THE SEMANTIC REALISM OF STROUD'S RESPONSE
TO AUSTIN'S ARGUMENT AGAINST SCEPTICISM

ALEXANDRE N. MACHADO

Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR)

Email: alexandre.n.machado.ufpr@gmail.com

This paper is a slightly modified version of the last section of a paper published in Portuguese some years ago (Machado, 2009) where I present a Wittgensteinian argument against what I call strong realism about truth.* Realism about truth is the thesis that truth is independent of knowledge. But this is an ambiguous formulation. It can be understood as saying that for each proposition, it can has a determinate truth-value and one may not know what this truth-value is. But it can also be understood as saying that all of one's beliefs have a determinate truth-value although one does not know what this truth-value is. This is strong realism about truth that entails the possibility of the massive error, that is to say, the possibility that all of one's coherent beliefs are false. In this case, one's sentences would have determinate truth-values, although one would have no knowledge. This is exactly the sceptical hypothesis concerning our knowledge of the external world that Descartes argues for in the *First Meditation* through the dream argument. But Wittgenstein has an argument against the massive error hypothesis that rests on the claim that our only criterion for the possession of a concept is the competent use one makes of it's linguistic expression. So that, if one makes only non-true assertions using a certain term, that is to say, only incompetent uses, then one does not posses the concept that competent users expresses by means of that term and, therefore, one cannot say anything meaningful using this term. Ergo, one cannot say anything false using this term, what shows that the sceptical hypothesis does not express a possibility. Therefore, if strong realism about truth entails the sceptical hypothesis, then, by *modus tollens*, it des not express a possibility.

Barry Stroud, in his classic book on philosophical scepticism (Stroud, 1984), does not agree with the last conclusion. In the first chapter he presents the problem of the epistemological scepticism about the external world through Descartes' dream

argument. The problem is that, from roughly trivial claims, we can validly infer that we cannot know anything about the external world. One supposition of this problem is that the sceptical hypothesis is intelligible, expresses a possibility, or at least it appears to do so. In the second chapter, ("Philosophical scepticism and everyday life"), Stroud seek to answer to Austin's argument for the thesis that the sceptical hypothesis does not express a possibility, in the extent that the belief that it does is based in a misunderstanding about the content of the concept of knowledge.

Austin's strategy (1961) consists in examining our use of the expression "knowledge" and correlated expressions and showing that the sceptical argument contains a violation of the rules that govern the use of these expressions. This would show that the sceptic would not be using the same concept (he would not be using the expression "knowledge" with the same meaning as) we use in ordinary contexts of everyday life and even in scientific contexts. But if he is not using the same concept, then whatever his conclusion states, it states nothing about what, in those contexts, we call knowledge. If it states that the knowledge about the external world is impossible, then it does not say that what *we* call knowledge about the external world in those contexts is impossible. The sceptic would be putting forward a falsely polemic thesis because he defines one of the concepts in its formulation, like someone who says that there are no doctors in New York and defines "doctor" as someone who is able to cure any disease in five minutes. What the sceptic does, according to Austin, is not paying attention to the fact that, when we use sentences of the form "*s* knows that *p*", although we do consider relevant hypotheses that are incompatible with what one claims to know and try to provide justification to believe that these hypotheses are false, in order to evaluate the use of these sentences, we consider only hypotheses that are motivated by special reasons attached to the context in which these sentences are uttered. The hypothesis that we are dreaming, for instance, can be relevant when I say that I know that someone was calling me in a context in which I am half asleep on the couch and I am not certain that I heard someone calling me or I was just dreaming of someone calling me. If someone asked me if I know that I am not dreaming right after I have said that I know that a certain person who just phoned me will come to the party that I am attending, this would be simply ridiculous. It would be the same way ridiculous to ask me if we know that the person who phoned will not be hit by a meteorite on his/her way to the party (except if there has been meteorite showers recently reaching the earth's surface in that particular area). The question on whether we know that we are not dreaming

would be unintelligible to us in this context (or even in most of scientific contexts). But the sceptical argument seems to suppose that it is always intelligible to ask such question whenever someone claim to know something about the external world. This seems to indicate that a reflection on the use of sentences of the form "s knows that p" shows that the concept of knowledge of the sceptic is different from the ordinary and scientific concept of knowledge.

Stroud's strategy for responding to Austin consists in showing that this last conclusion is false. In order to do that, he uses the traditional Cartesian distinction between practical life and search for the truth. His main thesis is that the fact that the use of sentences of the form *"s* knows that *p"* presupposes the unintelligibility of certain questions in the evaluation of their *use* does not entail that these questions are not relevant for evaluation of the *truth or falsehood* of these sentences. That is to say, Stroud assumes that the criteria to judge the truth of falsehood of these sentences are independent of their criteria of use, and vice-versa. The criteria of use of these sentences would be often based on non-epistemic concerns related to the practical life. That's why asking if I know that I am not dreaming when I say that I know that my friend will come to the party is ridiculous. It's a totally pointless question, if we have in mind the practical interests of the utterance of the sentence "I know that my friend will come to the party". According to its criteria of use, its utterance may be totally justified, even if I don't know that a meteorite will not hit him. That's why, according to these same practical criteria, it can be totally pointless asking if I know that he will not be hit by a meteorite in his way to the party, even if the uttered sentence is in fact *false*, in case my friend *is* hit by a meteorite in his way to the party. Justified assertion, therefore, is no the same as knowledge. The sufficient conditions for the justified assertion of sentences of the form "s knows that p" can be fulfilled, even if the necessary conditions for s knowing that p are not. What the Cartesian sceptic claims is that the later conditions cannot be fulfilled, although the former conditions are often fulfilled. This entails that it may be the case that we know nothing about the external world, even though the majority of our assertions about it are justified.

The alleged reason according to which we not only don't know, but we *cannot* know anything about the external world, is that a necessary condition for this knowledge, to know that we are not dreaming, apparently *cannot* be fulfilled. To ask if this condition is fulfilled in contexts in which one claims to know something may

be pragmatically unintelligible, but it is not unintelligible, so the sceptic claims, if our purpose is to judge whether our knowledge claim is or is not true.

The assessment of this debate between Stroud and Austin is relevant here not only because the sceptical thesis that we know nothing about the external world entails the possibility of the massive error of the use of any predicate to describe the external world, but because it entails the actuality of the massive error of the use of sentences of the form "*s* knows that *p*", were "*p*" expresses a proposition about the external world and *s* is an epistemic agent. It is not just a matter of entailing that all sentences of the form "*s* knows that *p*" are false, but also a matter of entailing that we are *always mistaken* when we sincerely say that *s* knows that *p*. All of our *beliefs* of the form "*s* knows that *p*" would be false, if the sceptical thesis is true.

But the important question here is the following: how can we know what knowledge about the external world is, if we are massively mistaken every time we claim that someone knows something about the external world? How can we know what the knowledge about the external world is, if we don't know a single case of knowledge about the external world? Does anybody know what yellow is if she always judges falsely that something is yellow? One could say that this last analogy is false because it's not a matter of always judging falsely that something is yellow, but only in a certain domain. We are always mistaken when we believe that something is knowledge *of the external world*, not in all cases we believe that something is knowledge period. We know what is knowledge in general from examples of other kinds of knowledge. But what kind? A promising candidate is the self-knowledge, the knowledge of our own mental states and processes (the logical and mathematical knowledge would be other promising candidates). The propositions expressed by the sentences "I know that I am in pain", "I know I see red", " I know that I think that it rains", etc., when sincerely uttered, would always be true. But how can we learn *from these cases* that to know that a certain proposition is true entails that we know that all propositions that we know that are incompatible with that one we claim to know are false, given that by learning how to use the sentences that express self-knowledge propositions we don't learn to verify that all propositions that we know that are incompatible with them are false. Where does it come from the idea that this is a necessary condition for knowledge?

Besides, this demand seems to entail a circular model of the concept of knowledge's acquisition. It seems that in order to learn what knowledge is, we have to learn that it involves *knowing* that the propositions that we *know* to be

incompatible with the proposition we claim to know are false, that is to say, in order to learn what knowledge is, one has already to have the concept of knowledge. On the other hand, the conditions for knowledge presupposed by this concept of knowledge seem to lead to a infinite regress, for if in order to know that p, one has to know that all propositions one knows to be incompatible with p are false, then one has to know that all propositions one knows to be incompatible with all propositions one knows to be incompatible with p are false, and so forth, *ad infinitum.*

Whether these objections are decisive or not, the way Stroud analyses the concept of knowledge entails a distinction between meaning and use which is at least committed to the possibility of the massive error and, at most, with the actuality of this kind of error in a fundamental case: the use of sentences of the form "*s* knows that *p*", where "*p*" is a proposition about the external world. This means that Stroud's analysis seems to be committed to the strongest version of the semantic realism, the target of Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of the massive error. And Stroud's analysis has this consequence because it is based in an anti-Wittgensteinian view about the relation between meaning and use, what is surprising coming from an enthusiast researcher on Wittgenstein's work, like Stroud.

The Wittgensteinian diagnosis of Stroud's epistemological analysis bear some similarity with a certain solution for the sceptical problem of the external world that he calls paradigmatic case argument:

> It is in this way, I think, that the sceptical philosopher would reply to any argument that starts from the premise that each of a pair of expressions S and not-S is meaningfully applied on different occasions and reaches the conclusion that both S and not-S must sometimes apply truly to such occasions. That 'paradigm-case argument' had a brief vogue at the height of linguistic philosophy in the 1950s. Something like it seems to be appealed to in Austin's rhetorical question 'How could we use and contrast the words 'waking' and 'dreaming' as we do if there were not recognized ways of telling on particular occasions that we are not dreaming?'. But the argument fails because it takes no account of how and why the expressions we use come to be applied to the different sorts of occasions to which we apply them. There can be real and easily discernible differences between two sorts of occasions, and we might apply an expression, or its negation, to an occasion on the basis of just such discernible features. But if certain widely-

shared but unexamined assumptions are what make it possible or desirable
for us to proceed in that way, or if certain restrictions are in force which
limit our interest simply to drawing a particular distinction between the two
kinds of occasion, then although we will be marking a real difference
between the occasion to which we apply S and that to which we apply not-S,
it will not follow that the distinction we draw is in fact the distinction
between S's applying truly to a particular occasion and its not so applying.
[Stroud, 1984, p. 74]

If I understand this passage correctly, Stroud is saying that the criteria for
distinguishing between saying correctly that something is S and saying correctly
that something is not-S are not criteria for saying something true, as long as the
application of such criteria, because of our practical interests, can be done under false
suppositions. However, although Stroud is concerned with the question on how and
why we adopt criteria to distinguish between when it's correct to say that something
is S and when it's correct to say that something is not-S, he surprisingly seem not to
be interested on the question on how we adopt criteria to distinguish between saying
something true by using a sentence of the form "x is S" and saying something false
by using the same sentence. How do we acquire the concept of being S and thus the
capacity to think of the possibility that something is S and the possibility that
something is not S, if we have *no example* of something that is S? Of course, in some
cases we can learn this by means of a definition. But the important question here is
the following: why do the sceptic adopts a certain definition and not another? How
does the sceptic knows that this definition grasps the content of the concept of being
S? How do the sceptic knows that the his definition grasps the content of the
concept of knowledge? I don't think that the sceptic has any good answer to that
question, for the analysis of the ordinary and scientific uses of the epistemic terms
has been rejected by the sceptic as a legitimate means of making the content of any
concept explicit.

My assessment of Stroud/Austin debate has to accommodate the intuition
that there is in fact a correct distinction between assertion conditions and truth
conditions, so that sometimes even if the assertion conditions of a sentence are
fulfilled, the truth conditions are not.[1] It seems that there must be room for a
justified false belief. I don't think that the Wittgensteinian argument against strong

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[1] Here I am trying to answer to an objection Stroud presented to me.

realism about truth makes the distinction between assertion conditions and truth conditions useless or illegitimate. However, this distinction should not be construed in such a way that it would entail the possibility of the massive error. How can that be done? I think that the only way that can be done is by identifying a subset of the set of sentences to which the distinction does not apply. The sentences of this subset describe the paradigmatic instances of their predicates. The correct use of these sentences guarantees that their users posses the concepts expressed by their predicates. The border between these sentences and the rest might neither be sharp nor unchangeable. There might be borderline cases and there might be conceptual changes when sentences get in or out of this subset. But the border of this subset can be identified by means of the identification of the paradigmatic cases that lay in or out of this subset, just like the identification of the border of any vague concept. Being that so, the distinction between assertion conditions and truth conditions applies to the sentences that don't belong to this paradigmatic cases set of sentences, but not to all sentences. The sentences to which the distinction applies are parasitic of the ones it does not apply.

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