

STROUD, SKEPTICISM, AND KNOWLEDGE-CLAIMS¹

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1 Introduction

We have had Professor Barry Stroud's immensely influential book on *The significance of philosophical skepticism* ('SPS' henceforth) for more than three decades now, and it remains one of the most revered sources for its topic. In that book, Stroud reminded the community that much in the literature aimed at silencing the challenge posed by Descartes's first 'meditation' amounted to little more than ineffective epistemological bravado. The reminder in SPS was not meant to be an endorsement of the skeptical voice in Descartes's work. It was just meant to show that the news of the demise of what we've (improperly) called 'Cartesian skepticism' had been greatly exaggerated in the literature on the issue. Stroud's lesson hasn't been forgotten. Very few authors have influenced our understanding of Cartesian skepticism as deeply as Stroud has. I'm one of those who are happy to acknowledge their debt to his venerable work. And I'm in great company. Just recently, John Turri (2014) suggested that Stroud's formulation of the Cartesian challenge in SPS, chapter 1, may be the best we have had. For Duncan Pritchard (2016, p. 191), it is 'a seminal contemporary discussion' of the problem. Anthony Brueckner (2010a, p. 1) has called Stroud's portrayal of Cartesian skepticism 'magisterial'. John Greco (2008, p. 113) has described it as the strongest influence on his understanding of the argument in that first meditation. And Stephen Hetherington (2002, p. 84-5) has also added to the praise lavished on that chapter in SPS. Even among those who'd be inclined to think that SPS overestimates the Cartesian threat, we'd be hard-pressed to find an author who disagrees about its impact. And yet, on close inspection, I think there is room for dissatisfaction with Stroud's work on that front. There is, I

¹ An early version of this paper, under the title 'Stroud and Cartesian skepticism', was published in a volume edited by A. Bavaresco, J. Milone, A. Neiva, and J. Tauchen, *Filosofia na PUCRS: 40 anos do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Filosofia* (Porto Alegre, Brazil: Editora Fi/EDIPUCRS, 2014). I am indebted to the editor, Plínio Smith, for the opportunity to publish this substantially revised version here, and to Flávio Williges for the invitation to address Professor Stroud at the 2014 ANPOF conference, in Campos do Jordão, Brazil, for which that early version of the paper was written.

believe, an interesting lesson to be learned from a discussion of what bothers me in Stroud's account of Cartesian skepticism. So, I will set my admiration for his work aside for the moment, with a view to putting that perceived flaw under the microscope in what follows.

2 Cartesian skepticism and epistemic closure

In order to provide you with the context for my criticism, I must ask you to consider what Brueckner (1994), speaking for so many of us, has called 'the canonical form' of the skeptical argument in that first meditation.²

It is often claimed that, when properly set up, the Cartesian argument in the first meditation rests on no more than two epistemic principles, in addition, of course, to commonsensical observations about misleading evidence and to the view that knowledge is no less than justified true belief: an epistemic closure principle and what Brueckner, following Jonathan Vogel, has called the 'underdetermination principle'.³ It has also become *de rigueur* to note that some of the so-called 'epistemic closure principles' we find in the literature -- in the wake of Gettier's (1963) and Dretske's (1970) formulations -- are often, strictly speaking, not *closure* principles. As most memorably noted by Jonathan Kvanvig (2008), the language of 'closure' in the literature on Cartesian skepticism is often downright *abusive*, for being so clearly misleading, so clearly inadequate, either because the epistemic property in question is obviously not closed under *logical implication* (as opposed to *valid deduction*) or because the property mentioned in the antecedent of the conditionals expressing would-be closure principles is not even the property mentioned in their consequents.

Consider the simplest forms of closure principles for knowledge as they appear in SPS, chapter 1.⁴ A simple knowledge-closure principle is this:

KC: If S knows that P, and P logically implies Q, then S knows that Q.⁵

² He actually describes it as 'the canonical Cartesian skeptical argument'. While I can't fully agree with Brueckner's views on the canonical argument, the discrepancies in how we set it up are negligible for our purposes here. I should also note that my understanding of Cartesian skepticism is greatly indebted to Peter Klein's work on the issue. See Klein (1995), (2004), and (2015). But I don't mean to endorse Klein's neo-Moorean form of anti-skepticism. My dissatisfaction with Klein's analysis of Cartesian skepticism is explained in a contribution to a forthcoming Springer volume edited by Rodrigo Borges, Cherie Braden, and Branden Fitelson. An introduction to neo-Mooreanism is offered in de Almeida (forthcoming), where a striking feature of the view is highlighted.

³ In correspondence just before he passed away, Brueckner let me know that his former PhD supervisee Jonathan Vogel was his source for the label 'underdetermination principle'.

⁴ I don't mean to suggest that Stroud was unaware of the inadequacies mentioned in what follows. He certainly did notice some of them.

And the stronger principle of known-implication-closure, the more appealing of the two, is as follows:

KIC: If S knows that P, and S knows that P implies Q, then S knows that Q.

These two have been standard fare in the debate over Cartesian skepticism for the last 50 years (just about). Consider KC first. It certainly *looks* like a closure principle we might want to accept: a *bona fide* closure principle is a transmission principle, and any KC-assertor would ostensibly be claiming that knowledge is transmitted, by logical implication, from a case of knowledge to some other belief the content of which is logically implied by the content of the first belief. But then we get the familiar rant about objectionable idealization: Because we don't necessarily believe all the logical consequences of what we know, and assuming that knowledge is properly qualified belief, we don't obviously know that Q just because we know that P and it is a fact that P implies Q. So, we move on to KIC. It seems reasonable to require that we at least perceive the implication of Q by P in order to claim that logical implication extends our knowledge from a belief in the latter to a belief in the former.

But KIC, itself, does not seem fully realistic: If knowledge is properly qualified belief, then KIC should seem false, since we all grant that one may fail to form the belief that Q even when the antecedent of KIC is true. Which leads us to obscure, but very popular, principles such as the following one, according to which *something in knowledge* is transmitted by logical implication, whatever it may be exactly:

SIK: If S knows that P, and S knows that P implies Q, then S is *in a position to know* that Q.

And it is finally acknowledged in the literature that we have now bent the concept of closure out of shape. The SIK principle is not, properly speaking, a closure principle -- never mind its extreme obscurity. The property mentioned in its antecedent is not the property mentioned in its consequent.

But here comes the familiar move: The SIK principle is really just a layover on our way to the immensely appealing destination, a *deductive closure* principle:

⁵ As usual for this kind of philosophical context, I omit the elements that are obvious -- quantifiers, time indices and the necessity operator -- in order to keep the schemata as uncluttered as possible.

DC: If S knows that P, and knows that P implies Q, and validly deduces Q from P, then S knows that Q.⁶

DC is an appealing principle, no doubt, but it can't be all that there is to be said for the idea of infallible transmission of epistemic status in (non-occurrent) reasoning that one is *entitled to perform*. We have, on present showing, moved away from our original motivation: the idea that logical implication, *on its own*, transmits something of epistemic value other than truth. That idea is not accounted for by DC.

I don't mean to belabor a familiar point. There is clear indication that, when KC is first appealed to in SPS, Stroud is not unaware of its inadequacy; nor is he suggesting that a charitable reading of Descartes unavoidably makes use of that obviously false principle. Inadequate as it may be, the KC principle may still be useful in a schematic presentation of Cartesian skepticism. And this is exactly how we've been taught to put up with such an obvious case of oversimplification. So, let's look beyond this preliminary point to where the action is.

The interesting point to be made at this juncture is that anyone trying to give Descartes a fair hearing *should* acknowledge his commitment to the *weakest* principle of epistemic closure in this conceptual neighborhood: a *justification-closure* principle. For one like Descartes, who welcomes a notion of justification as necessary to a satisfactory explanation of knowledge, there is this principle for him to help himself to:

JC: If S is justified in believing that P, and P logically implies Q, then S is justified in believing that Q.

Here, the only qualification to be made is one having to do with the language of the principle. In JC, one's being 'justified in believing' amounts to one's 'having a justification' for believing, regardless of whether one *actually believes* the relevant consequence of P. JC is a principle of *epistemic entitlement*. To many of us, it's *the* principle of choice for a discussion of skeptical arguments and of much that we care about in inferential knowledge. And it should also be noted that JC is not an evidentialist principle. If there is such a thing as an externalist conception of justification -- as so many, following Alvin Goldman (1979), have thought there is -- externalists are welcome to help themselves to a principle like JC.

⁶ One might reasonably wonder if there must be propositional knowledge of the implication of Q by P in order for DC to look satisfactory -- as opposed to merely requiring that Q be validly deduced from P. I won't press the objection here. I discuss closure principles in a forthcoming contribution to a volume edited by Stephen Hetherington for Cambridge University Press.

This is where I submit that we are now in a position to concentrate on my complaint about Stroud's account of Cartesian skepticism.

With JC in hand, we move on to what I regard as the strongest case to be made for the argument of the first meditation. Had Descartes looked at his skeptical argument from our vantage point, he might have schematically set it up in the form of the following familiar *modus tollens*:

1. If S is justified in believing that P (for any P describing an 'external-world' state of affairs), S is justified in believing that not-SH (the negation of a skeptical hypothesis that is incompatible with P).

2. But S is not justified in believing that not-SH.

3. Therefore, S is not justified in believing that P.

Premise 1 is an instance of JC (once we have assumed that P implies not-SH, either logically or nomically). We know some of us, most notably those following either Dretske (1970) or Nozick (1981), have targeted JC as one of the grand illusions in the history of epistemological thought about inferential knowledge.⁷ That polemic won't matter for present purposes. All that matters here, in this regard, is that JC should seem unassailable, which is, of course, the majority view in the matter.

We have also been taught that JC cannot do the skeptic's work on its own. The skeptic anticipates resistance to premise 2. Resistance to premise 2 is supposed to be defeated by a clever deployment of the following 'underdetermination principle':

UP: A body of evidence E justifies your belief that P *only if* E justifies you in believing the negation of any proposition that is incompatible (whatever the relevant modality) with the proposition that P.⁸

On the basis of UP, the skeptic might argue for premise 2 as follows.

The first premise in the sub-argument for premise 2 might look like the following conditional:

1a. If your evidence for believing that P is not evidence for the belief that not-SH (that is, not evidence against a hypothesis that is incompatible with the

⁷ A case against both justification- and knowledge-closure that is neither Dretskean nor Nozickian is put forward in de Almeida (2012). The paper also offers my view on how closure-failure affects Cartesian skepticism.

⁸ This is close to Brueckner's formulation of the principle. See Brueckner (1994) and (2010).

proposition that P), SH is arbitrarily deemed false (or improperly 'eliminated', or improperly disregarded).

Premise 1a is sustained by UP. A moment's reflection should convince you that we tacitly apply UP in everyday judgments about what is good evidence for what. For instance, I believe that I am in Brazil right now. Obviously, my being in Brazil (or my being where Brazil is in the actual world) is incompatible -- in this case, nomically incompatible -- with my being in Singapore (or with my being where Singapore actually is). So, naturally, anything that is regarded as good evidence for believing that I am in Brazil *must be* regarded as good evidence for believing that I am not in Singapore. For instance, my looking out the window and seeing the Porto Alegre street where I live would normally be regarded as good evidence for believing that I am in Brazil.⁹ But that's just because what counts as good evidence for believing that I am in Brazil on this given occasion also counts as good evidence for believing that I am not in Singapore (if the competing hypotheses concerning my whereabouts are confined to just Brazil and Singapore). Like JC, UP seems unassailable.¹⁰

Given an acceptance of UP, the argument for premise 2 in the skeptical *modus tollens* might proceed as follows:

2a. Your evidence for believing that P is not evidence for the belief that not-SH (because, if you were in an SH scenario, you would still, but then falsely, believe that P).¹¹

3a. Therefore, SH is arbitrarily deemed false. [from 1a and 2a by *modus ponens*]

4. But, if SH is arbitrarily deemed false, you're not justified in believing that not-SH.

5. So, you're not justified in believing that not-SH. [from 3a and 4 by *modus ponens*]

And, here, line 5 just is that premise 2 in the skeptical *modus tollens*.

⁹ The philosopher might, of course, want to describe my evidence in different, more 'cautious' language, possibly involving reference to my sense data on this given occasion and to episodes of inference to the best explanation. But we're now interested in how the non-philosophical folk would ordinarily talk about evidence.

¹⁰ I'd be remiss if I didn't note that I'm one of those for whom UP is the only unassailable principle of the two.

¹¹ I elaborate on the parenthetical remark in what follows.

It should be clear that the skeptical rationale for premise 2a is not fully displayed in the above schematic presentation of the sub-argument for premise 2. The dialectic employing, for instance, a dream-hypothesis expects it to be obvious to you that, if you were *only dreaming* that P, you would still, but then falsely, believe that P. To JC and UP, we need only add a misleading-evidence hypothesis, something like the claim that what one experiences in a vivid dream is qualitatively indistinguishable, to the doxastic agent, from what one experiences in one's waking moments. A dream-hypothesis is, to my mind, rightly chosen by Stroud as the hypothesis that best motivates the Cartesian deployment of UP. But there are the other familiar hypotheses concerning misleading evidence that might have been chosen for the job, such as one's being fed misleading evidence in demon worlds, brain-in-vat worlds, etc.

We may, of course, want to tweak the language of the skeptical sub-argument for premise 2 in a number of ways. But I trust we have seen enough to understand the appeal of the skeptical *modus tollens*.

3 Knowledge-claims and level confusions

Stroud brilliantly describes the skeptical conclusion of the first meditation as follows, in a passage in SPS that must rank with the most charming, most literary ever written on the subject.

I have described Descartes's sceptical conclusion as implying that we are permanently sealed off from a world we can never reach. We are restricted to the passing show on the veil of perception, with no possibility of extending our knowledge to the world beyond. We are confined to appearances we can never know to match or to deviate from the imperceptible reality that is forever denied us (STROUD, 1984, p. 33-34).

This is one of the passages in SPS where Stroud most vividly describes the skeptical conclusion *he thought he saw* in the first Cartesian meditation, and where he also claims that *it is the conclusion he has established, in his own way, on Descartes's behalf*. It is, however, as we shall now see, highly doubtful that Stroud succeeds in the latter task, the task of establishing, on Descartes's behalf, the skeptical conclusion that he thought he saw at the end of the first meditation. Notice, I will not be questioning whether Stroud aimed at the right target. No, I have no doubt that he did aim at the

right target. What I will be questioning here is whether, in what may well be the most influential stretch of text in his published body of work, chapter 1 in SPS, he did hit the right target.¹²

Consider the *modus tollens* Stroud most clearly puts under the spotlight in SPS, chapter 1:

- 1b. If S knows that P, then S knows that not-SH.
- 2b. But S does not know that not-SH.
- 3b. Therefore, S does not know that P.

Let us focus on this *modus tollens* and call it 'the argument from KC'. Never mind the fact that Stroud will eventually question the tenability of premise 1b, which is based on our principle KC, in this schematic representation of the Cartesian argument. He will eventually, in that chapter 1, suggest that a version of KIC might be more tenable than KC. That will not matter to our concerns here. What will matter is (a) whether Stroud's ostensible case for the premises in the argument from KC is, indeed, a case for *those very same premises*, as opposed to some other, stronger premises, and (b) whether his case for what he takes to be the Cartesian premises implies that very same conclusion we find in the argument from KC. To both (a) and (b), I say 'no'.

But, here, I see one last preliminary hurdle. It may seem that issues (a) and (b) might concern a case of infidelity to the historical Descartes. Nothing could be farther from my thoughts! To my mind, Stroud is as faithful to the letter of the first meditation as anyone can be.¹³ If the skeptical argument that emerges from chapter 1 in SPS is not as exciting as a Cartesian argument can be -- that is to say, not as exciting as the Cartesian elements for skepticism would have allowed the argument in that meditation to have been -- Descartes may have to take some of the blame for it, of course. But this is cold comfort to Stroud. My contention here is that, at a minimum, we are now in a position to do a better job on Descartes's behalf than the one we have received from Stroud, even after the knowledge-closure issue is brushed aside. Cartesian skepticism is just not as well-served by SPS, chapter 1, as it can be nowadays, considering the tools of the epistemology trade at our disposal -- maybe

¹² As evidence of its immense popularity, notice that chapter 1 in SPS is included in one of the most successful collections for the study of contemporary epistemology, the Sosa *et al.* (2008) volume.

¹³ Or, to be more precise, in any case, it is not my business here to question the quality of chapter 1 in SPS as a piece of exegesis.

not even as well-served as it could have been back when SPS was published (though I can't be sure that this historical claim is fair to Stroud).¹⁴

In order to see my objection, I'll expect you to keep in mind the following simple point about what people *should* mean (or understand) when they use the language of 'knowledge-claims'. If you 'make the claim' that P -- that is, if you *assert* that P -- and all goes as well as it can go in the circumstances, then your claim manifests your knowledge that P. For instance, if I claim that I am in Brazil right now, and all goes well, then I know I am in Brazil right now. My claim that P expresses my knowledge that P when all goes as well as we can possibly imagine.¹⁵ But, accordingly, if I claim *to know* that P, and all goes well, then I know that I know that P. So, for instance, if I claim that *I know* I am in Brazil, and all goes well, then I let you know that I am in Brazil *and know it* -- that is to say, not only am I in Brazil; I have also imparted the information that my belief that I am in Brazil is a case of knowledge. You may *infer*, from what I have claimed, that, if all has gone well, I am in Brazil, and you most likely will, but it remains that what I have *claimed* is much

¹⁴ For an introductory discussion implying that chapter 1 in SPS is every bit as successful as many have, for the last thirty-plus years, thought it is, see Turri (2014, p. 1-5). He introduces his reader to Stroud's chapter 1 with the question: 'The best case for skepticism about the external world?', and, to my mind, clearly lets his reader believe that Stroud's case for Cartesian skepticism is, indeed, as good as they come.

¹⁵ For an influential source for the view that, if S asserts that P and all goes well, S knows that P, see Williamson (2000), chapter 11. Williamson's formulation of a 'knowledge norm' of assertion has been vigorously opposed in the literature. Critics such as Jessica Brown (2008), Jonathan Kvanvig (2009), and Jennifer Lackey (2007) essentially complain that Williamson's knowledge norm is too strong, having been put forward as a 'constitutive' norm of epistemically proper assertion on analogy with the rules that govern acceptable, legal moves in competitive sports, games, and other rule-governed activities in which rule-breaking behavior counts as opting out of the activity. (Compare: You wouldn't describe a person who behaves as a chess player, except for the fact that she moves a bishop as if it were a knight, as a 'bad chess player'. You wouldn't regard her as being a chess player at all while s/he makes those wacky moves with the bishop. Maybe she's a comedian; maybe she is insane; but she's definitely not playing bad chess!) This is not the place for a review of that literature, but I should note that my formulation of a knowledge norm of assertion here is *much weaker* than Williamson's. To my mind, none of the points leveled against his proposal tells against this claim: An act of assertion that P (at a time t) is *epistemically beyond reproach* only if the asserter knows that P (at t). But this speaks only of *epistemically optimal* assertion. In contrast with Williamson's case for a knowledge norm, it allows for epistemically sub-optimal assertion. There should be no doubt that a liar, for instance, is making an assertion when her assertion that P is insincere, since s/he'll be doing what traditionally counts as an act of assertion: s/he'll be representing herself publicly as knowing that P. Clearly, however, the liar's assertion is not epistemically optimal. (In contrast with the wacky would-be chess player, the liar is a fully *legal* player in the 'game' of assertion, which accounts for the eventual success of a lie.) You'd react to evidence that s/he has lied to you by discounting her testimony. Analogous considerations would lead you to discount testimony from any asserter whom you take to be less than a knower. I should also add that assertion expressing Gettierized belief does not pose a problem for a knowledge norm as I construe it, but I don't have the space to discuss the issue any further here.

stronger than what I'd have claimed if all I wanted to impart is the information that I am in Brazil. What I assert is ostensibly about my epistemic position with regard to the fact that I am in Brazil. In both cases, only if I make a true assertion can you have inferential knowledge that I am in Brazil. But, obviously, the truth of the weaker assertion -- that I am in Brazil -- is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of the truth of the second, stronger assertion. I could be in Brazil without knowing it. And, more to the point, I could be in Brazil *and know it*, but have no higher-order belief as to whether I know it. But, when I claim that I know I'm in Brazil and all goes well, then, not only do I have a true second-order belief about my first-order belief that I am in Brazil, I *know* I have first-order knowledge concerning my whereabouts, and I express my second-order knowledge when I make the knowledge-claim. To recap: If I merely claim that I am in Brazil, and all that can go well regarding my claim does go well, I know that I am. But, when I claim that I know I am in Brazil, and all goes well, I know that I know I am. If true, knowledge-claims impart second-order knowledge.

Maybe the best lesson we have had on the pitfalls of failing to see the distinction we have just seen can be found in William Alston's paper on 'Level confusions in epistemology' (Alston, 1980), published a few years before SPS appeared in print. If we carry Alston's lesson in mind as we read SPS, we find that Stroud's presentation of the Cartesian case for skepticism about empirical knowledge is marred by 'level confusions'.¹⁶ Such level confusions greatly weaken the case for skepticism. As a result, it seems fair to say that, from our vantage point, his presentation of the Cartesian case for skepticism is just not the most *charitable* reading one can make of that first meditation. Stroud aimed at delivering the most stunning case one can make for the argument from KC. That is not, however, what he winds up delivering in SPS, chapter 1. Yes, again, he may well have been entirely faithful to the *historical* Descartes. But some of us care less about the historical Descartes than we do about the strongest possible case that can be made for *Cartesian* skepticism. Some of us want to know, first and foremost, if that problem is still alive under the piles of epistemology that have been produced to bury it.

¹⁶ Ironically, Alston's discussion of Cartesian skepticism in that paper is seriously misleading. He sets up an obviously invalid skeptical argument and falsely claims that it is representative of Cartesian skepticism. I regret not having the space to discuss that aspect of his paper here. But the important point for present purposes is simply that his 1980 paper has kept us on our toes as regards the all-important avoidance of level confusions in epistemology.

In order to substantiate the charge, I will, in what follows, display a number of passages from that first chapter in SPS where the level confusions are relatively easy to spot, now that you have been alerted to the problem.

Notice how an important aspect of Cartesian skepticism is laced with a level confusion in the following passage.

[Descartes] realizes that if everything he can ever learn about what is happening in the world around him comes to him through the senses, but he cannot tell by means of the senses whether or not he is dreaming, then all the sensory experiences he is having are compatible with his merely dreaming of a world around him while in fact that world is very different from the way he takes it to be. That is why he thinks he must find some way *to tell that he is not dreaming*. (STROUD, 1984, p. 12, emphasis added.)

According to Stroud, Descartes is trying to find a way to *establish that he is not dreaming*. Presumably, that is a necessary condition for him to establish that his beliefs about his external-world environment are true. But, notice, if successful, Descartes would have established that his first-order belief that he is sitting by the fire is a case of *knowledge*, as opposed to a case of false belief caused by misleading evidence. He would then *know that he knows*. Wouldn't that be the upshot of a successful attempt to establish that he does have the means to 'tell that he is not dreaming'? Maybe he does know that he is sitting by the fire. That is not the problem we are led to consider on Stroud's account. The problem we are enjoined to consider here is whether he can *tell that he knows he is*. On this picture of the epistemic situation, Descartes has a clear and interesting problem: the problem of whether he can tell -- the problem of whether he has the epistemic right to believe -- that he knows. Exciting as the higher-order issue may be, it's most definitely not the problem posed by the argument from KC.

Am I making too much of a minor verbal slip? No, I'm afraid I'm not. We're way beyond verbal slips here! Consider the following passage:

The Cartesian argument presents a challenge to our knowledge, and the problem of our knowledge of the external world is to show how that challenge can be met. [...] I have described it as that of showing or explaining how knowledge of the world around us is possible by means of the senses. (STROUD, 1984, p. 13)

Is 'the problem of our knowledge of the external world' that of *showing or explaining* how knowledge of an external world is possible? What challenge is that? Combining the two previous excerpts (from SPS, pages 12 and 13 above), we clearly have it that the challenge is that of knowing that we know what we think we know. That, according to Stroud, is what needs explaining or showing.

But the charge is serious, and I'm not making it rest on just a couple of excerpts. Our discussion of the next set of excerpts will reveal how Stroud's understanding of the argument from KC is crippled by a level confusion.

Here's the heart of the matter: There is a subtle fallacy being gestated in chapter 1 in SPS. Premise 1b in the argument from KC has it that a necessary condition of my knowing that P is my knowing that not-SH. Taking it literally, knowledge of, say, the fact that I'm in Brazil -- knowledge that I would express by claiming that I am in Brazil -- would require my *knowing* that every hypothesis that's incompatible with my being in Brazil does not obtain. But, of course, the hypotheses that are incompatible with my belief about my location are infinite in number. Can I even entertain those infinite hypotheses? Obviously not. So, if it's fallacious to make an argument rest on the obviously false KC, it's *obviously* fallacious to do so. In any case, as we ostensibly get started with KC and look for a more charitable reading of Descartes's argument, we look for adjustments to avoid an obvious fallacy. That's what Stroud is ostensibly doing. Anyone reasoning from KC must agree with Stroud when he writes:

If he *were* dreaming Descartes would not know what he claims to know. Someone who is dreaming does not thereby know anything about the world around him even if the world around him happens to be just the way he dreams or believes it to be. So his dreaming *is* incompatible with his knowing. (STROUD, 1984, p. 26-27)

However, in order to avoid the obvious fallacy embodied in the argument from KC, Stroud tries to provide refuge for the Cartesian in the thought that maybe we need to eliminate only those competing hypotheses that we acknowledge in a given context:

As soon as we see that a certain possibility is incompatible with our knowing such-and-such, it is suggested we immediately recognize that it is a possibility that must be known not to obtain if we are to know the such-and-such in question. [...] Perhaps, in order to know something, p , I do not need to know the falsity of all those things that are incompatible with p , but it can seem that at least I must know the falsity of all those things that I *know* to be incompatible with p . (STROUD, 1984, p. 27-28)

This is the pro-KIC gambit, and we have permissively decided to stick with it. But the ground gets very slippery here. Once you follow Stroud along this path, you're bound to overlook the source of the *subtle* fallacy at the beginning of the next-to-last excerpt (from SPS, pages 26-27 above): 'If he *were* dreaming Descartes would not know what he claims to know.' Here's the source of the subtle fallacy (or its outcome): As Stroud sees it, Descartes's problem is that of *justifying a knowledge-claim*. As we follow Stroud's account, we keep our eyes where the spotlight goes, so to speak. And the spotlight is firmly placed on the argument from KC. But look at the lesson Stroud fallaciously draws from the argument from KC: the lesson according to which Descartes cannot know that his belief that he is sitting by the fire is a case of knowledge – the impossibility stemming from the fact that, in view of how a belief in an external world is epistemically underdetermined by the available evidence, any *knowledge-claim* regarding knowledge of an external world must remain unjustified.

Now, consider the following passage in SPS, chapter 1, where the subtle fallacy is masked, as it were, by the emphasis placed on the argument from KC:

Those possibilities were all such that if they obtained I did not know *what I claimed to know*, and they had to be known not to obtain in order for the original *knowledge-claim* to be true. [...] If, in order to know something, we must rule out a possibility which is known to be incompatible with our knowing it, Descartes is perfectly right to insist that he must know that he is not dreaming if he is to know that he is sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in his hand. (STROUD, 1984, p. 26-30, emphasis added.)

Notice how the appeal to KC masks a fallacy: From the fact that you must know that you are not dreaming in order to know that you're sitting by the fire, it most definitely does not follow that you are entitled to make any knowledge-claim

whatsoever! Recall: If you claim that you know that P, and all goes well, then your claim manifests your knowledge that you know that P, *not just your knowledge that P*. In order merely to establish that you know that P, we only require that all go well when you claim that P. But that you know that P whenever you know that you know that P is something that is still a small inferential step away (through the assumption that knowledge is factive). To know that P, you do not need to deploy the concept of knowledge in your thoughts. To know that you know, you do.

And, here, I think we have, at last, found *conclusive* evidence for a level-confusion charge against Stroud's account of the argument of the first meditation. He takes that argument as expressing Descartes's problem of having a justified belief that he, Descartes, knows he is sitting by the fire. The Cartesian inquiry, according to Stroud, can succeed only if Descartes is justified in believing that his belief that he is sitting by the fire is a case of knowledge. Can Descartes know that he knows that he is sitting by the fire (as opposed to only dreaming that he is so sitting)? Only an affirmative answer that survives philosophical scrutiny will give us relief from Cartesian doubt – according to Stroud. Notice how he concludes that, in order to find relief from skeptical doubt, Descartes must be in an epistemic position to rule out a dream-hypothesis that is incompatible with his *knowledge-claim*. *He*, the doxastic agent, must do the ruling out of skeptical hypotheses. Naturally, one most clearly does the ruling out when one successfully determines that one does know after all, when one establishes to one's satisfaction that the skeptical hypotheses are false. Once the desired ruling out takes place, you know that you know. This should be contrasted with the view that Descartes cannot know that he is sitting by the fire because his *evidence* cannot 'rule out' – *the evidence*, itself, would not allow anybody to rule out – the hypothesis that he is merely dreaming that he is sitting by the fire, regardless of whether he ever considered what it takes to know that he is sitting by the fire on the basis of the evidence available to him. This is why the Cartesian elements for skepticism in the first meditation most forcefully impugn the idea that we can have *first-order* empirical knowledge, no matter how optimistic we may be in our non-philosophical moments.¹⁷

4 Concluding remarks

¹⁷ I use the expression 'first-order empirical knowledge' only to emphasize the contrast with second-order knowledge; not to suggest that some empirical knowledge may not be a case of first-order knowledge.

The Cartesian argument we started from, the argument in its 'canonical form', does not call for the justification of any knowledge-claim whatsoever. According to the hard-as-nails version of the Cartesian argument, the argument from JC, *and even according to the useful-but-clumsy argument from KC*, the problem is not just that you may not be able to know that you know. The Cartesian problem that still looms large in contemporary epistemology is the one according to which you cannot know anything concerning an external world that you might, in your higher-order thinking, expect to know. But no higher-order thinking is required from the would-be knower for her to be hit with Cartesian skepticism. If the skeptic is right, nobody knows anything whatever about an 'external world' -- regardless of whether the would-be knower is in the hazardous habit of making knowledge-claims or not. According to the most charitable construal of a Cartesian case for skepticism, there can be no empirical knowledge, period! You never even have the chance to mourn the loss of higher-order knowledge. That's the enduring challenge from the first meditation. Unfortunately, it is not a safe bet that the reader of SPS, chapter 1, will have learned that lesson exactly. But it is a safe bet that that's the lesson Stroud *meant* to give his reader.¹⁸

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¹⁸ In our exchange at the 2014 ANPOF conference, in Campos do Jordão, Brazil, Professor Stroud confirmed my hypothesis that, in SPS, chapter 1, he meant to convey the idea that Cartesian skepticism denies the possibility of *first-order* empirical knowledge. I'm grateful to him for his gracious reaction to my criticism on that occasion.

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