A Defense of Michael Williams' Theoretical Diagnosis of Skepticism

Chaney Brinkman Burlin
Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/student_honors

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.
A Defense of Michael Williams’ Theoretical Diagnosis of Skepticism

By
Chaney B. Burlin

Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements for the Department of Philosophy

Dr. Chauncey Maher, Supervisor
Dr. Corwin Aragon, Reader
Dr. Susan Feldman, Reader
Dr. Crispin Sartwell, Reader

May 9, 2013
Part 0 – Introduction

In *Unnatural Doubts*, Michael Williams aims to defeat Cartesian skepticism. In particular, he targets Barry Stroud’s initially seductive argument for the radical conclusion that we know nothing about the world. He contends that Stroud’s argument fails because it presupposes, or otherwise entails, a controversial and dispensable assumption about the nature of our epistemic concepts and practices, which Williams calls “epistemological realism.” According to epistemological realism, the justificatory status of a belief is context-invariant and redounds to highly abstract features of the content of the belief – like whether it is about the world or about one’s sense-experiential states. In virtue of such features of their content, beliefs are arranged into natural epistemic kinds that occupy fixed positions in a hierarchy of epistemic statuses: some are intrinsically justified and privileged (e.g., perceptual beliefs); others are intrinsically problematic (e.g., worldly beliefs).

Williams maintains that epistemological realism is more contentious than its antithesis, which he calls “contextualism.” According to contextualism, the justificatory status of a belief hinges on contextual factors that determine the relevance of a given error-possibility. These factors are methodological, dialectical, economic, and situational. Methodological factors eliminate certain error-possibilities within a specific contextual parameter on the grounds that they undermine the kind of inquiry that obtains within that parameter. Contexts are also situated within a dialectical environment. If a conversational partner issues a contextually relevant challenge to my belief that P, then I may lose whatever previous justification I had for believing that P; if I surmount the objection, then I may retain justification. Economic factors eliminate certain error-possibilities insofar as epistemic agents are practically engaged human beings who must weigh the costs and benefits (in terms of time, resources, etc.) of considering a given error-possibility. Finally, even if my belief survives the dialectic with my conversational partner, it is
not justified unless it is objectively well-grounded. My belief is objectively well-grounded only if it is consistent with a broader informational context, or "situation," constituted by facts some of which may be unknown to me.

Williams believes that because skepticism entails epistemological realism, and because epistemological realism is more contentious than contextualism, skepticism can be dismissed. In his own words, skepticism is "not forced on us by our ordinary ways of thinking about knowledge [and] justification" (Williams 32).

This thesis defends Williams' anti-skeptical conclusion, which is the product of what he calls a "theoretical diagnosis" of skepticism, against an important criticism developed by Stephen Jacobson. Besides the conclusion, it is divided into three parts. The first part presents Williams' theoretical diagnosis; the second part formulates Jacobson's objection to it; the third part deflects the objection. Part I, Section A explains Williams' distinction between natural and unnatural doubts and why it matters; Section B explains how a theoretical diagnosis is meant to overcome skepticism; Section C presents Stroud's crisp and apparently compelling skeptical argument; Section D introduces Williams' reply, which is that the argument entails epistemological realism, a highly questionable doctrine, and so does not convince. Subsections D(i) and D(ii) complete the reply by juxtaposing the highly questionable epistemological realism against the more feasible contextualism, respectively. Finally, Section E puts paid to the misguided suspicion that contextualism reduces to epistemic relativism, which in turn reduces to a kind of radical skepticism.

Part II reconstructs Jacobson's challenge to Williams' rejoinder to Stroud's skepticism. To motivate Jacobson's challenge, here is an overview of Williams' rejoinder. For Stroud's argument to persuade us, its "objects of investigation" – beliefs about the external world – must admit of "theoretical integrity," which is to say that they must be unified in some meaningful
way. Williams claims that the word “external” speaks to the source of the requisite unity. The external contrasts with the internal; and the basis of the contrast is the epistemic priority of beliefs about the latter vis-à-vis beliefs about the former. This is epistemological realism. Hence, the concept of externality, or of an external object, presupposes a dubitable theory about knowledge and justification. Jacobson counters by defining an external object as an object that can exist independently of perceptual experiences. If perceptual experience is a non-epistemic category, then the concept of an external object does not presuppose epistemological realism after all, in which case the skeptic remains undefeated.

Part III, the final part of the thesis, argues that Jacobson fails to drive a wedge between the concept of an external object and epistemological realism. This is because perceptual experience is an epistemic category. Following Bill Brewer and John McDowell, I argue that perceptual experience has conceptual content. However, only propositions have conceptual content. Hence, perceptual experiences are propositional. But propositions, by their very nature, admit of justificatory status, or are epistemic. Finally, if perceptual experiences are epistemic, then they are epistemically privileged relative to beliefs about the world. But this is epistemological realism again. The upshot of this thesis is that Williams’ theoretical diagnosis survives, or a wedge cannot be driven between the concept of an external object and epistemological realism.

If Williams’ theoretical diagnosis succeeds, then it represents a towering intellectual achievement. In an oft-cited footnote to the B edition of the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant wrote that “it always remains a scandal of philosophy” that the existence of the external world “should have to be assumed merely on faith” rather than be established by reason (CPR Bxxxix). Since Descartes, external world skepticism has remained a seemingly intractable problem. If Unnatural Doubts accomplishes its aim, then the problem has finally been solved.
Part I – Williams’ Theoretical Diagnosis of Skepticism

Section A – Natural versus Unnatural Doubts

On page one of Unnatural Doubts, Williams tells us that “the absolutely crucial question to ask about skepticism” – by which he means Cartesian skepticism, the paradigmatic form of which is skepticism about the existence of the external world – is whether skeptical doubts or arguments are “natural” and “intuitive” or are rather “the product of contentious and possibly dispensable theoretical preconceptions” (Williams 1). For skeptical doubts to be natural is for them to emerge out of our pre-theoretical understanding of the demands of, and the constraints on, knowledge and justification. For them to be unnatural is for them to make questionable theoretical assumptions, and so not merely to exploit features embedded in our ordinary epistemic concepts and practices (17-19).

At first blush, the natural-unnatural distinction should strike us as fairly straightforward, even though the ensuing investigation of the dialectic between skeptic and critic shall deepen our understanding of it substantially. It is less straightforward why it matters. To begin to see why it matters, I will briefly discuss, in a suitably general way so as not to endorse an especially controversial interpretation, relevant aspects of Hume’s skepticism – or, more accurately, that of Section 7 of Part 4 of Book 1 of A Treatise of Human Nature. In so doing, I am following Williams’ lead by looking to the great Scottish philosopher’s oeuvre for captivating passages that anticipate contemporary skeptical themes (2-10).

1 The designation of the skepticism at issue as “Cartesian” is meant to mirror Williams’ own conception of it in Unnatural Doubts, to introduce an array of skeptical problems that have long entranced philosophers (e.g., the problem of other minds, the problem of induction, and so forth) the fundamentals of which parallel the fundamentals of the problem of the external world, and to bracket a distinct kind of skepticism, Agrippan skepticism. Williams devotes considerable space in Problems of Knowledge to a discussion of the motivation for, and candidate replies to, Agrippan skepticism, the kind of skepticism most closely associated with the well-known concept of a “regress of justification.” (See chs. 5, 7, 13 of Williams, Michael. Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.)
Hume is deservedly infamous for concluding Book 1 of the *Treatise* in a paroxysm of skeptical despair, which he calls "philosophical melancholy and delirium" (*THN* 205). We need not address the difficult exegetical question of what the *precise* explanation of this despair is. It suffices to say that, *in general*, Hume descends into a skeptical abyss because he discovers upon reflection, in the course of developing his "science of MAN," that our cognitive faculties are in very bad shape (xxiv). He finds that some of their outputs are contradictory, that the imagination gives rise to multifarious "errors, absurdities, and obscurities," and even that reason, "when it acts alone," annihilates belief, or "entirely subverts itself" (203-204). The general lesson is that insurmountable cognitive "infirmities" beset human nature at its core (202). They are not always in view. When "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends," I do not withdraw my assent to fundamental beliefs like that the external world exists or that the future will resemble the past (206). But they are always potentially in view. One might think of them as hibernating, or as waiting to unleash their skeptical potential, until the reflectively inclined person, like Hume, has the urge to ask some basic questions about his own mind and its faculties. When Hume asks those questions, he triggers a skeptical tailspin that culminates in a rejection of "all belief and reasoning." To be sure, "nature" eventually "cures" his melancholy and delirium (205). But the cure is palliative. Hume never loses his "former disposition" to ask those very basic, and very dangerous, questions about what it means to be human (206).²

² Compare: "Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason" (*CPR* Avii). For Kant, these fundamental questions generate antinomies that can be solved only through transcendental idealism. Hume has a much more pessimistic philosophical orientation. His psychological investigation of the human mind reveals that our basic cognitive faculties, including reason, are riddled with ineradicable contradictions. While "nature" can sometimes *quiet* our skeptical worries, nothing can *solve* them.
Hume's is an exceptionally provocative representation of what it is for skeptical doubts to be natural, for them to sprout from the roots of human nature itself. Williams thinks that, to varying degrees, Stroud, Thomas Nagel, and P. F. Strawson (the “New Humeans”) are carrying on in this Humean tradition of regarding skepticism as a natural outcome of reflection on some central facts about our cognitive lives (Williamsd 10-17).³

We now have a richer understanding of what natural doubts are supposed to be. By implication, we have an equally rich understanding of what unnatural doubts are supposed to be. If skeptical doubts clash with, or build an elaborate edifice around, human nature; if they do not flow from the familiar facts of our everyday epistemic activity, but instead involve dubitable assumptions about knowledge and justification, then they are not natural.

We also have a clearer sense of why the natural-unnatural distinction is an important one. Imagine that skepticism is natural. That is, imagine that Hume, or the New Humeans, is right. What then? Williams' reply is blunt: it is “obvious ... that conceding the naturalness of the case for skepticism places the critic under a crippling dialectical disadvantage” (18). The problem is this. If skeptical arguments are natural, then the “collisions between deeply entrenched features of our thinking” that they “signal” – collisions between the skeptical conclusions themselves (in Hume, that the self-activity of reason extinguishes belief, for example) and the equally natural belief that we do know all sorts of things about the world (which, in Hume, is exemplified by the transitory triumph of nature over philosophical reflection) – require significant changes to our pre-theoretical understanding of knowledge and justification.

Traditionally, the outcome has been a revisionist “theory of knowledge.”⁴ In order to grasp just


⁴ Nagel calls such theories “reductive.” By reducing our claims about the objective world to “claims about possible experience or the possible ultimate convergence of experience among rational beings, or as
how inadequate these theories can be, consider Stroud's incisive commentary on Kant's transcendental idealism.\(^5\)

In Kant's view, as Stroud presents it, external world skepticism is motivated by empirical idealism. According to this form of idealism, favored by Descartes and other early modern philosophers, everything we perceive is an idea or a group of ideas in the mind (Stroud\(^a\) 140-145). It encourages skepticism because if I am immediately aware of nothing but my own perceptual experiences, then I cannot eliminate the possibility that their cause is not the external world (perhaps it is a malicious demon instead). To resist this conclusion, Kant invokes transcendental idealism, which contends, in broad outline, that objects conform to the mind (rather than vice-versa). Initially, this kind of idealism might look like a promising doctrine: if the faculties of sensibility and understanding constitute objects, then objective knowledge should be possible. The problem is that even transcendental idealism does an injustice to the intuition that we have knowledge of a mind-independent world (164-165). The transcendental idealist asserts that the objects of our knowledge are laden with subjectivity; we know things only as they appear to us conditioned by a priori features of the mind, not as they are in themselves.

Williams echoes Stroud's disapproval of Kant's revisionist approach to dealing with the skeptical problem (Williams\(^d\) 20). But his point is more general. Transcendental idealism is but one anti-skeptical strategy that buckles under the pressure of having to legitimate our ordinary claims to know once the naturalness of skepticism has been conceded. In fact, any such theory...

\(^5\) See ch. 4 of Stroud's *Significance*. In ch. 5, Stroud critically assesses Carnap's verificationism. In his view, both Kant's and Carnap's replies to the skeptic are revisionist, and therefore untenable, insofar as they upend the radical skeptical conclusion only by sacrificing the commonsensical notion that our knowledge is of an objective, mind-independent world.
will inevitably be revisionist. If skeptical argument respects rather than distorts our epistemic position, then something has got to give. We face, in Williams’ words, the “epistemologist’s dilemma”: either we assent to the skeptic’s pessimistic conclusion “directly” or we do so “in a roundabout, grudging way” by revising our pre-theoretical conception of knowledge (22).

This is quite an unhappy predicament.

Section B – Therapeutic versus Theoretical Diagnosis

Thus, the million dollar question: Is skepticism natural? Not according to Williams. The purpose of his book is to show that it is not. He claims that we can avoid the epistemologist’s dilemma, and so avoid pessimism and revisionism, by opting for a theoretical diagnosis of skepticism, a diagnosis which exposes the contentious theoretical presuppositions that underpin skeptical argument in order to show that, as a consequence of such presuppositions, skepticism is “not forced on us by our ordinary ways of thinking about knowledge [and] justification” (32).

However, some philosophers prefer therapeutic diagnoses of skepticism. Therapeutic diagnosticians, among them Stanley Cavell, J. L. Austin, and (on some interpretations of him) Ludwig Wittgenstein, hold that skepticism is, at bottom, incoherent or unintelligible (or, as Williams sometimes puts it, “less than fully intelligible”). Austin’s essay “Other Minds” is a canonical expression of this view.

As its title suggests, the essay is about the skeptical problem of other minds. According to Austin, the skeptic wants to understand how it is that I can know anything at all about the experiences – the mental goings-on – of other people. While I am acquainted with my own mental states immediately (I feel that I am happy, sad, angry, etc.), I do not have immediate access to the mental states of other people in the same way. I cannot literally feel your pain. I can

know of it only by inference or analogy, the skeptic avers. I observe certain “symptoms” or “signs” of pain in your countenance and behavior, which lead me to infer that you are in pain (Austin 160). But the skeptic shall query: “Couldn’t he just be faking it? Perhaps he is a robot without feelings.” Austin thinks that these skeptical worries are less than fully intelligible; in his own words, they are “misleading,” “silly,” “outrageous,” and “nonsense” (160; 162; 165; 177).

Ordinarily, we refer to “signs” of something “through an implied contrast to the thing itself” (167). Storm clouds signify impending rain, but the rain does not signify itself. When we feel raindrops on our skin, we say that it is raining, not that we are cognizant of symptoms of rain. Analogously, when we refer to signs of pain, we have in mind a wince, a grimace, and the like. But sometimes we know that someone is in pain. When you clamor in unendurable agony and shout “The pain is unbearable!” I do not draw an inference from symptoms to cause; I know you are in pain immediately. The skeptical argument is “nonsense” insofar as it disobeys the standards for the proper use of language. For that reason, Austin alleges, it is unpersuasive.

Williams finds the ordinary language criticism of skepticism difficult to countenance. It alleges that the meaning of words is inextricably linked to their ordinary use, such that to use words – like “signs” or “symptoms” – in a non-ordinary way, as the skeptic does, threatens to drain them of their meaning. But this is an intuition about linguistic meaning that many philosophers do not share. Moreover, it certainly appears as if the skeptic argues in a cognitively contentful way; indeed, “[t]he very fact that a theory contradicts something much more intuitively compelling than itself will always, in the long run, prevent it from carrying any conviction” (Williamsd 18). 7

7 Although Williams distances himself from the enterprise of therapeutic diagnosis, he acknowledges in Problems of Knowledge that therapeutic and theoretical diagnoses can overlap in interesting ways. For instance, perhaps the skeptic makes controversial and expendable assumptions not only in the epistemic domain, but also about meaning. If so, the two diagnostic strategies could work in tandem to defeat the skeptic. Williams explicitly resists ordinary language-style arguments primarily because he does not want
Williams pursues a theoretical diagnosis of skepticism. As a result, he eludes the ominous epistemologist's dilemma and shuns the ordinary language arguments of philosophers like Austin. Skepticism, he admits, is "conditionally correct" (41). It prevails if it is given its necessary presuppositions. But a theoretical diagnosis may well reveal that the presuppositions are highly questionable, in which case its triumph loses the air of inevitability (42).

Section C – Stroud's Argument for Skepticism

I have sketched important details of Williams' attitude toward skepticism. I have also explained why he is inclined toward a theoretical diagnosis. At this point in Part I, my aim is to reconstruct Stroud's (brilliantly compact) skeptical argument. I mentioned previously that Stroud is one of Williams' New Humeans. In "Understanding Human Knowledge in General," and in a positively Humean spirit, he argues that the traditional epistemological project, which he identifies as the attempt to explain how our knowledge in certain highly general domains (e.g., the external world, other minds, the future, etc.) is so much as possible, compels the devastating conclusion that we have no such knowledge in those domains. This demand for absolute generality, which he insists is in and of itself "a perfectly comprehensible intellectual goal," seems to force on us the skeptical conclusion that we know nothing about, for example, the external world (Stroud 32-33).

The reason for this is straightforward. If the traditional epistemological project, or the "distinctively philosophical assessment of knowledge," is to explain how such knowledge is possible, then it cannot presuppose that we have any such knowledge: to do so would be to "too quick to accuse the skeptic of not making sense" and because he rejects "the ideal of a purely therapeutic approach to philosophical problems," which is to expose such problems as defective in point of meaning "while avoiding any theoretical commitments of one's own" (Williams 146). Williams is a proponent of contextualism, which is a theoretical commitment if there ever were one. Williams pioneered the very idea of a theoretical diagnosis of skepticism, but he is not its only partisan. Peter Graham undertakes his own theoretical diagnosis in "The Theoretical Diagnosis of Skepticism." Synthese 158: 19-39, 2007. Interestingly, he strongly disagrees with Williams that epistemological realism is the cause and contextualism the cure of Cartesian skepticism.
manifestly question-begging (33). At this (very early) stage in the philosophical assessment, Stroud continues, traditional epistemologists “traffic in” the doctrine of “epistemic priority” (35). Sensitive to the fact that worldly knowledge cannot be presupposed, this doctrine introduces another kind of knowledge. This new kind of knowledge is basic, non-inferential, and privileged; the other kind — that kind whose possibility is to be explained — is non-basic, inferential, and problematic; the latter kind is parasitic on, and must be inferred from, the former. In the specific case of our worldly knowledge, Stroud says that “we single out epistemically prior ‘sensations’ or ‘sense-data’ or ‘experiences’ or whatever it might be, and then ask how on that basis alone, which is the only basis we have, we can know anything of the objects around us” (36). But it becomes immediately clear that this move threatens to dash our hopes for a completely general understanding of our knowledge of the world. The epistemic gap between knowledge of “experience” and knowledge of the “world” looks unbridgeable. For any attempted “inference” or putative “transition” will either presuppose worldly knowledge, in which case the generality we seek will be compromised, or will restrict us to experiential knowledge, in which case the “inference” or “transition” will be of no use (35). From Stroud’s perspective, then, the “perfectly comprehensible intellectual goal” of explaining how our knowledge of the world is possible reveals to us, via the necessity of “trafficking in” the “epistemic priority” doctrine in order not to presuppose any such knowledge, that no such knowledge is possible after all.

Section D — Williams’ Theoretical Diagnosis

Williams thinks that Stroud gives in to skepticism too quickly. In particular, he thinks that skepticism about our knowledge of the world can be deflected if it can be shown through his anti-skeptical weapon of theoretical diagnosis that the distinctively philosophical examination that engenders such skepticism presupposes controversial assumptions about our epistemic
concepts and practices (Williams 362). If these assumptions are *sine qua non* of the skeptical conclusion, then rejecting the assumptions means rejection the conclusion.

Williams commences his theoretical diagnosis of Stroud's external world skepticism by noting that the traditional epistemological project is possible only if its subject matter – our beliefs about the world, or (instances of) our knowledge of the world – constitute identifiable objects of theory: they must possess some kind of "theoretical integrity," or significance, which is to say that they must be unified or integrated in some meaningful way. In virtue of what, Williams asks, are our external world beliefs unified or integrated. Clearly not by *topical* considerations. The subject matter of external world beliefs is extraordinarily diverse, including such phenomena as quarks, quails, and quiche. Williams infers that they are unified by *epistemic* considerations (368).

How, exactly, does he draw that inference? First, he claims that the term "external" in "external world beliefs" (or the term "world" in "knowledge of the world") serves to distinguish the world *outside* (external to) the mind (or brain) from the world *inside* the mind or brain (constitutive of a sort of "inner" experience). But, Williams adds, this distinction is significant only because *beliefs* about the external "share an ultimate epistemic status," as do *beliefs* about the internal. The epistemic status external world beliefs share is that of being non-basic, inferential, and problematic; beliefs about our own sense-experiential states are, by contrast, basic, non-inferential, and privileged (369).

This should look like familiar territory. The distinction between epistemically privileged and problematic beliefs is exactly what Stroud maintains that traditional epistemologists "traffic in" *after* the philosophical assessment has gotten under way. Although Williams refers to the idea embodied in the internal/external distinction as "epistemological realism," it is no different from what Stroud calls the "epistemic priority" doctrine (369). But what all of this means, or so
Williams argues, is that epistemological realism is not a by-product of traditional epistemology; it is a presupposition. Without epistemological realism, the traditional epistemological project would be unthinkable: there would be no such thing to assess as “external world beliefs” (379).

For a theoretical diagnostician like Williams, the discovery that skepticism hinges on epistemological realism should motivate a critical assessment of its professed naturalness. Recall that natural skeptical doubts flow from the familiar facts of our everyday epistemic activity and do not accept controversial and expendable assumptions about knowledge and justification. The thrust of Williams’ diagnosis is that epistemological realism is controversial and expendable. But it is crucial to note that this is a comparative, not an absolute, claim. Compared to a doctrine he calls “contextualism,” epistemological realism provides a distorted model of our epistemic lives. Let’s take a closer look at both doctrines, beginning with epistemological realism.

**Subsection D(i) – Epistemological Realism**

---

9 By declaring that epistemological realism is a presupposition, not a by-product, of traditional epistemology, Williams circumvents an extensive literature, in which no general consensus has emerged, on presupposition – in particular, on the individuating features of presuppositions relative to regular entailments and on presupposition failure. I broach the topic only to suggest that it is far from obvious that Williams needs epistemological realism to be presupposed by traditional epistemology rather than merely entailed by it in some other way. If we set aside the so-called “pragmatic” models of presupposition and focus on the classic model favored by P. F. Strawson in “On Referring,” it looks like a proposition P presupposes a proposition Q just in case if Q is false, then P is “insignificant,” or neither true nor false (Strawson 329). The example Strawson uses in developing this analysis, and in developing simultaneously a criticism of Bertrand Russell’s Theory of Descriptions, is the proposition “The present King of France is wise.” That proposition presupposes the proposition “The present King of France exists” just in case if the latter is false, then the former is neither true nor false. Epistemological realism says that “The epistemic status of a belief is context-invariant and is determined exclusively by content.” Williams considers this proposition to be false. But does he want to argue that, as a result of its falsity, Stroud’s epistemological inquiry is meaningless? Surely not. Not only is its meaningfulness flamingly obvious, but Williams is in general averse to arguments against some doctrine on the grounds that it is meaningless (as we saw in Section B, when I characterized his attitude toward therapeutic diagnosis as largely negative). The better – safer – approach would be for Williams to argue that traditional epistemology entails, in some sense other than presupposes, epistemological realism. In any case, I will assume henceforth that Williams’ position can be glossed as either that traditional epistemology presupposes epistemological realism in some non-Strawsonian sense or that it otherwise entails epistemological realism.
In Problems of Knowledge, Williams distinguishes between structural foundationalism and epistemological realism. According to

Structural foundationalism: (i) There are basic beliefs, beliefs that are in some sense justifiably held without resting on further evidence. (ii) A belief is justified if and only if it is either basic or inferentially connected, in some appropriate way, to other justified beliefs (Williams b 82).

According to

Epistemological realism: (i) and (ii) above. (iii) There are certain kinds of beliefs (or other conscious states) that by their very nature – that is, in virtue of their content – are fitted to play the role of terminating points for chains of justification. These beliefs (or other conscious states) are epistemologically basic because intrinsically credible or self-evidencing (83).

Williams himself is a structural (formal or linear) foundationalist. Nonetheless, he would prefer to ditch the label. This is because structural foundationalism is often confused with epistemological realism (164). Whereas the structural foundationalist makes the limited claim that justification is transferred from basic to non-basic beliefs, the epistemological realist specifies which beliefs those are. Furthermore, for the epistemological realist, basic and non-basic justification accrues to the content of a belief, often to highly abstract features of content, and is context-blind (84). More specifically, in the history of Western philosophy, epistemological realists – from early modern philosophers like Descartes to contemporary philosophers like...

---

10 Strictly speaking, his distinction is between structural and substantive foundationalism. Several paragraphs later, he says that substantive foundationalism “is thus committed to” epistemological realism and the epistemic priority doctrine. However, the Williams corpus is littered with passages in which epistemological realism, substantive foundationalism, and the epistemic priority doctrine are used interchangeably. Nonetheless, I suppose there are subtle differences. Epistemological realism claims that there are natural epistemic relations between natural epistemic kinds. By “natural” Williams means “objective.” The epistemic relations between beliefs B and C are “fixed and permanent,” irrespective of the context in which they are held (Williams b 84). Substantive foundationalism provides an interpretation of epistemological realism. It specifies which beliefs go where on the objective hierarchy of epistemic statuses. If B is about a subject’s own experiences, then it is privileged. If C is about the external world, then it is problematic and must be inferred from beliefs of kind B (Williams d 114-115). The epistemic priority doctrine accepts epistemological realism but emphasizes that some beliefs are epistemically prior to others according to the objective hierarchy of epistemic statuses. That said, as we saw in Section C, Stroud uses the epistemic priority doctrine to mean substantive foundationalism (which, again, is committed to epistemological realism). To avoid needless confusion, I will consistently use epistemological realism as a catch-all term for all three doctrines.
Stroud – have supposed that experiential beliefs, beliefs about behavior and about the present are privileged because they are about experience, behavior, and the present and that worldly beliefs, beliefs about other minds and about the future are problematic because they are about the world, other minds, and the future. For epistemological realists, “content determines status” in a hierarchical pyramid of natural epistemic kinds (Williams 116).

Does justification actually work that way? It would appear not. Consider

_Umbrella_: Someone packs an umbrella before setting out for a hike, because he heard on the weather channel that in the early evening the probability of rain is high. (Here is an example of a basic belief about the future that licenses a comparatively non-basic belief about the advisability of bringing an umbrella in the present.)

_Psychiatry_: A psychiatrist learns from a colleague that his anger management patient is in an especially bad mood today, and so to prepare for the upcoming session the psychiatrist decides to remove all sharp objects from his office. (Here is an example of a basic belief about the mental state of another person that licenses a comparatively non-basic belief about his likely behavior.)

_Mirage_: Someone perceives a mirage of a tent that he knows not to have been caused by a real tent. (Here is an example of a basic belief about the world that licenses a comparatively non-basic belief about the veracity of a perceptual experience).

The traditional epistemologist assumes that it is a context-invariant fact that experiential beliefs, beliefs about behavior and about the present are epistemically prior to worldly beliefs, beliefs about other minds and about the future. But _Umbrella, Psychiatry_, and _Mirage_ suggest that it is a context-sensitive fact. In skeptical contexts, the epistemic relations are as the traditional epistemologist assumes; in ordinary contexts, however, they can be otherwise.

There is more to Williams’ contextualism than can be gleaned from a glimpse at a few relatively undefined contexts. We need to flesh things out.

**Subsection D(ii) – Contextualism**

Williams advocates a contextualism whose “fundamental idea … is that standards for correctly attributing or claiming knowledge are not fixed but subject to circumstantial variation” – as
possibility that the college recently decided to discontinue that project for some reason. If the only way to eliminate it is to attend a long and insufferably boring meeting with the facilities management division this Friday night, then the possibility is an inadmissible defeater. The benefits of eliminating it are not great (my parents do not much care either way) and the costs are astronomical. On the other hand, if I am giving prospective students a tour, the cost/benefit analysis is different. Perhaps the error-possibility is a serious defeater because it would be wrong to give the students potentially misleading information.

Finally, there are situational factors to take into account. Methodological, dialectical, and economic factors pertain to what Williams calls "personal justification" (161). I am personally justified in believing that P if P is unchallenged by contextually relevant error-possibilities. But I may not be evidentially justified in believing it. Justified beliefs need to be "objectively well-grounded." Situational factors "determine a broader informational context or environment constituted by ... facts" some of which may not be known to the epistemic agents in question (163). Williams wants to say that if it is false in this "broader informational context" that the college is building squash courts, then my belief is not evidentially justified, even if it is personally justified.

But there is an important qualification to make. The "broader informational context" does not include every fact. It is itself bound by "considerations of epistemic responsibility" (164). For example, if college administrators decided not to build the squash courts because an evil alien race brainwashed them, then I am evidentially justified in believing that the courts will be built. The "broader informational context" does not include the fact of the brainwashing because I could not possibly have been expected to know about it. On the other hand, if they abandoned the project of their own accord due to a realization that high school seniors find
squash lame, then I may well lack evidential justification. The “broader informational context” might include that fact because at least I could be expected to know it, even though I do not.

To illustrate how these contextual factors work in everyday life, consider

*Baseball*

Joe: Good thing A-Rod’s up. The Yankees need a base hit badly.

Torre: What makes you think A-Rod’s up? I know you can’t see the batter’s jersey number without your binoculars.

Joe: The announcer said so a moment ago. Plus, I can tell from his stance.

If Torre has nothing to say in response to Joe’s latest comment, then Joe is at least personally justified in believing that A-Rod is up. We can identify several methodological assumptions that enable this conversation to take place. Both speakers must presuppose the existence of the external world, the reliability of testimony and perception, and so on. The logic – or in Wittgenstein’s parlance, the “grammar” – of the conversation precludes either of them from entertaining the skeptic’s hypotheses, for taking them up would transform an ordinary exchange between two baseball fans into a bizarre epistemological quandary.

But Torre might issue the following challenge: “Are you sure you heard the announcer amid all the noise? It’s awfully loud. And A-Rod doesn’t have a particularly distinctive stance.” Unless Joe can defeat these new error-possibilities, then his belief will lose (at least some of) its epistemic warrant. This is an example of how a change in the dialectical environment constituted by the introduction of a new error-possibility can have an effect on justificatory status. Of course, a change in the dialectical environment can be associated with an increase in justificatory status as well. Such would be the case if Joe could defeat this new error-possibility.

Imagine that he defeats it by calling Torre’s attention to the Red Sox fans seated beside them who are shouting “A-Rod sucks!” Joe asks rhetorically: “Why would they shout that unless he were up?” Ordinarily, this testimonial evidence should suffice to undercut Torre’s objection.
But consider the influence of economic considerations. It is possible that the fans are taunting
A-Rod even though they are too drunk to know who is at bat. If it does not much matter to Joe
whether he is right or wrong, then this possibility is excluded on economic grounds. But if Joe is
a sports reporter who must record every outcome of every at bat for every Yankee player, then
he may have to ask himself whether the drunken fans are reliable.

Now let’s consider situational factors. Suppose A-Rod is not up. Suppose our evil alien
race designed an impeccable replica of A-Rod and planted it at home plate undetected.
According to Williams, Joe is evidentially justified in believing that A-Rod is up. He could not
possibly be expected to know that there exists an evil alien race, let alone that it takes an interest
in major league baseball. His “broader informational context” does not include the fact that an
alien race swapped A-Rod for a replica. But it might include the fact that Derek Jeter accidentally
put on A-Rod’s jersey in the locker room before the game, and so the person at bat wearing the
number “13” is not the Yankee third basemen. Joe could be expected to know that (perhaps by
walking toward the dugout to get a closer look at the batter’s facial features), and so his “broader
informational context” includes that fact that Jeter, not A-Rod, is up. In these circumstances, he
is not evidentially justified.

For the contextualist, the methodological, dialectical, economic, and situational factors
constitutive of contexts like Baseball determine the epistemic status of a belief. But the
epistemological realist will have none of that. In his view, content is king and context is
irrelevant. Joe’s belief is intrinsically problematic because it presupposes the existence of the
external world.

When epistemological realism is pit against contextualism in this way, it looks highly
tenuous. At the very least, it is contentious. But that is all Williams needs. If Stroud’s external world
skepticism entails a contentious thesis about knowledge and justification, then it is unnatural.
And if it is unnatural, or not forced on us by our pre-theoretical understanding of our epistemic concepts and practices, then it can be tossed aside.

The skeptic is unlikely to sit quietly while Williams assaults him. In Part II, we shall consider Stephen Jacobson’s attempt to rescue him. But first we need to confront an objection that appears to vitiate Williams’ argument entirely. It runs like this.

Contextualism reduces to epistemic relativism. Epistemic relativism is just a fancy name for skepticism. Therefore, Williams proposes to “diagnose” skepticism with skepticism. That is absurd. Therefore, Williams’ project fails. That is the argument in rough outline. Now let’s consider the details.

Section E – Why Contextualism Really Is Not Relativism

In Fear of Knowledge, Paul Boghossian constructs a plausible argument for relativism and then hacks it down. I am interested in the argument itself, not his criticism of it. But first, what is relativism? According to Boghossian, it is the conjunction of the following three theses.

(I) There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies. (Epistemic non-absolutism)

(II) If a person, S’s, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form “E justifies belief B” as expressing the claim E justifies belief B but rather as expressing the claim: According to epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B. (Epistemic relationism)

(III) There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others. (Epistemic pluralism) (Boghossian 73).

Before we consider the argument for this tripartite doctrine, there are two preliminary points to make. First, as Boghossian observes, if (I) is true, then arguably (II) and (III) are true as well.  

13 I say “arguably” because one might oppose the entailment by embracing non-cognitivism (perhaps expressivism in particular) about epistemic judgment, if not normative judgment more broadly.
For if there are no absolute facts of the right kind, then a subject’s claim to be justified in believing that P will be true only if it is relativized to his own epistemic system (epistemic relationism). Ex hypothesi, there is nothing outside all epistemic systems (no brute facts) on the basis of which to assess his claim. But if justification is system-dependent in this way, then different systems should be able to deliver different verdicts as to the epistemic status of the same beliefs (epistemic pluralism). Once again, because there is nothing outside the diverse population of systems to adjudicate the dispute, no system is objectively superior (superior in virtue of the brute facts) to any other (74-75).

The second preliminary point is that if there are absolute epistemic facts, then it is possible to acquire justified beliefs about what they are – if not in “full detail,” at least to a degree such that we can eliminate “radical alternatives.” Not only does the very enterprise of epistemology presuppose this possibility, but our everyday epistemic judgments tacitly assume that the absolute epistemic facts are known, not merely knowable (76).

So, the argument for relativism proceeds by way of an argument for non-absolutism. The thrust of that argument is that it is not possible to acquire justified beliefs about what the absolute epistemic facts are, from which it follows, given our second preliminary point, that there are no such facts. It is easiest to develop the argument by means of an example.14

Adam and Eve

One fine day, while strolling through London’s Royal Botanic Gardens, Adam and Eve stumble into each other. After exchanging awkward glances, Adam breaks the silence by confidently proclaiming: “Isn’t it something that God created the world only 10,000 years ago?” Eve recoils in disgust: “For one thing,

Boghossian ignores this possibility because he wants to formulate the best available argument for relativism (74-75).

there is no God; and the Earth was ‘created’ nearly 4.5 billion years ago.” Adam and Eve strike up a conversation therewith. While Adam appeals to the Bible and to the testimony of various religious leaders with whom he has meaningful and trusting relationships, Eve appeals to the radiometric dating of meteorite material at the Earth’s surface, among other geological considerations. Neither of them budges an inch after hours of heated debate. In the late afternoon, they are banished from the garden by the groundskeeper who needs to close the gates for the night.

What does the relativist have to say about Adam and Eve? Notice that Adam and Eve disagree not only about the facts, but also about the epistemic procedures by which justified belief about the facts may be generated. Adam accepts the epistemic system we might call Creationism. It endorses such principles as that it is rational to believe that P if P is the judgment of the world’s leading creationist thinkers. Eve accepts the epistemic system we might call Science. It endorses such principles as that it is rational to believe that P if P is the judgment of empirical observation and scientific experiment.

The relativist’s central thought is that there are no absolute epistemic facts that privilege Eve’s belief relative to Adam’s, or vice-versa. For how shall Eve defend her acceptance of Science – that is, of observation, experiment, induction, inference to the best explanation, and so forth? Only by employing a particular epistemic system. Obviously, she must employ her own, certainly not Adam’s. But Adam would argue for his epistemic system by using his own epistemic system. The result is the “self-certification” of competing systems. Both Adam and Eve offer “norm-circular justification” for fundamentally incompatible worldviews (79). But if they can offer only norm-circular justification for their respective epistemic systems, then they cannot acquire justified beliefs about what the absolute epistemic facts are.

This conclusion generalizes. Because every belief is situated within a particular epistemic system, and because any such system can be defended only circularly, no one can acquire justified beliefs about what the absolute epistemic facts are. But if that is true, then, given our
second preliminary point, non-absolutism is true, from which it follows, given our first
preliminary point, that relativism is true.

One objection to relativism is that it entails radical skepticism. If no one can rationally
defend any belief – for any such defense must avail itself of some epistemic system the
justification for which can only be question-begging – then no belief is rationally defensible.15

This kind of skepticism is far more debilitating than Cartesian skepticism. At least the latter
leaves unscathed perceptual and mathematical judgments. Relativism-skepticism undermines all
judgments.

Why is this excursus on relativism important? Because if Williams’ contexts are
equivalent to the relativist’s systems, then Williams’ theoretical diagnosis of skepticism is in

---

15 By way of a different (and move involved) argument, Boghossian seems also to reach the conclusion
that relativism entails skepticism, although he does not say so explicitly. His argument is this. Relativists
believe that absolute judgments of the form \( E \) justifies belief \( B \) are uniformly false. If an epistemic judgment
is to be true, it must be relativized to a particular epistemic system (epistemic relationism). Once
relativized, an epistemic judgment takes the general form \( \text{According to epistemic system } C, E \) justifies belief \( B \).

The problem is that epistemic systems are composed of absolute epistemic principles. Adam’s system
endorses the principle “It is rational to believe that \( P \) if \( P \) is the judgment of the world’s leading
creationist thinkers”; it does not endorse the principle “According to Creationism, it is rational to believe that
\( P \) if \( P \) is the judgment of the world’s leading creationist thinkers.” This means that relativists must regard
all epistemic systems as composed of uniformly false epistemic principles. But an epistemic system
composed of uniformly false epistemic principles cannot have any normative force. Why should anyone
believe its pronouncements? (84-87). This is clearly a skeptical conclusion. All beliefs are unjustified (or
without normative force) because no subject can justify a single one.

In an effort to rescue relativism from this objection, Ram Neta relativizes even the epistemic
principles constitutive of epistemic systems. That is, in Neta’s view, Adam’s system does endorse the
principle “According to Creationism, it is rational to believe that \( P \) if \( P \) is the judgment of the world’s leading
creationist thinkers” (Neta 35-43). However, as Boghossian rightly notes, while Neta’s proposal implies
that epistemic principles are not uniformly false, it “leaves it a mystery how one could accept just one of
these epistemic systems to the exclusion of the others,” for it also implies that epistemic principles are
uniformly true! (Boghossiana 63). In other words, it is true according to Creationism that the Bible is the word
of God; it is true according to Science that geology is authoritative about the age of the Earth; it is true
according to the Azande tribe that “all calamities are to be explained by witchcraft” (Boghossianb 71). But if
all epistemic principles are true, then none has any normative force: surely an epistemic principle can
have normative force only if it is better than at least one alternative. Hence, the relativist faces a dilemma:
either all epistemic principles are false (in which case the normativity of epistemic judgment is
inexplicable) or all epistemic principles are true (in which case the normativity of epistemic judgment is
also inexplicable). This looks like radical skepticism to me.
serious trouble. The Cartesian skeptic could reply that epistemological realism is less, not more, contentious than contextualism, from which it would follow, by Williams' own lights, that Cartesian skepticism is true. Recall that, for Williams, skepticism is “conditionally correct.” If skepticism is natural, then it prevails. But if epistemological realism is less contentious than contextualism, its antithesis, then skepticism is natural.

So, are contexts equivalent to systems? Initially, it might seem like it. If we focus on the methodological, dialectical, and economic factors of contexts but ignore the situational factors, then they are equivalent. Why do I say that? Consider Adam’s creationism. Just as it is a methodological assumption of historical inquiry that there is an ancient past, so it is a methodological assumption of creationism that the world’s leading creationist thinkers are generally reliable. In addition, just as the historian’s claim that the Mongols conquered the Jin Dynasty in 1215 is personally justified if it is unchallenged by contextually relevant error-possibilities, so Adam’s claim that God created the world 10,000 years ago is personally justified if it is unchallenged by contextually relevant error-possibilities. Once Adam and Eve are asked to justify their respective epistemic frameworks, they fail miserably by offering only norm-circular justification. The relativist-skeptic concludes that neither of their beliefs about the age of the Earth is justified. How can the contextualist avoid the same conclusion?

---

16 Does anyone think they are equivalent? It is hard to say. Pritchard has argued that contextualism reduces to relativism, although his definition of relativism is not Boghossian’s definition (Pritchard 43). For reasons similar to those I give below, Thomas Grundmann argues that contextualism does not reduce to relativism (Grundmann 346-347). In an essay on the relationship between relativism and contextualism, Patrick Rysiew writes that “Michael Williams’ brand of ‘contextualism’ (in spite of his own arguments to the contrary) … is really most plausibly construed as a form of relativism” (Rysiew 289). Speaking of Williams’ “arguments to the contrary,” Williams’ essay “Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism Is Not Relativism” contains only one paragraph in which he explicitly makes the case that contextualism does not collapse into relativism. Clearly, there is some confusion in the literature as to what is and is not contextualism and as to what is and is not relativism. I shall try to argue that, as Boghossian defines relativism, Williams’ own version of contextualism is not relativism.
He avoids that unpalatable conclusion because systems are “hermetically sealed off” from the world, whereas contexts are “penetrable” by the facts (Williams 104). Here is where situational factors come in. For a belief to be fully justified, it is insufficient that it be personally justified. It must be evidentially justified as well; that is to say, it must be “objectively well-grounded.” Williams describes his contextualism as “doubly ‘externalist’” (Williams 162). Eve may be personally justified in believing that the Earth is nearly 4.5 billion years old even if she cannot give a reason why the external world exists, as long as her belief is dialectically unchallenged (the first externalist component); she may be evidentially justified only if it is an “objectively well-grounded” belief (the second externalist component). For the relativist, Adam and Eve are on an epistemic par. For the contextualist, however, while Adam and Eve may both be personally justified in their respective beliefs, they are not both evidentially justified.

If contextualism does not reduce to relativism, then of course it does not reduce to skepticism, in which case the claim that Williams “diagnoses” skepticism with skepticism is false.

**Part II – Jacobson’s Rejoinder**

Williams takes Stroud to task for (unwittingly) presupposing a highly contentious doctrine about the nature of our epistemic concepts and practices. For Williams, epistemological realism is built into the traditional epistemological project from the very beginning. Beliefs about the external world cannot be objects of theory for the traditional epistemologist unless they are integrated in some coherent way. How are they integrated? A clue is the word “external.” The clear contrast to the external is the internal; and the basis for this contrast is the epistemic priority that beliefs about the internal have vis-à-vis beliefs about the external. But this epistemic priority doctrine is nothing other than epistemological realism. Because epistemological realism is plainly false (and contextualism plainly true), the radical skeptical conclusion that we know nothing about the world is entirely unwarranted.
Williams’ theoretical diagnosis of skepticism, in tandem with his contextualism, has provoked surprisingly limited discussion in the literature – especially considering the burgeoning interest in epistemic contextualism more broadly. Stephen Jacobson’s contribution to this discussion is an important and probing one, however. His strategy is to drive a wedge between the internal/external (or inner/outer) distinction and epistemological realism, thereby liberating the traditional epistemologist from the burden of supporting a contentious epistemic doctrine, by cashing out the distinction without appealing to epistemic considerations. He acknowledges that if the distinction invokes epistemic considerations, then it invokes epistemological realism in particular. Although he does not say so explicitly, his reason for this must be Williams’ reason. It is “taken for granted” – perhaps even self-evident – that a contrast between something inner (beliefs about perceptual experience) and something outer (beliefs about worldly objects) the basis of which is epistemic must assign a more privileged status to beliefs pertaining to the former category (Williams 106). In addition, if we are to know anything about the contents of the latter category, it must be on the condition that we “reach” that knowledge from a more “primitive” stratum of experiential knowledge. Of course, this is precisely what epistemological realism says.

So, if Jacobson’s reply to Williams’ theoretical diagnosis should warrant our assent, then it must truly drive a wedge between the internal/external distinction and epistemological realism.

If Jacobson’s proposed account of how to cash out the distinction smuggles in epistemology-

---

talk, so to speak, then it does not undermine Williams' diagnosis. Part II develops Jacobson's account. In Part III, I argue that the account does indeed smuggle in epistemic considerations, and therefore fails as a response to Williams.

Jacobson begins his critical assessment of Williams by dissecting a passage from Unnatural Doubts that appears to contain the substance of Williams' dialectical move against Stroud.

The essential contrast to "beliefs about the external world" is "experiential beliefs" and the basis for the contrast is the general epistemic priority of beliefs falling under the latter heading over those falling under the former. "External" means "without the mind"; and it is taken for granted that we have a firmer grasp of what is "in" the mind than of what is outside of it (Williams 106).

On Jacobson's reading of this passage, Williams claims that "the concept of an external object is the concept of an object that can exist independently of the mental" and that the mental states "relevant to this account - [paradigmatically] sense-data ... - are distinguished from ... other mental states, by the nature of our access to them" (Jacobson 387). That is to say, our beliefs about sense-data, or perceptual experience, are more certain than are our beliefs about tables and chairs, for example. This claim about unequal epistemic status is the nub of epistemological realism. Jacobson teases out of the passage a concise thesis that he thinks captures Williams' reasoning.

Thesis*: "An object x is an external object iff it can exist independently of states of mind which are the subject matter of beliefs that are strongly foundational" (388).

The "states of mind" in question are perceptual experiences; "strongly foundational" beliefs are epistemically privileged beliefs. Let us dissect Thesis* further. It makes three separate assertions:

(a) There is a particular kind of mental state invoked by the claim that external objects are mind-independent.
(b) This kind of mental state is perceptual experience.
(c) Beliefs about perceptual experience are more certain than are beliefs about external objects.
Now we have all the elements of the above passage fully in view. We can ask: Why does the concept of an external object presuppose epistemological realism? The answer seems to be that (c) *is* epistemological realism, or the epistemic priority doctrine, in Stroud’s parlance.

Thesis*, or some variant thereof, looks like the kind of thesis that Williams espouses. He needs somehow to show that built into the very concept of an external object is the doctrine of epistemological realism. The problem, from Jacobson’s point of view, is that (c) need not be entailed by the concept of an external object. In other words, Williams misunderstands what an external object is. Jacobson endorses this modified thesis.

Thesis**: An object $x$ is an external object iff it can exist independently of perceptual experiences.

This thesis borrows (a) and (b) from Thesis* but jettisons (c). But if it is (c) that binds the concept of an external object to epistemological realism, then jettisoning (c) would appear to sever that bind.

What is Jacobson’s argument for Thesis**? He states that assumptions about the epistemic priority of perceptual beliefs “are not required to pick out the mental states [i.e., perceptual experiences] that figure into the account of the external world” because perceptual experiences can be identified as “objects of immediate awareness” with absolutely no epistemic status whatsoever. Straight sticks appear bent in water; round coins appear elliptical from certain angles; the sun appears smaller than one’s thumb from the Earth’s surface. Examples like these involve perceptual experience, the kind of mental state built into the idea of an external, or mind-independent, object. One *experiences* a bent stick, an elliptical coin, a tiny sun, even though the stick is *not* bent, the coin *not* elliptical, and the sun *not* tiny. Yet although one can have these experiences – experiences “of immediate awareness” – one may not be able to have beliefs, let

---

18 Reid Buchanan makes a similar claim in “Natural Doubts: Williams’ Diagnosis of Skepticism.” *Synthese* 131: 57-80, 2002.
alone epistemically privileged beliefs, about them. Jacobson alleges that children, animals, and some mentally infirm adults can experience a bent stick, etc., even though they "lack the conceptual sophistication to have beliefs" (388).

But if the idea of an external object is the idea of a mind-independent object; and if the idea of the latter invokes perceptual experiences; and yet assumptions about epistemic priority are not built into the concept of such experiences, then the idea of mind-independence does not presuppose assumptions about epistemic priority, that is, the idea does not presuppose epistemological realism. This means that Stroud's (or the traditional epistemologist's) objects of theory – namely, beliefs about external objects – do not presuppose epistemological realism; they possess the theoretical integrity bestowed on them by Thesis**. The upshot is that Williams' theoretical diagnosis fails and that skepticism remains undefeated.

Jacobson's reply to Williams is not persuasive. To see this, we need to investigate an exciting and current debate in the philosophy of mind – that between conceptualists and non-conceptualists about perceptual experience. Following Bill Brewer and John McDowell, I shall argue that conceptualism is true, or likely true. Once the argument is through, and several crucial objections to it have been deflected, I shall explain why conceptualism about perceptual experience entails that Thesis** presupposes epistemological realism. The conclusion of this section is that Williams' theoretical diagnosis survives Jacobson's criticism because Thesis* and Thesis** are not essentially distinct.

**Part III – A Defense of Williams' Theoretical Diagnosis**

Section A – An Argument for Conceptualism about Perceptual Experience

Bill Brewer defines conceptual content thus: a subject's mental state has conceptual content iff "it has a representational content which is characterizable only in terms of concepts which the subject himself possesses, and which is of a form which enables it to serve as a
premise or the conclusion of a deductive argument, or of an inference of some other kind (e.g.,
inductive or abductive)” (Brewer 217-218). More succinctly, conceptual content “is the content
of a possible judgment by the subject” (217). The requirement that conceptual content be that of a
possible judgment is reflected in the claim that it be of a form such that it can serve as the
premise or conclusion of an argument. Premises and conclusions are judgments. The
requirement that the judgment in question be the subject’s own judgment is reflected in the claim
that the concepts articulated in the judgment be employable by the subject himself (218).

With the definition of conceptual content under our belts, let us turn to Brewer’s
argument for conceptualism about perceptual experience, which he abbreviates as CC. After
slightly modifying the terminology, the argument for CC looks like this.

(A) Perceptual experiences provide reasons for, i.e., justify, perceptual beliefs.
(B) Perceptual experiences justify perceptual beliefs only if they have
conceptual content.
(C) So, perceptual experiences have conceptual content (CC).

In the essay I have been discussing, Brewer does not argue for (A), for he takes it to be
unproblematic – as do many non-conceptualists, for what it is worth.19 Instead, he focuses his
attention on (B). He contends both that (i) a perceptual experience justifies a perceptual belief
only if its content is that of a possible judgment and that (ii) the concepts articulated in the
judgment in question must be employable by the very subject whose belief is (or is being)
justified. I will try to flesh out Brewer’s case for (i) and (ii) through an example.

The Mysterious Tree

Suppose I were to form the belief on the basis of perception that there is a pine
outside my window. A friend of mine challenges me to justify the claim, to
explain what gives me the epistemic right to declare the tree to be a pine rather
than some other kind. Now, if my perceptual experiences really do justify my

19 Notable in this regard are Philippe Chuard’s “Perceptual Reasons.” Australasian Journal of Philosophy 28:
Hemdat Lerman’s “Non-conceptual Experiential Content and Reason-giving.” Philosophy and
belief, then meeting my friend’s challenge will involve “identify[ing] some feature of [my] situation which makes the relevant judgment or belief appropriate, or intelligible, from the point of view of rationality” (218). In other words, I will need to provide reasons for my belief; and the reasons I provide will need to be my perceptual experiences. My friend asks: “How do you know?” I respond: “Because I see it.” My friend asks: “But what is it that you see?” I will tell him that I see pinecones, pine needles, and a large trunk. These perceptual experiences of mine are reasons that function as the premises of an inductive (or perhaps abductive) argument whose conclusion is that there is a pine outside my window. Were I pretentious enough to formalize it for my skeptical friend, the argument would look like this.

(I) The mystery tree has pinecones.
(II) Only pine trees have pinecones.
(III) It grows pine needles instead of leaves.
(IV) It has a large trunk diameter.
(V) So, the tree is no mystery; it is a pine!

(I) and (II) might suffice to license (V), even deductively. But if my friend were especially mistrustful of my knowledge of dendrology, he might demand further evidence. Quite obviously, the premises of my argument are judgments, or propositions. However, propositions have conceptual content, Brewer claims (219). Therefore, because my perceptual experiences have these propositions – that the tree has pinecones, grows pine needles, and is relatively large – as their contents, they have conceptual content.

The more general lesson here is that all perceptual experiences work this way. Insofar as they justify perceptual beliefs, they must license those beliefs as premises license conclusions. But because premises are propositions and propositions are conceptual, perceptual experience must be conceptual, or have conceptual content.

Strictly speaking, we have not yet established premise (B) of CC. We need to make something explicit, which is only implicit in The Mysterious Tree. The reasons provided for the belief that there is a pine outside my window are, and must be, my reasons. This is because, a la premise (A), a subject’s perceptual experiences justify the selfsame subject’s perceptual beliefs. If this is true, then the premises justifying the conclusion that there is a pine outside my window must
be accessible to me, which means, trivially, that the concepts articulated in those premises must be employable by me. Now we have established (B). For a perceptual experience (of mine) to justify a perceptual belief (of mine), the content of that experience must be that of a possible judgment (by me). Because (A) has been taken for granted, CC immediately follows.

John McDowell makes a similar argument for CC in *Mind and World*, only his is more cryptic because it is encased in Kantian metaphors. Here is a relevant passage.

It can seem obvious that a possessor of one piece of representational content, whether conceptual or not, can stand in rational relations, such as implication or probabilification, to a possessor of another. But with spontaneity confined, we lose the right to draw the conclusion, as a matter of routine, that one term in such a relation can be someone's reason for another. If experience is pictured as input to spontaneity from outside, then it is another case of fraudulent labeling to use the word “content” for something we can even so take experience to have, in such a way that reason-constituting relations can intelligibly hold between experiences and judgments. The label serves to mask the fact that the relations between experiences and judgments are being conceived to meet inconsistent demands: to be such as to fit experiences to be reasons for judgments, while being outside the reach of rational inquiry (McDowell 53).

Unlike the argument for CC that I have reconstructed above – which Brewer calls a “prima facie” case for conceptualism – here McDowell juxtaposes conceptualism against non-conceptualism (Brewer 217). His immediate aim in Lecture III of *Mind and World*, from which the passage is drawn, is to prove that non-conceptualism cannot account for the justificatory character of perceptual experience. The last sentence is the most important. Perceptual experiences can be “reason-constituting” only if they are within “the reach of rational inquiry,” only if these reason-constituting relations can “come under the self-scrutiny of active thinking,” as McDowell says in the preceding paragraph (McDowell 53). For us to scrutinize these relations is in part for us to offer reasons for our perceptual beliefs. But offering such reasons, to use language with which Brewer would be comfortable, just is articulating our perceptual experiences in terms of propositions that serve as premises of valid arguments whose conclusions are the perceptual beliefs that we have been asked to justify. To use McDowellian language, when we confine
"spontaneity," or the activity of conceptualization, in such a way that experience does not involve conceptual capacities at all, we render it impossible "to credit experience with a rational bearing on empirical thinking" (52).

A standard objection to CC is that perceptual experience is too rich, or too fine-grained, to be captured exhaustively by concepts. When I observe a waterfall, the objection runs, I am presented with an extremely rich array of colors. I do not have concepts of most of them. I have the concepts BLUE, INDIGO, TEAL, and the like, but my experience, it is alleged, vastly outstrips my concepts. Gareth Evans encapsulates the intuition driving the Fineness of Grain Objection (FGO) in this rhetorical and oft-quoted question: "Do we really understand the proposal that we have as many color concepts as there are shades of color that we can sensibly discriminate?" (Evans 229).

McDowell develops a response to this objection. He acknowledges that our perceptual experience is fine-grained, but he does not restrict our capacity "to embrace color ... to concepts expressible by words like 'red' or 'green' and phrases like 'burnt sienna'" (McDowell 56). Demonstrative concepts can do the trick. As I peer over the ledge and gaze at the waterfall below, I perceive "that shade of blue" (among numerous others). I may experience it if I conceptualize it as that shade. Nor do I need to have the concept "in advance" of my experience. According to McDowell, "[w]e do not have all these [i.e., demonstrative] concepts in advance, but we do have whichever we need, exactly when we need them" (170). So, even if I lack the demonstrative concept "that shade of blue" at time \( t_1 \), if I experience the shade of blue in question at \( t_2 \), then I possess this very demonstrative concept at \( t_2 \).

If McDowell's rejoinder to FGO succeeds, then CC survives. As I said, however, Brewer regards CC as a provisional, prima facie argument in favor of conceptualism. It has been attacked
by several non-conceptualists. I shall focus on two such attacks, which I think are the most important.

Section B – Non-Conceptualist Objections and Conceptualist Replies

The first is championed by Richard Heck, among others, and is summarized in Brewer's essay. Heck's argument, in a nutshell, is that the Demonstrative Strategy (DS) fails to appreciate the fact that perceptual experiences explain why we possess the perceptual concepts we do. It is because I experience that part of the waterfall as that shade of blue that I am capable of conceptualizing it as “that shade of blue.” To hold that the demonstrative concept is the content of the perceptual experience is to fall foul of the basic fact that we get concepts from experience (Brewer 221). To put the point slightly differently, our experiences cause our concepts. We would not have our concepts, demonstrative or otherwise, without experience. There must be, Heck infers, some temporal gap between the experience itself and the acquisition of the concept that the experience occasions.

Brewer offers a neat rebuttal of Heck's criticism of DS. The demonstrative concept, he maintains, constitutes the perceptual experience and is not caused by it. Perhaps, if it were caused by it, DS would be defective for the reason Heck mentions. But it is not as if, gazing down at the waterfall, I experience that shade of blue first and then, after some time elapses (how much time, anyway?), I experience that shade of blue as “that shade of blue.” Rather, as Brewer explains, my perceptual experience of that shade just is “entertaining a content in which the demonstrative concept [“that shade”] figures as a constituent” (Brewer 222). So, in a manner of speaking, Heck is right that experience explains concept-possession. Although it is not the case that I conceptualize that shade as “that shade” after I experience it, I do acquire the demonstrative concept because I experience that shade: had I not experienced it, I would not have acquired the concept.
The second criticism of DS is that demonstrative phrases like "that shade of blue," "this volume of water," and "those shapes over there" do not express genuine concepts. This criticism does not require a defense of a theory of concept-possession, only the identification of a constraint on concept-possession. The operative constraint has come to be known as the re-identification requirement (RR). Brewer outlines the criticism and proposes a solution. In my view, Philippe Chuard’s solution is more satisfactory than Brewer’s. For that reason, I will be guided by Chuard’s critical discussion of the Re-identification Objection (RO) and reproduce his solution.

Chuard provides a schematic presentation of Sean Kelly’s argument for RO. Due to the fineness of grain of perceptual experience, subjects cannot always re-identify the properties of their perceptual experiences. However, demonstratives do “instantiate” the re-identification condition; that is, if a subject possesses the demonstrative concept of a property P – "that shade of blue," for instance – then he can re-identify objects that have that property. It follows that (at least) some of the content of perceptual experience cannot be captured even by demonstratives. So, the Demonstrative Strategy fails as a response to the Fineness of Grain Argument, which means in turn that conceptualism is false (Chuarda 14).

Clearly, Kelly’s argument hinges crucially on his deployment of RR. To get a clearer sense of what the requirement amounts to, it will be useful to consider an adaptation of a thought-experiment that Chuard draws from Kelly.

Home Depot

One glorious afternoon, inspired by the pine outside my window, I decide to paint my study a dark green. Terribly excited, I hasten to the Home Depot. An elderly worker greets me at the door and directs me to the paint aisle. I browse around until I fix my sight on the green shades. I pick up several handfuls of color cards with different samples. The differences are very subtle, but each shade is slightly darker or lighter than every other. Some are too dark for my taste; some are too light. Finally, I find the perfect shade. But then, all of a sudden and as if to spite me, a gust of wind blows the cards out of my hands and
strews them on the floor! I scamper to retrieve them, but, despite my best efforts, I cannot re-identify the color that I previously identified as "that (marvelous) shade of green." Horrified, I leave Home Depot in tears.

Home Depot might lead one to reassess the intuition that RR is a genuine constraint on the possession of demonstrative concepts. While I could not re-identify the right shade, perhaps my initial experience of it was enough to give conceptualization a foothold. Kelly recognizes that an example like the foregoing might compel the conceptualist to reject RR as orthogonal to demonstrative concept-possession. He raises two challenges for the conceptualist: first, RR must be rejected in a principled manner, not *ad hoc*; second, alternative constraints on demonstrative concept-possession must be provided (14-15). Meeting these two challenges is tantamount to overcoming RO.

Chuard meets the first challenge by (a) distinguishing the characteristics of demonstratives from those of ordinary, or "standing," concepts like GREEN, ELECTRICITY, and TACO and by (b) differentiating four *kinds* of re-identification (17). Let us take (b) first.

Chuard distinguishes between *de re* and *de jure* re-identification, on the one hand, and synchronic and diachronic re-identification, on the other.

*De re* re-identification: A subject *de re* re-identifies a property of an object if (i) he identifies some object O (e.g., the color chip) as P (e.g., "that (marvelous) shade of green") in context A and (ii) some object O' as P in context B.

*De jure* re-identification: A subject *de jure* re-identifies a property of an object if (i), (ii), and (iii) he identifies P as the *same property* P in both contexts (16).

Furthermore, it suffices for *synchronic* re-identification that the subject identify two or more objects as P *at the same time*, whether *de re* or *de jure*. It is necessary for *diachronic* re-identification, however, that the subject identify two or more objects as P *at different times*, whether *de re* or *de jure* (17).

There are four possible combinations of these two distinctions. The problem with Kelly's argument is that it assumes *de jure* diachronic re-identification to be a necessary condition
of demonstrative concept-possession. He probably assumes this because standing concepts meet this condition. But why must demonstratives meet the same condition? A demonstrative concept is unlike a standing concept in several respects. (Here is where (a) comes in.) For one thing, it is "perception-dependent" insofar as it is caused by a single perception and is "context-dependent" insofar as it represents properties specific to a single perception (12; 23-26). What is more, it serves different functions (at least arguably): whereas a standing concept is operative in verbal communication between subjects, a demonstrative concept is more like a "disposable classificatory device," which there is no social "pressure" to remember (32-34). Thus, Kelly’s first challenge has been met. Because it is only a de jure diachronic re-identification constraint that demonstrative concepts do not meet, the fact that demonstratives are different from standing concepts in important respects means that an argument must be given for subjecting them to the same constraint.

The second challenge – that alternative constraints on demonstrative concept-possession must be provided – is met by specifying features of demonstrative concept-possession that are consistent with a subject’s failure to re-identify de jure diachronically instantiations of a given demonstrative concept. Chuard lists eight such conditions (34-36). Here are three of them.

Location constraint: If a subject forms a demonstrative concept C for a property P, then he is able to locate an instance of P in his perceptual field.

Attention constraint: If a subject forms a demonstrative concept C for a property P, then he is able to focus his attention on an instance of P in his perceptual field.

Discrimination constraint: If a subject forms a demonstrative concept C for a property P, then he is able to discriminate instances of P from non-instances of P.

Clearly, I meet these three conditions in Home Depot. It is precisely because I could locate the marvelous shade of green in my perceptual field, fix my attention on it, and discriminate it from other less marvelous shades that I wanted to buy it to paint my wall. These and other
constraints are sufficient to constitute the “alternatives” to RR, and specifically to the *de jure* diachronic interpretation of it. So, we have met both of Kelly’s challenges. As a consequence, we have undermined both criticisms of DS. But if DS prevails as a conceptualist strategy to resist AFO, then AFO diminishes in potency, which means in turn that CC survives.

To be sure, the debate between conceptualists and non-conceptualists is far from over. There are several other arguments for non-conceptualism that I have not considered.20 We might call CC the Master Argument; it justifies conceptualism, at least *prima facie*. By problematizing three non-conceptualist arguments, however, I also hope to have conferred additional merit on CC. However, imagine that our entire investigation has failed to justify conceptualism even *prima facie*. Someone who holds this view might find CC deeply suspect or think that the demonstrative concept is an irretrievably weak resource, unable in principle to countenance the richness of our experience of the world. Non-conceptualism would still carry a very heavy burden. Perhaps the primary reason why non-conceptualism is difficult to accept – and even to understand – is that it is unclear what non-conceptual content could possibly be. Comparatively speaking, it is clear what *conceptual* content is. As Brewer explains, it is the content of a possible judgment by the speaker whose mental state has the content in question (Brewer 217). More than one account of non-conceptual content has been given, but these accounts are obscure and highly controversial. In light of this serious barrier to accepting non-conceptualism about perceptual experience, and also in light of the relative success of conceptualism in the foregoing dialectic, there ought to be a solid presumption in favor of conceptualism.

Section C – Taking Stock

What has been the purpose of exploring part of the ongoing debate between conceptualists and non-conceptualists about perceptual experience? Recall how Part II began. Jacobson hopes to overturn Williams’ theoretical diagnosis of skepticism by driving a wedge between the concept of an external object and epistemological realism. To that end, he substitutes Thesis* for Thesis**, that is, he redefines an external, or mind-independent, object as an object that can exist independently of perceptual experience. If perceptual experience is a non-epistemic category, then *ipso facto* Thesis** does not presuppose epistemological realism. On the other hand, as I clarified in the Introduction, if perceptual experience is an epistemic category, then it does presuppose epistemological realism. For this reason, Jacobson must (and does) regard Thesis** as wholly detached from epistemic considerations. So, it has been important to interrogate the idea that the category of perceptual experience is non-epistemic.

I have argued that conceptualism is true, or likely true. It follows that perceptual experience is epistemic. The entailment is straightforward. The only kind of thing that can be conceptual is a proposition. But propositions, by their very nature, admit of justificatory status. This is because of their function of representing the world as it is, of “correctly registering how things are,” as Brewer puts it (at least in the case of perceptually-based propositions, etc.) (Brewer 220). But if correctly registering how things are is a function of a proposition, then they must either succeed or fail at it – that is, they must either be justified or unjustified. Perceptual experiences, then, are epistemic. Therefore, Thesis** presupposes epistemological realism; it is not essentially distinct from Thesis*. For that reason, the skepticism to which it leads can be dismissed.

**Part IV – Conclusion**

This thesis has argued that Williams’ theoretical diagnosis of skepticism survives Jacobson’s challenge. A theoretical diagnosis dismisses skepticism on the grounds that it presupposes, or
otherwise entails, controversial and expendable assumptions about our epistemic lives. In particular, Williams contends that Stroud’s argument for external world skepticism presupposes epistemological realism. Stroud’s objects of theory are beliefs about the external world. But such beliefs are unified via epistemological realism. The “external” is juxtaposed against the internal; and the basis of the juxtaposition is the epistemic priority of beliefs about the latter relative to beliefs about the former. Beliefs about the internal, our own sense-experiential states, are epistemically “privileged”; beliefs about the external, the world not immediately accessible to us, are epistemically “problematic.” But Williams insists that justification does not work this way; epistemological realism turns a blind eye to the phenomenology of our epistemic activity. Justification is a context-sensitive phenomenon. A belief B does not possess an epistemic status S across all (possible) contexts and in virtue of highly abstract features of its content. So, if Stroud’s argument presupposes that justification does work this way, then it is unpersuasive. Jacobson hopes to rescue skepticism by driving a wedge between the concept of externality, or of an external object and epistemological realism. He maintains that an external object is an object that can exist independently of perceptual experiences. Given that perceptual experience is not essentially epistemic, he says, the theoretical integrity of the traditional epistemologist’s objects of theory does not depend on a dubious theory about the nature of knowledge and justification. However, I argue in Part III that conceptualism about perceptual experience is true, or likely true. If so, then perceptual experience is an epistemic category. As an epistemic category, it presupposes epistemological realism in particular. Jacobson’s objection does not withstand scrutiny. Williams’ theoretical diagnosis prevails. As I said in the Introduction, if Williams’ reply to the skeptic succeeds, then the seemingly insoluble skeptical problem of the external world has been solved. That is a remarkable accomplishment.


