Proposal for:

The Possibility of Philosophical Understanding:
Essays for Barry Stroud

To be published by
Oxford University Press, USA
Final draft due September 2009

Edited by:
Jason Bridges (Chicago)
Niko Kolodny (Berkeley)
Wai-hung Wong (CSU Chico)

Barry Stroud’s work has had a profound impact on an array of central philosophical topics, including: the interpretation of Hume, the interpretation of Wittgenstein, skepticism, logical necessity, transcendental arguments, and subjectivism about color and value. And yet there is no book-length critical treatment, be it a monograph or collection, of his work. The collection we propose, with its excellent and diverse group of contributors, would both advance discussion on the topics to which Barry has contributed and serve to illuminate the thought of this superlative philosopher. And of course, we hope the collection might serve to honor his contributions to the discipline.

In our view, our proposed volume meets two demands that face any ‘festschrift’-style collection and that matter greatly for both the scholarly value and marketability of such a collection. The first demand is to meaningfully engage the thought and work of the subject of the collection. The second is to strike a balance between coverage and thematic unity.

With respect to the first demand, there is a tendency for contributions to festschrifts to consist of a few paragraphs of homage to the honoree followed by an essay that, while it may concern a topic upon which the honoree has written, addresses his or her work tangentially or not at all. One gets the sense that the contributor had the paper lying around and just tacked on the introduction when the opportunity for including it in the festschrift arose. In our experience, this is the most frequent complaint one hears from philosophers about such collections. A recent example of this complaint comes from a review in Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews of a collection in honor of Cora Diamond. The reviewer writes:

The authors in virtually every instance pay lip service at some point to Diamond as someone whose seminal writings on this or that exegetical or philosophical problem have had an impact on their own thinking, or with whom they have discussed related ideas in the past, and then proceed to ride their own hobbyhorses to the end of the essay on whatever subject other than Diamond (Bernard Williams, Donald Davidson, Fontane, etc.) they prefer to discuss (NDPR, 12/5/2007).

And he concludes his review with the following caution: “the innocent reader should be advised that the otherwise independently interesting essays in this volume will absolutely not satisfy their desire to be much enlightened about Diamond’s philosophy. For that, we shall have to…undertake to formulate on our own what might have been provided here…”
Such a criticism could not be advanced against the proposed collection. Each of the 12 contributions for which the author has provided us with a description, with the possible exception of Sosa’s contribution, will take as it primary topic specific ideas and arguments of Stroud, either critiquing these ideas and arguments or applying them in new ways. (For the topic descriptions, see below.) This is a testament to the extent to which the contributors are engaged with Stroud’s work, the extent to which his work informs and stimulates their own.

We believe that there is a sizable readership that shares our contributors’ interest in Stroud’s work, and it is with that readership in mind that we have sought contributions that would cover a reasonable range of the topics upon which Stroud has written. But this leads directly to the second demand that faces any proposed festschrift: striking an appropriate balance between breadth of coverage and degree of thematic unity. For we want to draw in readers on the basis of the topics discussed, not merely on the basis of their interest in Stroud, and such readers are more likely to be attracted to collections that have multiple essays addressing their particular interests. To this end we have been able to sort the essays into three themes, each of which constitutes a central and widely discussed philosophical topic and to each of which Stroud has made well-known contributions. We are confident that this organization will demonstrate to readers focused on these topics that there is much here for them to chew over.

Finally, there is a more abstract level of thematic unity to the contributions as a whole that is worth noting. This unity flows from the unity of Stroud’s own thought. For Stroud’s whole body of work exhibits an overarching concern. That concern is to get into view, and to critique, philosophy’s perpetual aspiration to arrive at a completely general understanding of the relationship between the world and our conception of it—an understanding from, as it were, a standpoint outside that conception itself. From his earliest work on transcendental arguments against skepticism (in “Transcendental Arguments”, one of the most frequently cited philosophy articles of the last 50 years) to his most recent work on subjectivism about color (in The Quest for Reality) the larger topic—sometimes explicitly, sometimes not—has always been the possibility of philosophical understanding as such. As our proposed title for the collection reflects, we take this to be one of the most significant features of Stroud’s work. It is also one of the least appreciated. We hope that this collection might go some way to making this aspect of his thought more generally available.

Our list of contributors includes both some of the most distinguished names in contemporary philosophy and several of Barry’s most promising recent students. On the following pages they are arranged in a tentative table of contents, in accordance with the thematic template mentioned above.
List of contributions

There are two writers who have agreed to contribute but have not provided us with topic descriptions. They are:

Robert Fogelin, Dartmouth
Michael Williams, Johns Hopkins

In addition, there is one writer who has expressed a desire to contribute but has not committed and has not provided us with a topic description. He is:

Tyler Burge, UCLA

The cover photo has been contributed by:

Derek Parfit, All Souls College, Oxford

The remaining contributions are listed in a tentative table of contents:

Introduction

i. Jason Bridges, Chicago and Niko Kolodny, Berkeley
An overview of Stroud’s work, with an emphasis on bringing out and explaining the thematic unity described above.

ii. Wai-hung Wong, CSU Chico and Niko Kolodny, Berkeley
Description of contributions.

Skepticism and knowledge

1. Edward Cushman, Reed
This paper discusses Stroud’s work on the source of the epistemic standards that underwrite arguments for external-world and deductive skepticism, as well as, possibly, inductive and meaning skepticism. It chases down the significance and consequences of a fertile ideal found in Hume, though neglected in the rest of his corpus: skeptical arguments have their source in a conception or idea of epistemic rationality under which reasonable beliefs are based on reflectively available reasons. The paper explores some of the ways in which this understanding of the skeptical problematic is superior to the one that Stroud favors in most of his writing, namely, that the skeptical arguments get their purchase from our ordinary epistemic standards.

2. Jonathan Ellis, Santa Cruz
Stroud has recently suggested in several papers that the threat of (epistemological) skepticism cannot even be raised, that we face no threat of skepticism at all. Central to Stroud’s anti-skeptical argument is the notion of disengagement. How this argument unfolds depends precisely upon how we are to understand this notion. This paper explores a variety of different senses of disengagement and explains why none of them is clearly adequate for the job Stroud asks it to do. As such, Stroud’s argument remains unpersuasive. There is, however, a particular element of Stroud’s strategy that bears considerable promise; the final section of this paper is an attempt to outline a different way of developing the element to anti-skeptical ends.

3. Ernest Sosa, Rutgers
Sosa will write on the problem of ‘easy knowledge’ and the Pyrrhonian problematic.

4. Wai-hung Wong, CSU Chico
Wong argues that we cannot answer epistemological skepticism by considering how we use the word ‘know’ (and its cognates). The argument is inspired by Stroud’s discussion of Austin in *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*; it extends the critique given there of ‘ordinary-language philosophy’ to contextualism, perhaps the most popular current epistemological theory.

Meaning and rule-following

5. Jason Bridges, Chicago
The topic of this contribution is Stroud’s views about the idea of ‘basing’ one propositional attitude (or action) on another propositional attitude (views developed in *Hume*, in the papers on rule-following, and elsewhere). Bridges criticizes Stroud’s view of the role played by dispositions in constituting that relationship, and proposes a novel view of the nature of reasons for action.

6. Jim Conant, Chicago
Conant argues that there is a tension between what is best in Stroud’s own reading of Wittgenstein (especially in his essays on private language and the recent essay that he gave in the Wittgenstein Conference at UC Santa Cruz) and his own account of the robustness of philosophical skepticism (especially in *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*).

7. Hannah Ginsborg, Berkeley
This paper addresses Stroud’s work on meaning and rule-following. It discusses some of his early work, e.g. “Wittgenstein on Logical Necessity” and more recent papers responding to Kripke’s rule-following skepticism.

Subjectivism and Reality

8. John Campbell, Berkeley
This paper is on Stroud’s views on subjectivism about color. It contrasts (a) his view of color experience as intentional, the intentional content being environmentally determined, with (b) a view of color experience as relational, involving an acquaintance with colors in the environment.
9. Cheryl Chen, Harvard
Chen’s topic is whether we could still ascribe tensed beliefs to people if we thought that there were no tensed facts. In The Quest for Reality, Stroud attempts to undermine the Error Theory of Color by arguing that we cannot ascribe beliefs about the colors of objects unless we ourselves believe that objects are colored. This paper examines whether similar considerations could apply to the Tenseless View of Time. Besides Stroud’s argument, the paper also discusses commentary on Arthur Prior’s ‘Thank Goodness that’s Over’ argument.

10. Don Garrett, NYU
One of the most enduring and contested questions in Hume’s philosophy is: What was the reason behind his rather cryptic recantation, in the Appendix to his Treatise of Human Nature, of the theory of personal identity that he had offered with such enthusiasm in the main body of that work? Stroud’s much-discussed answer to this question in Hume is often seen as having close affinities with a somewhat different answer in Garrett, “Hume’s Self-Doubts about Personal Identity” (Philosophical Review 1981). Subsequent decades have seen no consensus, but rather an alarming proliferation of further theories. Recent work by Galen Strawson has helped to clarify the issues involved, however, and this paper proposes to utilize some of Strawson’s distinctions to formulate and defend a final answer similar in many respects to those originally proposed by Stroud and Garrett.

11. John McDowell, Pittsburgh
McDowell may write on Stroud’s resistance to subjectivism about color. But he emphasizes that this topic is tentative.

12. Sarah Stroud, McGill
This paper is on Barry Stroud’s view on value. In his writings on value, Stroud eloquently and steadfastly resists the subjectivism or anti-realism about value that has been the dominant strand in twentieth-century meta-ethics (and whose roots go back at least to Hume). But Stroud also resists the contrary metaphysical conclusion about matters of value, namely, metaphysical moral realism. The paper examines these two aspects of Stroud’s view on value.