepticism when I sat in on a seminar given by Thompson Clarke in Berkeley in the Autumn Term 1976. Watching him display the unsatisfactoriness of all the familiar arguments against the sceptic, on the one hand, taught me a real respect for the problem, while, on the other hand, his own concern to construct a reply with none of the dogmatic or verificationist defects of the standard arguments had the effect of persuading me that there must be a way out of the muddle. In the following pages I present the reply to the sceptic that I have developed in thinking about the problem more or less continually since I attended Clarke’s seminar” (McGinn 1989, “Preface”).

¹¹ In Clarke 1952, Clarke is clearly engaged in ‘philosophy proper.’ That paper is on a topic deep in the trenches of the semantic theory of its day and connects hardly if at all with what Clarke is doing in NTE and LS.

¹² For more on the distinction between traditional and nontraditional philosophy, see Eichorn 2019, §1.3; Eichorn 2020a, §2; Eichorn 2020b, 200.

thinking and teaching about skepticism and its relation to everyday life helped to shape in various ways such works as Charles Guignon's *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge*,¹³ John Richardson's *Existential Epistemology*,¹⁴ Charles Travis's *The Uses of Sense*,¹⁵ and Robert Fogelin's *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*.¹⁶ Given the breadth of his firsthand influence, it's not surprising that his influence is discernible even in philosophers who do not cite him and perhaps never read his work. Prominent early examples include, arguably, Bernard Williams's *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*¹⁷ and P.F. Strawson's *Skepticism and Naturalism*.¹⁸ Others—a prominent example being Michael Williams—appear to have found their way to Clarke through their reading of Stroud, Cavell, and others. Williams's *Unnatural Doubts* introduces its 'theoretical-diagnostic' approach to skepticism by quoting (misquoting, actually) the question with which Clarke opens LS, a question Williams refers to as "the absolutely crucial question to ask about scepticism" (Williams 1991, 1), namely, "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?" (LS, 754). Indeed, it's not much of an exaggeration to say that Williams's catalog of "the New Humeans," whom he takes as his foils in *Unnatural Doubts* (Stroud, Nagel, and Cavell, with the "uneasy" addition of Strawson), could just as easily—and perhaps more accurately—be called "the Clarkeans."¹⁹

More recently, Clarke's influence is evident in such works as Neil Gascoigne's *Scepticism*, Annalisa Coliva's *Moore and Wittgenstein*, and Duncan Pritchard's *Epistemic Angst*, which opens with the identical misquote of Clarke that kicks off Williams's *Unnatural Doubts*.²⁰

¹³ Guignon lists Clarke as one of "my teachers who shaped my philosophical outlook" (Guignon 1983, 5). He also writes, "For my appreciation of the importance of the problem of skepticism, as well as my characterization of the stages of the skeptic's inquiry and the structure of epistemological arguments, I am deeply indebted to Thompson Clarke's lectures and seminars at Berkeley in 1970–1972" (Guignon 1983, 2n3).

¹⁴ Richardson writes, "To [Clarke] I owe a certain basic conception of the nature and limits of epistemology, which has shaped the overall structure of this book, and guided some of its concrete arguments" (Richardson 1986, vi).

¹⁵ Travis writes that he was "greatly inspired, and largely set in my present philosophical ways, by... Thompson Clarke and Hans Herzberger. Clarke gave me an appreciation of Wittgenstein and of Austin, and he also gave me some form of the idea which appears in this work as S-use sensitivity," that is, the idea of *occasion-sensitivity* that went on to become one of, if not *the*, central idea in Travis's work (Travis 1989, xii). Cf. Travis 2013 and Travis 2008, 11, 14.

¹⁶ Fogelin writes that "hearing, then reading, Thompson Clarke's 'Legacy of Skepticism'" helped to confirm his growing dissatisfaction in the 1960s with ordinary-language resolutions of philosophical problems (Fogelin 1994, vii).

¹⁷ Compare Williams's characterization of 'pure inquiry' with Clarke's discussion of the nature of philosophy at LS, 760–1. Given (a) LS's repeated use of the words 'pure' and 'purity' to describe philosophy and (b) the fact that Williams 1978 is dedicated to Stanley and Cathy Cavell, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Williams's conception of 'pure inquiry' may have derived in some measure, however indirectly, from Clarke.

¹⁸ Clarke knew Strawson from his time at Oxford, but there is no evidence to suggest that Strawson 1983 was directly influenced by Clarke. Even so, Clarke's influence is clearly present at secondhand in Strawson's discussion of Stroud. See esp. Strawson 1983, 5–6, where clear traces can be seen of such Clarkean themes from LS as what Clarke calls 'verbal twins' and the related distinction between 'the plain' and 'the philosophical.'

¹⁹ Williams 1991, 10–17. Williams later adds Fogelin to his list of 'neo-Humeans' (see Williams 1999). There are two other groupings of philosophers that are striking given their members' relation to Clarke. The first is provided by Richard Bett, who argues that for Stroud, Nagel, and Bernard Williams, "the reality of sceptical threats is bound up with some version of an objective, or 'absolute', conception of reality" (Bett 1993, 336). The second is the "half-true tradition" described by Brian Ribeiro, mentioned in the main body of the text above.

²⁰ See also Kingwell 1995, Ribeiro 2004 and 2006, Sayward 2005, Gascoigne 2007, Marušić 2008, Narboux 2014, Hamawaki 2014, and Gorodeisky & Jolley 2014.

2 Clarke and Ancient Skepticism

Nor does the story of Clarke's reach end at the boundaries of contemporary epistemology. Virtually simultaneous with the renewal of interest in 'modern,' 'Cartesian' skepticism among analytic philosophers in the 1970s came a renewal of interest in ancient skepticism among classicists and historians of philosophy.²¹ For classicists, the question of how to understand ancient skepticism philosophically—whether the Academic skepticism of Cicero, the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus, or the positions of their forebears—took center stage with the seminal debate of the late 1970s and early '80s between Michael Frede and Myles Burnyeat.²² Work on ancient skepticism, especially Pyrrhonism, has flourished ever since.²³ As was perhaps inevitable, it did not take long for these separate developments to intersect. An early example is Oliver Johnson's *Skepticism and Cognitivism* (1978), which brings together extended discussions of skepticism in antiquity with discussions of the skeptical (or halfway-skeptical) views of Lehrer and Unger.

Clarke occupies a fascinating place at the intersection of contemporary epistemology and work on ancient skepticism. In his final riposte against Frede's take on the ancient skeptics, Burnyeat argues that Frede cannot be right because he, Frede, interprets the ancient skeptics in a uniquely modern way. Therefore, Burnyeat argues, Frede's interpretation, though it is an "attractive" one, is "anachronistic" (Burnyeat 1984/7, 345). The (supposedly) modern innovation that Burnyeat has in mind is what he calls "insulation" (Burnyeat 1984/7, 316–7): the view that the beliefs, claims, and practices of everyday life are 'insulated' from philosophical doubts such that (a) "philosophical scepticism cannot be straightforwardly refuted by common sense" and (b) "common sense cannot be refuted by philosophical scepticism" (Burnyeat 1984/7, 317). In other words, what Clarke will call 'the plain' and 'the philosophical' are, as Clarke puts it, "unmixable types" (LS, 764) despite that plain and philosophical questions, claims, etc., can be inscribed using identical words that have, at least along one semantic axis, identical meanings (LS, 759; NTE, 42). Clarke calls such "typographically" (NTE, 39) identical questions, claims, etc., "verbal twins" (LS, 756). "[W]e find," Burnyeat writes, "that [Clarke's] starting-point, the foundation of the whole thing, is the thesis that the judgements and knowledge-claims we make in ordinary life are immune (that is his word) from philosophical doubt" (Burnyeat 1984/7, 317). Frede's interpretation of ancient skepticism is anachronistic, according to Burnyeat, because 'insulation' of this sort did not enter the philosophical landscape until the appearance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: "It was Kant who persuaded philosophy that one can be, simultaneously and without contradiction, an empirical realist and a transcendental idealist" (Burnyeat 1984/7, 343). With this "distinction

²¹ Early examples include Hallie 1968, Naess 1968, and Stough 1969. In separating out 'classicists' and 'historians of philosophy,' I mean to distinguish primarily between those focused on ancient Greek and Roman sources and those working on the history of skepticism in later periods. In particular, the 'historians' I have in mind belong, in a more or less 'orthodox' way, to the contemporary field of historically oriented skepticism studies forged by Charles Schmitt, Ezequiel de Olaso, Giorgio Tonelli, and especially Richard Popkin. (See Schmitt 1972; Popkin 1980, 1992, 2003; Popkin, de Olaso & Tonelli (eds.) 1997.) Popkin and Co.'s historical story begins with the influence of Cicero and Sextus Empiricus on the philosophical, theological, and sociopolitical upheavals of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Partly in response to the emphasis placed by Popkin and Co. on the 'rediscovery' of ancient skepticism in Western Europe in the sixteenth century, others have pushed the story further back. On this, see Lagerlund (ed.) 2010 and Heck 2014. Classicists and Popkinite historians come together in the seminal collection Burnyeat (ed.) 1983. For a recent overview of the skeptical tradition that brings together the work of classicists, Popkinites, and contemporary philosophers, see Machuca & Reed (eds.) 2018.

²² Frede 1979, 1984; Burnyeat 1980, 1984/7.

²³ See Bett 2018 and Machuca 2019.

of levels, Kant thought to refute scepticism once and for all. The effect, however, was that scepticism itself moved upstairs to the transcendental level” (Burnyeat 1984/7, 344). In wrapping up his breathtakingly ambitious historical story, Burnyeat brings back Clarke: “I say this because I find it interesting to notice how Thompson Clarke’s sceptic repeats some of what Kant said, but in a quite different tone of voice.” Why a different tone of voice? Because Clarke’s sceptic, unlike Kant’s, is a *transcendental* sceptic. As such, he is attempting to challenge not “the plain way” of making certain statements, but only the “philosophical way” (Burnyeat 1984/7, 344).

Burnyeat draws two main conclusions from his wide-ranging reflections. First,

... Clarke’s sceptic... [along with] most of the references to ‘the sceptic’ in modern philosophical literature... has no historical reality. It is a construction of the modern philosophical imagination... [W]hen scepticism goes transcendental, the expression ‘the sceptic’ has to lose the historical reference it still carries in Hume, its connection with what certain historical figures actually said and thought. (Burnyeat 1984/7, 344)

Or, as he had put it a year earlier,

Kant brought the skeptical tradition to an end. Not that there is nothing left for contemporary philosophers to say about various kinds of skepticism. But the skepticisms they are talking about are a free creation of the modern philosophical imagination. They no longer descend from the ancient lineage of Pyrrho and the Academy. (Burnyeat 1983, 3)

It follows—and this is Burnyeat’s second main conclusion—that any attempt to read the ancient skeptics in a ‘Clarkean’ (i.e., post-Kantian) way is doomed to anachronism, for “of course it is true that when Sextus wrote Kant had not existed” (Burnyeat 1984/7, 345) and that therefore, if Burnyeat is right, insulation “was not yet invented” (Burnyeat 1984/7, 318).

A book—indeed, a critical history of Western philosophy—could be written in response to Burnyeat’s paper. Suffice it to say that I remain unconvinced. Indeed, it seems to me that Burnyeat is fundamentally mistaken at each and every stage of his argument, beginning with his understanding of ‘insulation’ and of ancient skepticism. For present purposes, I will confine myself to the following remarks regarding this fascinating and problematic paper.

To begin with, it’s worth noting (a) that Burnyeat’s reading of Kant derives from Barry Stroud, (b) that Stroud’s reading of Kant was largely inspired by Clarke, and (c) that connecting Stroud’s reading of Kant to Clarke no doubt occurred to Burnyeat as a result of the time he spent in the early 1980s at Berkeley, where he met Clarke. “This paper,” Burnyeat writes, “owes debts to... the writings of Barry Stroud, and Burton Dreben’s Howison Lectures at Berkeley in 1981,” lectures that Clarke attended (Burnyeat 1984/7, 123n49).²⁴ Burnyeat tells us that “[t]hese

²⁴ In commenting on an earlier draft of this material, Barry Stroud confirmed that Clarke attended Dreben’s lectures. Dreben was “an old friend of Clarke’s from Harvard undergraduate days and a classmate during their qualifying examinations” (Cavell 2010, 319). Stroud also informed me that, *contra* Burnyeat, the lectures Dreben delivered were *not* the Howison Lectures.

sketchy remarks [on Kant] owe much” to Stroud’s contribution to the anthology *The Skeptical Tradition*, edited by Burnyeat (Burnyeat 1984/7, 122n47). That contribution, “Kant and Skepticism,” was incorporated a year later into Chapter 4 of Stroud 1984. In the paper’s final footnote, Stroud writes that he is “grateful... to Thompson Clarke for my appreciation of the importance for epistemology of something like Kant’s distinction between the transcendental and the empirical” (Stroud 1983, 434n11). A year later, in the “Preface” to Stroud 1984, he writes that his and Clarke’s

extended discussion of issues raised in that paper [i.e., LS] eventually gave me a grip on the distinction between what he [i.e., Clarke] calls ‘the plain’ and ‘the philosophical’ which in one form or another runs throughout this book. It then helped me to understand Kant’s notion of the ‘transcendental’ as I try to explain it in Chapter Four. (Stroud 1984, xiii)

Burnyeat is surely on to something, then, in finding an affinity between Kant’s empirical–transcendental distinction and Clarke’s plain–philosophical distinction. I also believe that he’s right to find affinities between Frede’s interpretation of ancient skepticism and Clarke. In his second paper on ancient skepticism, Frede, who taught at Berkeley from 1971–76, thanks, among others, Barry Stroud (Frede 1984, 369n12). Burnyeat, meanwhile, tells us that *his* second paper on ancient skepticism (Burnyeat 1984/7) “began as a further contribution to” the debate represented in Frede 1979 and Burnyeat 1980, but that his “opponent... has moved to a new position” and that Burnyeat 1984/7 “joins with Frede’s current concern to see the whole issue in a broader historical framework extending into modern times” (Burnyeat 1984/7, 321n13). It strikes me as plausible that Burnyeat’s charge against Frede—i.e., that Frede’s reading of ancient skepticism is ‘Clarkean’ and therefore anachronistic—arose not just from historico–philosophical reflection on Burnyeat’s part, but also from the fact that he *knew* that Frede 1984 was influenced by Stroud (and hence by Clarke at secondhand, if not directly).

The principal connection between Stroud/Clarke and Frede is, as suggested by the passage from Stroud 1984 quoted above, that between Clarke’s plain–philosophical distinction and what Frede refers to as the appearance–reality distinction. This latter distinction lies at the heart of Frede’s metaphilosophical account: “dogmatic philosophy creates a global contrast between appearance and truth or reality” (Frede 1984, 210). According to Frede, this contrast introduces a schism between the epistemic practices of philosophers and those characteristic of everyday life; it does so by raising the standards of knowledge in philosophical contexts far beyond the standards that hold in everyday life: “in ordinary life and in ordinary language we do not subject ourselves to these [philosophical] standards” (Frede 1984, 211). For Frede, one thing that distinguishes ‘classical’ from ‘dogmatic’ skepticism is that the classical skeptic will “question not only the assumptions arrived at within [the dogmatists’] framework, but the very framework itself” (Frede 1984, 222). At the heart of that framework lies the ‘global’ appearance–reality distinction (Frede 1984, 221). Rejection of the dogmatic framework allows for the possibility of viewing everyday epistemic practices as being perfectly in order—but only *qua* everyday practices (i.e., not as *new dogmas*). In this way, descriptive claims such as “[w]hat we expect from somebody who knows varies enormously from context to context” (Frede 1984, 222) can be accepted as having an ‘everyday’ kind of normative authority. This questioning of the framework itself (appearance–reality, plain–philosophical) is central to Clarke’s

account of the legacy of skepticism. It is in this sense especially that Clarke ends up looking a lot like Frede's ancient skeptic—or, if Burnyeat is right, vice versa.

It seems to me, however, that Burnyeat's insightful bringing-together of Sextus, Kant, and Clarke has the opposite effect to the one he intended. Though Burnyeat links Frede's interpretation of Sextus to Clarke in an attempt to discredit that interpretation, I find that his arguments reinforce the notion that a philosophical kinship exists between Clarke and Pyrrhonism. If it could be shown, as I believe it can, (a) that Burnyeat mischaracterizes Pyrrhonism, (b) that he also mischaracterizes, by way of his notion of 'insulation,' Clarke's plain-philosophical distinction, and (c) that a correct understanding of Pyrrhonism and of Clarke's distinction would undermine the anachronism charge against Frede, then the way would be open to exploring the affinities between Clarke and Pyrrhonism, beginning perhaps with the sort of affinities suggested by Frede's "attractive interpretation" of Sextus Empiricus.²⁵ Indeed, Stroud himself suggests as much:

The contrast implicit in [ancient] sceptical practice²⁶ between 'appearances' and 'the way things are' is... perhaps one version of an elusive distinction [i.e., Clarke's plain-philosophical distinction] I examine from various angles in what follows. My concerns are to that extent continuous with those of ancient skepticism. (Stroud 1984, vii)

On this point, I could not agree with Stroud more heartily.²⁷ In fact, if we accept, with Stroud, that the Kantian distinction is a version of Clarke's plain-philosophical distinction (or vice versa), then the further philosophical connection between Clarke's distinction and the ancient appearance-reality distinction becomes virtually indisputable, for as both Giorgio Tonelli and John Christian Laursen have convincingly argued, the Kantian distinction between *phenomena* (roughly, appearances) and *noumena* (roughly, reality), to which the empirical-transcendental distinction is closely tied, was actually borrowed by Kant from the ancient skeptical

²⁵ Regarding (a), see Part I of Eichorn 2014. For an excellent summary and assessment of the Frede-Burnyeat debate, see Brennan & Roberts 2018, §4. I address (b) in Eichorn 2019 and 2021, though not principally with reference to Burnyeat. For a direct critique, see Marušić 2008, 62–3. Regarding (c), a good place to start is Bett 1993, which, though it fails to challenge Burnyeat's reading of Kant and uncritically echoes his misreading of Clarke, makes a convincing case that "a general distinction between ancient and contemporary philosophers" of the sort Burnyeat proposes "cannot be made out" (Bett 1993, 381). See also Grgić 2011, 86 ff. and Eichorn 2014, 130–3, though my quick treatment of Clarke in that section requires considerable qualification. Brennan & Roberts conclude (correctly, in my view) that Burnyeat "has no argument to the conclusion [that Sextus did not 'insulate by level'], other than the claim that no one prior to Kant insulated by level. And this indirect argument from anachronism simply begs the question against Frede: Kant was not the first person to insulate by level if Sextus did it before him" (Brennan & Roberts 2018, 136).

²⁶ It is unclear what Stroud means by "implicit" and "practice." There is nothing *implicit* about the appearance-reality distinction in ancient skepticism; rather, it is explicitly and absolutely fundamental both to ancient skepticism and, I would argue (with Stroud—see Stroud 2000, 3), to philosophy generally. I'm also not sure what he's getting at in specifying that this distinction is "implicit" in skeptical "practice." He might be saying that the appearance-reality distinction is implicit in the ancient-skeptical "way of life" (Stroud 1984, vii); but (a) it is *not* confined to their way of life, and (b) it is no more "implicit" in their way of life than it is in their philosophizing, as Sextus makes clear when he writes that "the criterion [of action] of the skeptical way of life is what appears" (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1.22).

²⁷ Stroud himself invokes an appearance-reality distinction throughout Stroud 1984. For example, he describes "the position we would all be in if Descartes's conclusion as he understands it were correct" (Stroud 1984, 31) this way: "if he is right, Descartes has lost the whole world. He knows what he is experiencing, he knows how things appear to him, but he does not know whether he is in fact sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in his hand" (Stroud 1984, 12). On the Cartesian picture, "[w]e are confined to the appearances we can never know to match or to deviate from the imperceptible reality that is forever denied us" (Stroud 1984, 34).

tradition, specifically from Sextus Empiricus.²⁸

If all this is on the right track, then far from bringing the ancient skeptical tradition to an end, as Burnyeat contends, Kant is better understood as having ushered that tradition into a new stage of development. There is little question in my mind that, at the very least, this makes better sense of the historical record. In the same year in which the first version of Burnyeat 1984/7 appeared, the renowned historian of skepticism Richard Popkin demolished, in person, Burnyeat's contentions regarding Kant's place in the skeptical tradition. Popkin recalls that

at the Woffenbüttel conference [*Skepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, 1984], Myles Burnyeat had expressed the opinion that after Kant's achievement, skepticism had ceased to be a philosophic problem. I replied that Kant's solution lasted only a few weeks until it was attacked and skeptically challenged by Maimon, Hamman, Schulze and others. Burnyeat was surprised and asked if anyone but Popkin knew about these figures. (Popkin 1998, xi)

Anyone with a serious interest in the history of skepticism should find it astonishing that Burnyeat, editor of *The Skeptical Tradition*, would *fail* to know the names of Maimon, Hamman, and Schulze, the last of whom published his influential skeptical tract under the pseudonym 'Aenesidemus' after the founder of Pyrrhonism.²⁹ At least as astonishing as this is his evident failure to appreciate the role that ancient skepticism played in shaping the views of Hegel,³⁰ Kierkegaard,³¹ Nietzsche,³² Husserl,³³ Heidegger,³⁴ Wittgenstein,³⁵ and a great many others—a list that is more than sufficient to give the lie to Burnyeat's rash claim that, after Kant, "the sceptic" spoken of by philosophers "has no historical reality" (Burnyeat 1984/7, 122). The ancient skeptical tradition not only survived Kant; it thrived, and continues to do so.

Further evidence that a Pyrrhonian interpretation of Clarke might prove fruitful is provided by links that commentators have drawn between Clarkeans and Pyrrhonism. Plínio Smith has argued that we find in Barry Stroud "a form of

²⁸ See Tonelli 1967, 72–3; Laursen 1992, Ch. 8. I would note that Tonelli's claim that "we have found no grounds for assuming that Kant had even read Sextus Empiricus" (Tonelli 1967, 87n2) has been superseded by Laursen & Popkin 1998.

²⁹ A number of primary texts central to post-Kantian skepticism are collected in di Giovanni & Harris (eds.) 2000. See also Beiser 1987, Franks 2005, Limnatis 2008, and the articles in Part IV of Charles & Smith (eds.) 2013.

³⁰ In addition to the texts cited in the previous footnote, see Forster 1989; Westphal 1989, 1998; Walsh 2005; Heidemann 2007; and Trisokkas 2012.

³¹ See Popkin, "Hume and Kierkegaard," in Popkin 1980; Maia Neto 1995, 1996; Rudd 1998, 2010.

³² See Parush 1976, Conway & Ward 1992, Schmitz 1998, Bett 2000, Berry 2011, and Sommer 2018.

³³ Surprisingly little work has been done on the connection between Husserl and Pyrrhonism, despite the obvious importance of the notion of *epoché* in Husserl's post-1907 output. Husserl's relation to the *actual* ancient skeptical tradition is obscured by the fact that, when he refers to 'the ancient skeptics,' he usually has in mind the Sophists. (See Husserl 1969, 1–2; Husserl 2008, 178.) But see Heaton 1997.

³⁴ As with Husserl, surprisingly little work has been done on the connection between Heidegger and Pyrrhonism, despite the importance of ancient skepticism for Husserl and despite Heidegger's own (unfortunately aborted) plans to teach a course on "Skepticism in Ancient Philosophy" in the winter semester of 1922–3 (Kisiel 1993, 269, 299, 556). But see Köchler 1978, 1982; Rudd 2003.

³⁵ See esp. Sluga 2004, who points out that "Pyrrhonian skepticism was, in fact, familiar to [Wittgenstein]... from his reading of Fritz Mauthner's *Contributions to a Critique of Language*. In that book, Mauthner was explicit about his commitment to a nontheoretical, Pyrrhonian style of skepticism" (Sluga 2004, 102; cf. Sluga 1996, 13). On philosophical connections between Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism, see Watson 1969; Fogelin 1992 (Essay 14), 1994 (Appendix B); Rudd 2003; Plant 2004; Stern 2004 (Ch. 3); Pritchard 2011, 2020; Tor 2014; Gutschmidt 2020.

updated Pyrrhonism” (Smith 2016, 157; cf. Fogelin 2011; Virvidakis 2008, 169). Similarly, Markus Gabriel suggests that Stanley Cavell “pursues the Pyrrhonian project of saving everyday life” from the “semantic nihilism” of the dogmatic (Cartesian) skeptic (Gabriel 2008, 145; trans. mine). In Cavell, Gabriel concludes, we find “a new version of Pyrrhonian skepticism” (Gabriel 2008, 147; trans. mine).

3 Clarke’s “Problem” and Its Possible Solution

In this paper, we’ve explored Clarke’s influence on contemporary discussions of both ancient (classical) and modern (dogmatic) skepticism. But the most important legacy that Clarke has left us remains the material he himself produced. I hope that the preceding discussion has convinced at least some readers that it is worth taking the time to seek out and come to grips with this dense, difficult material. In conclusion, I want to lay out what strike me as some of the most promising areas for future research centered on Thompson Clarke.

First, anyone who wants to understand Clarke must read his unpublished dissertation, NTE, which remains (with the exception of Cormier 2012 and Eichorn 2019 and 2021) exegetical *terra incognita*. Not only does NTE explain in far greater detail the ideas presented in Clarke’s “Seeing Surfaces and Physical Objects” (SS), it also sheds invaluable light on the arguments he would later develop in LS. I am convinced that, though LS offers important conceptual advances over NTE such that many claims made in NTE require qualification in order to be made compatible with LS, the two works are fundamentally of a piece. They are motivated by the same basic questions (what is philosophy? how does philosophy relate to everyday life? where do we today stand vis-à-vis traditional philosophy?), and they reach the same basic conclusions. Specifically, they both conclude with a characterization of what Clarke takes to be the most pressing philosophical issue left over from the wreckage of traditional philosophizing. In LS, Clarke characterizes this issue in terms of solving “the problem of the plain, of its structure, the character and source of its relative ‘non-objectivity’” (LS, 769). In NTE, he writes that “[i]f properly understood traditional epistemology comes as a shock, and it leaves us with a philosophical problem of the greatest magnitude” (NTE, 242). In the final paragraph of his dissertation, he characterizes that problem as follows:

There is at the present time in philosophy no answer to traditional epistemology. 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 [i.e., the ‘plain’ of ‘everyday life’] then we can know and see very little indeed... The problem of first priority now is the study and characterization of what I have referred to as the non-rule-like dimension. In this present study I have labelled this dimension; I have not undertaken the difficult problem of characterizing it. To study this dimension is to examine “daily life”... The question of the nature of... “daily life,” must have first claim on our thinking if we are to progress beyond traditional epistemology. Once the non-rule-like dimension is characterized we shall be in a better position to try to make sense of how knowing and seeing can be genuine even though essentially dependent on this dimension. (NTE, 247–8)

To characterize the “non-rule-like dimension” is to solve the “problem” of the “structure” of “the plain.”

Thus, the first task, of which I have made a beginning (particularly in Eichorn 2019), is to present a holistic interpretation of Clarke's work, culminating in a statement of just what Clarke's "problem" is. LS remains the centerpiece of his thought, but our understanding of it must be supplemented by close study of NTE. In assessing the correctness of Clarke's diagnosis of the "problem of the plain," it would be helpful to interrogate his account of G.E. Moore in LS, his scathing critiques of (and sometimes startling concessions to) J.L. Austin in NTE, and the viability of his reliance on the work of H.P. Grice.

The second major task would be to attempt to take up Clarke's problem in an attempt either to solve it or to show that it does not require (or does not admit of) solution. Efforts in this area can be found in works by Stroud and Cavell, though it remains an open question whether (or to what extent) they understood the underlying problem the same way Clarke did. It seems to me that they did not and that a better understanding of Clarke's problem is required if we are ever to develop a satisfactory solution to it. It strikes me as a mistake to lean too heavily on Stroud, Cavell, or anyone else in trying to understand Clarke.

That said, there are many places we might look for clues as to how to approach Clarke's problem. Though Clarke refers to the problem of the plain as "something new to ponder"—it is, he says, a "new, challenging problem" (LS, 769)—it seems to me that the problem was articulated long before Clarke stumbled on it. My own view is that Clarke's problem can be detected (and a possible solution to it found) in the works of Sextus Empiricus, and §2 of the present paper tries to motivate bringing together Clarke and Sextus, as well as Clarke and Kant (and Sextus and Kant). Indeed, I believe that a full understanding of Clarke and his problem—its shape, history, and possible solution—requires placing Clarke within a history of thought on philosophy, everyday life, and their relation that goes back at least to the ancient skeptics and encompasses ancient skepticism's modern legacy, including figures such as Montaigne, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and others. (See notes 29–35, above.)

I argue in my paper on LS that appears earlier in this issue of *Sképsis* (Eichorn 2021) that the problem of the plain is really the problem of developing a new conception of the human epistemic standpoint, where 'new' means not only 'non-Cartesian,' but also (and more fundamentally) what we might call 'non-Platonic,' where Plato is invoked similarly to how he is invoked by Richard Rorty and John McDowell—namely, as a sort of totem of traditional philosophy.³⁶ Looked at this way, Clarke's problem is very much like the problem that Heidegger tried to solve in *Being and Time*. It is interesting to note in this connection that both Charles Guignon and John Richardson wrote dissertations at Berkeley on Heidegger and skepticism under the supervision of Clarke and the Heideggerian Hubert Dreyfus. (See notes 13–14, above.) These works, however, are almost entirely given over to interpretations of Heidegger. I suspect that we could learn much from a study that brings Heidegger and Clarke into direct conversation. (For a first tentative step in that direction, see Eichorn 2019, §3.6.)

Heidegger is not the only phenomenologist who might help us better understand Clarke. It seems to have been a recurrent theme of the conference "The

³⁶ In one place, Rorty introduces his brand of pragmatism by opposing it to the kind of capital-P Philosophy practiced by "the 'Platonists' and the 'positivists,'" both of whom share, he argues, "[t]he Platonic presupposition... that what the vulgar call 'truth'... should be thought of as divided into a lower and an upper division, the division between (in Plato's terms) mere opinion and genuine knowledge" (Rorty 1982, xvi). To a large extent following Rorty (cf. McDowell 1996, ix–x), McDowell tries in *Mind and World* to open a middle way between what he calls "bald naturalism" and "rampant platonism," the latter of which he characterizes—again echoing Rorty (cf. Rorty 1979, 43)—as a kind of "supernaturalism" (see McDowell 1996, 77–8).

Legacy of Thompson Clarke,” held at University Bordeaux Montaigne in 2011, that Clarke’s problem shares features with the problems explored by Merleau-Ponty in his final, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*.³⁷ I suspect this is true, and it merits closer scrutiny.

Another source we might draw on in thinking about Clarke’s problem, both its shape and its possible solution, is Wittgenstein, particularly *On Certainty*, which introduces *avant la lettre* the crucial Clarkean notion of “verbal twins” (LS, 756).³⁸ We know that Clarke had read and taught Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* prior to publishing LS, but I am unsure when Clarke first encountered *On Certainty*, which did not appear in print until 1969, or whether it influenced LS. It seems plausible that Wittgenstein’s interest in Moore in *On Certainty* spurred Clarke’s own thinking. Moore plays no role in NTE, and many (if not all) of LS’s conceptual advances over NTE arise from Clarke’s extended discussion of Moore in the first part of that paper. But it’s equally plausible, at least on its face, that the similarities between LS and *On Certainty* are not the result of the latter influencing the former. After all, even the notion of verbal twins from LS is anticipated in NTE’s discussion of phrases that are “typographically the same” but have different meanings (NTE, 39, 42).³⁹ I do not know if it is possible that Clarke was familiar prior to 1962 with the material from which *On Certainty* was drawn, but it does not strike me as likely.

Finally, it would no doubt prove fruitful to extend Clarkean-style arguments to other areas in philosophy, such as Charles Sayward did in applying Clarke’s arguments in SS to the problem of other minds. Indeed, I suspect that, in writing his paper, Sayward was familiar not only with SS, but also with NTE. In his article he writes that “[i]nterest attaches to [the surface inquiry] because it is a kind of simpler model for the sense-data inquiry” (Sayward 2005, 2). Clarke agrees, but he does *not* say as much in SS, in which ‘sense-data’ are never mentioned.

Stroud’s book on colors (*The Quest for Reality*) is also, arguably, an example of extending a Clarkean-style analysis into a new area. Stroud mentions that “[s]oon after I had given the lectures [on colors] in Oxford, Thompson Clarke and I gave a seminar together in Berkeley, which, as usual, closed off one line I had thought promising and eventually set me off in a completely new direction” (Stroud 2000, xiv). At a presentation he gave on the ontological status of colors at the University of Chicago in 2017, Stroud spoke of how Clarke had at some point developed a new way of presenting the plain–philosophical distinction solely in terms of how to understand the ‘reality’ of colors.

More interesting (to my mind, at least) is the possibility of exploring the moral, ethical, and political implications of a Clarkean account of what it means to be a human knower in the world. This joining of the ‘theoretical’ and the ‘practical’ comes naturally to someone like me, who reads Clarke as a kind of Pyrrhonian; but even if we put the ancients aside, I suspect that Clarke’s thought would illuminate discussions of moral skepticism, moral realism and anti-realism, etc.

In short, there is much work to be done on Clarke’s own writings. There is also work to be done in exploring—perhaps even trying to carry out—the philosophical project with which he left us. In addition, there are any number of novel uses to which we might put Clarke’s ideas. To paraphrase the man himself: It’s a pleasant surprise when Clarke, who has always given us plenty to think about, gives us something new to ponder.

³⁷ See Narboux 2014, 165n17, 181n40; Gorodeisky & Jolley 2014, 237n9, 249n17; Baz 2014, 267, 269, 285.

³⁸ See Wittgenstein 1969, §§259, 347, 406.

³⁹ See also NTE, 127: “One senses that the same words do not say the same thing in both cases.”

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