

The Reidian claim we have encountered is that there is no special, absolute sense in which one knows or can't be wrong about one's own mental states. And the Reidian argument²⁶ that even such beliefs and beliefs in metaphysically necessary truths rely for their status upon the reliability of the process by which they are

²⁶The Reidian argument I have presented is an adaptation of Reid's attack on what he calls the "semi-sceptic." Reid's semi-sceptic chooses some of the sources of his beliefs to be acceptable before they are verified; all other sources must be verified by these favored sources. The "ideal system" of philosophy, for example, chooses the "principle of consciousness" ("that our thoughts, our sensations, and every thing of which we are conscious, hath a real existence") and deductive reasoning as favored sources, according to Reid (Inquiry, VII, p. 206b). Reid construes the semi-sceptic as one who adopts the policy of not believing or not accepting or not admitting into his philosophy any beliefs that are not among the favored sources or from sources that have been verified by the favored sources. Thus, one of Reid's most persistent attacks against semi-scepticism of the ideal variety is that it is psychologically impossible to maintain (as is thorough scepticism); he points out in many places that Hume admits to being forced into believing his senses and other faculties as soon as he leaves his studies (see, for example, Inquiry, I, 5, p. 102a). But we have been dealing with his more interesting attack: his claim that the beliefs acceptable to the "ideal philosopher" are no better off than are some external world beliefs. This attack is more interesting because it, unlike Reid's first attack, can be adapted, as I've adapted it, to combat the "semi-sceptic" who doesn't claim that he won't believe or include in his philosophical picture of the world anything that doesn't live up to the semi-sceptical standards, but rather makes the more modest claim that only such things are known in some high or absolute sense.

formed seems to me to lend a good deal of credibility to this claim.

From Reid's view of the human situation, we must take it on faith that we are not set up in a radically defective way. I have claimed that we cannot conceive of what it would be not to be in such a situation. But taking such a thing on a faith, and thereby taking it on faith that various sceptical hypotheses are false, seems to be inconsistent with the "external" point of view which many sceptics urge us to take. If so, then it seems we cannot conceive of any cognitive being knowing anything in the sceptic's external way. The Reidian diagnosis of scepticism is that the sceptic, perhaps under the illusion that there are some beliefs that she can "see to be true" without having to rely on our nature or the reliability of the belief-forming mechanism, has set up trivially impossibly high standards for knowledge.²⁷

²⁷For an exposition of Reid's own response to the sceptic, see part II.B (pp. 326-331) of my "Reid's Anti-Sensationalism and His Realism", The Philosophical Review 98.3 (July 1989), pp. 313-348. I have explained the adjustments on Reid's strategy I have made in constructing the present "Reidian" treatment of scepticism in footnotes 16 and 26 of the present chapter.

K. The Insignificance of Philosophical Scepticism.

Does all of this, if correct, substantiate the suspicion that the sceptic's denials of knowledge are meaningless? I think not.

The contextualist, I have claimed, should hold that an important aspect of the truth conditions for knowledge attributions is the standards for knowledge that are in place. To understand an attribution or denial of knowledge, therefore, it is necessary to understand what standards for knowing are in place. Often, it seems, our understanding of these standards largely consists in our knowing, for many conceivable situations, whether or not a subject would count as "knowing" in such situations. That is why our inability to conceive of a subject living up to the sceptic's standards may, from a contextualist point of view, make it look as though we do not have any understanding of the standards that are behind the sceptic's denials of knowledge, and that we, therefore, have no understanding of the content, or, in a relevant sense, the meaning of the sceptic's denials. This may, in turn, make us doubt that there is a determinate meaning to these denials.

But we should not confuse our inability to conceive of a being living up to the sceptic's standards with an

inability to understand those standards themselves. For the standards themselves seem to be understandable enough -- I have tried to clarify them in section G of this chapter. Our problem is not that we don't understand the standards, but rather that we can see that, for fairly trivial reasons, they cannot conceivably be met. This triviality may make us doubt that the sceptic really meant to be intending such high standards. But there is every indication that she does intend them, and if she doesn't, it is up to her to explain what it would take to know something according to her standards.

I have argued in Chapter 3 against the bold sceptic who claims to show that we say something false when we claim to know this or that about the external world. Defenders of scepticism have accused me of missing the point by taking such a bold sceptic as my target. Stroud might accuse me, like Moore, of missing the fact that the sceptic is using know in a special, "external" way, and that her denials of knowledge are not inconsistent with our everyday "internal" claims to know.

It can at times seem obvious that there is some interesting way of knowing -- a "high", "absolute",

"philosophical", or "external" way -- and that the external world sceptic is right in claiming that in this way we "know" nothing about the external world. My goal has been to rouse the not-so-bold sceptics from their dogmatic slumbers by putting some pressure on them to make clear what their "external" questions about and denials of knowledge amount to in such a way as to show why such denials cannot be properly based on anything so slight as repeated applications of Descartes's doubt. For it initially seems as if their denials of knowledge could be established in this way, and if they are so trivial that they could be established in this way, and if they do not threaten to show that our ordinary claims to know are defective, they slip into insignificance.

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