

The quest to understand philosophy

What kind of a thing is philosophy? We might think of it as a subject matter or area of study. But we might think of it instead as something we do or undertake: an activity, a project, an enterprise. Even, following Barry Stroud, as a quest. The quest would apparently be to understand a certain subject matter, so it might look like the second conception of philosophy collapses immediately into the first. But one way to see what is distinctive about Stroud's work, and the source of its particular richness and depth, is to appreciate the role played by his conviction that the philosophical project or quest is itself something we do not really understand. We do not have a good grasp on what we seek, or why. Stroud is fond of the remark, attributed to J.L. Austin, that in a work of philosophy it's typically all over by the end of the first page. "What really matters," elaborates Stroud, "is off the page and settled in the mind before the author's announced task has even begun" (Stroud, 2000b, p. ix). One assumption that Stroud endeavors to unsettle from the mind and place on the page is the very idea that we know what we are after when we do philosophy.

In what follows we will interpret and expand upon some themes of Stroud's long-standing and ongoing quest to understand philosophy.

The apparent aim of the philosophical enterprise is to achieve some kind of understanding. To understand that aim, we need to grasp what philosophical understanding is supposed to be. Why might it be thought difficult to grasp this? One source, or perhaps symptom, of the difficulty, Stroud tells us, is that the same words we use to voice our aspiration for philosophical understanding can be used with no such end in view. "Do you know if the fireplace in the study is lit?" might frame an inquiry whose successful resolution would require taking the measure of Cartesian skepticism, or it might be adequately met with a nod. "Is this wall really yellow or does it

just look yellow?” might be asked of a philosophy seminar or a realtor. “Philosophical questions,” writes Stroud, “can look and sound exactly like familiar ordinary or scientific questions.” (2000b, p. 4).

In his willingness to distinguish “philosophical” and “ordinary” uses of the same sentence, and in his insistence that it is not the “form of words alone” that marks a claim as philosophical but rather the “purpose at hand” (2000b, p. x), Stroud might look like an ally of contemporary ‘contextualists’. Contextualists believe that philosophers have tended to underrate the role that a local discursive context plays in shaping an utterance’s content. Many believe that giving this feature of language adequate due will enable us to solve or at least deflate longstanding philosophical problems. For example, some contextualists argue that an utterance about what a person “knows” or “doesn’t know”, when offered in the teeth of the far-reaching doubts raised by Descartes and other skeptics, has a different meaning than an utterance of the same sentence in a conversational context where those doubts are not in view. The two utterances of the sentence might even require the satisfaction of different conditions for their truth. If so, then denials of knowledge issued in the skeptic’s context, even if sweepingly general, need not contradict our ordinary claims to know. Skeptical pronouncements seem threatening at least in part because we fail to recognize this.

This might look like just the diagnosis Stroud has in mind when he suggests that a “failure to distinguish philosophical questions” about knowledge from “similar-sounding ordinary or scientific questions” makes “ordinary or scientific thinking look worse than it is” (2000b, p. 4). An unsatisfactory attempt to answer the philosophical question about how our knowledge is possible is taken to have the “same significance” that similar-sounding conclusions would have in science or everyday life, with the upshot that “we feel forced to conclude that we do not really know anything in science or everyday life” (2000b, p. 4).

But for Stroud a satisfactory account of how philosophical questions about knowledge get confused with ordinary or scientific questions about knowledge will first have to explain what philosophical questions about knowledge are, and to do that, it will have to explain the point of these questions. It will have to explain why people ask them: what they hope to accomplish by asking them, what understanding or resolution they hope an answer to them might provide. And whatever the merits of the 'contextualist' account of "knows" , it does not provide such an explanation.

A contextualist might say, for example, that the truth-conditional content of an utterance of, "I know that there is a fire in the study," is partly determined by the character of the doubts salient in the utterance's context: roughly speaking, the more far-reaching the doubts, the stricter the truth-conditions. The doubts raised in the context of philosophical inquiry into knowledge tend to be far-reaching indeed. This might be thought to explain why our ordinary ways of justifying claims to knowledge don't work in the context of that inquiry. Even if the contextualist were right that salient doubts shape the content of knowledge talk, however, this doctrine would not explain *why* far-reaching doubts about perception are salient in the philosophical context. No doubt they are salient because they have been raised. But why have they been raised, and once raised, why they are taken seriously by the parties to the philosophical discussion? This seems particularly puzzling given the contextualist's observation that such doubts are not raised on ordinary occasions for asking after and justifying claims to know. What moves people in the 'philosophical context' to treat these doubts differently? Is it tied to the distinctive interests and focus on the part of the participants in that activity? Then how are we to understand their interests and focus?

The same questions arise for any hypothesis the contextualist might propose about the features of contexts of knowledge claims that shape the contents of those claims. Contextualism takes as given that there are special features of the discursive contexts of philosophical questions, and then

draws on this basis conclusions about the contents of these questions and correspondingly their possible answers. But what contextualism takes as given is just what Stroud wants to examine and understand.

One might suppose that contextualism at least defuses the threat of skepticism, even if it does not illuminate the source of the special features of the philosophical context and so perhaps does not give us everything we want. But can we really have the former without the latter? Epistemologists take themselves to be answering fundamental and highly general questions about the relationship between human beings and the world. Answering these questions is supposed to tell us something important about how things are for human beings, and not merely when they're sitting in epistemology seminars or reading the *Meditations*, but whenever they form a belief about the future, or about other minds, or on the basis of perceptual experience. Skeptics and their philosophical opponents agree that the skeptics' answers to these questions are surprising and alarming. These answers may even be so outrageous that they are impossible to believe. But at any rate they are disturbing. Disturbing enough, Hume tells us, to leave one "inveron'd with the deepest darkness", beset by "melancholy and delirium" (Hume, 1978, p. 269).

The contextualist tells us that a skeptic who concludes that no one "knows" anything on, say, the basis of perceptual experience does not refute ordinary claims to possess perceptual knowledge. Of course, many people say this about skeptical pronouncements. The distinctive feature of the contextualist view is that it allows us to say this while leaving open that the skeptic's conclusion is perfectly correct and that the skeptic's argument for that conclusion was perfectly sound. The skeptic fails to impugn our ordinary claims to know not because the skeptic's reasoning is incorrect in any detail, but because she is talking past us: the relationship she denies people to bear to the world upon which their experiences ostensibly report is not the relationship we claim ourselves to bear when, in ordinary discourse, we say we know on the basis of perception.

Let's suppose we could convince, say, Hume that the skeptical conclusions about knowledge he defends in his philosophical texts are severed from ordinary claims about knowledge in this way. (It is difficult to imagine convincing Hume of this, and that points to a different worry about contextualism. But that is not our focus here.) Would this realization succeed in relieving Hume of the melancholy and delirium occasioned by his skeptical conclusions? Why should it? So far as Hume knows, the conclusions still stand, and they are supported by just the premises, observations and arguments he has used to reach them. Presumably the realization is supposed to show that the skeptical conclusions are not as important or significant as Hume thought them to be, and so that they do not warrant getting upset over, let alone falling into melancholy. But why shouldn't Hume conclude rather that what our ordinary knowledge claims tell us about our relationship to the world is not as important or significant as we thought? Philosophical skeptics, after all, see themselves as critics of ordinary thought and discourse. There seems nothing to prevent a skeptic from accusing ordinary thought and discourse of failing to so much as have in view the important questions about how our beliefs relate to the world they concern.

The point is that Descartes and Hume see the arguments they pursue in their philosophical texts as ways of arriving at important general truths about the human condition. If there is to be any hope of convincing Descartes or Hume that the conclusions they reach do not have the significance they take them to possess, we must attempt to understand what sort of truths they are after, and why they take their modes of argument to be apt for revealing such truths. And of course it is not really Descartes or Hume that we want to convince. It is ourselves, who are no less prone to be impressed by skeptical arguments and then to quail at their seemingly incredible conclusions.

This last point is of central importance for Stroud: his interest in understanding the philosophical enterprise is a function of the attraction the enterprise has for him, and for likeminded others. "Perhaps only certain traditions or cultures in the history of humankind have engaged in

these reflections as we know them,” he told a conference audience. “But all of us here belong to at least one such tradition or culture, so we cannot help engaging in, or trying to come to terms with, the reflections I have in mind” (Stroud, 2000a, p. 124).

This motivates another distinction between Stroud’s approach and one it might seem to resemble. We have said that Stroud believes that the aim of philosophical work is not obvious, and that it is insufficiently understood even by those engaged in it. And he believes that a legitimate mode of criticism of that work, indeed an essential one, involves getting clearer on that aim. These presumptions are not widespread in Anglo-American philosophy. But they are likely to look familiar to anyone who has acquaintance with other areas of the Humanities. In many such areas it is common, in criticizing a scholarly work, not to engage the work on its own terms, but instead to focus on exposing the work’s hidden, unacknowledged meanings and aims. What is exposed may turn out to be diametrically opposed to the announced aims and conclusions of the work: for example, a work ostensibly examining and criticizing certain patterns of social or cultural dominance may emerge under critical scrutiny to be engaged in reproducing just those patterns. The revealed aims may be portrayed not as the aims of the work’s author as such, but rather of some larger social or cultural institution or practice of which the work is a product. And it is taken for granted that the author’s stated reasons for concluding what she does need not provide the whole, or even part, of the actual explanation of her reaching those conclusions.

This is not Stroud’s orientation to philosophy. What he wants, he says, “is to develop from the inside a rich sense of what it takes to engage in the enterprise in the right way and to see what sorts of conclusions can be reached” (2000b, p. 3). The aim is not to find some standpoint external to the philosophical enterprise from which one can pronounce upon its self-delusions and reveal the forces of which its practitioners are unknowing pawns. The aim is rather to understand the enterprise from the inside. That means taking seriously just what the critical theorist is often

inclined to discount: the philosopher's stated reasons for concluding what she does. It means endeavoring, as sympathetically as possible, to reconstruct the reasoning by which philosophical conclusions are reached, if need be filling in inferential gaps and interpreting insufficiently explained terms or theses. One must try to go as far as one can in understanding and feeling the force of philosophical arguments, and then see where that leaves one. It is this kind of effort "that is finally the best test of whether we can make the project intelligible to ourselves and of the validity of whatever we find in carrying it out" (2000b, p. 3).

Stroud's method for understanding philosophy, then, is to do philosophy. But crucially, we are to proceed with the awareness that we do not fully grasp what we are thereby doing, and that this is one of the things we hope to find out. And we should be alive to the possibility of discovering that we cannot after all satisfy the aim of the philosophical enterprise, that the kind of understanding we seek cannot in the end be had by us. It is this spirit that pervades Stroud's own philosophical work and that distances it so radically from much of the contemporary philosophical literature.

It also explains some of the most notable stylistic features of his work: his avoidance of '-isms' and philosophical terms of art more generally, and his willingness to repeat again and again seemingly basic, even simple, points about the subject at hand. To his opponents, these tendencies might seem to reflect either a false naiveté or a failure to appreciate the subtle distinctions and logical complexities that are the stock and trade of contemporary analytic philosophy, distinctions and complexities that cry out for a technical vocabulary to help us keep track of them. The perplexity Stroud's approach instills in his interlocutors is likely to be increased when he responds to their nuanced criticisms, as he is prone to do, with a patient recounting of the same ground-floor observations they take themselves to have left far behind. But if you think that it is still far from clear what is at stake in a given philosophical discussion, and so what the force or significance of a thesis advanced in that discussion might be, then you are going to find the proliferation of finely

distinguished such theses as at best obfuscating. You are going to suspect that technical terminology conceals gaps in understanding and encodes confusions. And you will think that the best way to proceed is to start at the beginning, or at some place that looks like it might be near the beginning, and proceed as slowly as you can, retracing ground until a picture of the terrain starts to come into view.

At the beginning, or near it, are surely the “traditional” questions of philosophy. How, if at all, can we know anything about the external world? How, if ever, do our words come to mean anything? Is the world really as we take it to be? Are things colored? Are actions good? Do some events cause others? Are some truths necessary?

But what are these questions asking, and what sort of answer do they seek? As we have noted, Stroud thinks that progress can begin only with the recognition that such questions aim for a special kind of understanding—a distinctively philosophical understanding—of ourselves and our place in the world. But this may seem only to replace one interpretive problem with another. What is this philosophical understanding, and what makes it distinctive? Again, the same words that give voice to our aspiration to philosophical understanding can be used without any such end in view. In ordinary life, I might be asked how I know something, or what I meant, or whether something really as it seems to be.

One might make the observation that in ordinary life, these questions are tied to local matters of interest. “Is this wall really yellow?” you may ask the realtor, wondering whether it isn’t just the effect of the lighting. “Did you mean anything by that?” or was your gesture just a reflex? By contrast, one wants to say, the philosophical aspiration is to understand knowledge, meaning, or reality *in general*. But what, exactly, does this come to? For the relevant generality is not a matter of the *words* in which the question is expressed. On the one hand, the aspiration to philosophical

understanding can be couched in specific terms, “Is this wall *really* yellow?” “Did you mean *anything* by that?” On the other hand, “ordinary,” or at least non-philosophical, questions can be expressed in perfectly general terms. A cognitive scientist, asked how we come to know anything about the world around us, might answer with a comprehensive discussion of the way light and sound waves stimulate our sensory organs, and of the neural processes that this sets in motion. She does not seem to be thereby answering a philosophical question about knowledge.

We can at least gesture toward what seems to be the sought-after generality as follows. We see ourselves as related to the world in certain ways. We take ourselves, for example, to know certain things, to refer to objects, to perceive colors, to witness evil-doing, and so on. Philosophical understanding seeks, distinctively, to explain how the content of this conception of our place in the world can be true, or to determine whether it is true, *without relying on any elements of the conception itself*. To put it figuratively, we would achieve philosophical understanding only by somehow bringing our conception into view from a standpoint outside of it. Only then would we understand knowledge, or meaning, say, “in general,” or “as a whole,” in the relevant sense.

This aspiration to understand our conception from a standpoint outside of it, by its very nature, cannot be achieved by appeal to the claims and procedures that belong to that same conception. That would be to presuppose, we feel when gripped by the philosophical aspiration, what we seek to explain. For example, a philosophical explanation of our knowledge of the external world cannot rest on some claim to prior knowledge of the external world, as does the cognitive scientist’s appeal to what neurological research has shown. This is why G.E. Moore’s proof of an external world serves, for Stroud, as such an instructive failure. One would be hard-pressed to deny its soundness. And the conclusion that it establishes has the right generality: that external, physical objects exist. But because it helps itself to a piece of knowledge that it does not explain, namely that there’s a hand, it cannot begin to tell us how our knowledge of the world, as a whole, is possible. Similarly, a

philosophical understanding of meaning cannot appeal to some instance of meaning. It is no use to answer Kripke's skeptic, "Oh, I mean plus by 'plus,' because I'm using the word in its normal English sense." And we cannot answer the philosophical question of how our beliefs correspond to reality by relying on our accepted procedures for verifying them. We cannot settle whether anything is colored, for example, by simply bringing it out into the daylight.

Once we deprive ourselves of the "internal" resources of our conception—once we endeavor to take up a standpoint outside of it—it can seem that there is no hope of explaining or vindicating our conception. The quest for philosophical understanding thus first seems to lead us to a skeptical or negative verdict on our conception. We cannot know anything about the external world. There is no fact of the matter whether 'plus' means plus, or 'rabbit' refers to rabbit. Nothing is colored. Much of Stroud's work is devoted to showing that, once we have allowed the philosophical questions to be raised, attempts to offer positive verdicts emerge under scrutiny as hopelessly unsatisfactory. The care and relentlessness of Stroud's demonstrations of the failure of these attempts has led to a perception of Stroud as himself a skeptical philosopher.

Yet to assume that we have reached a negative verdict on our conception is to assume we have succeeded in taking up a standpoint outside of our conception from which to pass judgment. Have we? *Can* we? The question is not whether we can forswear appeal to anything we claim to know about the external world, or to the accepted meanings of signs, or to the contents of our beliefs about colored things. In some cases, we can do this. We can simply opt for a time not to think or say anything about the colors of things, for example. The question is instead whether, having done it, we can make sense of our initial philosophical question, of what it was that we originally sought to understand. Stroud's answer, which achieves increasing clarity and force in his later work, is that it is doubtful that we can. Without the "internal" resources of our conception, we cannot so much as

grasp the philosophical question about it, or identify the conception that we seek to philosophically understand.

Why is this? One reason stems from a requirement on attributing psychological states, either to others or to ourselves. In order to attribute to someone beliefs about color or vice, we must ourselves have beliefs about color and vice. This is because in order to attribute beliefs with such contents, in order to recognize someone as seeing that a lemon is yellow or as reproving of a cruel deed, we must have some independent grasp of those contents themselves. But that requires some grasp of what color and vice are: of when something counts as, say, yellow or cruel. And such understanding cannot be gained or held without judging, or being prepared to judge, that things are yellow or cruel.

Of course, attributing belief does not in general entail such commitment to what is believed. We can attribute beliefs about centaurs without ourselves having beliefs about centaurs. We need only beliefs about the torsos of men and the bodies of horses. But this is because the contents of beliefs about centaurs are complex. By contrast, the contents of beliefs about color and vice are simple, or autonomous. They cannot be constructed out of independently graspable constituents.

The philosophical question about our conception can also become unintelligible when we “step outside” of that conception for other reasons. Philosophical understanding of our conception of causation, for example, would seem to involve an explanation of how our interaction with a world devoid of causal relations gives rise to a conception of the world as imbued with such relations. Hume’s *Treatise* offers perhaps the most famous attempt at such an explanation. Let us grant that the philosopher offering such an explanation can identify our conception, that she can attribute beliefs about causal relations, without herself being committed to beliefs about causal relations. Even so, she needs to account for the “interaction” that “gives rise” to these beliefs. And how is this interaction, or this giving rise to be understood, except in causal terms? To take a more extreme

example, to have a thought with the determinate content that P, it seems, involves some grasp of what must be the case, as well as what cannot be the case, if P. If this is so, then any thought at all, let alone thought about our conception of necessity, requires beliefs about necessity.

The crucial point, put generally, is that certain psychological and linguistic capacities presuppose other such capacities. This is a recurring concern of Stroud's work: to trace the interdependence of conceptual capacities and their significance for traditional philosophical questions. This concern runs through such seemingly disparate projects as his assessment of transcendental arguments in his classic 1968 paper, his examination of the limitations of the theory of ideas in *Hume*, and his more recent reconstructions of Wittgenstein's reflections on ostension and "private language."

This conclusion, that to step outside of our conception is to lose sight of it, has two main consequences. The first is that *we cannot coherently accept skepticism* about knowledge or meaning, or a *negative* metaphysical verdict about color, value, causation, or necessity. If, in order to understand the philosophical question about our conception, we must remain within it, then we must have the beliefs that constitute that conception. And the contents of these beliefs are incompatible with a negative answer. The contents of those beliefs are that we know or mean this or that, that this or that thing is colored, and so on.

This first upshot demands careful formulation. It does not follow that the negative answer *is false*. The negative answer, for all that has been shown, may still be true. It may seem disappointing that we avoid the negative answer, but do not refute it. But to go further, Stroud suggests, would be to embrace a kind of idealism. To refute the negative answer, we would need some premise to the effect that if certain psychological conditions—our having certain beliefs, or our being unable to have some beliefs without others—obtain, then reality is a certain way. And it is unclear what could underwrite this guarantee other than the idealist thesis that things must be as be as we think they are.

The second upshot is thus not only that we cannot coherently accept a *negative* answer to the philosophical question, but also that we cannot coherently arrive at *any* answer, negative or positive. If we cannot understand our conception from outside it, the kind of philosophical understanding that we seek must always lie beyond our grasp.

This conclusion can seem profoundly dissatisfying. If philosophical understanding must always elude us, what peace are we to make with our seemingly irrepressible striving after it? So our quest for philosophical understanding has brought us back, as so often with Stroud, to the beginning: to a search for the roots of whatever it is that compels us to seek philosophical understanding. Here is where Stroud's thought is perhaps the least settled, and where the expectation of a definitive diagnosis is most likely to go unmet.

What is clear, however, is that whatever it is that accounts for our impulse to seek philosophical understanding, it is not, in itself, to be regretted. Philosophy cannot after all be simply identified with the quest for philosophical understanding that we have been discussing. But it is hard to see how there could be philosophy without the quest. Stroud's philosophy, which refrains from pursuit of the quest, but depends for its point on its lure, is testament to both points. And the philosophy that issues from the quest brings genuine self-understanding. By doing philosophy, we come to see how certain psychological and linguistic capacities presuppose other such capacities: how our ability to think or say one thing requires an ability to think or say something else. And so we come to see "from the inside"—to use that treacherous phrase—how our conception of ourselves and of our relation to the world hangs together. Under the influence of the quest, these insights may seem like so many way stations or lemmas on the route to the philosophical understanding that we are really after. But, as we hope the reflections on Stroud's work to follow will suggest, these insights may be wherein lies the enduring value both of philosophy in general and of Stroud's philosophy in particular.

In his Dewey Lecture to the 2008 meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, Stroud quoted Wittgenstein: “someone unpractised in philosophy passes by all the spots where difficulties are hidden in the grass, whereas someone who has had practice will pause and sense that there is a difficulty close by even though he cannot see it yet.” But sensing is not enough; there is also the fact of “how long even the man with practice, who realizes there is a difficulty, will have to search before he finds it.”(Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 29; quoted in Stroud, 2008).

Reflecting on this observation, Stroud noted:

The philosophers I admire most possess just that kind of acute sensitivity to philosophical difficulties. They are open to potential philosophical riches, and they find them, in what look to most of the rest of us like very unpromising places. And, what is equally important, those philosophers I admire most know how to keep searching when they know they haven't really found the right thing yet. ... [T]hose I most admire have a firm foothold in reality and a “nose” or feel for real problems, along with the patience to unfold the detail of what has to be overcome to achieve the kind of understanding that can mean the most to us. I am happy to know or to have known some philosophers like that. (Stroud, 2008).

Those who have been students, colleagues, friends, or interlocutors of Barry Stroud have known a philosopher like that. It is hoped that this volume will be a worthy tribute to our good fortune.

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