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ABSTRACTA
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EVANS AND FIRST PERSON AUTHORITY

Martin Francisco Fricke

Abstract

In *The Varieties of Reference*, Gareth Evans describes the acquisition of beliefs about one's beliefs in the following way: 'I get myself in a position to answer the question whether I believe that p by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether p .' In this paper I argue that Evans's remark can be used to explain first person authority if it is supplemented with the following consideration: Holding on to the content of a belief and 'prefixing' it with 'I believe that' is as easy as it is to hold on to the contents of one's thoughts when making an inference. We do not, usually, have the problem, in going, for example, from ' p ' and ' q ' to ' p and q ', that one of our thought contents gets corrupted. Self-ascription of belief by way of Evans's procedure is based on the same capacity to retain and re-deploy thought contents and therefore should enjoy a similar degree of authority. However, is Evans's description exhaustive of *all* authoritative self-ascription of belief? Christopher Peacocke has suggested that in addition to Evans's procedure there are two more relevant ways of self-ascribing belief. I argue that both methods can be subsumed under Evans's procedure.

In Chapter 7 of *The Varieties of Reference*, Gareth Evans discusses how we can acquire knowledge of what we believe and what we experience. His main concern is to show that such self-knowledge is not based on a form of perception, involving "an *inward* glance at the states and doings of something to which only the person himself has access".¹ By providing an alternative account, Evans aims to show that the self-ascription of mental states is compatible with his account of self-reference according to which we have to conceive of ourselves as persisting subjects, located in space and time, in order to be able to refer to ourselves. In this paper, I am not concerned with Evans's account of self-reference, although serious objections can be brought forward against it. Furthermore, I am not concerned with Evans's explanation of the self-ascription of experiences. Instead, I wish to discuss Evans's well-known remarks about the self-ascription of belief. Evans spends just two paragraphs on this topic; but it seems to me that they contain an important idea for the explanation of first person authority. In what follows I shall present the idea, show why it is

¹ Evans (1982: 225).

incomplete as an explanation of the authority in question and attempt to complement it so that the explanation is no longer incomplete.²

First person authority is that authority which we enjoy in beliefs about, and knowledge of, certain of our own mental states. We are generally less likely to be mistaken in these beliefs than we are in our beliefs about other people's mental states of the same kind. The mental states in question are beliefs, other propositional attitudes and certain sensations. The remark of Evans's that I wish to discuss here concerns just our knowledge of our own beliefs. However, if the explanation of our authority in this knowledge is correct, it might be possible to expand it to cover our authoritative knowledge of our other propositional attitudes as well.

In the *Varieties of Reference*, Evans describes the following procedure for acquiring beliefs about one's beliefs:

If someone asks me 'Do you think there is going to be a third world war?', I must attend, in answering him, to precisely the same outward phenomena as I would attend to if I were answering the question 'Will there be a third world war?' I get myself in a position to answer the question whether I believe that p by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether p .³

Evans thinks that if a subject is following this procedure for obtaining beliefs about his beliefs we can conclude two things: First, the subject is not gazing inwards at an internal state; he is not having a perception of a special kind of internal object. And second, applying this procedure, the subject will necessarily gain knowledge of his beliefs; a sceptic could not doubt that the subject's belief-ascription is correct. Since a similar procedure for ascribing beliefs is not available from the third-person point of view, we can say that, according to Evans, if a subject applies the procedure he describes, he will necessarily enjoy first person authority in his self-ascription of belief:

² Other recent accounts of first person authority that are inspired by Evans's remark include Moran (2001), Heal (2003) and Fernández (2003).

³ Evans (1982: 225).

If a judging subject applies this procedure, then necessarily he will gain knowledge of one of his own mental states: even the most determined sceptic cannot find here a gap in which to insert his knife.⁴

Is this a convincing argument? Why does this procedure entail first person authority? The thought behind the argument seems to be that the procedure is so simple that it cannot go wrong. It just involves what Evans at one point calls “the prefixing of a sentence ‘*p*’ with ‘I believe that’”.⁵ The subject thinks “*p*” and now all she has to do is to proceed to “I believe that *p*”. The judgment “I believe that *p*” will always be correct because it is based upon the prior thought “*p*”, which is an expression of the belief which the second-order judgment ascribes. All the subject has to do in going from “*p*” to “I believe that *p*” is to retain the content (or thought) “*p*”.⁶ It seems difficult for “even the most determined sceptic” to argue that in following this procedure the subject could get her belief-ascription wrong.⁷

However, here we should look a bit closer. To say that it is *difficult* to get this procedure wrong is not to say that it is *impossible* and that knowledge obtained by applying this procedure is *infallible*, as Evans seems to suggest.⁸ It seems that the procedure could go wrong in the following way: the subject thinks “*p*” and now tries to prefix this thought with the operator “I believe that”. But in trying to do so, somehow the original thought content “*p*” alters to “*q*” so that the resulting belief-ascription is “I believe that *q*”. So the subject proceeds from “*p*” to “I believe that *q*” rather than to “I believe that *p*”. In consequence her

⁴ Ibid.: 225.

⁵ Ibid.: 226 [footnote 36].

⁶ Christopher Peacocke argues that this is an instance of a “general explanatory principle about the role of concepts in the ascription of attitudes” (Peacocke (1996: 118)) – the “*Redeployment Claim*: The concepts (senses, modes of presentation) that feature in first-level thoughts not involving propositional attitudes are the very same concepts which feature in thoughts about the intentional content of someone’s propositional attitudes” (Peacocke (1996: 131)).

⁷ Evans also wants to “encapsulate this procedure for answering questions about what one believes in the following simple rule: whenever you are in a position to assert that *p*, you are *ipso facto* in a position to assert ‘I believe that *p*.’” (Evans (1982: 225f.)) To avoid circularity (knowing that *I* can assert that *p* is already knowing that I believe that *p*) it might be better to formulate impersonally: Whenever ‘*p*’ is assertable, so is ‘I believe that *p*’. This rule does not imply omniscience on the part of the believer (whenever somewhere something is assertable, I believe that it is the case) because it applies only to what the believer *herself* finds assertable. The fact that the believer *herself* finds ‘*p*’ assertable is a consequence of the fact that she *herself* applies the rule; it is not something that she has to know about (this would imply a circularity).

⁸ Cf. Evans (1982: 229), where he speaks of an “infallibility [...] which arises in the case of the self-ascription of belief”.

belief-ascription would be false.⁹ Is this unimaginable? It is perhaps difficult to imagine, but it does not seem impossible. So we might agree with Evans that the sceptic cannot doubt the truth of the subject's belief-ascription if Evans's procedure is applied *correctly* – but the sceptic does have room to doubt whether or not the subject does indeed apply the procedure correctly. If first person authority is to be explained – which, admittedly, is not among Evans's explicit aims – then it is not enough to say that the correct application of Evans's procedure necessarily leads to true belief-ascriptions. If there is a procedure for the acquisition of some knowledge and if this procedure is applied correctly and in appropriate circumstances by some subject, then it is *always* necessary that the subject end up with knowledge. If we want to explain first person authority by appeal to the procedure through which we acquire beliefs about our own beliefs, we have to explain what makes this procedure special, why it is different from other procedures of knowledge-acquisition. One way to do this would be to try to make it plausible that it is easier correctly to follow the procedure for second-order belief-ascriptions than correctly to follow the procedures for the acquisition of other beliefs.

So are there any reasons for assuming that Evans's procedure for the acquisition of beliefs about one's beliefs is less prone to failure than other procedures of belief or knowledge-acquisition? It seems to me that there are such reasons. Evans's procedure requires the subject to go from the thought “p” to the thought “I believe that p” without on the way “corrupting” the thought content “p”. Such a “holding on” to thought contents while going from one thought to the next is in fact a very common phenomenon in our everyday reasoning. We think “p” at some point, and a bit later “q”, and yet a bit later “p and q”. In such an inference the thought contents “p” and “q” are preserved through time and “redeployed” at a later stage. I think “It's a hot day today”, but after entering the house and feeling the cold air inside I say, “It's such a hot day, but inside the house it's still cold”.

⁹ The ascription might turn out to be true because, as it happens, the subject also has a belief that q. Furthermore, Tom Stoneham suggests that a second-order belief such as “I believe that p” is *necessarily* true because it has at least all the commitments and consequences which characterise the belief that p. (Cf. Stoneham (1998).) In either case, the truth of the second-order belief is not due to an application of Evans's procedure. (I have argued elsewhere that even though Stoneham is probably right with his suggestion, this fact does not provide an adequate explanation of first person authority because it does not show how we get from a *prior* belief that p to an authoritative belief “I believe that p”. Cf. Fricke (2001: 164-9).

No one is surprised in such contexts that the speaker's thought contents are preserved in such reasoning. There is commonly no danger that the thought "It's a hot day today", on the way to forming a further belief, transforms into some other thought such as, say, "It *will be* a hot day *tomorrow*" so that the resulting thought might be "It will be such a hot day tomorrow, but inside the house it should still be cold." An example more directly related to Evans's procedure, involving a sentence-operator, would be this: Someone looks at a photograph and reports "There are three people, dressed in black tie and jumping off Magdalen Bridge." A minute later she tells someone else "*On that photo you can see that* there were three people, dressed in black tie and jumping off Magdalen Bridge." Again, if the time between the two statements and the associated thoughts is appropriately short no one will accept the idea that the retained thought might during the process of retention and incorporation into another thought change its content – e.g. so that the three men become five.

The phenomenon we are dealing with here is a form of memory – very short-term memory. If someone is to transform the thought "p" into "I believe that p", she has to remember or retain the original thought "p" in order to be successful. It would seem then that it should be no more surprising that we can follow Evans's procedure correctly and acquire true second-order beliefs through it than it is surprising that we can redeploy thought contents in new contexts such as the ones I have described. Second-order beliefs acquired through Evans's procedure should be as authoritative as we are in redeploying the thought content "p" in a new thought of the form "p and q". This is, I think, a pretty high degree of authority and one which is higher than that of most other beliefs we form. We often have reason to wonder whether we made a mistake in the acquisition of our ordinary perceptual beliefs. But we hardly ever wonder whether we have correctly redeployed a thought content in a later (perhaps more complex) thought. *Retention* of thought contents is easier than *perception* of the world. It follows that second-order beliefs which are acquired through retention of thought contents as Evans's procedure describes it are more authoritative than second-order beliefs which are acquired through perception.

My explanation of first person authority, then, is this. Those second-order beliefs in which we enjoy such authority are based on the first-order beliefs which they are about.

They are formed through a retention of the content of the first-order belief and an “embedding” of that content in a new belief of the form “I believe that p”. We might say that the retained thought content of the first-order belief is just “prefixed” with “I believe that”. This procedure of acquiring second-order beliefs yields more authoritative results than most other procedures for the acquisition of beliefs about the world because the correct redeployment of thought contents is easier than correct perception of the world.¹⁰

Three remarks remain to be made. First, my explanation of first person authority does not assume that the authority is infallible. If the explanation is correct then we are dealing with an authority that is higher than that of beliefs based on perception or inference. We do not have to make correct perceptions nor valid or strong inferences to apply Evans’s procedure, although we do have to be able to hold on to and redeploy thought contents. My claim is that this ability is more reliable than our ability to perceive truthfully or to make good inferences. (The ability is necessary, but not sufficient for making good inferences.) We might say that the authority is as strong as our rationality, for clearly a failure in our capacity for conceptual redeployment is a failure of rationality.¹¹

¹⁰ Here is an idea for generalising this explanation to knowledge of other propositional attitudes: I get myself into a position to answer the question whether I desire/hope/fear/doubt that p by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether it is desirable/to be hoped/to be feared/to be doubted that p. Assuming that a positive answer to the first-order question expresses my own attitude, we can form a correct second-order belief by exchanging the impersonal sentence-operator “It is desirable/to be hoped/to be feared/to be doubted” with the first-person operator “I desire/hope/fear/doubt that”, while retaining and redeploying the operated content. As in Evans’s procedure, we start with an impersonal question about the world and use the response that we find us with to answer a question about ourselves. But could there not be a divergence between what we believe *should* be desired/hoped/feared/doubted and what we *in fact* desire/hope/fear/doubt? It seems that such divergences frequently occur. To accommodate them within the suggested framework we would have to characterise them as failures of rationality of some kind. It seems to me that we would not only have to assume an incoherence between the subject’s beliefs of, say, “It is not to be feared that p” and “I fear that p” (first-order and second-order level), but also between “It is not to be feared that p” and “It is to be feared that p” (beliefs on the first-order level, in this case perhaps associated with different levels of coolheadedness or temporal distance to the occurrence of the fact that p). Knowledge of such propositional attitudes might also be associated with knowledge of one’s own sensations. I am not saying anything in this paper about how knowledge of one’s own sensations might be acquired and why it might be authoritative.

¹¹ There are several writers who argue, in different ways, that rationality requires first person authority, for example McGinn (1982), Shoemaker (1990), Burge (1996) and Moran (2001). My claim is not that rationality cannot exist without first person authority, but rather that a particular capacity needed for making inferences should also enable us to have authoritative knowledge of our own beliefs. However, I do not wish to argue that rationality necessarily requires the capacity to make inferences or to have the concept of belief.

Second, as Evans pointed out, mastery of his procedure for the acquisition of second-order beliefs “cannot constitute full understanding of the content of the judgement ‘I believe that *p*’”.¹² If a subject knows nothing else about the concept of believing, she will only have a “purely formal”¹³ understanding of the concept. For a full understanding it is required that the subject know that the concept could be applied to others than herself and that for such an application to be correct certain evidence must be given – a kind of evidence which also bears on the truth of her own self-ascriptions. In addition, the subject has to know that the judgment “I believe that *p*” might be true, although “*p*” is not. So the judgment does not have to be declared a mistake when “*p*” turns out not to be the case. However, as Evans remarks, “adding the background makes no difference to the method of self-ascription”.¹⁴ I have to know what a belief is in order to make a self-ascription of belief. But this is quite compatible with the claim that such ascriptions are based on a redeployment of the content of the belief to be ascribed. Adding the background just means adding the framework in which the content is to be redeployed.

Third, to evaluate the suggested explanation of first person authority we should ask whether *all* our authoritative second-order beliefs are acquired in the way described. If the explanation applies only to a limited range of cases, there will be some authoritative second-order beliefs whose authority requires a different explanation. So how universally is Evans’s procedure applied in the acquisition of our second-order beliefs? To start with, let me clarify that we are only asking how our authoritative beliefs about our own *beliefs* are formed. So first person authority in knowledge of other propositional attitudes or in knowledge of our own sensations is not under consideration. But do we acquire all authoritative beliefs about our own beliefs in the Evansian manner?¹⁵ Let me consider a

¹² Evans (1982: 226).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Up to this point my principal interest was in the question of what it is that confers special authority on Evans’s procedure. This does not mean, however, that I have only investigated how authoritative second-order beliefs *could* be acquired. Clearly, Evans’s original remark is intended to highlight how we actually *do* arrive at self-ascriptions of belief, not just how we could arrive at them. In this respect, the remark and my paper differ from the approach taken by Donald Davidson, who apparently claims that authoritative self-ascriptions of belief *could* be the result of an inference based on our knowledge of which utterances we hold true and what we mean by our own words (cf. Davidson (1984 and 1987)). Since I do not think that this is how we arrive at self-ascriptions of belief (the idea is phenomenologically inadequate) and since Davidson

possible challenge to this view. In an exchange with Tyler Burge, Christopher Peacocke has described three different ways in which self-ascriptions of propositional attitudes are made: First, the self-ascription might be based on an “intermediate conscious state”¹⁶ such as a memory which we take at face value. Peacocke’s example is that of someone who seems to remember that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo, takes this (apparent or real) memory at face value, and, on the basis of this conscious state, makes the first-person self-ascription “I believe that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo”.¹⁷ Second, the ascription might be based on an “underlying state”,¹⁸ which is similar to the intermediate state in the first case, only that it is not conscious. Peacocke mentions knowledge of “your name, your address, your phone number, your job”.¹⁹ Such knowledge can be self-ascribed, “I know that my phone number is xyz”, without having to be based on a conscious memory that the number is xyz. It is based on an underlying, unconscious state with the same content. Third, “the process leading up to the self-ascription is one of making up your mind”.²⁰ In this case, there is no pre-existing state. Rather, the self-ascriber forms the attitude, which she then self-ascribes, at the same time as making the self-ascription. This is Peacocke’s example:

When you are asked ‘Do you intend to go to next year’s Joint Session?’, you may be considering that question for the first time. You can answer the question by putting into operation whatever procedure you have for deciding whether to go to next year’s Joint Session, and answering ‘I do intend to go’ if and only if you do then decide to go.²¹

Peacocke’s formulation is, of course, analogous to Evans’s remark about the self-ascription of belief, and he says that his case “includes that in which you follow the procedure for self-ascription of belief described by Evans”.²²

It is not quite clear whether Peacocke regards those self-ascriptions which are based on underlying states as authoritative. But he explicitly includes self-ascriptions based on

himself does not say that this is how we actually do acquire our authoritative second-order beliefs, I shall not discuss his theory in this paper. (For a detailed discussion see Fricke (2007).)

¹⁶ Peacocke (1996: 120).

¹⁷ Cf. Peacocke (1996: 120).

¹⁸ Peacocke (1996: 121).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.: 121f.

²² Ibid.: 122.

conscious intermediate states among the “near-infallible” ones.²³ So if Peacocke is right we should complement the Evansian procedure at least with that one where the acquisition of the second-order belief is based on an intermediate conscious state, an apparent memory state, which is accepted at face value. Note that this complementation would not seem to affect the explanation of first person authority presented above. Suppose you seem to remember that *p* and take this memory at face value. All that is then needed to arrive at a correct self-ascription of belief is that you retain the content of your memory and redeploy it in a new belief of the form “I believe that *p*”. Why are we good at retaining and redeploying contents in this way? Again, it could be pointed out that this is no more surprising than the fact that we are able to draw simple inferences without corrupting our thought contents. Even where the self-ascription is based on an underlying, unconscious state, the basic mechanism of arriving at the self-ascription should be similar. The underlying state has a specific content and this content has to be retained and redeployed by the subject in order to make a correct self-ascription. So to the extent to which this “redeployment of first-order concepts and contents”²⁴ can be assimilated to that of which we are capable for example in simple inferences, we should also enjoy first person authority in self-ascriptions that are based on underlying states of belief.²⁵

Perhaps Peacocke’s two additional ways of acquiring knowledge about one’s own beliefs, viz. by way of an intermediate conscious state or based on an underlying state, can be construed as different versions of Evans’s procedure. The main distinction Peacocke draws between Evans’s procedure and the two other ways of self-ascribing belief seems to be that, on his view, the latter involves a process of “making up your mind”²⁶ about the first-order issue (“Is it true that *p*?”). The result of this process is then self-ascribed (“I

²³ Cf. Peacocke (1996: 147f.).

²⁴ Peacocke (1996: 121).

²⁵ Peacocke develops in some detail the idea that ascriptions of propositional attitudes redeploy the same concepts and contents as are used in the first-order states ascribed. In the paper cited, he defends this “Redeployment Claim” in the face of Fregean objections and develops some general consequences from it. In addition, he shows how the presumption of such redeployment helps us to explain, even within an externalist theory of mental content, the “near-infallibility of a thinker’s knowledge of the content of his conscious beliefs” (Peacocke (1996: 147)). But why are we good at retaining and redeploying contents in our self-ascriptions of belief and why are we better at it than at perceiving the world? My paper aims to present some ideas as to how this question, on which Peacocke remains silent, might be answered.

²⁶ Peacocke (1996: 121).

believe that p”). In this procedure, the first-order question is considered for the first time on the occasion of making the self-ascription. Peacocke’s two additional ways of self-ascribing beliefs, on the other hand, involve pre-existing states, either a memory state which is accepted at face value or an underlying unconscious state. However, it seems to me that Evans’s formulation – “putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether p”,²⁷ – does not necessarily mean dealing with, and answering, the question *for the first time*. It seems to me that such a procedure might well consist in consciously or unconsciously “reaching back” to an already existing belief. Evans’s point seems to be that, in self-ascriptions, we are not occupied with internal objects, which we identify as beliefs of a certain kind. If self-ascriptions of belief required such internal identifications, we could go wrong in determining the object in question as a belief or in determining the belief as the belief that p.²⁸ However, no such identification needs to be involved in consciously or unconsciously reaching back to existing beliefs. Asking myself whether p, I might come up with the answer, “Yes”, simply because I believe that p – neither because I have worked out the answer from *other* information, nor because I have *identified* an existing belief. I simply “find myself” with the answer. The answer might either be based directly on what Peacocke calls an underlying state, or it might be based directly on an intermediate memory state. If I then proceed to the self-ascription “I believe that p”, then it seems that I have followed Evans’s procedure. I have put into operation a procedure for answering whether p, which here involved reaching back to existing beliefs, and prefixed the answer with “I believe that”. So it seems to me that we should regard Peacocke’s account as a more detailed explication of the procedure Evans describes. Rather than specifying further procedures of self-ascribing beliefs in addition to Evans’s, Peacocke is illustrating in more detail the three ways in which Evans’s procedure might be put into practice by us.

Perhaps the point of Peacocke’s differentiation is that, ordinarily, we do not explicitly ask ourselves whether p before making the self-ascription “I believe that p”. Here Peacocke’s analysis might seem closer to the phenomenology of the acquisition of self-

²⁷ Evans (1982: 225).

²⁸ Cf. Evans (1982: 225): “There is no question of my applying a procedure for determining beliefs to *something*, and hence no question of my possibly applying the procedure to the wrong thing.”

knowledge. However, Evans's procedure does not have to be read as a phenomenological description. It is obvious that no-one explicitly uses a rule such as the one Evans gives for making self-ascriptions of belief. The point of Evans's procedure, as I suggest to read it, is to draw attention to the fact that to go from the belief that *p* to the belief that I believe that *p* only requires me to prefix an existing thought with "I believe that". This fact is quite independent of whether or not anyone explicitly answers, "Yes", to an internal question as to whether *p* and only then goes on to make the self-ascription "I believe that *p*".

Whatever the exact relation between Evans and Peacocke might be, the additional analysis gives some support to the claim that now we have captured the ways in which we acquire authoritative beliefs about our own beliefs quite *exhaustively*.²⁹ It is of course possible to observe oneself "from the outside", from a third-person perspective, and to ponder what beliefs one would ascribe to oneself from such a perspective. However, most people would agree that such ascriptions do not enjoy first person authority. They are just as prone to failure as ordinary third person ascriptions, although perhaps supported by a special wealth of information. Those ascriptions that do enjoy first person authority seem to be captured by Evans's explanation, which we might regard as further explicated by Peacocke's account. I think it follows that the explanation of first person authority which I have suggested can be extended to cover all relevant ways of second-order belief-acquisition. If a second-order belief is formed on the basis of a conscious memory or on the basis of an underlying state, the basic mechanism of forming this belief is the same as in the case where the first-order state is only acquired on this occasion. The content of the state has to be retained and redeployed in the new belief of the form "I believe that *p*". There seems to be no reason to assume that this redeployment is any more difficult than in the case previously considered. So if it is true that our authoritative second-order beliefs are obtained in the three ways which I have described, then they are obtained through the

²⁹ One challenge to this somewhat ambitious claim might come from Burge who asserts that there are "*cogito*-like judgments", such as "I am thinking that there are physical entities", which are "contextually self-verifying" (cf. Burge (1996: 92)). Burge thinks that understanding such judgments suffices for knowing that they are true. So no retention and redeployment of thought contents would seem to be required for making them. Whatever we think about this claim – it seems to me that, contrary to Burge, we are just dealing with a "philosophical curiosity" (cf. *ibid.*) – it is clear that most of our ordinary authoritative second-order beliefs are not contextually self-verifying.

retention and redeployment of the content of the first-order beliefs which they are about. There seem to be good reasons to assume that such retention and redeployment of contents is easier and more reliable than our ordinary perception of the world. It follows that the second-order beliefs which are based on it enjoy a special authority.³⁰

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³⁰ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Joint Session in Belfast in 2003 and I am grateful for a question by Crispin Wright on that occasion, although I am sure that my paper does not answer it. The main ideas of the paper also formed part of several other presentations and discussions in Oxford, Boston, Berlin, Mexico City and Merida. I would like to thank the audiences for their comments, among them John Bengson, Carlos Pereda, Galen Strawson and Timothy Williamson. I am also grateful for the comments made by an anonymous referee for *Abstracta*. Special thanks go to Paul Snowdon for very helpful discussions.

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NAGEL ON CONCEIVABILITY

Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract

In the sixth chapter of *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel aims to identify a form of idealism, to isolate the argument for it and to counter this argument. The position that Nagel takes to be idealist is that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us. In this paper, I show that Nagel has not made a convincing case against this position. I then present an alternative case. In light of this alternative case, we have reason to reject an important example that Nagel offers of a contemporary idealist, namely Donald Davidson.

1. In the sixth chapter of *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel draws our attention to a thesis that I shall refer to as the conceivability thesis. According to this thesis, what there is must be possibly conceivable by us. He claims that this thesis is a form of idealism and declares that a number of contemporary philosophers are idealists because they accept it (1986: 90). Nagel seeks to justify rejecting the thesis. First he presents what he takes to be the argument for it. Then he attempts to counter the argument. This paper has three aims. The first is to show that Nagel does not make a convincing case against the argument he uncovers for the conceivability thesis. The second is to show that there is an alternative case that he could have made. The third is to show that, in light of this alternative case, we have reason to reject an important example Nagel gives of a contemporary philosopher who is an idealist, namely Donald Davidson. Before pursuing these aims, I clarify the conceivability thesis.

2. There are at least two notions which are in need of clarification in order to understand the thesis that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us. One of these is the notion of 'us'. Who counts as one of us and who does not? The other notion in need of clarification is that of being possibly conceivable. Nagel contrasts being possibly conceivable by us with being actually conceived of by us and being currently conceivable by us. For instance, after briefly criticizing certain forms of idealism, he writes:

But the form of idealism with which I am concerned isn't based on this mistake: it is not the view that what there is must be actually conceived or even currently conceivable. Rather it is the position that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, or possibly something for which we could have evidence. (1986: 93)

But what does it mean to say that something is merely possibly conceivable by a person as opposed to actually conceived by them or currently conceivable by them? In this section I seek to clarify the notion of us and the notion of being possibly conceivable.

Let us begin with the notion of 'us'. Nagel does not define this notion, despite suggesting that a grasp of the criteria for counting someone as us is crucial for understanding the position he has in mind (1986: 90-1). However, while arguing against the conceivability thesis, he does clearly indicate that certain kinds of people are not to be counted as us. People with the permanent mental age of a nine-year-old are not us, for Nagel. His argument involves contrasting us with such people (1986: 95). According to Nagel, we can conceive things that they cannot conceive. Nagel also contrasts us with people he imagines whose mental faculties are superior to his to the extent that the gulf between them and him is comparable to that between him and people with a permanent mental age of nine (1986: 95). According to him, they might be able to conceive things that we cannot conceive. From these two contrasts, one might form the impression that a person only counts as one of us, for Nagel, if they have mental faculties that are not dramatically superior or inferior to his own. This is the understanding of 'us' that I shall work with in this paper. It may be that it is in need of refinement, though. It might not perfectly capture how Nagel uses the term 'us'. Nevertheless, it is adequate for the purposes of this paper.

Let us turn now to the notion of being possibly conceivable by a person. The distinction between being actually conceived by a particular person and being currently conceivable by that person is straightforward. Someone might not actually conceive that snow is falling in the vicinity. If they do not think that it is, then they do not actually conceive that it is. Nevertheless, they might have the ability to conceive that snow is falling in the vicinity. If so, then it is currently conceivable to them that snow is falling. What though does it mean for something to be possibly conceivable by a particular person? There

are certain things that a person might not at present have the ability to conceive yet might one day be able to conceive. For example, a person who has never seen snow before might not have the ability to conceive of snow falling. If they are one day shown snow falling and are taught to think of this happening as snow falling, they might then acquire this ability. It is part of our commonsense outlook that in the future a particular person might acquire the ability to conceive of certain things which they cannot currently conceive. Such things are not currently conceivable by the person but they are possibly conceivable by them. All the things that the person can already conceive are also possibly conceivable by the person; it is just that with these things the possibility is already realized.

In the quotation above, Nagel attempts to formulate the view that concerns him by writing not just of what must be possibly conceivable by us but also of what we could possibly have evidence for. However, prior to this point in the text, he discusses the view at length without doing this and it is not clear why he mentions possible evidence at all. I do not think he means to add anything significant. The position that Nagel focuses on is that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us. For understanding this thesis, it is important that the following point be kept in mind. If something can only be conceived by a being with mental faculties that are dramatically superior to our own, then it is not possibly conceivable by us. Perhaps a person who is currently one of us can undergo the kind of improvement which enables them to conceive of such a thing. But then they would not be one of us, on Nagel's understanding of 'us'. The conceivability thesis involves denying that there could be superior beings who are able to conceive things that beings with our mental faculties could never conceive.

3. Once Nagel has explained the position that concerns him, he makes an assertion about what an argument in favour of it must show:

An argument for this general form of idealism must show that the notion of what *cannot* be thought about by us or those like us makes no sense. (1986: 93, his emphasis)

The reason why Nagel thinks that such an argument would secure the conceivability thesis is as follows. The only seeming rival to this thesis is the view that there could be some things that are not possibly conceivable by us. This is a genuine rival view if it is intelligible. If it simply does not make sense, then it is not a genuine rival view. The view is only intelligible if there is an intelligible notion of what is not possibly conceivable by us. (In the quotation, Nagel writes of the notion of what cannot be thought about by us. More precisely, he means the notion of what is not possibly conceivable by us.) As such, an argument which shows that there is no intelligible notion of this kind provides us with a good reason to assert that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us. For the putative rival view, that there could be some things which are not possibly conceivably by us, is not a genuine option. Even if it appears at first to be an intelligible view, the argument reveals otherwise.

Nagel does not just assert that the conceivability thesis would be supported by an argument which shows that a certain notion does not make sense. He also asserts that it has to be argued for in this way. In the quotation above, he writes as if no other line of argument could ever justify it. I shall not contest this. What I wish to present in this section is the argument that Nagel ascribes to philosophers who endorse the conceivability thesis, before evaluating Nagel's response to it. Here is Nagel's statement of this argument:

The argument is this. If we try to make sense of the notion of what we could never conceive, we must use general ideas like that of something existing, or some circumstance obtaining, or something being the case, or something being true. We must suppose that there are aspects of reality to which these concepts that we *do* possess apply, but to which no other concepts that we *could* possess apply. To conceive simply that such things may exist is not to conceive of them adequately; and the realist would maintain that everything else about them might be inconceivable to us. The idealist reply is that our completely general ideas of what exists, or is the case, or is true, cannot reach any further than our more specific ideas of kinds of things that can exist, or be the case, or be true. (1986: 93-4, his emphasis)

Nagel depicts the justification for the conceivability thesis as hinging on the claim that there is the following entailment relation: if something can be correctly represented using at least one general concept of ours, this entails that every property of this thing can be

represented using only concepts that are within our grasp. To illustrate the thought of such a relation, suppose that a being has a concept that we do not have which is used to identify a type of thing that we have not encountered before, for instance a kind of animal. The being uses this concept to declare that an instance of this type of thing exists. In doing so, they represent the world in a way that uses at least one general concept of ours, namely the concept of existence. Let us suppose that the representation is correct. If so, something has been correctly represented using at least one general concept of ours. For Nagel's opponents, this entails that every property of the thing can be represented using only concepts that are within our grasp, that is, either concepts we currently have or concepts that we could one day acquire without undergoing a dramatic improvement in any of our mental faculties. On the basis of this supposed entailment relation, they claim that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us.

When Nagel explains the argument for the conceivability thesis, he does not present any case in favour of this supposed entailment relation. This point will play an important role in my evaluation of Nagel's response. Before moving onto this evaluation, here is the argument in steps.

- (1) The conceivability thesis is correct if and only if the following view does not make sense: there might be some things which are not possibly conceivable by us.
- (2) This view only makes sense if the notion of something which is not possibly conceivable by us makes sense.
- (3) This notion only makes sense if the following claim is true: if something can be correctly represented using at least one general concept of ours, it does not follow that all the properties of this thing can be correctly represented by using only concepts that are within our grasp.
- (4) But this claim is false. If something can be correctly represented by using at least one general concept of ours, it follows that all the properties of this thing can be correctly represented by using only concepts that are within our grasp.

From (3) and (4):

(5) The notion of something which is not possibly conceivable by us does not make sense.

From (2) and (5):

(6) The view that there could be some things which are not possibly conceivable by us does not make sense.

From (6) and (1):

(7) What there is must be possibly conceivably by us.

Nagel does not himself break the argument down into steps, before specifying any premises or inferences which he is against. From examining what he says though, it becomes clear that the principal clash between himself and his opponents is over (4).

After presenting the argument for the conceivability thesis, Nagel gives us a reason to reject (4). It is part of our commonsense outlook that some people cannot understand certain truths because their mental development has not advanced to the point where they can grasp certain concepts. For example, most little children cannot understand many mathematical truths because they do not have the relevant mathematical concepts nor are they at a stage in their mental development when they can be successfully taught these concepts. In light of such cases, it seems that there could be some truths that we too cannot understand because our mental faculties are not advanced enough to grasp certain concepts. Nagel presents cases of this kind in order to support the view that some of what there is might not be possibly conceivable by us (1986: 95). This way of supporting the view involves rejecting the inference that if something can be correctly represented by using at least one general concept of ours, it follows that all the properties of this thing can be correctly represented by using only concepts that are within our grasp. We suppose that there might be aspects of the world that can only be correctly represented by using at least one general concept of ours, such as the concept of existence, but along with some concepts that are simply not within our grasp. Hence Nagel's justification for his view involves rejecting (4).

Nagel considers an objection to this justification. It appears to be an objection that he devised himself. He anticipates that someone might make this objection but he does not

present any philosopher as actually making it (1986: 96). I shall not introduce this objection or his response to it, because without doing so it can be shown that Nagel has not done enough to secure his view. Why does any philosopher endorse (4) to begin with? When one turns to the paragraph in Nagel which explains the argument for the conceivability thesis, no grounds are given for this premise. Advocates of the conceivability thesis are depicted as simply asserting that there is a certain entailment relation, even though it is not obvious that there is this entailment relation. This depiction is suspect. Consider the following remark which Nagel makes while introducing the conceivability thesis:

The idea that the contents of the universe are limited by our capacity for thought is easily recognized as a philosophical view, which at first sight seems crazily self-important given what small and contingent pieces of the universe we are. It is a view that no one would hold except for philosophical reasons that seem to rule out the natural picture. (1986: 92)

Given that (4) is glaringly in need of justification, a philosophical reason for the conceivability thesis cannot involve a bald assertion of this premise. It seems then that Nagel has left out a crucial piece of information when telling us the argument for the conceivability thesis. He has left out the reasons that have actually been given for (4). Without this information, we ought not to be convinced by Nagel. Why not? One might think that if Nagel has made a good case against (4), then we can know that any reasons given in favour of (4) are bad ones prior to being made aware of them. But consider again Nagel's case in light of what is said in the quotation above. In this quotation, philosophers who hold the conceivability thesis are depicted as knowingly departing from an intuitive view, or 'natural picture' to use Nagel's term, because they have reasons which they find compelling enough to warrant a departure. Now the case that Nagel makes against (4) is ultimately an explanation of why it is intuitive to reject (4). If someone wanted an explanation of why it is intuitive, one could say what he does: given that there are truths that others cannot understand but we can, surely there might be truths that we too cannot understand. (Note that the claim in the quotation that we are small and contingent pieces of the universe, rather than gods say, is not a different explanation; it just explains the use of 'surely' here.) But there is still room to wonder whether advocates of the conceivability

thesis have a compelling reason in favour of (4), that is, a reason strong enough to warrant departing from the intuitive view. If some philosophers purport to offer reasons of this kind, Nagel needs to show that the reasons offered are not compelling, but all he does is imply that reasons are offered without telling us what they are and without revealing their inadequacy. This is why Nagel's case is unconvincing. It is analogous to a case against determinism which merely explains why it is intuitive to believe in free will. In the final section of this paper, which focuses on Davidson, I shall support the suspicion that Nagel has not considered the reasons that are actually given for (4). Before this section, I shall contest another premise of the argument that Nagel presents for the conceivability thesis.

4. The argument that Nagel isolates for the conceivability thesis is a bad one even if (4) is true. Consider (3) instead:

The notion of something which is not possibly conceivable by us only makes sense if the following claim is true: if something can be correctly represented using at least one general concepts of ours, it does not follow that all the properties of this thing can be correctly represented by using only concepts that are within our grasp.

Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that advocates of the conceivability thesis are right to assert that the claim following the colon is false. Contrary to (3), we can still form the notion of something that is not possibly conceivable by us. In order to see that this is the case, imagine that two people are playing a game of chess and a child who knows how to play chess is watching. A player resigns. The child asks why. The child is told that it was within the other player's power to achieve checkmate in four moves. Both players then try to explain to the child how. But the child cannot understand the explanation. Demonstrations are given using the board. Still the child cannot understand. The chess players then check to see whether the child can ever understand how it is within a player's power to achieve checkmate. Their tests reveal that the child can sometimes understand how, but only when the scenarios are relatively straightforward. There is something about

the child's mind which means that although they can understand the general idea of it being within a player's power to achieve checkmate in four moves, they cannot ever understand the details of how this is so in a particular match. What is this something about the child's mind? Even if we cannot specify exactly what it is – after all, the relevant psychological knowledge is not commonplace – we can say that the problem is not that the child lacks some concept or other. The child knows how to play chess and so it is possible to construct an explanation of how checkmate can definitely be achieved in four moves using only concepts that the child has grasped, such as the concept of a king, the concept of a move and so on. But the child cannot understand the explanation.

From this example, we can see that there is a potential gap between all the correct representations that can be formed using a particular person's repertoire of concepts and all the correct representations that this person can understand. We can thus imagine that superior beings construct some correct representations that we cannot understand even though these representations are constructed using concepts that we have. Suppose then that we grant the entailment relation that Nagel rejects. Contrary to (3), we can still form the notion of something that is not possibly conceivable by us. For even if all the properties of a thing can be correctly represented using concepts that are within our grasp, it may nevertheless be the case that without an improvement in our mental faculties we cannot understand some of these correct representations. And so, there is still room for the thought that there are features of reality which are not possibly conceivable by us. Leaving aside whether or not (4) is acceptable, (3) is false.

In the previous section, I claimed that we would expect Nagel to explain how various philosophers have attempted to justify (4) when he presents the argument for the conceivability thesis. Given that (3) is false, and therefore not self-evident, should we not also expect an explanation of how such philosophers have attempted to justify (3)? I think that we should not. Whereas (4) is glaringly in need of justification, it is understandable for a person to not register anything controversial about (3). Examples that can be used to contest (3) do not come to mind so easily. It is understandable then for proponents of the conceivability thesis to simply assert or assume (3), whereas it would be bewildering for them to simply assert (4), since this premise is patently controversial.

5. Nagel regards the conceivability thesis as a form of idealism. Furthermore, he regards it as presupposed by all other forms of idealism. The other forms are characterised by him as specific forms, whereas what he is interested in is characterised as a general form of idealism, since it is presupposed by the specific forms (1986: 91). It is reasonable to doubt whether the conceivability thesis is a form of idealism, whether each form of idealism involves a commitment to it and whether Nagel is right to think that realism involves rejecting this thesis. But so far I have not engaged in these debates. I have remained neutral on these issues and continue to do so below. Nevertheless, the alternative counter that I have presented in the previous section can be used to dispute an important example that Nagel offers of a philosopher who is an idealist.

When Nagel makes his case against the conceivability thesis, he refers to Davidson as an example of a thinker who espouses this supposed form of idealism. But he does not present Davidson as ever claiming that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us. Rather he quotes Davidson making a claim that he treats as amounting to an assertion of (4). The claim is this: it is impossible for there to be a truth which can be stated in another language but cannot be stated in our language (1986: 194). But even if we grant that the conceivability thesis is a genuine form of idealism, is Davidson an idealist just because he makes this claim? Nagel has convinced some philosophers to regard Davidson as an idealist (McGinn 1987: 268; Avramides 2006: 237). What I shall show is that we ought to reject this charge of idealism.

The claim that Nagel quotes is made by Davidson in his renowned essay 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'. In that essay, Davidson aims to show that the idea of a conceptual scheme does not make sense (1984: 183). He thinks that the intelligibility of this idea depends on the intelligibility of the thought that different groups of people might have different conceptual schemes (1984: 198). Davidson considers four attempted explanations of what it would be for different groups to have completely different schemes, each of which he deems unintelligible (1984: 192-5). He then sets out to show that we cannot even make it intelligible to ourselves how different groups could have partially different schemes. The claim that Nagel quotes emerges from Davidson's treatment of two of the attempts to explain what it is to have a completely different scheme (1984: 193-4).

According to one attempt, a conceptual scheme consists of a set of beliefs that fit with the data of sensation. According to the other attempt, a conceptual scheme consists of a set of beliefs that fit with reality. Both attempted explanations hold that two groups of people have completely different schemes if and only if the beliefs which comprise the conceptual scheme of one group cannot be translated into the language of the other group and vice versa. In response to these attempts, Davidson proposes that to speak of beliefs fitting with either the data of sensation or reality is to say, in a metaphorical way, that the beliefs are true (1984: 194). Consequently, in Davidson's eyes the attempted explanations depend for their intelligibility on the intelligibility of the following thought: there might be truths which are expressible in one language but not in another. Davidson denies the intelligibility of this thought. He does this in the passage that Nagel quotes:

The criterion of a conceptual scheme different from our own becomes: largely true but not translatable. The question whether this is a useful criterion is just the question of how well we understand the notion of truth, as applied to language, independent of the notion of translation. The answer is, I think, that we do not understand it independently at all. (Davidson, quoted in Nagel 1986: 94)

For Davidson, it cannot be the case that there are truths which can be expressed in a language unfamiliar to us but cannot be expressed in our language. Note that Davidson's use of the term 'our language', which does not feature in this quotation but does elsewhere in his essay, is apt to appear obscure in light of Nagel's use of 'our'. For the people whom Nagel counts as us do not all speak the same language. Which language then does 'our language' refer to? It is tempting to say English, since this is the language that Davidson writes in. However, he clearly does not want to accord a special status to English. He does not want to say that English can be used to express any truth that is expressed in another language, but other languages might not be able to express certain truths that can be expressed in English. It seems that he is happy for 'our language' to be thought of as any natural language (Case 1997: 11). Whichever natural language is taken as 'our language', Davidson believes that this language can be used to express all truths that can be expressed in other languages.

On the basis of his claim that there cannot be truths that are only expressible in certain other languages, Nagel interprets Davidson as asserting the entailment relation proposed in (4): if something can be correctly represented using at least one general concept of ours, it follows that all the properties of this thing can be correctly represented by using only concepts that are within our grasp. Nagel says that Davidson simply has another way of putting this point, in terms of language (1986: 94). Now, before proceeding to defend Davidson against the charge of idealism, it is worth noting how Davidson supports his claim. He appeals to Tarski as providing us with our best intuition about the concept of truth (1984: 194-5). According to him, an implication of this intuition is that every truth can be translated into our language. Some philosophers have discussed this appeal to Tarski (Hacker 1996: 300-1; Soames 2003: 324-330), but Nagel never does. I do not want to go into more detail about it here, only to make the following point. The fact that Nagel does not discuss Davidson's appeal to Tarski supports the suspicion raised in the third section of my paper that Nagel simply does not specify the reasons actually given for (4). If Davidson is asserting (4), he is doing so for a philosophical reason and Nagel does not address this reason.

Let us return now to the purpose of this section: to dispute Nagel's charge of idealism against Davidson. The example in the previous section enables us to see how one can respond on behalf of Davidson. Using a vocabulary that the child in the example already has, it is possible to explain how it is within the power of one player to achieve checkmate in four moves. There is no individual piece of terminology involved in this explanation whose meaning eludes the child. Nevertheless, the child cannot understand the explanation. As such, there is a potential gap between which truths can be expressed in a language spoken by a particular person and which of those truths can be grasped by that person. This allows us to envisage the following possibility. There are beings of superior intelligence who speak a language that we do not know and sometimes make true statements in this language that we could never understand without a dramatic improvement in our mental faculties. Nevertheless, it is possible to translate the sentences that are used to express such truths into our language. It is just that we cannot understand these sentences. If there are beings of superior intelligence who speak our language, they

might be able to understand what is being said, but we cannot. When Davidson denies that there might be truths that can only be expressed in other languages, he leaves room for this possibility. Hence he can admit that there could be things that we cannot possibly conceive. He can say, 'We cannot understand some, or all, true statements about such things. Nevertheless, any truth that can be stated in another language can also be stated using our language.' This stance does not occur to Nagel.

Nagel tells us that what he takes to be a form of idealism was popular at the time when he was writing. But while making his case against it, he only refers to Davidson as an example of this sort of idealist. Later on in the chapter, Strawson and Wittgenstein are also identified as idealists. The latter is presented as an important source of contemporary idealism (1986: 105). Whether or not Nagel is right about this or right to label these two philosophers as idealists, for now we should reject the charge that Davidson is one. Idealism is not regarded as an attractive metaphysical position within the philosophical culture from which Davidson's work emerges. This means that we should suppose that Davidson too is opposed to idealism unless we encounter evidence that indicates otherwise. There may be evidence of this kind, but Nagel does not provide us with it.

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FEATURE-PLACING SENTENCES AND THE CANONICAL SCHEME

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Abstract

Feature-placing sentences are often confused with the general sentences in the canonical predicate calculus. The confusion is largely caused by their perceived commonality that both lack the subject-predicate form. In this paper, I offer some clarification of the fundamental differences between the two: the general sentences of the canonical predicate calculus contain predicates and variables which take individual objects as their values, and it is the sense of predication implied by the existence of predicates in these general sentences that is completely absent in feature-placing sentences.

1. Elimination of Singular Terms

Feature-placing sentences such as “it is raining here” or “there is snow there” are so called (by Strawson), because they are used to describe some feature of the world (water, snow, etc.) to be found in some place and time, and the feature introduced in such sentences is simply “a general kind of stuff”, not a particular nor a property or characteristic of particulars. Like a subject-predicate sentence, a feature-placing sentence consists of two main components, a feature expression (e.g., “water”) and placing (e.g., “here”). But unlike a subject-predicate sentence, it contains no part that introduces a particular.¹ While the introduction of a particular by a sentence, according to Strawson, would automatically disqualify the sentence as being feature-placing, the lack of any such introduction in a sentence, I argue, does not automatically qualify it as being a feature-placing sentence. Case in point is the so-called standard quantified sentences or general sentences in the canonical predicate calculus. There is a quite prevalent confusion of feature-placing sentences with such quantified sentences. Ian Hacking, for instance, equates quite explicitly “feature-placing language”, a language that contains only feature-placing sentences as understood by Strawson, with the language resulting from elimination of all singular terms *a*

¹ Strawson (1959: 203).

la Quine, and dubs the former “the Quinian language”. He describes such a language as follows,

The implied model of a language must be very ancient. Assertions might consist of utterances of feature-words. If “whale” and “spouting” were such words in a feature-placing language we might translate an utterance of “Whale” as, “there is a whale”. “Spouting” would be, “there is spouting going on”. “Whale spouting” would convey the fact that the features of whaleness and spouting are found together in some place indicated by context: A whale is, or whales are, spouting. The force of these feature-placing sentences is much like that of sentences of an interpreted predicate calculus: $(\exists x)(Wx)$, $(\exists x)(Sx)$, and $(\exists x)(Wx \wedge Sx)$.²

They are indeed similar insofar as neither introduces particulars. Standard quantified sentences, at least conceived in the Russellian-Quinian tradition, are a result of elimination of singular terms that occur in sentences of the subject-predicate form. Russell eliminated definite descriptions from the predicate calculus, and thereby provided an adequate formal logic without subject-predicate structure. By extending Russell’s theory of descriptions, Quine was able to analyze away not only descriptions, but also proper names. Ultimately all sentences of the subject-predicate form can be paraphrased into sentences which are not subject-predicate through eliminating singular terms. “All singular terms, aside from the variables that serve as pronouns in connection with quantifiers, are dispensable and eliminable by paraphrase.”³ A sentence devoid of singular terms will be such that it contains nothing but logical connectives, quantifiers, variables and predicates. A sentence containing proper names or singular descriptions will be re-construed as of the form $(\exists x)(\dots x \dots)$, after singular terms are eliminated. However, the elimination of singular terms which results in non-subject-predicate sentences, does not eradicate subject-predicate as a conceptual scheme within which sentences resulting from such elimination of singular terms can be properly understood.

² Hacking (1968: 171).

³ Quine (1953: 13).

2. What Cannot Be Eliminated in Singular Terms Elimination

It is worth noting that Quine sometimes calls bound variables singular terms (the remaining singular terms),⁴ and says that reference to single objects is made by variables of quantification. Now it may appear quite odd to regard variables as singular terms and think that they can take over the burden of referring to objects. The bound variables in such sentences are certainly not singular terms in the sense in which proper names are, for they do not purport to name or refer to particulars, they are merely place holders for their values to fill in. Yet they have something to do with singular terms just because the values are expressed by singular terms like proper names before the elimination. Or as Quine puts it, “The singular term belongs in positions of the kind in which it would also be coherent to use variables ‘x’, ‘y’, etc. (or in ordinary language, pronouns).”⁵ Because quantification for Quine carries ontological commitment, the position of variables should be reserved for singular terms and not for general terms, if one wishes to avoid Platonism. But the doctrine of ontological commitment should not worry us, and the quantifier need not be tied to individual variables. The quantifier itself, as C. J. F. Williams points out, can be viewed in the way being is for Aristotle, that is, it is outside all categories, and can be used to bind variables of any category.⁶ However while a variable can be of any category, it must be of one and the same category in a given sentence. For instance, the variable x in “for some x , x is a king and x is bald” is of the category of particular individuals, whereas the variable ϕ in “For some ϕ , both red horses ϕ and sunsets ϕ ” is of the category of predicables. It is a function of a bound variable that it indicates what category of expression is required to provide an existential or universal instantiation of a quantified formula.

Thus the elimination of singular terms will not result in feature-placing sentences, which do not contain variables of the category of particular individuals. Such variables are nevertheless a necessary part of the sentences resulting from elimination of singular terms.

⁴ As Strawson observes, Quine entertains two senses of the expression “singular terms”, the broad sense including variables of quantification that serve as pronouns, and the narrow sense excluding the variables. The singular terms which can be eliminated are only ones understood in the narrow sense. See Strawson (1956: 433-454).

⁵ Quine (1982: 205). Quine is careless here. Pronouns of ordinary language (e.g., “he”, “she”, “it”) are singular terms in the narrow sense, because they refer to people or objects in a given context, though they are not names.

⁶ Williams (1981: 153).

There is no shift of conceptual scheme in Quine's elimination of singular terms, as "[n]one of the eliminations of singular terms ... eliminated objects", and "the objects stay on as values of the variables though the singular terms be swept away."⁷ The paraphrase of sentences with conspicuous subject-predicate form into those containing only logical connectives, quantifiers, variables and predicates is a paraphrase precisely because it is accomplished within the same conceptual scheme in which sentences with conspicuous subject-predicate form are understood. In his critical response to Quine, Strawson makes the following point, "we do not come to understand the use of a logical symbolism simply by gazing at the symbols. It has to be explained to us in terms not belonging to the symbolism. So it has to be explained to us, in such terms, just what *are* the positions in which it would be coherent to use the variables 'x' and 'y'".⁸ In fairness, Quine does explain to us his symbolism, not in terms of singular terms, but in terms of the kind of values for the variables, namely, objects, which certainly do not belong to the symbolism itself.

3. Feature-placing Sentences and Standard Quantified Sentences

With his theory of presupposition, Strawson in fact provides a very clear account of how feature-placing sentences are distinguishable from standard quantified sentences. According to this theory, any sentence that introduces a particular presupposes some empirical fact, i.e., some "term distinguishing" fact. While the sentences that are used to express such facts may themselves involve the introduction of other particulars or quantification over particulars, there are always sentences at the end of the regress of presuppositions which contain only predicates and bound variables of existential quantification, if we pursue the regress to the end.⁹ However such sentences still introduce particulars, albeit in a different sense. They introduce "kinds of particulars, or even particulars in general". Facts expressed by sentences that introduce particulars in this second sense are presupposed by sentences that introduce particulars in the first sense, and the sentences that express such facts presuppose or rest upon the existence of facts the statement of which does not involve introducing particulars in

⁷ Quine (1960: 192).

⁸ Strawson (1956: 439).

⁹ Strawson (1959: 192-198).

any sense or quantifying over any particulars at all.¹⁰ So there are two kinds of presupposition which parallel the two kinds of introduction. The first kind of presupposition is the presupposition of facts expressed by sentences involving the second kind of introduction by sentences involving the first kind of introduction, whereas the second kind of presupposition is the presupposition of facts expressed by sentences involving no introduction of particulars by sentences involving the second kind of introduction of particulars. Now only the second kind of presupposition of facts is the presupposition of feature-placing facts expressed by feature-placing sentences, which are themselves not quantified sentences or at least not standard quantified sentences, and the feature-placing facts they express are presupposed by quantified sentences.

Those who confuse feature-placing sentences with standard quantified sentences might have been misled by Quine's way of formulating quantified sentences. Quine suggests that whenever we cannot find a ready-made description for a proper name, we can always manufacture one in the following way. From names like "Socrates" and "Pegasus", we can form the verbs "socratizes" and "pegasizes". The sentence "Socrates is wise" can then be replaced by "there is one and only one thing such that it socratizes and it is wise". "It socratizes" is the same in grammatical form as sentences of the impersonal construction like "it snows". This, coupled with Quine's occasional use of genuine impersonal sentences such as "it mamas and it smiles" to illustrate the primitive stage of thinking, encourages the confusion.¹¹ However, in the sentence "it snows", for instance, "it" is not a variable, and cannot be treated as such, for there is nothing that may be thought as a value for it. As a mere dummy, the "it" in "it snows" only serves to satisfy the grammatical requirement of the English language for sentencehood. That impersonal constructions such as "it snows" are sometimes called subjectless sentences¹² should be understood not only in the weak sense that the dummy subject does not denote any particular thing, but also in the strong sense, in the sense just described, that it is not even a variable. Only understood in the weak sense,

¹⁰ Strawson (1959: 199).

¹¹ The confusion caused by the careless reading of Quine persists in some of the most recent literature on feature-placing sentences. Austen Clark in his *A Theory of Sentience* cites Quine's example of "something is cating and is white and is dog-facing and is bristling" to illustrate the idea of multiple features placing. See Clark (2000: 148).

¹² Brentano (1969: 98-108).

may such sentences be also called “mere predicate sentences”¹³, as, for instance, although the pronoun “it” is a dummy, the verb “snows” is not, and it looks the same in kind as those which are unquestionably predicates, “runs” as in “the cat runs”, or “is wise” as in “Socrates is wise”. This makes sense especially when we consider two sentences with the identical appearance, (1) “it is cold” (reporting weather), (2) “it is cold” (describing the temperature of a particular thing, e.g., a poker). It does not seem wrong to think that they share the same predicate, though one is subjectless and the other is not. Understood in the strong sense, however, “predicate sentences” is clearly a misnomer. As Brentano points out, subject and predicate are correlative concepts and they stand and fall together, such that a sentence that is truly subjectless must also be predicateless.¹⁴ “Snows” and “is cold” in (1), appearance to the contrary, are not predicates, precisely because the “it” in these sentences does not even make a cross reference to “something”. We cannot respond to the claim “it is cold” when understood as (1) by asking “what is cold?” But we certainly can ask such a question in response to “it is cold” understood as (2) and we expect something like “the poker” to be the answer. The fact that we cannot ask such a question indicates precisely that not only is there no actual subject in the sentence, but also no concept of subject which is necessary to make the sentence intelligible. By contrast, the quantified sentences that result from the elimination of singular terms introducing particulars can only be called subjectless in the weak sense and are therefore not predicateless. The “it” in “it socratizes” is a pronoun which cross-refers to “something” of the existential claim “there is something”. Or to put it differently, to understand the role of the variable x in $F(x)$ is to understand that it can be replaced by a constant a and $F(x)$ can have an instant $F(a)$. But to understand instantiation one must have the concepts of subject and predicate in the first place. That is why we can speak of such quantified sentences as subjectless, yet as also containing predicates along with logical connectives, quantifiers, and variables.

Impersonal construction is not the only form of feature-placing sentences, which can also take the existential form “there is snow here”, and even an apparent subject-predicate form “snow is falling here”, though the latter may be regarded as a different way of saying

¹³ Brentano (1969: 104).

¹⁴ Brentano (1969: 104).

“there is snow here and it is falling”. Now “there is snow here” is of the same form as that of “there is a cat here”, a standard existential sentence, except that the noun (“snow”) in the former sentence is a mass noun while the noun (“cat”) in the latter is a count noun. But would this make any difference? Williams thinks it does. According to him, the difference it makes is that “there is” in the latter is an existential quantifier and hence expresses existence, a view derived from Quine’s dictum that existence is what the existential quantifier expresses, whereas “there is” in the former is not, it merely functions as what he calls a “verbalizer” to convert a noun (e.g., “snow” in “there is snow here”) into a verb (e.g., “snows” in “it snows here”). He explains that the reason why the latter alone expresses existence is that it alone admits instantiation, and the existence of something is nothing more than the instantiation of some property.¹⁵ Sortal universals such as cat and table can be instantiated, whereas feature universals like snow and water cannot, because, quite simply, there are no such things as a snow and a water, but only a pool of water and a patch of snow—a pool of water is an instance of pool of water, not water, and a patch of snow is an instant of patch of snow, not snow.¹⁶ But the idea that feature-placing sentences like “there is water here” do not express existence cannot be right, as it amounts to saying that only objects, but not stuffs, exist, which is plainly false. Given that it deductively follows from the premise that existence is identical with instantiation, the premise itself must be false. However, Williams’ argument highlights in a particular way how fundamentally the concepts of feature (or matter) and feature-placing are foreign to the canonical scheme of particular and universal, subject and predicate, which is often represented as being ontologically exhaustive.¹⁷

4. Different Conceptual Schemes

¹⁵ See Williams (1981: 300-316). What Williams expresses here is the core idea in a philosophical tradition on existence going back to Frege that existence is a second-level predicable predicated of concepts, not a first-level predicable predicated of particulars.

¹⁶ See Laycock (1979: 111).

¹⁷ See Laycock (2006: 55-58).

The difference between feature-placing sentences and the standard quantified sentences may then be understood as a difference between two conceptual schemes, that is, between the “primitive” or “immature” conceptual scheme and “adult” or “mature” conceptual scheme, as Quine call them respectively. The following is how Quine contrasts the two:

We in our maturity have come to look upon the child’s mother as an integral body who, in an irregular closed orbit revisits the child from time to time; and to look upon red in a radically different way, viz., as scattered about. Water, for us, is rather like red, but not quite; things are red, stuff alone is water. But the mother, red, and water are for the infant all of a type; each is just a history of sporadic encounters, a scattered portion of what goes on. His first learning of the three words is uniformly a matter of learning how much of what goes on around him counts as the mother, or as red, or as water. It is not for the child to say in the first case “hello mama again,” in the second case “Hello, another red thing;” and in the third case, “hello, more water.” They are all on a par: “Hello, more mama, more red, more water.”¹⁸

In this “primitive” or “immature” conceptual scheme, the distinction between count nouns, mass nouns, and adjectives breaks down, there is only concatenation of features, instead of attribution of properties to particulars, and the speaker of the language treats all she encounters as referents of mass nouns. There are, for instance, no particular cats, but only cat feature or various occurrences of cat feature.

It should be noted that this “infantile learning situation” should not be confused with the “adult learning situation” which Quine describes elsewhere. According to Quine, since all names can ultimately be dissolved into predicates (universal terms) and variables, the learning of names (particular terms) should be in fact based on the learning of predicates (universal terms). However, for any universal terms to be understood, some universal terms have to be learned ostensively by direct confrontation. He writes,

We may insist that what are learned by ostension, or direct confrontation, are never names, but solely predicates. ... Instead of treating the ostensively learned word as a *name* of the shown object to begin with, we treat it to begin with as a predicate *true* exclusively of the shown object; then we construe the name, as such, as amounting to “(rx)Fx” where “F” represents that primitive predicate.¹⁹

¹⁸ Quine (1960: 92).

¹⁹ Quine (1982: 218).

That is, in learning the universal terms from which other universal terms may be learned discursively, we must put ourselves in the situation where the universals the terms stand for are present. Now whether or not singular terms introducing particulars must be actually present in such a situation is a matter subject to debate²⁰. It is undoubtedly an adult's learning situation, one in which the learner has already mastered the ins and outs of our adult conceptual scheme of enduring and recurring particular objects, in contrast to the "infantile learning situation". To confuse feature-placing sentences with the standard existential sentences is in a sense to confuse the "primitive" or "immature" conceptual scheme with the "adult" or "mature" one.

Of course, feature-placing sentences are not used only by children before they have become mature, that is, before they have mastered the divided reference of general terms or the scheme of enduring and recurring particular objects. The difference between the "primitive" or "immature" and the "adult" or "mature" conceptual schemes is the presence in the former and the absence in the latter of the concept of particulars, rather than that in the former there is no longer a place for the concept of feature—we in our maturity constantly use such feature-placing sentences as "it is raining here" or "there is water here" to describe feature-placing facts. As Quine puts it, "The mastery of divided reference seems scarcely to affect people's attitude toward 'water'. For 'water', 'sugar', and the like the category of mass terms remains, a survival perhaps of the undifferentiated occasion sentence, ill fitting the dichotomy into general and singular."²¹ The difference between feature-placing sentences and the standard quantified sentences has something to do with the difference between the two conceptual schemes, just because the use of the standard quantified sentences does, while the use of feature-placing sentences does not, require the grasp of the concept of particular or the dichotomy into general and singular, which belongs only to the "adult" or "mature" conceptual scheme and not to the "primitive" or "immature" one.

²⁰ Strawson suggests that to articulate such a situation, or to express a case of direct confrontation, some demonstrative element must present in the language, which can only be understood as introducing a particular. See Strawson (1956: 449-451). In objection to this view, Cheng argues that "the linguistic demonstrative element need not be incorporated in an expression which makes identifying reference to the instance of the predicate, nor need it be presented by demonstrative adverbs such as 'here' or 'there'. ... the identification of, and the identifying reference to, a particular can be partly decided by the act of pointing and partly by the categories of things in a given situation to which it is recognized to belong." See Cheng (1969: 282-295).

²¹ Quine (1960: 95).

While the “primitive” or “immature” conceptual scheme may well be the factual conceptual scheme of children in the early stage of learning their first language, there is no theoretical difficulty to conceive a language spoken by mature adults whose sentences are all feature-placing, such that the conceptual scheme it implies is very much the same as the children’s, yet speakers of such a language can perhaps say things having approximately the force of the things speakers of a “mature” language like English actually say. This possibility is suggested by some “revisionist” metaphysics, most notably process metaphysics, which sees particular objects like rocks, trees, animals and people as nothing more than series of snapshots taken by the mind, while in reality there are only stuffs blending into each other and shifting ceaselessly. The conceptual scheme thus envisaged will include no concept of particular and the facts that are described in English by subject-predicate sentences will all be described by feature-placing sentences.²²

5. Quantifying Feature-placing Sentences

While feature-placing sentences are different from and hence should not be construed as existential sentences of the canonical predicate calculus, they can certainly be construed as existentially quantified sentences of a different sort. “There is water here” can be glossed as “there is something such that it is water and it is here”. However, the values that can fill in the variable must be of a category different from that of which the values fill in the variable in quantified sentences resulting from the elimination of singular terms. It cannot be replaced by a constant for a particular as in the case of existential instantiation. “Something” here no longer means at least one thing, and a value of the variable will not be an instance of water, as water, or anything like water for that matter, cannot be instantiated, but the incidence of water, for example, the water that is here or the water in a glass. The question is whether feature-placing sentences can always be construed in this way, that is, as quantified sentences that contain variables whose values are particular incidences of matter such as the snow on the roof or the water in the glass. If feature-placing sentences are understood as

²² The conceptual scheme of the third ontology Zemach describes in his well-known piece “Four Ontologies”, the ontology whose entities are bound in time but continuous in space, seems to approximate to such a conceptual scheme. See Zemach (1979: 63-80).

making indefinite references to the incidence of matter, there must be corresponding sentences that are able to make definite references to it. We can move, for instance, from “there is water here” to “the water that is here”, “the water in my glass”, or simply “this water”.

Now it appears that such kind of move cannot always be made—it cannot be made quite certainly in what may be called the flux situation, in which no particular incidence of matter can be differentiated from any other and can therefore be referred to as such. One may point at the flowing water in a river and say “there is water here”. However, for the sentence “there is water here”, there doesn’t seem to be a corresponding sentence that contains the *definite referring* expression “the water that is here” or “this water”, an expression that is able to pick out some particular incidence of water. In other words, although it is true to say in such a situation that there is water in the river, there is no incidence of water that we can refer to in the way we can refer to the water in a glass, when it is also true to say that there is some water in the glass. Given that the ability of making indefinite reference cannot be separated from the ability of making definite reference, “there is water here”, when used to describe the fact about the flowing water in the river, should not be understood as making an indefinite reference to some particular incidence of water. Surely, “there is water here” is still a quantified sentence and as such it can be read as “there is x and x is water and x is here”. But what kind of values can fill in the variable? They are certainly not particular individuals, nor particular incidences of matter. It would seem that the variables in feature-placing sentences, when used to describe facts of flux, can only be universal variables, that is, feature universal variables, as they can only be filled in by feature universals. Thus the best way of reading “there is water here” is that “there is some liquid (or simply stuff) and it is water and it is here”.²³ Now this way of quantifying a feature variable is in some sense akin to quantifying predicate variables; “there is some liquid (or simply stuff) and it is water and it is here” is then comparable to “there is some quality and it is red and it is a quality of the maple leaf”, which is a reading of “the maple leaf is red”. It should be noted, however, that while in both cases the values of the variables

²³ “Some liquid or some stuff” may be easily but mistakenly interpreted as “some particular incidence of liquid or stuff”. Here it should mean “a kind or type of liquid or stuff”.

are universals, quantification of feature universals is beyond the hierarchical “orders” of the standard logical system which places particular individuals at the bottom.

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THE SKEPTICAL DEAL WITH OUR CONCEPT OF EXTERNAL REALITY*

Cláudio Costa

Abstract

The following paper contains a new refutation of the skeptical argument concerning our knowledge of the external world. The central idea is that the argument fails because it presupposes ambiguous attributions of reality. Once these ambiguities are identified, they make the argument either trivial or equivocal. Differently from others, this refutation does not lead us to undesired results.

Since Descartes, the so-called *argument from ignorance* concerning the external world¹ is one of the most puzzling skeptical arguments ever created. In order to be prepared to construct it we need to make use of some general skeptical hypothesis about the external world. Examples of them are as follows:

- (1) I am dreaming the external world.
- (2) I am hallucinating an external world.
- (3) I am a soul being deceived by a malign genie, who makes me believe that I am living in this world, which in fact does not exist (the Cartesian version).
- (4) I am a brain in a vat, linked to a supercomputer that makes me believe that I am living in a real world, when in fact this is only an implemented program of virtual reality (the main contemporary version).

Typical of such skeptical hypotheses is that their truth is at least logically possible. Indeed, it seems that we are not even able to *know* that they are false.

* I would like to thank professor Richard Swinburne for his sympathetic criticism.

¹ See Peter Unger (1975), chap. 1. See also Neil Gascoine (2002: 9-10).

Now, considering the trivial statement “I have two hands”, and the skeptical hypothesis “I am a brain in a vat”², we can build the following instance of the argument from ignorance about the external world:

I

1. If I know that I have two hands, then I know that I am not a brain in a vat.
2. I don’t know whether I am not a brain in a vat.
3. Therefore: I do not know whether I have two hands (1, 2 MT).

Indeed, if I cannot know that I am not a brain in a vat, how can I know that I *really* have two hands?

Since the statement and the skeptical hypothesis can change, calling p any trivial statement about the external world such as “I have two hands”, “This table exists”, “There are stones”... calling K the operator for knowledge, and h any skeptical hypothesis, the general form of the argument can be rendered as the following *modus tollens*:

² The skeptical hypothesis of brains in vats can face anti-skeptic arguments based on semantic externalism. However, these arguments are controversial and limited in their conclusion, since they are ineffective against others skeptical hypotheses like those of the dream or of the hallucination. See the seminal argument from Hilary Putnam (1981), chapter 1. For a critical account, see Anthony Brückner (2003). The underlining idea of the brain-in-vats anti-skeptical argument is that they cannot have thoughts about real things like water, vat, brain, etc. because they lack *causal* contact with these real things or their components. Since we have these thoughts, we cannot be brains in vats.

Nonetheless, it may be argued that this anti-skeptical argument gains its apparent strength only by ignoring that the ways of reference can be quite crooked. We admit that there must be something externally real, which is the ultimate source of reference, but this something does not need to be what is experienced or inferred as to be referred to. It seems to be reasonable, for example, that thoughts of brains in vats of water, for example, have a reference, even if water does not exist. To see this, let’s suppose that the first source of the brain’s idea of water is the fictive water experience produced by the program of the supercomputer. These organized sense-impressions are not causally unrelated with real things! They were causally originated, say, by the thoughts of its programmers about water, which combine their ideas of properties like wetness, liquidness, transparency, causally originated by their own experiences in the dry planet Omega, where they never saw water... It seems that Putnam undervalues the plasticity of language. (If you believe in Putnam’s argument, you can replace the brain-in-vat occurrences in my examples by some other skeptical hypothesis.)

A

- 1 $Kp \rightarrow K\sim h$
- 2 $\sim K\sim h$
- 3 $\therefore \sim Kp$ (1, 2 MT)

At first view, this argument seems to be compelling: Since I cannot know that I am not a brain in a vat, it seems that I cannot know the reality of anything in the external world, which includes whether I really have two hands or not.

Nonetheless, the argument from ignorance cannot be so compelling, for we can apply a *modus ponens* in order to build a converse anti-skeptical argument, which might be called the *argument from knowledge* concerning the external world. Below is its logical form:

B

- 1 Kp
- 2 $Kp \rightarrow K\sim h$
- 3 $\therefore K\sim h$ (1, 2 MP)

And here is an instantiation:

II

1. I know that I have two hands.
2. If I know that I have two hands, then I know that I am not a brain in a vat.
3. Therefore: I know that I am not a brain in a vat. (1, 2 MP)

Both arguments seem to be similarly compelling. Which is the right one, the skeptic or the anti-skeptic? In this paper I will reject both these alternatives, for I think that both arguments are equivocal. I intend to justify this claim with the help of a long argument with three stages: in the first stage, I will show that all lines of both arguments involve attributions of external reality, which can be made explicit. In the second, I will analyze the concept of external or objective reality, showing that it has at least two different senses, one

belonging to the ordinary life, the other belonging to the unusual context of skeptical hypotheses. Finally, in the third stage I intend to show that the attributions of external reality slip inadvertently from one sense to the other in the course of both arguments, which can be clearly shown in the forms where these attributions are made explicit. These slides of sense make both arguments equivocal and therefore fallacious.

1. Making Explicit the Attributions of External Reality Involved in the Arguments

The first thing to be noted is that attributions (or disattributions) of external, objective or concrete reality or existence are always considered in each line of the arguments from ignorance and knowledge, though usually in an implicit way. Indeed, all the stages of the arguments depend on implicit consideration of attributions of external reality, for what the argument from ignorance says is that because of the lack of knowledge of $\sim h$ we are unable to know the reality of the external world, and that because of the lack of knowledge of the reality of the external world we are unable to know the reality of any state of affairs belonging to it, unable, therefore, to attribute external reality to anything stated by p .

In both arguments, what I mean by Kp is that I know the external reality, the concrete existence of the fact represented by p . Therefore, the conclusion $\sim Kp$ of the argument from ignorance amounts to the same as the conclusion that I do not know that p *in reality* is the case. Such attribution of external reality involved in the trivial statement p may be more or less explicit. So, when p is the statement “This table is real (or exists)”, the attribution of (external) reality is explicit. However, when p is “I am holding a piece of chalk”, what this statement means is “I am *really* holding an *externally real* piece of chalk”. Such attributions of external reality remain usually implicit, because the fact that they are always involved makes superfluous to spell them. (The case is like that of statements; one does not need to make explicit the illocutionary act of stating by saying, “I state p ”; since so many of our utterances involve statements, saying “ p ” is usually enough.) A way to see the attributions of external reality implicitly involved in knowledge claims concerning the external world is to deny that we know the external reality of what is said in the utterances. It is blatant nonsense to say, “I know that this table is real, but I do not know whether it is

real or not”; but it is no less a nonsense to say, “I know that I am holding a piece of chalk, but I do not know whether it is (externally) real or not; indeed, I do not know whether I am really holding anything”. This result could not be different: as Kp is a statement about the external world, the attribution of external reality to its factual correlate must be if not said, at least implicitly involved in the statement.

Once we have seen this, the argument (I) instantiating (A) can be stated in a way that makes explicit the assumptions concerning the external reality:

I-a

1. If I know that I have two (*externally*) *real* hands, then I know that I am not a(n) (*externally*) *real* brain in a vat.
2. I do not know whether I am not a(n) (*externally*) *real* brain in a vat.
3. Therefore: I do not know whether I have two (*externally*) *real* hands. (1, 2 MT)

On the other hand, the argument (II) instantiating (B) can also take a form that makes explicit the attributions of external reality:

II-a

1. I know that I have two (*externally*) *real* hands.
2. If I know that I have two (*externally*) *real* hands, then I know that I am not a(n) (*externally*) *real* brain in a vat.
3. Therefore: I know that I am not a(n) (*externally*) *real* brain in a vat. (1, 2 MP)

These arguments only make explicit what is already assumed in (I) and (II), namely, their concern with the external reality. Later on, I intend to show that the attributions of external reality in both arguments have a different meaning in the premises and in the conclusion, which makes them equivocal. However, this work demands, previously, a detailed examination of the meanings of expressions such as ‘external reality’ or ‘objective existence’.

2. Carnap's Semantic Distinction and its Limits

In the search of an analysis of the concept of external or objective reality in its relation to skepticism concerning the external world we may wonder whether Rudolph Carnap's famous distinction between external and internal questions of existence or reality would be of some help. His distinction applies to all domains of knowledge, but it is its application to what he calls the 'world of things' (the external world) which interest us here. The most usual questions about reality or existence concerning the external world are what he calls *internal* questions. In this case, he writes:

...to recognize something as a real thing or event means to succeed in incorporating it into the system of things at a particular space-time position so that it fits together with the other things recognized as real, according with the rules of the framework.³

Therefore, when we ask ourselves whether the Statue of Liberty really exists, or whether there is a Santa Claus, we are stating internal questions, which are well-succeeded in including a thing among others belonging to the external world in the first case, but not in the second.

However, Carnap also holds that philosophers may ask about the existence of the thing-world in itself, about the reality of the external world as a whole. For him to ask whether our-external-world-as-a-whole really exists, understanding this as an internal question of existence, would be misleading. It would be to state a metaphysical question that is unverifiable and consequently senseless – for an internal question can be answered, and therefore stated, only when it is about things related one another within the system, and never when it is about the system as a whole. For Carnap, a question about the existence of the world of things would only make sense when understood as an *external* question, which concerns merely our decision to use a linguistic framework about the world of things (the thing-language). This acceptance, however, is not the result of a cognitive decision, but of a pragmatic one, based on factors like expedience, fruitfulness and efficiency of the framework.⁴

³ R. Carnap (1958: 207).

⁴ Ibid.: 214.

Although Carnap's distinction is certainly not without a difference, it does have its own flaws, already pointed out by philosophers such as Barry Stroud⁵ and P. F. Strawson,⁶ who have convincingly argued that the problem of the reality of the external world as a whole cannot be reduced to the mere status of non-cognitive linguistic decisions. In order to see that there is more to the question than what is supposed in Carnap's distinction, consider the following statement showing a pervasive ambiguity in our attributions of reality to the external world:

(1) I know that the (external) world is real.

This statement is ambiguous. It might mean

(1a) I know that our external world *has* reality,

but sometimes it can also mean that I know that this is *the* external world, or

(1b) I know that our world (against any skeptical hypothesis) is *the* ultimately real one.

The difference between (1a) and (1b) starts to be clearer when we consider what truth-value we would give to each statement. Consider the negation of (1a):

(~1a) I do not know whether our external world has reality.

Surely, most of us would agree that (1a) is true, whereas (~1a) is false. I know, we all know that *our* external world has reality in the sense that it *contains*, that it is *full* of reality. This truth can be denied only metaphorically, as when the poet T. S. Eliot refers (in "The Waste Land Part III – The Fire Sermon") to the foggy London as an unreal city.⁷

⁵ Barry Stroud (1984), chap. 5.

⁶ See P. F. Strawson's comments on Stroud in his (1985: 7).

⁷ "Unreal city under the brown fog of a winter noon" (Eliot, 1963:60-65).

But with statement (1b) is a different case; it seems to be false. To see this more clearly consider its denial:

(~1b) I do not know whether our world (against any skeptical hypothesis) is the ultimately real one.

Statement (~1b) seems to be true, because we feel that we do not have epistemic resources to reject the logical possibility that, unknowingly for us, a skeptical hypothesis about the external world is true and its reality is only virtual.

In contrast with (1b), (1a) cannot be shown to be false, even if it is true that I am a brain in a vat or a soul deceived by a *malign genie*. Even if a skeptical hypothesis were true, I would still be right in thinking that the world I am experiencing is *a perfectly real one*, and not something like, for example, the limited world experienced when I see a movie-picture or the faint world of my dreams.

Our question now is: what kind of relation could be found between Carnap's distinction and the present distinction between two cases of attributions of reality? At first we have the strange feeling that the sense (1a) of the statement "The (external) world is real" has to do with an internal question of reality, while the sense (1b) has to do with an external question of reality. However, since both statements concern the whole world of things, it is obvious that the attribution of reality in both of them should be answering an external question of reality, to be established as the result of pragmatic decisions... But in this case, why do we distinguish (1a) from (1b), regarding the first true and the second false? Why are we ready to attribute cognitive status to (1a) but not to (1b)? In what follows next I will delineate an analysis of the concept of objective reality that allows an answer to these questions.

3. Introducing a New Semantic Distinction

My own strategy to analyze kinds of attribution of external reality is inspired in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. I will assume two very plausible semantic insights from him. The first one is the view that a difference in the way of using or employing an

expression corresponds to a difference in its sense or meaning.⁸ Attention to the praxis of our language shows that there are many more of such differences than we are usually aware of, being this lack of awareness if not the only source of philosophical problems (as Wittgenstein sometimes seems to think), at least a relevant source of philosophical misunderstandings, particularly in the case of non-substantive riddles such as the skeptical ones.⁹

The second insight is his view that the criterial rules for the application of an expression are *constitutive of its meaning*; an expression without criteria for its application is devoid of meaning, and when we change the criteria for the application of an expression, we change its meaning (its form of application, its way of use).¹⁰ The first semantic insight is related with the second by the fact that it seems that when we speak about ways of use we are speaking about the rules determining the singular (spatiotemporally located) uses of expressions, and the criterial rules are rules determining the singular uses of expressions. In order to make explicit the criteria for the application of an expression, we can make use of a criterial analysis methodologically, as a way to explain the meaning of conceptual expressions.

Applying the first insight to the external and internal questions, it might be suggested that in the usual case, when we ask or answer an internal question about existence, we are using the concept of external existence in one way, which is different from the way we use the concept of external existence to ask or answer an external question. Consequently, we are applying the concept of external existence or reality in different senses. So, when we

⁸ Wittgenstein's thesis was stronger, since in many cases he *identified* meaning with use. See his 1983a, sec. 43. More precisely, he identifies meaning with *ways of use* (*Gebrauchsweise*) or *application* (*Verwendungsweise*) of words, and not with their episodic uses (see 1983b: sec. 61). This allows us to identify these *ways* (*Weise*) with semantic rules (or combination of rules) determining the episodic uses. Examples of such rules would be the so-called criterial rules, which will be considered further on in this text.

⁹ This is why Wittgenstein has much to say about skepticism, though I am not espousing his views on this issue here.

¹⁰ For Wittgenstein, criteria "give our words their common meaning" (1958: 57). His doctrine about criteria is scattered in his manuscripts. Important passages are in (1958: 24-25), (1983a: sec. 354), (1984: sec. 438), (1979: 28). It is worth to note that the thesis that criteria are constitutive of meaning would have no point if we had in mind the objectively given criteria. However, by criteria he also means *criterial rules* (or combination of rules), which are semantic and verificational rules, and not the objectively given criteria that might satisfy these rules or not, making them applicable or not. For an investigation of criterial rules and their semantic role, see G. P. Baker (1986: 194-225). See also the last chapter of P. M. S. Hacker (1986).

ask an internal question, for example, whether the Statue of Liberty really exists, we are using the expression ‘really exists’ in a sense which is different from the sense they have when we ask whether the external world as a whole really exists and it is not, for example, a fiction produced by a supercomputer.

Calling the sense or kind of attribution of reality usually linked with the internal question the *inherent* one, and the sense or kind of attributions that should be linked with the external question – concerning the reality of the world against the possibility that any skeptical hypothesis is true – the *adherent* one, we can find some linguistic clues confirming this semantic distinction. A linguistic feature of the inherent sense is that the words ‘real’ or ‘exists’ can be replaced by the word ‘actual’. A further linguistic feature is that instead of saying that something is real or exists, we can in this sense also say that it *possesses* reality, that it *has* or *is full of* reality: the piece of chalk that I am holding is actual, it has, it possesses reality. However, the same does not apply to the concept of adherent reality: one cannot affirm that a world that is adherently non-real (like the world of the brain-in-a-vat) does not have these properties. Such a world could be actual, possessing (inherent) reality, although remaining adherently non-real.

The proposed distinction can be confirmed, made precise and deeply investigated when considered in terms of criteria. In what follows I will apply a criterial analysis to conceptual expressions like ‘external reality (or existence)’ or ‘objective reality (or existence)’ (expressing kinds of attribution of reality) in order to distinguish more adequately the inherent from the adherent senses, beginning with the first.

4. The Inherent Senses of ‘External Reality’

Let us consider, searching for criteria, the conceptual expressions used for the attribution of external or objective reality or existence in the supposed inherent sense. The primary use of these expressions seems to be when we ask whether things in the external world around us really do exist, since we first become acquainted with them. According to our understanding of Wittgenstein, we are allowed to suppose that the inherent sense of the conceptual expressions used for the attribution of external reality around us is constituted

by criterial rules for this attribution. Such rules would tell us that only with the satisfaction of certain *criteria of external reality* would we be enabled to apply expressions like ‘is externally real’, ‘exists objectively’, ‘is actual’, ‘is concrete’ in the inherent sense. But can we find these criteria?

My claim is that criteria for the inherent sense of attributions of reality exist indeed. They have been considered by many influential thinkers. So, according to the representationalist Locke, our opinions about material objects are justified by properties linked with our ideas of senses like their involuntary character, by their orderly and coherent fit together reflecting law-governance, and by their awareness from others.¹¹ According to the imaterialist Berkeley, ideas formed by imagination are faint, indistinct and also entirely dependent of the will, while ideas perceived by sense are vivid and clear and have no dependence of our will.¹² For Hume too, perceptions of real things enter with most force and violence into the soul, differently from the faint images of them in thinking and reasoning.¹³ For Kant, the conformity to the law (*Gesetzmäßigkeit*) of all objects of experience is what defines the formal aspect of nature.¹⁴ For J. S. Mill the external (material) world is made of continuous or warranted possibilities of sensation, following from one another according to laws.¹⁵ According to Gottlob Frege, the main criterion of *objectivity* is the interpersonal access, followed by the independence of will, while the main criterion of *reality* is the spatial and/or temporal location; hence, the realm of *objective reality* is for him built by those things that are interpersonally accessible and spatially and/or temporally given.¹⁶ In a paper G. E. Moore summarizes the properties of external reality saying that real is what is independent of the mind, what is verifiable by others, what is always connected with certain other things, having in this way certain causes, effects and accompaniments (I would say, following regularities), and what has the highest degree of reality.¹⁷ Finally, a psychologist such a Sigmund Freud suggested that a new born is moved

¹¹ John Locke (1975), book IV, chap. 11.

¹² George Berkeley (1948-57: 235).

¹³ David Hume (2000), Book I, section 1.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant (1997), § 16.

¹⁵ J. S. Mill (1889), chap. XI.

¹⁶ Gottlob Frege (1918-19: 58-77).

¹⁷ G. E. Moore (1953).

by the *principle of pleasure*, looking always for immediate satisfaction and unable to distinguish the external from the internal world. Only gradually the child learns that the external world, differently from the world of his imagination, does not follow his will, what forces him to learn how to postpone the satisfaction of his instincts and in this way to replace the principle of pleasure for a new one, namely, the *principle of reality*.¹⁸

Indeed, since our childhood we learn to distinguish external reality from appearance by means of criteria such as the greatest intensity of sensation, independence of will and interpersonal access, and it seems to be a *conceptual truth* that world-states without these properties should be said to be non-real or non-existent. Although it was already argued that criteria like these are useless, since none of them is sufficient,¹⁹ it is easy to join them and to claim that together they are strong enough to be conclusive. Doing this in a non-systematic way, we can say that things around us – using the word ‘thing’ in the widest sense, in order to include objects, properties, conditions, states of affairs, events, processes, etc. – are real when:

1. the sensible experience of them has the *greatest intensity*,
2. they remain *independent of our will*,
3. their experience is *co-sensorial*,
4. they are *interpersonally checkable* to anyone.
5. they are submitted to *regularities* (external things follow regularities such as those imposed by natural laws, social norms, etc.).

In order to make a correct or justified application of predicates like ‘...is externally real’, ‘...exists objectively’ in their primary inherent sense, namely, attributing reality to things in the external world around us, at least these standard criteria of reality must be satisfied. Let us suppose, for example, that I hold a piece of chalk and say “The piece of chalk I am holding is real”, or simply “I am holding a piece of chalk”. As far as it is assured that the

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud (1958).

¹⁹ So complains Lawrence Bonjour against the criteria of reality proposed by Locke. See Bonjour (2002: 130-5).

criteria (1) to (5) are being satisfied, I am allowed to think that the piece of chalk isn't a figment of my imagination, but something externally real or objectively existent in the inherent sense. Indeed, in order to be true the utterance "The piece of chalk I am holding is (externally) real" must satisfy criterion (1) because the intensity of the sensations is maximal, unlike those of a dream. It must satisfy criterion (2) because the chalk is independent of my or your will (we cannot make it disappear like a mental image). It must satisfy criterion (3) because it is co-sensorially experienciable: I can see, touch, smell it. It must satisfy criterion (4) because its experience can be the object of interpersonal checking, that is, actual or earlier experience ensure us that it can be recognized as the same by any other knowing subject (usually we cannot share an hallucination; collective hallucinations are possible, but they are usually restricted to few persons). Finally, a real piece of chalk must also satisfy criterion (5) because it must show the regularities of objects following natural laws: the chalk scribbles, it is breakable, if dropped it falls, while imaginary chalks can float in the air, etc. When we attribute reality to things in the world it is because we are assuming that they satisfy these criteria directly to our senses (as in the case of opaque medium-sized dry goods) or indirectly, by means of some kind of sensible effect (as in the case of mesons and electromagnetic waves). Being all these criteria satisfied, the piece of chalk must be unavoidably seen as inherently real. It is in this way that we succeed to incorporate a thing among other things into a space-temporal system of things according to the rules of the thing-language (in this case the criterial rules) as Carnap requires for his internal questions of existence,

There is a further semantic point about the inherent sense of our conceptual expressions for external reality, which is ignored in Carnap's approach. It is not improper to use concept-words like 'real' or 'exists' in order to claim that our external world *as a whole* is objectively real or exists externally, in so far as by 'our external world' we mean something like the mereological sum of the things we think that satisfy our standard criteria of external reality. These things are not only those objects, properties, conditions, states of affairs, events, processes, etc., that in the present moment are satisfying (directly or not) our standard criteria of external reality (like this computer monitor and the electric energy that illuminates it), but also all the other things that are not presently experienced, but which we

have good reason to suppose they would, under appropriate circumstances, satisfy our standard criteria, and that consequently can also be seen as actual. This is the case of all things that we have already experienced, but which are now too distant or inaccessible to us to be (directly or indirectly) experienced. This is also the case of many things we know to satisfy the criteria only via testimony from others. And this is surely also the case of many things that certainly exist but that were not (and probably will never be) experienced by none of us. My claim is that we can inductively infer, beginning with the successive experience of things around us, which satisfy the standard criteria of inherent reality, that there is presently a whole world of things that in a potential way satisfy the same criteria, although they are not being presently experienced.

Using the word ‘experience’ not only to refer to direct experience, but also to the most indirect ones, and having in mind only the inherent sense of external reality or existence, a rough attempt to reconstruct the reasoning that leads to the commonsensical conclusion that our external world as a whole exists, that it is real in the inherent sense, can be formulated as follows:²⁰

1. Many things that are presently experienced satisfy the criteria of external reality (our bodies and the external things around us).
2. Most things that we have experienced in the past have successively satisfied the criteria of external reality.
3. (inductively from 2) There are things that were experienced in the past and, although they are not being experienced now, they (are still able to) satisfy the criteria of external reality.
4. We are always experiencing *new* things around us that satisfy the criteria of external reality.
5. (inductively from 4) There must be non-experienced things that (are able to) satisfy the criteria of external reality.

²⁰ A precise and detailed reconstruction of the ways we get knowledge of the external reality could demand empirical investigation of how the concept of external reality is learned, etc. Since my purpose here is only to answer the skeptics, a rough reconstruction must be sufficient.

6. Testimony is a reliable way to knowledge.
7. There is much testimony of things that satisfy the criteria of external reality.
8. (deductively from 6 and 7) There must be many non-experienced things that satisfy the criteria of external reality, this being known via testimony.
9. (deductively from 1, 3, 5 and 8) There is a totality of things, some of them are (a) presently experienced things, satisfying our criteria of external reality, some of them are (b) things not being experienced now, although we know they satisfy our criteria of external reality, since they have satisfied these criteria in the past, some of them are (c) things still unknown, but able to satisfy our criteria of external reality, for we are always experiencing new things satisfying these criteria, and some of them are (d) non-experienced things that satisfy the criteria of external reality via testimony.
10. What we mean by the idea of our external world as a whole is an enormous amount of things, some of them are (a), some are (b), some are (c), and some are (d).
11. (deductively from 9 and 10) Our external world as a whole satisfies the criteria of external reality.
12. What satisfies the criteria of external reality is (inherently) real.
13. (deductively from 11 and 12) Our external world as a whole is (inherently) real.

This is, if you wish, our proof of the external world. Although this argument is only a rough approximation, it is plausible enough for our purposes, for it seems very plausible that we know that our external world as a whole has reality, that it is actual, that it is inherently real as the sum of all things that we believe to satisfy (or that are able to satisfy, which amounts to the same) our standard criteria of external reality. I call all levels of generalization that go beyond the present experience of our surroundings the *extended inherent senses* (uses, ways of application) of our conceptual expressions for external reality, in contrast with what we might call the *primary* inherent sense.

The importance of the extended inherent attributions of reality is that when generalized to the whole world they seem to capture what is meant by the plain man, when he says things that appear to be philosophically naïve like “It is obvious that the external world (as a whole) exists” or “Only a madman would doubt the reality of our world”. He is intending

to say that we have a good inferential basis to believe that the whole world, as a sum of its presently experienced, already experienced, and yet non-experienced constituents, is able to satisfy the criteria of inherent reality and therefore actually exists. The existence of an extended inherent sense of reality can explain why we think that the statement (1a), which states that we know that our external world *has* reality, is true, for (1a) is the widest expression of this sense; it also explains why we have the strange feeling that it answers an internal question of existence.

The inherent senses of the concept of external reality are familiar and non-problematic. Their examination shows that Carnap was mistaken as he thought that one cannot meaningfully pose something of a kind similar to an internal question about the reality of our world as a whole, since this question would be unverifiable and metaphysical. He thought this because with the internal question he had in mind only the primary inherent sense of our attributions of external reality, along with some near extensions of it, without visualizing the possibility of its inductive generalization to the whole world. However, we have already seen how, based on an inductive process that begins with the satisfaction of the standard criteria of reality, we may arrive at the justified knowledge that the whole external world referred by us is real.

5. The Adherent Attributions of Reality

Let us suppose that I take a drug that for some hours produces in me a perfect hallucination of a world like ours. Afterwards I can say to myself: “This was a world of my imagination, not the real one”, for I have reasons to think so. In this case I am not disattributing reality in the inherent sense, because the standard criteria of reality were satisfied. In this case, I suggest, I would be disattributing reality in the *adherent* sense of the word.

What are the criteria for this adherent kind of attribution of reality? We can explore this point by imagining skeptical thought-experiments. For instance if we suppose that one morning I wake up in a completely different environment, with a different body and surrounded by strange creatures. They explain to me that until now I have not lived in the real world. They tell me that in the whole of my previous life I was a brain in a vat,

monitored by a supercomputer simulating the external reality. They say that this is a usual pedagogical procedure to foster mind diversity on the planet Omega, where each new brain receives, in its brain formation, a different program, which in my case happened to be the “Philosophy Lecturer on Earth”. But now, they explain further, my brain has been implanted in a real body, and I will have to live my life in the really real world. Since all my further experiences turn out to be in full agreement with the explanations given to me, I gradually come to the conclusion that what they say is true, that the world I have experienced until now was not the real world, but indeed a virtual one.

It is important to see that I can find criteria leading me to this adherent disattribution of reality. However, they have nothing directly to do with the standard criteria for any inherent sense of external reality! For the highest intensity of experience, the independence of the will, the co-sensoriality, the possibility of interpersonal access, etc., were all already given to me when I was living my life as a brain in a vat on Earth, as much as now on the planet Omega. I can even say that my world – as I was a brain in a vat – was actual, it had reality, neither more nor less than the world being presented to me now. Consequently, my conclusion that my previous world was not the real one is achieved by means of adherent criteria of reality, which can be summed up as *the coherence of the new information with the new and old experiences I have lived*. The old world was not adherently real, although only relatively to the new one. The criteria are also very different and the only link between them is that the criteria of reality in the adherent sense are used to choose between two conflictive realities that already satisfy the inherent criteria of reality, differentiating one of them as an illusion-making by-product of the other.

A further thought-experiment can show that we can imagine criteria working in order to suggest that not only the past, but also the actual and the future world is not the (adherently) real one. Let us suppose that in the civilization of the planet Omega, instead of the death penalty, criminals are condemned to live their remaining lives as brains in vats. After hearing the penalty, the criminal is put to sleep and his brain is removed and immersed in a vat, where he can live a perfectly normal wicked life, although being disturbingly conscious that he is living in a virtual world where all reality is produced by a supercomputer. The person will live in a world that is perfectly real (actual) in the inherent sense, but one which

he *knows* that is and will remain virtual, namely, not real in the adherent sense. (This should not sound so strange: we can have a bad dream and, being half-awake, based on our awareness and memories, assure ourselves that we are only dreaming.) Also here we can have criteria for the adherent non-reality of a world relatively to another, and in this sense to know that one of them is not the real one.

Something similar might be said about some disattributions of adherent reality concerning *parts* of the world. In an experiment with artificial reality, a person uses a special glove to close his hand around the holographic projection of a cup of tea. Inherent criteria like intensity, co-sensoriality, even interpersonality, might be satisfied. In this way the holographic projection gains some inherent reality. But the fact that the person knows that it is an experiment, along with the circumstances surrounding them, serves as a criterion to make him sure that the cup of tea he is holding is adherently unreal relatively to the external world as it is known. In this way, the adherent reality of what is represented by the statement *p* can be also contested.

Against examinations such as these it could be objected that such criterial knowledge that the external world or even parts of it are adherently real or unreal is rather feeble. It could be, for example, that the new world from our first example was another figment of reality, just as the first one, only that a new program, called “Being awoken from a life as a brain in a vat”, is implemented in the place of the old “Philosophy Lecturer on Earth” program. It is also possible that my past life until this event was in the real world, and that my brain was extracted from my head by aliens and then put in a vat, where the new program was implemented. It is even possible that the person in our third case is a brain in a vat and the supposed holographic projection is the only real thing he is having access to, with the help of a robotic arm, outside his artificial world! In conclusion: diversely from the cases of the standard criteria of inherent reality, which are non-defeasible when in fact given, the criteria for adherent reality are defeasible, even when in fact given, what means that we can’t really know whether a world is *ultimately* the real one.

In order to answer this objection, we need to distinguish between two conceivable uses or senses of adherent attributions of reality: a *relative* one, considered in our thought-experiments with skeptical hypotheses, and a *non-relative* or *ultimate* or *absolute* one. The

sense of a word is relative when it is gained by contrast within a context. The word ‘small’, for example, has a relative sense; a baby elephant is small relatively to elephants, but it is big relatively to a mice.²¹ The same is the case with the concept of external reality as it is considered in the skeptical thought-experiments. Its sense is relative, gained only within the context created by a skeptical hypothesis that has been shown to be true in the light of the given evidences, even when taking into consideration that such evidences can be always defeated by new ones. I sustain that this relative sense of our adherent attributions of reality, though not very helpful, is legitimate, since we can conceive of criteria for it.

Consider now the supposed non-relative or ultimate or absolute sense of our adherent kinds of attributions of reality. It should answer the question whether our world is ultimately the real one, beyond any possibility of doubt arising from skeptical hypotheses. It seems clear that such criteria for ultimate reality cannot be truly available to us. Therefore, the answer to the objection that we cannot really know that a world is adherently real, for the criteria for adherent reality are defeasible, is affirmative, as far as we understand it as concerning its ultimate adherent reality, though not when we understand it as concerning its relative adherent reality against the background of a skeptical scenario that has shown to be the case. Reflection on this shows why we think that the statement (1b), saying that we know that (independently from any skeptical hypothesis) our world is the ultimately real one, must be false. We cannot possibly know so much because we lack criteria to know that the external world is ultimately real or that any skeptical hypotheses are false or, when we have evidences for their truth, that they could not be defeated by others that could be also defeated and so *ad indefinitum*. From this we may conclude that we are also unable to know that parts of our external world are ultimately real in the adherent sense, a conclusion that extends itself to any *p* statement. Indeed, we cannot know whether our hands are *ultimately* real.

Carnap would certainly give another answer to this question. He would say that we in fact attribute ultimate reality in the adherent sense to our external world as the result of a *posit*, of a *pragmatic decision*, based on grounds like expedience, fruitfulness and efficiency of a linguistic framework. However, as Stroud has convincingly argued, not only

²¹ Irwing Copi (1972: 93).

does there seems to be no valid alternative to the thing-language, but also it does not seem to make any sense the idea that the existence of the external world depends on our decision to adopt a linguistic framework.²²

More plausibly, David Deutsch has argued for the greater simplicity of the hypothesis that our world is the ultimately real one. According to him, skeptical hypotheses require a world that is actually far more complicated than the idea that our world is the real one, for they are *parasitic* to the first one. This would require more complexity than the external world as it is known. Consequently, the skeptical hypothesis is not as simple and economical as what he calls the commonsense view, and should be rejected for this reason.²³ However, simplicity is an epistemic virtue insofar as it is *theoretical*, as when we make comparison between scientific theories with similar scope. Simplicity does not seem to be an epistemic virtue when it is factual simplicity, concerning concrete states of affairs. Compare the claim that there is only one egg in the basket with the claim that there are twelve eggs. Because the first alternative is factually simpler, it is not more probable than the second. Similarly, since the simplicity considered by Deutsch is factual rather than theoretical, it does not seem to count as a reason for the truth of the statement that the reality of our external world is the ultimate one.

It seems also that we are really unable to know the ultimate adherent reality or unreality of an external world. But we should not be afraid of this conclusion, since it shows itself as an inoffensive truth when we think that we do not have any criteria for knowledge here and since expressions without criteria are devoid of meaning. If we accept this, then the statement “The external world is ultimately real” (in the adherent sense) is as devoid of sense as the statement “The whole world (with all things within) doubled its size in the last night”, which, being unverifiable, is useless like the loose wheel in the machine, to use a metaphor from Wittgenstein. The statement “We do not know whether the external world is (ultimately) real” is like the statement “We do not know whether the whole world doubled its size in the last night”, which might not be completely senseless, but is vacuous enough to be inoffensive. Our world counts for us through the quality of being inherently real

²² Barry Stroud (1984), chap. 5.

²³ David Deutsch (1995).

(intense in the highest degree, independent of the will, public, etc.) and not of being the adherently real world in the ultimate sense, for we would never be in the condition to know it.

Why is it then that the question whether our external world is adherently real in the absolute or ultimate sense does not *seem* devoid of meaning? In my view all that we have here is an impression of meaning that can arise from two sources. The first is the confusion of the adherent with the extended inherent sense of our attributions of reality to the whole world. In the last sense is perfectly correct to say that our external world is real. There seems to be, however, a deeper source, which is a confusion of the relative sense of the adherent attributions of reality – only possible against the background of skeptical hypotheses in the imaginary case in which they show themselves to be true – with an absolute or ultimate sense of these attributions, which is devoid of criteria, but which is at stake when we ask whether our external world (or part of it) is in the adherent sense *the* real one. Our access to the relative sense of attributions of reality, provided by the consideration of skeptical hypotheses, added with our lack of awareness of these fine semantic distinctions, leads us to see the absolute or ultimate sense of attributions of reality as it were something meaningful, when it is in fact only a semantic *fata morgana*.

6. Recapitulating What We Have Learnt So Far

The result of our investigation is that we have:

(α) The *inherent senses* of attributions of external reality, based on the standard criteria of reality (1) to (5). These inherent senses form a scale that begins with the primary inherent sense and continues with various degrees of extended adherent sense, culminating in its application to the whole world. These senses can be explained as follows:

($\alpha 1$) The *primary inherent sense* of the conceptual expressions for external reality. This sense is basically constituted by the application of criterial rules for the satisfaction of the standard criteria presently given to us, when we acknowledge reality to things around us. (Example: my hands, this paper, this table, are real.)

(α 2) The *extended inherent sense* of the concept-words for external reality. This sense extends inductively the application of standard criteria of reality to what is not presently experienced, concluding that there are also many non-presently given things which also satisfy them. In this sense we can say that our world as a whole, or great extensions of it, have reality, actuality. The plain man is appealing to this sense when he claims: “Of course the external world is real; were it not real, it would not be our external world”. (When this sense is meant, it also answers affirmatively a kind of internal question of existence about the whole thing-world, *pace* Carnap.)

(β) The *adherent sense* of concept-words for external reality. In this sense, conceptual expressions for external reality do not have ultimate criteria for their application, which deprives them of meaning. Consequently, we can't know whether our external world is ultimately real, and we can't know whether the skeptical hypotheses are ultimately false or even true. Nevertheless, it seems that the question concerning the ultimate reality of one world is meaningful. For if this were not the case, how would we make sense of skeptical hypotheses? In my view the meaningfulness of the questions concerning the ultimate adherent reality is an illusion. These questions seem to be meaningful because of the fact that in the skeptical context we are still able to conceive of criteria for using the concept of external reality in a *relative* adherent sense. So one would have some criteria of coherence to deny the reality of the experienced world of a brain-in-a-vat relatively to the new world where he or she is presently living, as we can see in films like *Matrix* and *The Real Thing*. But this should not mislead us into thinking that an ultimate or absolute attribution of adherent reality could make sense. Indeed, the relative adherent sense, which is valid only against backgrounds like those of a dream or of a skeptical scenario, seems to replace all that might be meant by external questions of existence.

Finally, we are now prepared to advance our general thesis about the skeptics. When he says that we do not know whether the external world is real, he is allowed to say this by considering the concept of external reality in its supposedly adherent (non-relative) sense. Indeed, we cannot know so much. Based on this he can even infer that we are unable to know the *adherent* reality of any trivial proposition *p*, which is true but trivial. Nonetheless, the skeptic cannot, based on this, infer that we don't know *p* in its inherent reality, namely,

in its actuality, independence, publicity, since the things constituting our world continue to satisfy the standard criteria of external reality. As we will see, this is precisely what the skeptic is trying to do.

7. Refuting the Argument from Ignorance

Now we come to the last stage of our argument, which consists in applying the semantic distinctions between different kinds of attributions of reality to the skeptical and anti-skeptical arguments. Consider first the expanded form of the argument from ignorance (dropping the dispensable word ‘external’ for clarity):

I-b

1. If I know that I have two *real* hands, then I know that I am not *in reality* a brain in a vat.
2. I do not know whether I am not *in reality* a brain in a vat.
3. I don’t know whether I have two *real* hands. (1, 2 MT)

At first sight, this more explicit form of the argument is also flawless. However, it is easy to show that in this form – and consequently also in its original form – the argument cannot stand up. This is done by making the kinds of attributions of reality explicit. By doing this we get two straight ways of interpreting the attributions of reality that make sense, or at least seem to make sense, a weaker and a stronger.

(a) Under the weak interpretation of the attributions of reality in the argument, the skeptic is trying to convince us that we cannot know that all our knowledge of things belonging to the external world are not part of an universal illusion. In this case, all the attributions of reality in the argument would be understood as coherently belonging to the *adherent* sense as it is shown in the following formulation:

I-c

1. If I know that I have two (*adherently*) *real* hands, then I know that I am not *in* (*adherent*) *reality* a brain in a vat.
2. I do not know whether I am not *in* (*adherent*) *reality* a brain in a vat.
3. I do not know whether I have two (*adherently*) *real* hands.

The premises 1 and 2 are understood as involving adherent attributions of reality, what makes them true, producing a sound argument (which would not be the case if the attributions of reality in them were inherent). Indeed, it is true that ultimately I can't know that I am not in an adherent sense of reality a brain in a vat, following from this that I do not know whether anything in the world is ultimately real in the adherent sense, including that I have two adherently real hands. Nonetheless, the conclusion that we cannot know the ultimate adherent reality of those things is trivial and wholly inoffensive. As we have already seen, to deny the knowledge of the ultimate adherent reality of our world amounts to the same as to deny that we know that the whole world doubled its size in the last night or to deny that we know that someone died the day after tomorrow or that a stone is proud. Lacking criteria for their truth, such statements are devoid of sense and to deny our knowledge of them is to deny nothing. The impression that we are losing something important is false, arising from the confusion with the special case of relative attributions of adherent reality, which can be made against the improbable background of a skeptical scenario that has shown to be the case. This last case would be meaningful, but it is not what is considered when we say that we cannot know whether that world (or a part of it) is ultimately real, that is, intending with this to assert that our knowledge of its reality is immune to any skeptical hypothesis. On the other hand, in this weak interpretation of the argument, our knowledge of the inherent reality of any state of affairs in the world, which would affect our lives, remains unchallenged.

(b) In my view what the skeptic is trying to convey does not exhaust in this minor point. Taking advantage of our lack of awareness of the two senses of reality involved, he is puzzling us by suggesting a strong interpretation of the argument, according to which I also cannot know the reality of *p* in the usual inherent sense, or, in the case of our example, that

I cannot know that I have two (inherently real) hands. He is suggesting that we do not know any state of affairs from our world in its reality, that is, as something having the maximal perceptual intensity, independence of will, truly interpersonal access, etc. and that the plain man is wrong when he claims to know that he has two real hands or that our world really exists! The feeling of awkwardness caused by the argument from ignorance results mainly from this suggestion.²⁴

However, in the interpretation (b) the argument is fallacious. Here it leads us to inadvertently slide from the understanding of the words ‘real’ and ‘reality’ in the adherent sense in the first and second premises, to the understanding of the word ‘real’ in the inherent sense in the conclusion, which makes the application of the *modus tollens* wrong. To explain this better we can write the argument more explicitly as follows:

I-d

1. If I know that I have two (*adherently*) *real* hands, then I know that I am not *in (adherent) reality* a brain in a vat.
2. I do not know whether I am not *in (adherent) reality* a brain in a vat.
3. I do not know whether I have two (*inherently*) *real* hands. (1, 2 MP)

The premises here are the same as in the argument (I-c). But the condition of inherent reality involved in the conclusion makes the argument equivocal, because the kinds of attribution of reality are different in the premises and in the conclusion. Only through inadvertently going from an adherent to an inherent use of the attributions of reality arrives the skeptic to the surprising suggestion that we are not able to know that we have two real hands in the relevant inherent sense.

Finally, using ‘*ir*’ to indicate the inherent attribution of external reality in the statement, and ‘*ar*’ to indicate the adherent attribution of external reality, the stronger form of the argument for ignorance can be symbolized as follows:

²⁴ In fact, religions have contrasted our world with the real one, beyond our senses, and much of the philosophical tradition, from Plato to Plotinus, treated our world as a less real one.

A'

- 1 $K_{par} \rightarrow K\sim har$
- 2 $\sim K\sim har$
- 3 $\sim K_{pir}$ (1, 2 MT)

The unavoidable conclusion from this reasoning is that the most incisive form of skeptical argument about the external world either is sound, but inoffensively trivial, or is invalid, since it rests on a subtle fallacy of equivocation, which falls apart when confronted with a sufficiently careful semantic analysis of what is involved in the ordinary senses of our words.²⁵

8. Refuting the Argument from Knowledge

Now, we turn to the argument from knowledge. Here too, we can find a weak and a strong interpretation of the argument. In the weak interpretation, all attributions of reality are inherent, leading in the argument (II) to the conclusion that I know that I am not in inherent reality a brain in a vat, a conclusion that is devoid of sense, as much as the conclusion of (I-c).

In the important strong interpretation of the argument, making explicit kinds of attribution of reality that make sense and that are able to make the premises true, we can now write the argument (II) as follows:

II-b

1. I know that I have two (*inherently*) *real* hands.
2. If I know that I have two (*adherently*) *real* hands, then I know that I am not *in* (*adherent*) *reality* a brain in a vat.

²⁵ It would be hurried to approach my proposal to contextualism. I am not basing my considerations on the different strengths of knowledge. See Keith DeRose (1995: 1-52). Neither am I sustaining that context changes the “angle” of scrutiny (Michael Williams (1996)). What I am doing is to change the focus from the concept of knowledge to the concept of external reality, investigating then its (contextually relative) uses or senses in terms of criteria of application, which is not incompatible, for example, with moderate foundationalism.

3. Therefore: I know that I am not *in (adherent) reality* a brain in a vat. (1, 2 MT)

Even though the premises are true, I can't use the *modus ponens* to state the conclusion that I know that it is ultimately true that I am not a brain in a vat, since the attribution of reality in the first premise can be only inherent.

Here too we can state the argument symbolically in a way that shows that it is fallacious, since it is equivocal:

B

1. K_{pir}
2. $K_{par} \rightarrow K\sim har$
3. $K\sim har$ (1, 2 MP)

Finally, it is interesting to submit G. E. Moore's famous argument against idealism to this kind of analysis, since his argument is a variation of the argument from knowledge. Here are his words:

I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, "Here is one hand", and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, "And here is another". And if, by doing this, I have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in a number of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.²⁶

Since Moore is explicit in saying that he is not intending to refute the skeptics, but to prove the real existence of the external world, what he is intending to say can be rendered as:

- 1 I know that I have two *inherently real* hands.
- 2 If I know that I have two *inherently real* hands, I know that there is an *inherent reality* around me (at least concerning my hands).
- 3 I know that there is an *inherent reality* around me. (1, 2 MP)

²⁶ G. E. Moore (1939: 165-6).

There is nothing wrong with this argument, which is to me a practical instantiation of the first stages of the rough proof of the external world already presented by us, hinting therefore in its direction. Consequently, Moore's argument has some force against the idealist, as he originally intended, so far as the idealist (like the skeptics) is trying to convey the idea that our world is made from the matter from which the dreams are made. However, this argument would be too weak if used to prove the falsity of any skeptical hypothesis, since they are concerned with reality in the adherent sense.²⁷

We conclude that both the argument for knowledge and the argument for ignorance are misguided attempts to prove what can't be proved; we can know neither as much nor as few. This is the way the skeptical and the anti-skeptical problems about the reality of the external world can be completely dissolved, I hope, as a kind of linguistic-conceptual philosophical bewilderment.

9. The Argument from Ignorance Concerning our Past Reality

A similar argument from ignorance can be applied to restricted forms of skepticism, like that about the past. Consider Bertrand Russell's remark that it is possible that our whole world and ourselves, with all our memories, were created five minutes ago.²⁸ Can we know that this hypothesis is false? Apparently not. In this case, how can we know whether anything was the case before these five minutes? The argument from ignorance concerning the past can be stated as follows:

III

- 1 If I know that the French revolution occurred in 1789, then I know that the world existed before five minutes ago.
- 2 I do not know whether the world existed before five minutes ago.

²⁷ Until this point I agree with Charles Landesman's defense of G. E. Moore in his (2002), chap. 9-11.

²⁸ See Bertrand Russell (1989), lecture 9.

- 3 Therefore: I do not know whether the French revolution occurred in 1789. (1, 2 MT)²⁹

Our answer to this skeptical argument is like the others. We need to distinguish between two senses of our attributions of reality to a past occurrence. The first is an *inherent* sense, which depends on the insertion of our past occurrence in our historical framework. In this sense I can claim to know that the French revolution really occurred in 1789, because of documentary evidence that remits us to the inherent reality of this past historical occurrence. What allows this claim is once again an extended application of our standard criteria for external reality, this time applied to the past. The criteria for the inherent reality of historical occurrences are evidences of memory, testimony, documentary and physical historical evidences, etc. But as such they are *criteria of criteria*, because they work as indirect ways to warrant that the past was real in the inherent sense, that is, that the past occurrence would satisfy our usual inherent criteria of reality (like the highest intensity of experience, independence of will, intersubjectivity, etc.) for observers like us placed in the past. Indeed, to say that the French revolution occurred in 1789 amounts to the same as to say that the historical evidence shows that if observers like us were living in the right time and places, we could experience the satisfaction of the usual criteria for external reality concerning the events that constituted the French revolution.

However, there is another sense of real existence, which is adherent. This sense is external to our historical framework and could only arise in the context of a skeptical hypothesis. Let us suppose, for example, that God created us and the whole world five minutes ago, with all our memories and forged historical evidences. In this adherent attribution of reality, we cannot really know, neither that the world existed before five minutes ago nor that the French Revolution really occurred in 1789. Indeed, in the adherent sense there is no way to achieve a knowledge of the ultimate reality of the past, except a relative one, in this case we have the unexpected evidences for the truth of the skeptical hypothesis, which makes the occurrences of the last five minutes the (adherently) real ones.

²⁹ Certainly, we can construct an anti-skeptic *modus ponens* counterpart of this argument too, which is correspondingly equivocal.

The clue for answering the skeptics is the same here: the skeptical argument is an attempt to confuse us, sliding equivocally from our ignorance of the adherent reality of our past to the ignorance of the inherent reality of historical occurrences as a conclusion. What follows is the most natural interpretation of the argument (because it seems sound and informative), when reconstructed in a way that exposes its equivocal character:

III-a

- 1 If I know that the French revolution *really* occurred in 1789 (in the *adherent* sense of *reality*), then I know that the world was (*adherently*) *real* before five minutes ago.
- 2 I do not know whether the world was (*adherently*) *real* before five minutes ago.
- 3 Therefore: I do not know whether the French revolution *really* occurred in 1789 (in the *inherent* sense of reality). (1, 2 MT)

For the soundness of the argument true premises, dealing with adherent senses of reality, were chosen. But we cannot really apply the *modus tollens* to them in order to get the conclusion because the sense of our attribution of reality in the conclusion is different from the sense of this attribution in the premises, which makes the conclusion equivocal. Moreover, the argument would remain equivocal in the case we understand the senses of reality in the first premise as inherent. And although the argument would be sound and unequivocal if all the attributions of reality were understood as adherent, the conclusion would be trivial, for we do not need any argument to be aware that we cannot ultimately know that the French revolution occurred in 1789.

10. Why the Principle of Closure Seems to be Endangered

Sometimes the problem we have dealt with is abbreviated to form three statements composing an inconsistent set:

- (1) Kp ,
- (2) $K(p \rightarrow \sim h)$,
- (3) $\sim K\sim h$.

This is paradoxical because although each of the three statements seems to be true, one of them must be always false. So, the skeptical denies (1) since he accepts $\sim K\sim h$, which with $K(p \rightarrow \sim h)$ entails $\sim Kp$. The anti-skeptic denies (3) since he accepts Kp , which with $K(p \rightarrow \sim h)$ entails $K\sim h$. There are also more neutral philosophers who reject the link (2) in order to accept (1) and (3). These philosophers do this by rejecting the principle of closure under known entailment, which says that “ $Kp \ \& \ K(p \rightarrow q) \ \vdash \ Kq$ ”. Since the principle of closure is intuitive, and since $K(p \rightarrow q)$ seems to be the same as $(Kp \rightarrow Kq)$, so that the principle turns out to be “ $Kp \ \& \ (Kp \rightarrow Kq) \ \vdash \ Kq$ ”, which seems not only intuitive but also obvious, the rejection of this principle is a high price to be paid.³⁰

By submitting this paradox to our analysis of the kinds of attributions of reality, our conclusion is that the three statements can be true without the impairment of the principle of closure. The argument is the following. Based on our analysis, the first statement, Kp , is true only when understood as attributing *inherent* reality to what p asserts. The third statement, $\sim K\sim h$, is true when understood as concerning lack of knowledge of the ultimate adherent reality of the world considered by h . The second statement, $K(p \rightarrow \sim h)$, would be true when the reality of the antecedent and the consequent were both seen as adherent. This is shown by the following instantiation:

- (1') I know that I have two *inherently real* hands.
- (2') I know that if I have two *adherently real* hands, then I
am not an *adherently real* brain in a vat.
- (3') I don't know whether I am not an *adherently real* brain in a vat.

³⁰ The validity of the principle of epistemic closure was challenged by some non-skeptic arguments, particularly those of Robert Nozick (1981: 240-5), and Fred Dretske (1970). My treatment of the skeptical problem lets this principle untouched.

We can from (2') and (3') conclude (4'), "I don't know whether I have two adherently real hands". Nonetheless, since from this it does not result in the denial of (1') nor the denial of (3'), the set is not only formed by true statements, but is a consistent one.

If our argument is correct, then the contemporary forms of the skeptical and anti-skeptical arguments about our knowledge of the external world only seem to make sense, not because of lack of logical syntax, but because this syntax is used without enough semantic and pragmatic reflection.

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