

# Skepticism and Circularity



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## On Metaepistemological Scepticism

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### 1 Introduction

Since at least the mid-1990s, there has been a wave of ‘anti-externalist’ replies to externalist responses to scepticism.<sup>1</sup> Richard Fumerton has been one of the most influential figures in this wave, and alongside Barry Stroud his contributions to this debate are the most well-known. Indeed, one often finds Fumerton and Stroud being jointly identified as defenders of a position known as ‘metaepistemological scepticism’ (for example, see Bergmann 2008; Fumerton 2006: 181–2; Pritchard 2005: 208–13). In this chapter, we seek to revise this tradition, for although there are important similarities between their views, there are also important differences. Finding out what those differences are will help us to better appreciate their individual contributions.

In particular, we focus on three important points of contact, which we can summarize as follows:

- (1) Externalist theories permit a kind of non-inferential, perceptual justification and knowledge of the external world, but it’s not sufficient for *philosophical assurance*—that is, it’s not ‘philosophically satisfying noninferential justification’ (Fumerton 2006: 190).
- (2) Direct acquaintance with facts in some domain *D* is sufficient for philosophical assurance about *D*, and can thereby be appealed to explain how knowledge in *D* is possible.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Note that throughout this chapter, when we refer to ‘externalism’ we will have epistemic externalism in mind.

<sup>2</sup> More specifically, Fumerton maintains that *S* has ‘philosophically satisfying’ non-inferential justification to believe that *p* iff *S* believes that *p*, *p* is true, *S* is acquainted with the fact that makes *p* true, and *S* is acquainted with the correspondence relation between *p* and the fact that makes *p* true.

- (3) We *don't* have direct acquaintance with facts about the external world (see Fumerton 2014: 121, 2006).

Fumerton accepts each of (1)–(3). However, while Stroud accepts (1), interestingly he disagrees with Fumerton on *both* (2) and (3). The interesting disagreement between them, then, is that while Fumerton thinks that it's at least *possible* that direct acquaintance with facts about the external world yields philosophical assurance, Stroud does not think this. Put another way, if only it were possible for us to be directly, perceptually acquainted with facts about the external world, then we would be in a position to achieve a philosophically satisfying response to the sceptical challenge.

In Section 2, we provide an exposition of Fumerton's central argument against externalist responses to scepticism, and the role of philosophical assurance in that argument. In Section 3, we present Stroud's anti-externalist argument, and along the way review and reject two interpretations of Stroud's argument in this regard. In Section 4, we return to the contrast between Stroud and Fumerton.

## 2 Fumerton on Metaepistemology and Scepticism

According to Fumerton, one of the principal concerns of his book *Metaepistemology and Scepticism* is to:

explore the implications of accepting various accounts of internalism and externalism for the way in which one should understand and respond to the traditional sceptical challenges.

(Fumerton 1998: 906)

In particular, Fumerton argues that 'there is something wrong with paradigm versions of externalism', because of the 'ease with which externalists can and *should* ignore sceptical challenges *at all levels*' (Fumerton 1998: 906).

Here we are exposed to Fumerton's distinctive strand of *metaepistemological scepticism*, which targets externalist responses to the 'traditional sceptical challenges', such as the problem of the external world, the problem of other minds, the problem of induction, and so on. According to Fumerton, one of the central problems facing externalist responses to these kinds of sceptical challenges is that the externalist ought to permit a question-begging track-record argument in order to support their second-order beliefs about the epistemic credentials of their first-order beliefs. But as Fumerton himself summarizes the problem with these kinds of arguments:

You cannot use perception to justify the reliability of perception! You cannot use memory to justify the reliability of memory! You cannot use induction to justify the reliability of induction! Such attempts to respond to the skeptic's concern involve blatant, indeed pathetic circularity. (Fumerton 1995: 177)

The basic idea, then, is that if externalism were true, it would be possible for one to know that their perceptual faculties were reliable on the basis of a track-record

argument, refuting the sceptical claim that it's not possible for one to know that their perceptual faculties are reliable, because for all one knows one is just dreaming or a brain in a vat, situations in which one's perceptual faculties are unreliable. But Fumerton thinks that these kinds of track-record arguments are at best a *reductio* of externalism (see also Fumerton 2006: 179–80).

Here one might wonder what's missing from the externalist's explanation of how we can know that our perceptual faculties are reliable. Fumerton's suggestion is that what's missing is some kind of *philosophical assurance* that those faculties are reliable (for example, see Fumerton 2006). After all, we might appeal to the alleged fact that there have been several occasions in the past where whenever we had a perceptual experience as of *p*, *p* turned out to be true, and whenever we have a perceptual experience as of *q*, *q* turned out to be true, and so on. From this, we could then formulate a track-record argument for the conclusion that perception is reliable. But couldn't we have just been dreaming that *p* was true, and all the while we were having the perceptual experience as of *p* nevertheless, and so on for the rest of our perceptual experiences? In short, how can we assure ourselves that this is not so, among countless other possibilities? In order to make good on this kind of question, Fumerton's suggestion is that the philosopher seek philosophical assurance, and philosophical assurance, we are told, is not what the externalist's explanation gives us.

Here we are led to at least three questions, which we will consider in turn: what is philosophical assurance; how can one get it; and why can't externalism allow one to get philosophical assurance?

Consider the first question. According to Fumerton, philosophical assurance is the state in which one's *philosophical curiosities* are satisfied, because one has an *assurance of the truth* of the claim in question. For comparison, consider a child who asks her parents 'why is the sky blue?' As Fumerton explains, one might answer with something like a school-level scientific explanation, appealing to wavelengths and the fact that wavelengths of that kind look blue to people with normal colour vision. But then the child might persist: 'why do wavelengths of that sort look blue to us?' The child's curiosities haven't been satisfied. And this would continue to be so if the parent got to the point in the exchange with an answer like: 'That's just how it is.'<sup>3</sup> What the child seeks is some kind of *explanation*—an explanation which should no longer yield any more 'why?' questions.

In this way at least, philosophers are like children. We want our philosophical curiosities satisfied, just as children want their curiosities satisfied. In particular:

The epistemologist... wants to know why we can legitimately conclude that a certain way of forming belief is legitimate, and the epistemologist's philosophical curiosity isn't going to be satisfied by being told at any stage of the game that it just is. (Fumerton 2006: 184)

<sup>3</sup> This example is borrowed from Fumerton (2006: 184–5).

So what is sufficient for philosophical assurance? In general, following Fumerton, we might say that if *S*'s philosophical curiosities are settled with respect to *p*, then *S* has no further philosophical reason to ask 'why *p*?'. *Philosophical assurance* simply is what one gets when one's philosophical curiosities are satisfied. So, to ask what's sufficient for philosophical assurance with respect to *p* is to ask what's sufficient for settling one's philosophical curiosities with respect to *p*. And to ask whether one's philosophical curiosities with respect to *p* are (or ought to be) settled is to ask whether one has any further philosophical reason to ask 'why *p*?'

According to Fumerton, the relation of *acquaintance* is sufficient for philosophical assurance, because it's the kind of epistemological relation that brings the truth-maker of one's belief before one's mind.<sup>4</sup> On this view, acquaintance with *p* ought to provide one with no further philosophical reason to ask 'why *p*?'. In particular, acquaintance is a *sui generis* relation of 'direct awareness' of the truth-maker for the corresponding belief that *p*.<sup>5</sup> What's important about acquaintance is that (i) *S*'s being acquainted with the fact that *p*, (ii) their belief that *p*, and (iii) the correspondence relation between them, is jointly *sufficient* for non-inferential justification that satisfies *philosophical curiosity*—that is, it generates philosophical assurance.<sup>6</sup> On Fumerton's view, then, all it takes for us to acquire philosophical assurance for our beliefs about the external world is for us to be acquainted with facts about the external world. Once this question is settled, the philosophical problem of the external world will be resolved.

Can we be acquainted with the truth-makers of some of our beliefs? And if we can, what is the range of our acquaintance? As it turns out, Fumerton thinks we *can* acquire philosophical assurance for a certain limited range of propositions, because we can be acquainted with the truth-makers of those propositions. For example, consider the propositions that *I'm in pain now*. On Fumerton's view, when I'm in pain, I can come to know that that proposition is true because 'I am directly aware of the pain itself—the very truth-maker of my belief' (Fumerton

<sup>4</sup> For an explicit statement of this, see Fumerton (2006: 188).

<sup>5</sup> An interesting question here is what Fumerton has to say about objections to his acquaintance theory from proponents of the 'Myth of the Given', such as Bonjour (1985) and McDowell (1994). Roughly put, how could a non-representational (or more narrowly, non-propositional) relation like *acquaintance* yield *justification* for one's beliefs, a representational state (or more narrowly, a propositional attitude)? It seems like it could do so only by entailment, or probabilification, each of which seems to be a relation that can hold only between representational states. Note that this kind of objection doesn't obviously arise for proponents of an acquaintance theory, such as Campbell (2009), and perhaps also Travis (2004, 2005), who maintain that acquaintance is a non-representational relation, but that it's epistemic role is to give one *non-propositional knowledge* of external things.

<sup>6</sup> See Fumerton (1995: 74–6, 2006: 187–90) for his work on acquaintance and its role in philosophical assurance. Note that here we represent Fumerton as thinking that acquaintance is sufficient for philosophical assurance, but elsewhere he seems to think it's *necessary* as well (e.g., Fumerton 2014: 123). Note, however, that some other philosophers, such as Campbell (2009), support a different theory of acquaintance.

2006: 189). But now consider a proposition about the external world, such as that *I have hands*. Can I be acquainted with the fact that I have hands? According to Fumerton, I cannot, because since

one can possess in hallucinatory experience the *same* justification that one possesses in veridical experience for believing truths about one's physical environment, I don't think one can be directly acquainted with facts about physical objects. (Fumerton 2014: 123)

As we have interpreted Fumerton, acquaintance with *p* is sufficient for philosophical assurance about *p*. The prospects of acquiring philosophical assurance for our external world beliefs cannot therefore come from acquaintance with facts about the external world. But that leaves open whether it is strictly necessary. Can we acquire philosophical assurance for our beliefs about the external world even if we cannot be acquainted with facts about the external world? A second question is whether or not an *externalist* can integrate acquaintance within their stock of non-inferential reliable processes. The thought here is that if what explains the epistemological properties of acquaintance are properties that can be explained along externalist lines, then it's not clear what would prevent Fumerton from being committed to the thesis that either acquaintance is not sufficient for philosophical assurance, or else that externalists can accommodate the requirement that we can acquire philosophical assurance for our beliefs about the external world.

Consider the second question. At least as far as Fumerton (e.g., 2006: 188) is concerned, a stable causal, reliable, or modal relation between one's state of mind and a fact is not identical with acquaintance with that fact, even if it is sufficient for non-inferential justification to believe that fact. If this is right, we might wonder why acquaintance is the kind of non-inferential relation that can generate philosophical assurance, whereas the externalist's explanation of our non-inferential perceptual processes, for example, cannot generate philosophical assurance. After all, that the relation of acquaintance is *sui generis* does not entail that the explanation of its epistemological properties is *sui generis* as well—that the epistemological properties of acquaintance admits of no further explanation.

The closest we get to an explanation of why acquaintance with facts enables it to yield philosophical assurance is that it's a relation in which the fact in question is before the subject's mind, and that when a fact is before the subject's mind, and the subject's belief which represents that fact is also before their mind, this ought to settle the question of its truth. Fumerton's thought here is that there is simply *nothing more* to want in terms of assurance of truth than having the fact of the matter 'before one's consciousness'. As he asks: 'What more could one want as an assurance of truth than the truth-maker before one's mind?' (Fumerton 2006: 189).

Now one might think that none of this implies that the externalist is barred from thinking that veridical perceptual experience is *not* the kind of relation that brings the fact in question before the subject's mind, settling the question of its truth. On the

other hand, Fumerton gestures towards this sort of position. In an exposition of the nature of non-inferential justification, Fumerton tells us that:

The state that *constitutes* noninferential justification is a state that contains as constituents both the bearer of truth value and the truth-maker.

(Fumerton 2001: 14, our emphasis, see also 2014: 123)

The reason this passage suggests that Fumerton ought to think that the externalist is barred from holding that perceptual experience is a relation that can bring facts about the external world before the subject's mind is that *if* perceptual experience could do that, it would then be sufficient for philosophical assurance. After all, this is what's supposed to explain the epistemological significance of acquaintance.

On the other hand, we might wonder how the externalist *could* accommodate the view that what constitutes non-inferential justification is a state that contains both the truth-bearer and the truth-maker. Here's the problem: *if* it is constitutive of non-inferential justification that the target justification-conferring state have the truth-bearer and the truth-maker as constituents, *ipso facto* the state is *not* the kind of state that one could have in the absence of the truth-maker. And here's the reason: consider a perceptual experience as of having a hand. Suppose that *S* has a hand, and that she believes this *because* she has a perceptual experience as of having a hand. However, let us suppose that it's possible for *S* to have that kind of perceptual experience, an experience with the very same nature as the one she's having now, even if she did not have a hand. Still, this is compatible with *S*'s perceptual experiences as of having a hand being a *reliable indicator* that she has a hand. So, if a version of externalism such as reliabilism were true, then this state would be *sufficient* for non-inferential justification, modulo defeaters. But the proposal from Fumerton in the previous passage suggests that it simply *couldn't be* sufficient for non-inferential justification—at least, not 'philosophically relevant justification' (Fumerton 2006: 188). On this account, it's not just that the externalist cannot account for philosophical assurance, but that the externalist cannot really account for non-inferential justification either.

So, what's really wrong with an externalist response to the traditional sceptical challenges, such as the problem of the external world, is that their explanation of how our non-inferential justification is possible is philosophically dissatisfying. And what grounds the dissatisfaction we ought to have with their explanation is that what they call 'non-inferential justification' isn't the kind of epistemic state, relation, or process that is even *capable* of settling the question over the truth of the target belief. But 'philosophically relevant justification' has, at the very least, to be capable of settling the question of truth of the target belief. If it is not capable of settling the question of the truth of the target belief, then we will not be in a position to acquire philosophical assurance for that belief.



### 3 Stroud's Metaepistemological Scepticism

There are at least two interpretations of the source of Stroud's metaepistemological scepticism in the literature. The first interpretation—the internalist reading—maintains that Stroud argues for internalism about knowledge, and that his anti-externalist view flows from his internalism. The second interpretation—the circularity reading—maintains that Stroud argues that externalism permits an unsatisfactory circular explanation of how knowledge of the world is possible.

Let's begin with the internalist reading. If people know that there are tables, then people know that there are external things. This would be a positive answer to G. E. Moore's (1939) question of whether the existence of external things is known, rather than just an article of faith. However, Stroud reminds us that:

[i]f many people knew that there are external things, but no one knew that anyone had that knowledge, then no one would know the answer to the epistemological question. There would be a positive answer—the existence of external things would be something known and not just an article of faith—but no one would know it . . . The truth of the answer they accept would not give them the understanding they seek unless they could recognize that they know or have good reason to believe that answer. (Stroud 2004: 166)

At first glance, this passage makes Stroud look like an internalist. But our suggestion is that Stroud is not expressing a straightforward internalist thesis about knowledge or justification. Instead, he's expressing a constraint on understanding how knowledge of the world is possible. What it tells us is that we cannot understand how our knowledge of the world is possible unless we 'recognize' that we have knowledge of the world. That thesis does not entail that knowing that  $p$  requires having to 'recognize' that one knows that  $p$ . While there might be an interesting relationship between first-order internalist theses and Stroud's thesis about philosophical understanding, failing to distinguish them encourages a misreading of Stroud, and so a failure to appreciate his metaepistemological views.

A related internalist interpretation of Stroud is due to Fumerton (2006). According to Fumerton, we can distinguish between modest and immodest internalist epistemological goals. The goal of each type of internalist is to philosophically understand how knowledge of some sort is possible, and to do so by respecting internalist principles. According to Fumerton (2006: 181), Stroud is our paradigmatic immodest internalist, because he 'seems to locate the epistemologist's target as second-level knowledge (or understanding)'. While it's true that Stroud locates the epistemologist's target at second-level knowledge or understanding, it's not clear that this need give expression to internalist desiderata. After all, Stroud's core thought seems to be that one of our epistemological goals is to understand how knowledge of the world is possible in the face of various sceptical problems which makes it look impossible. In the face of this challenge, what we want is not just knowledge of the world, but an

understanding of how it's possible given those problems which made it look impossible.

We can bring this element of Stroud's views into sharper relief by considering his views on the relationship between perceptual knowledge and scepticism. On Stroud's view, perceiving that  $p$  is a form of knowing that  $p$ , and he thinks that we can come to facts about the external world on the basis of this kind of perception. In fact, he tells us that this 'is one answer to a question about our knowledge of external things; what might be called the most straightforward answer' (Stroud 2004: 166). What Stroud means by the straightforward answer to the epistemological question of whether knowledge of the external world is possible is thus that we can come to know that there are external things on the basis of seeing or perceiving that there are.

However, Stroud believes that while the straightforward answer is true, it cannot offer us a philosophical understanding of how knowledge of this kind is possible. This might seem odd, since Stroud thinks that the straightforward answer is true, and that its truth implies that we know about the external world. One puzzle, then, is what's wrong with the straightforward answer, if it's not that it's false?

Let's consider two possible deficiencies. On the first account, what makes the straightforward answer deficient is that it presupposes that perceiving that  $p$  is a form of knowing facts about the world. What we need to know is that that's what it is. On the second account, what makes it deficient is that it's somehow too close to what we want to explain for it to be a satisfying explanation. After all, one might think that an answer to the question 'how is it possible for one to know that  $p$  by perception?' by saying that one can perceive that  $p$  is like saying one can know that  $p$  by knowing that  $p$ .

For Stroud at least, we can know that we perceive that  $p$ , because we can perceive that others perceive that  $p$ :

If perception is indeed a way of coming to know something about external things, then I can also know by perception that that answer to that epistemological question is correct. I can often see that someone right in front of me sees that there is a table in the room and thereby comes to know that there is a table in the room... The truth of the straightforward epistemological explanation is something I can know to be true by perceiving that it is true.

(Stroud 2004: 166–7)

So Stroud thinks that not knowing that the straightforward answer is true is not what makes it deficient, because we can know that it's true. What about the second? There is the temptation to protest that knowing that there are external things on the basis of perceiving that there and knowing that other people know that there are external things on the basis of perceiving that that is true, is a circular explanation of how knowledge of the external world is possible.

This point is related to Stroud's (2000a: 201) *desideratum* that a satisfying explanation of how knowledge of the world is possible must be 'general in several respects'. For example, Stroud argues that one problem with the straightforward answer is that

if we thought of sensory knowledge as itself knowledge of material objects around us we would not get an appropriately general explanation of how any knowledge of any [*material*] object is possible by means of the senses. We would be explaining knowledge of some material objects only on the basis of some others. (Stroud 2000b: 105)

Now, while the transition from seeing that *p* to knowing that *p* is not a circular transition, because it's not an inferential transition, there can still be an issue with appealing to the putative fact that we know that we perceive that *p* and that it's a form of knowing that *p*, because it's a circular explanation rather than a circular inference. The straightforward answer tries to explain how our knowledge of the world is possible on the basis of our knowledge of the world.

#### 4 Fumerton and Stroud

Fumerton maintains that acquaintance with facts is sufficient for philosophical assurance of one's beliefs about those facts, and is therefore committed to the thesis if we could have direct acquaintance with facts about the external world, then we could have philosophical assurance for our beliefs about the external world. The problem with externalism is that *S* can be non-inferentially justified in believing that *p* while their philosophical curiosities about whether or not *p* are still wide open, so that one lacks philosophical assurance about *p*.

Although Stroud doesn't express perceiving that *p* in terms of direct acquaintance with or perception of *p*, this is a natural understanding of the nature of that state. It's a state with a mind-to-world direction of fit; one in which it's impossible to be in unless the content *p* is true and *known* to be true. At least, Stroud has endorsed this kind of view in his recent work (see Stroud 2009, 2011). But Stroud wouldn't want to claim that the immediate perception of external world facts allows one to attain a philosophical understanding of how our knowledge of the world is possible.

In this fashion, Stroud can allow that we have assurance of the truth of our beliefs about the world, and even that we have assurance of the truth of that proposition as well. What remains in question is whether this would be sufficient for Fumerton's *philosophical assurance*. It seems like it should be, since facts about the external world, on Stroud's view, can be brought right before our minds during certain kinds of perceptual states.

What's perplexing here is the disagreement between Fumerton and Stroud. Both Fumerton and Stroud seem to think that rule-circular explanations are not good explanations. Stroud thinks the straightforward answer of how we know that there are external things is true, and known to be true. However, his explanation of how we know that it's true appears to be rule-circular. So, one might think that Fumerton and Stroud are not too far apart after all, since both seem to bar rule-circular explanations. The thought here is that what's wrong with the straightforward answer, and externalist answers, for example, is that these answers are rule-circular.

As it turns out, however, things are far more complex. Fumerton holds that acquaintance, unlike being caused to believe that  $p$ , or the belief that  $p$  being the product of a reliable belief-forming process, is sufficient for philosophical assurance. Of course, one could ask ‘can we be acquainted with the fact that we are acquainted with  $p$ ?’ But Fumerton thinks we can ask and answer this: we *can* be acquainted with that fact! However, the externalist will have to keep moving up levels. As he expresses the point:

The matter is quite different, I think, with belief-forming processes that may or may not be reliable . . . Am I noninferentially justified in thinking that I am in pain when I stub my toe? The reliabilist, for example, says that I am provided that my belief is caused by a process that is unconditionally reliable. The philosopher can’t resist, at this point, asking the obvious next question. But is my belief caused in the right way? (Fumerton 2006: 189)

This echoes Stroud’s view that we can perceive that we perceive that there are external things. The philosopher can’t resist asking ‘but can we perceive that there are external things—how can we know that the straightforward answer is true?’ But according to Stroud, this question can be settled, just as the question of whether we can know that we are acquainted with certain facts can be settled through acquaintance.

Stroud thinks that the reason some philosophers will be dissatisfied with the straightforward answer to the problem of the external world is that these philosophers will simply think it’s false: no one can see that such-and-such is so in the external world if seeing that  $p$  is a form of knowing that  $p$ . What’s interesting about this suggestion, in connection with our puzzle about what Stroud thinks is wrong with the straightforward answer, is what he thinks the relationship is between the straightforward answer and the problem of the external world:

how do we get knowledge by perception of the existence of such external things, given that we never, strictly speaking, see or otherwise perceive that they exist? This is perhaps what has come to be called the philosophical problem of the external world. But with this understanding of the restricted deliverances of unaided perception, the word ‘external’ takes on new significance. It no longer just denotes things to be met with in space, like tables and trees. It now applies to everything that is not . . . perceived to be so; and what is perceived turns out to be much less than might originally have been thought. The problem then is how we can come to know or have reason to believe anything about what is ‘external’ to us, or beyond that limited domain of what we strictly speaking perceive. (Stroud 2004: 168)

This passage gives expression to one of Stroud’s central views about scepticism and the problem of the external world. As Stroud presents it, the philosophical problem of the external world depends upon the denial of the thesis that we can perceive that there are external things. On his account, the phrase ‘the external world’, as it is expressed in ‘the problem of the external world’, means *everything that cannot be perceived to be so*, and so *everything that cannot be known on the basis of perception alone*. For Stroud, the denial of our being able to perceive that there are external things is what presents us with the ‘deep and challenging’ epistemological problem.

Here we see that Stroud's dissatisfaction with the straightforward answer to the problem of the external world is not that it is not true, but that without presupposing that it isn't true, we won't have a challenging philosophical problem to answer. Contrast this view with the stronger claim that we just won't have the *philosophical problem* of the external world unless the straightforward answer is false. It's not clear which interpretation is correct. However, in favour of the stronger claim, Stroud tells us that:

its source [*the problem of the external world*] lies somewhere within the familiar and powerful line of thinking by which all of our alleged knowledge of the world gets even temporarily split off all at once from what we get in perception, so that we are presented with a completely general question of how perception so understood gives us knowledge of anything at all in the physical world. If that manoeuvre cannot really be carried off successfully, we have no completely general question about our knowledge of the world to answer.

(Stroud 2000c: 153)

This passage suggests the stronger reading, because he makes clear that in order to be presented with the problem of the external world, it has to be that 'all of our alleged knowledge of the world' gets 'split off all at once' from a paradigm case of perceptual knowledge.

Now we are in a better position to understand Stroud's argument against externalism. Let us suppose that Stroud is right about the problem of the external world. On his view, the problem depends upon the view that we're unable to perceive that there are external things. Now in order to achieve a philosophical understanding of how knowledge of the external world is possible, we have to know that there are external things, and know that we know this. But then how could the straightforward answer be a genuine answer to the philosophical problem of the external world, if there even being some such problem requires that that answer is false? On this view of the problem of the external world, then, it's the conditional-problem whereby *if* the perception of facts about the external world is impossible, how then is it possible for us to know anything at all about external things?

Let us suppose that the externalist philosopher believes that externalism can provide a satisfying philosophical answer to this challenge, given what Stroud thinks is required for it: *that we can't perceive that there are external things*. According to Stroud, the externalist philosopher ought therefore to be in a position to explain how (a) we know that there are external things, and (b) how we know that (a) *is true*, without the explanation presupposing that we *do* know about external things.

Again, recall that Stroud thinks the proponent of the straightforward answer can explain how (a) is true and how (b) is true. But Stroud wants to draw a distinction between the proponent of that thesis and the externalist at the metaepistemological level. On his view, while the proponents of the straightforward answer can explain how (a) is true, and how (b) is true, their explanation is not intended to be—*nor could it be*—a *bona fide* answer to the philosophical problem of the external world.

However, for the proponent of externalism, their explanation of how (a) is true and how (b) is true *is* intended to be an answer to the philosophical problem of the external world. For this reason, our assessment of each view will have to answer to different demands: for the former explanation is not even in the market to answer the philosophical problem of the external world, while the other is.

In rough outline, Stroud's argument against externalism is that an externalist account of how we know that we can have perceptual knowledge of the world is no better than an astrologer's explanation of how astrologers know that we have astrological knowledge of the world. Of course, it might be that there are reliable, co-variations between our perceptual experiences and the facts that we form beliefs on that basis, whereas this is not so for the astrologer's crystal-ball images. But since the philosophical problem requires that we see their respective epistemic bases—*perceptual experience* in the one case, and *crystal-ball gazing* in the other case—as being impoverished and restricted, we have to conclude that both are on epistemic par, as far as understanding how their putative knowledge is possible.

In order to appreciate this argument in more detail, consider two kinds of theorists: an externalist about crystal-ball gazing knowledge and an externalist about perceptual knowledge. In each case, the theorist wants to explain how (a) is true and how (b) is true: how we know that there are external things, and how we know that too:

*The Externalist Crystal-Ball Gazer:* I know that I am looking into the crystal ball, and I believe that if there are reliable connections between what happens in the ball and the world I form beliefs about, then I can know about the world I am forming beliefs about. I also believe that there are reliable connections between what happens in the ball and the world I form beliefs about.

*The Externalist Perceiver:* I know that I am having perceptual experiences as of an external world, and I believe that if there are reliable connections between what happens in (or is represented by) these kinds of perceptual experiences and the world I form beliefs about, then I can know about the world I form beliefs about. I also believe that there are reliable connections between what happens in our perceptual experiences and the world we form beliefs about.

Here we need to distinguish between at least three questions we might ask about the ball gazer and the perceiver. The first question is whether or not these theorists are right about there being reliable connections between their epistemic bases and their target beliefs. To this question, one might argue that:

The difference between the positions of the two theorists lies only in the believed-in connections between the relevant experiences and the wider world. The theory says in each case that if such connections hold, that theorist knows. Each theorist, confidently sticking to his own story, believes that they hold in his case and not the other. Each might even try to settle the matter by consulting his own experience and his own theory, and find himself content with the discovered result. In that respect, the two positions are equally satisfactory, or unsatisfactory.

(Stroud 2004: 171)

However, this response will strike most externalists as begging the question against externalism. After all, one might suggest that the reliabilist explain the epistemological difference between the ball gazer and the perceiver as follows: the ball gazer does not have reliable beliefs, beliefs in the market for knowledge, because ball-gazing is unreliable, whereas the perceiver does have reliable beliefs, beliefs in the market for knowledge, because perception is a reliable belief-forming basis. Perhaps one will think that the ball gazer and the perceiver are epistemic equals, but to do that would be to reveal one's internalist intuitions, if ball-gazing is unreliable, while perception is reliable.

The second question asks whether or not the ball gazer and the perceiver are in a position to *know* that their beliefs are reliable, and so in the market for knowledge. In short, the second question is whether the theorists can achieve higher-order knowledge of their respective epistemic sources: ball-gazing and perception.

Here the externalist will claim that, because ball-gazing is unreliable, the ball gazer is not in a position to know that her ball-gazing beliefs are reliable, and so in the market for knowledge, whereas the perceiver *is* in a position to know that her perceptual beliefs are reliable, and so in the market for knowledge. According to this view, if externalism is true, then insofar as the perceiver's belief that *her beliefs formed on the basis of perception are reliable* is in fact the product of a reliable belief-forming process, then her higher-order belief will be in the market for knowledge as well.

Of course, one might argue that even if the perceiver's beliefs about the world are in the market for knowledge, the application of their externalist proposal the next level up is problematic, because we do not achieve what Fumerton calls 'philosophical assurance' of our belief-forming processes or methods.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, Stroud focuses on the fact that (i) both the theorists are externalists, and (ii) that both of their epistemic resources are impoverished in the same way. What he's interested in is whether one of the theorists is better off than the other, as far as achieving a philosophical understanding of how their (putative) knowledge of the world is possible. What is crucial to his proposal is that neither is better off than the other, *because* of how impoverished *both* theorists' epistemic resources are supposed to be. For in both the perceiver's case and the crystal-ball gazer's case, their epistemic basis for forming beliefs about the world is supposed to be limited to what Stroud calls a 'restricted domain': *mere* perceptual experiences *as of* an external world, and *mere* ball-gazing images *as of* an external world.

According to Stroud, if neither theorist can *perceive that* there are external things, then the externalist perceiver is in no better of a position for understanding how her (putative) perceptual knowledge of the world is possible than the externalist ball gazer is for understanding how her (putative) ball-gazing knowledge of the world is

<sup>7</sup> See Bergmann (2008) for an exposition and assessment of this response, and Fumerton (2006: 184–6) for a defence.

possible. This is because what we get in sense-perception bears the same relation to the world we think we know about through perception as the ball gazer's ball-gazing bears to the world the ball gazer thinks she knows about through ball-gazing.

Now this response might seem obscure, because it's not clear what makes the externalist committed to the thesis that we *cannot* perceive that there are external things, as opposed to just having perceptual experiences *as of* there being external things. However, recall that Stroud thinks the rejection of the straightforward answer is dismissed from the start. On Stroud's view, then, if the externalist takes this response, it's no better or worse than the straightforward answer. Indeed, he wonders whether we would need an externalist response to the problem, if the straightforward response were available (see, for example, Stroud 2004: 172). But if we reject the straightforward answer because we cannot perceive that there are external things, then according to Stroud (2004: 171), all that 'we are aware of in perception' is therefore 'restricted to features of our perceptual experiences', such that the 'external facts we know as a result of those experiences are nothing we ever perceive to be so'. The source of Stroud's dissatisfaction with externalist responses to the problem of the external world is grounded in this kind of concern.

One might query Stroud's reasons for thinking that the straightforward answer has to be dispensed with from the start. Recall that his reason was that it seems to be a pre-condition of the philosophical problem of our knowledge of the external world. One might question whether the straightforward answer is incompatible with an externalist answer. Perhaps the thesis that one can see that  $p$ , where  $p$  expresses a proposition about the external world, *can* be integrated within an externalist account of knowledge, and in particular, be appealed to in order to respond to the problem of the external world (for example, see Williamson 2000).

Against this, however, Stroud holds that this kind of response would be puzzling. He tells us that the '[*straightforward answer*]' does not look like an answer to a deep and challenging question that we need an "externalist" or any other kind of philosophical theory of knowledge to answer' (Stroud 2004: 173). The argument here seems to be this. If the straightforward answer were true, then the problem of the external world would not be an interesting, deep, and challenging philosophical problem. But if one thinks that it *is* an interesting, deep and challenging philosophical problem, it follows that one has rejected or otherwise dismissed the straightforward response.<sup>8</sup> In this fashion, the tension between the straightforward answer and the problem of the external world is that the latter requires the former to be false, even if in fact it isn't false.

We can bracket whether one should think that Stroud is right about the straightforward answer having to be presupposed as false for there to be a philosophical

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Fumerton (2014) advances an argument of this kind against those 'disjunctivist' views (broadly speaking)—e.g., McDowell (1995), Williamson (2000), and Pritchard (2011, 2012)—which maintain that the nature of one's epistemic support in cases of veridical perceptual experience can be



problem of the external world. These are interesting and difficult issues that we won't attempt to settle here. Instead, our focus is on whether Stroud has made a good case for the view that if the crystal-ball gazer and the perceiver have restricted epistemic sources, then they are epistemically on par as far as understanding how their (putative) knowledge of the world is possible.

In order to motivate Stroud's case, consider the following example. First, imagine the crystal-ball gazer, who believes that *a book is there* on the basis of *seeing an image of a book in the crystal ball*. Second, imagine the perceiver, who believes the same proposition, but on the basis of her *perceptual experience as of a book being there*. Both of these epistemic sources are *restricted* in the sense that it does not follow from *S* ball-gazed that *p*, that *S* knows that *p* (or even that *p*), and it does not follow from *S* has a perceptual experience as of *p*, that *S* knows that *p* (or even that *p*). Moreover, what the perceiver and the ball gazer appeal to in forming their beliefs about their target epistemic sources is *restricted to* the mere deliverances of those epistemic sources alone, and what one could reason from what can be known on the basis of those sources alone.

Now the crucial question here is how far each theorist's track record of their epistemic sources would take them. After all, when the perceiver forms beliefs about how reliable their perceptual experiences as of the external world are, their comparison will be between previous perceptual experiences as of *p* being true, and their believing that *p* is true, their perceptual experiences as of *q* being true, and their believing that *q* is true, and so on. For example, the perceiver will believe that their perceptual experiences as of the cat being on the mat are reliable perceptual experiences, because on most of the occasions she had that kind of experience, a cat was on the mat—or rather, it was for the perceiver *just as if* a cat was on the mat. What the perceiver can consult is more perceptual experiences, and whatever they can infer from what can be known *a priori* or by perceptual experience. Likewise, when the ball gazer forms a track record about the constellations and people's personalities, she too will be restricted to what can be gazed in the ball, and known on the basis of crystal-ball-gazing alone. For example, when she goes to check whether her crystal-ball-gazing experiences as of the Moon being full are reliable indicators of their friend Smith being sad, the crystal-ball gazer will be *consulting the ball* and whatever can be inferred that she knows on that basis.

Which theorist is better off as far as understanding how their knowledge is possible? On the one hand, it might be that one theorist has more true beliefs than the other. In this sense, one *is* better off because one has more true beliefs than the other. But when it comes to them *knowing* that their beliefs are true, how *could* one of the theorists be better off than the other? As Stroud noted, the relation the

radically different from cases of introspectively indistinguishable hallucination. For an overview of how metaphysical and epistemological disjunctivism makes contact with scepticism, see Pritchard and Ranalli (forthcoming).

perceiver stands to their perceptual experiences is the same kind of relation that the ball gazer stands to their crystal-ball-gazing experiences. Again, it might be the case that the perceiver's first-order beliefs about the world are true, and their second-order beliefs about the epistemic merit of their perceptual experiences are true, but when it comes to *knowing* that this is so, and so being in a position to understand how their putative knowledge is possible, it's hard to see how the perceiver could be better off than the crystal-ball gazer, because the perceiver will be consulting the restricted deliverances of their perceptual experiences, just as the crystal-ball gazer will be consulting the restricted deliverances of their crystal ball.

Of course, the externalist still might not think there's a real problem here, because perceptual experiences as of *p*—even if 'restricted' along the lines that Stroud has in mind—are still reliable, whereas crystal-ball-gazing is not. But Stroud's rejoinder here is that the externalist philosopher—in providing this kind of answer—must have relied upon their perceptual experiences as epistemic support for that claim. In this fashion, the externalist philosopher who accepts that our perceptual experiences of the world are restricted along the lines that Stroud has in mind provides an actual test case for his metaepistemological claim.

The thought here is this: *what else* is the externalist philosopher going to appeal to in order to support their belief that their own and other people's perceptual experiences are reliable, if not that he has had perceptual experiences as of himself and others making reliable judgements about the world which have been correct in the past, and that we had perceptual experiences as of our and other people's judgements, assertions, and expressions of belief being accurate representations of the world? So, the problem here is that what the externalist philosopher must appeal to is no better at the higher-order level than it was at the first-order level: either it's as good or it's as bad. But the problem with the track-record argument is that the externalist

must acknowledge that he does not . . . ever *see* or otherwise *perceive* that those human beings and other external things that he is interested in are there. Nor does he ever *perceive* the reliability of the connections that he believes hold between them. The most he is perceptually aware of or presented with in experience are the qualities or character of his perceptual experiences. (Stroud 2004: 170)

On Stroud's view, then, the problem with the externalist using a track-record argument in order to provide support for the belief that perception is reliable is that all that that would-be externalist can perceive to be so falls short of the facts in the external world. All we would have are perceptual experiences as of *p*, rather than perceptions that *p*. In short, the track record does not improve upon the so-called impoverished epistemic sources, such as perception (so understood) and crystal-ball-gazing.

The core disagreement between Stroud and Fumerton, then, is that:

- (1) we have assurance of the truth of our beliefs about the external world, and we can have assurance of the truth of this belief as well.

(2) if (1), then we could have a philosophically satisfying explanation how that knowledge is possible.

Stroud is committed to (1), but he denies that (2), while Fumerton is committed to (2), but denies that (1). While both theses are contentious, it might strike one that the denial of (2) is much stronger than accepting it. In this fashion, Fumerton is on stronger ground than Stroud.

On the other hand, both Fumerton and Stroud's arguments against externalist explanations of how our knowledge of the world is possible seem to turn on their dissatisfaction with rule-circular explanations. After all, what's so pathetic about using perception in order to provide support for the thesis that perception is a reliable source of knowledge of the world, *contra* scepticism, is that that kind of explanation is rule-circular. At first glance, Stroud thinks that the straightforward answer, that we can perceive that facts about the external world obtain, and that we can perceive that the straightforward answer is true, is not a good answer to the philosophical problem of the external world because it's rule-circular. In other words, when Stroud demands the answer or explanation to be 'general', his demand is that it not be rule-circular.

Of course, as Michael Bergmann (2000, 2005) has argued, this kind of anti-externalist complaint, that one cannot acquire non-inferential justification or knowledge that one's principles, methods, or rules that are required for that kind of knowledge or justification are true without presupposing or using those principles, methods, or rules, is applicable to Fumerton's own view. After all, explaining how we know that acquaintance with facts generates non-inferential knowledge or justification on the basis of being acquainted with the fact that acquaintance with facts generates non-inferential knowledge or justification *is* rule-circular.

According to Fumerton (e.g., 2006, §4), however, the acquaintance theorist avoids this objection, the objection that externalists do not avoid, because acquaintance allows, while one's belief-forming process or method meeting various externalist conditions does not, one to acquire philosophical assurance for the relevant higher-order beliefs. So, Fumerton might accept a metaepistemological constraint like the following:

(F) No satisfying, philosophical explanation of how knowledge of kind *K* is possible can be rule-circular *unless* our explanation of how we know that our explanation is correct assures our philosophical curiosities.

Stroud, on the other hand, appears to be committed to a stronger thesis than (F), where the qualification is dropped. Indeed, this helps corroborate Fumerton's claim that Stroud sets less modest internalist goals than he does, since, for Stroud, there are *no* satisfying rule-circular explanations of how our knowledge of the world is possible.

However, a proponent of Stroud's views might respond to this objection as follows. We need to distinguish between (a) the deficiencies in the externalist explanation

from (b) the deficiencies in the straightforward explanation (that we can perceive facts about the external, and that we know that we do on the basis of perceiving that that is so). What's wrong with the straightforward explanation is not that it's rule-circular, even if it is. It's that it is *not an answer* to the problem at all. On the other hand, what's wrong with the externalist answer, for Stroud anyway, is that from the first-person perspective, the externalist theorist about perceptual knowledge of the world is in just as good or bad an epistemic position as regards understanding how their (putative) knowledge is possible as other kinds of externalist theorists are, even ones who maintain a different view, not about the nature of knowledge or justification, but about how it is acquired.

Stroud's constraint that one's explanation is philosophically convincing only if it neither implies nor presupposes that one has knowledge of the world has to be satisfied, then, because without it we are not answering the philosophical problem of the external world. We can therefore summarize Stroud's 'resolution' to the problem of the external world as follows: if we can explain perceptual knowledge so that the philosophical problem of the external world cannot emerge, then the problem will dissipate—there will be no problem for which a positive 'anti-sceptical', or negative 'sceptical', answer can be given.

This, of course, should seem surprising. When it comes to giving a satisfying explanation of how our knowledge of the world is possible, what more could one want—to *echo Fumerton*—than to know that we are directly epistemically related to facts about the external world? For Stroud, this isn't enough because it violates his generality condition, the condition that our explanation cannot imply or presuppose that we know anything about the external world. This, then, is the heart of the difference between Fumerton and Stroud.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Michael Bergmann, Brett Coppenger, Richard Fumerton, and the other participants at the Orange Beach Epistemology Workshop, at which an earlier version of this chapter was presented.

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