METASCEPTICISM AND THE TRADITIONAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROJECT: SOSA AND STROUD ON STANDARDS OF SUCCESS[1]

METASCEPTICISMO Y EL PROYECTO EPISTEMOLÓGICO TRADICIONAL: SOSA Y STROUD SOBRE LOS ESTÁNDARES DE ÉXITO

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Abstract: The exchange between Ernest Sosa and Barry Stroud on the possibility of a theory of knowledge is usually treated as a quarrel about epistemic circularity. I argue that it is better understood as a clash over standards of success for epistemology. On Sosa's virtue perspectivism, reliability and apt belief fix the aim of epistemology. On Stroud's view, philosophical success requires first-person accessibility and non-circular understanding. The dispute about circularity is therefore derivative. Drawing on Pérez Chico and Sanfélix's notion of metascepticism, I propose an operational test that distinguishes genuine reform from metascepticism in the strict sense. The result is a way of classifying positions that clarifies what success in epistemology can coherently amount to.

Resumen: El intercambio entre Ernest Sosa y Barry Stroud sobre la posibilidad de una teoría del conocimiento suele entenderse en términos de una disputa sobre la circularidad epistémica. Sostengo que el intercambio se entiende mejor como un desencuentro sobre cuáles son los estándares de éxito de la epistemología. De acuerdo con el perspectivismo de la virtud de Sosa, son la fiabilidad y la creencia adecuada las que fijan el objetivo de la epistemología. De acuerdo con Stroud, el éxito filosófico requiere accesibilidad en primera persona y un tipo de comprensión no circular. Basándome en la noción de metaescepticismo de Pérez Chico y Sanfélix, propongo un test que ayuda a distinguir la reforma genuina del metaescepticismo en sentido estricto. El resultado es una forma de clasificar posiciones que aclara en qué puede consistir el éxito en epistemología.

Palabras clave: metaescepticismo, Proyecto epistemológico tradicional, satisfacción filosófica, perspectivismo de la virtud, Sosa, Stroud.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early modern epistemology turned to questions of justification and warrant. Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641/1984) set a template by testing belief under methodical doubt and asking what would make knowledge possible. The modern project, in this tradition, seeks an explanation of knowledge in general, and won't settle for piecemeal reassurance about particular cases. Barry Stroud helps us see what that template demands and why it is exacting. In his opinion, the answer must provide what he calls a "satisfactory explanation," one that addresses the subject's philosophical perplexity rather than merely insisting that we do know (Stroud, 2000a, p. 100). It is against this demand that Sosa's virtue perspectivism proposes a reconfiguration of epistemological success, and that Stroud insists that the original question has not been met.

The traditional demand proves exacting because an adequate account must range over kinds of knowledge and make the link from experience to the world intelligible from within the subject's standpoint, with sceptical pressure still in view (Stroud, 2000a, p. 114). "Sceptical pressure" here refers to the fact that the epistemological account must work for a subject who is genuinely wondering whether she knows, not merely for an external observer who can verify that the relevant conditions obtain. Stroud articulates this constraint when he notes that even if investigators arrived at a true belief about how human beings know, "the truth of the answer they accept would not give them the understanding they seek

unless they could recognize that they know or have good reason to believe that answer" (Stroud, 2004, p. 166). What counts as a satisfactory explanation, then, is not fixed by truth alone. The subject must be able to see, from within her own epistemic situation, that the explanation applies to her.

Stroud treats persistent dissatisfaction with familiar responses as a symptom of this very aspiration. Even if reliability or competence stories are true as third-person accounts, they can leave open the demand for first-person understanding that the project itself generates. A theory might correctly specify the conditions under which beliefs count as knowledge, and yet fail to render those conditions recognisable to someone who raises sceptical worries about her own case. This helps explain why the sense that something is still missing keeps returning (Stroud, 2000b, p. 151). As Stroud puts it elsewhere, "[w]e know that scepticism is no good; it is an answer, but it is not satisfactory. But being constitutionally unable to arrive at an answer to a perfectly comprehensible question is not satisfactory either. We therefore continue to acquiesce in the traditional problem and do not acknowledge that there is no satisfactory solution" (Stroud, 2000a, p. 100).

This demand also marks a familiar divide. Internalists hold that the factors determining whether a belief is justified must be accessible to the subject through reflection (BonJour, 1985, pp. 31–32, 42; Fumerton, 1995, p. 63; Plantinga, 1993, p. 36). Externalists deny this requirement and propose instead that factors external to the subject's perspective can contribute to justification without reflective access to them (cf. Goldman, 1979, pp. 10, 15). Reliabilism exemplifies the externalist approach by holding that beliefs are justified when produced by reliable cognitive processes, regardless of whether subjects can determine through reflection that these processes are reliable. Yet the question that matters here is not whether externalism correctly characterises knowledge, but whether such a characterisation satisfies the demand that the traditional project generates. If Stroud is right, a theory can be true and still leave the subject's perplexity intact. The internalist-externalist divide, then, is better seen as a consequence of a deeper split about standards of success for epistemology. To adjudicate such a disagreement requires making the competing standards explicit and asking whether either can be met.

Stroud frames the predicament in precisely these terms. Sosa, he observes, wants to defend the traditional epistemological enterprise, and a successful theory as Sosa understands it "would show that, and how, we know the sorts of things we think we know, and so would provide a general explanation of human knowledge." Yet Stroud thinks "there remains a question about its philosophical prospects that [Sosa] does not consider or put to rest" (Stroud, 2004, p. 165). What is this unresolved question? The present article argues that it concerns the prior issue of what would count as success in answering the epistemological question. If the parties to the debate work with different and perhaps incompatible standards of success, technical arguments about circularity will not move them.

Sosa's virtue perspectivism represents the most developed externalist response to this predicament. Sosa (2007, p. 27) argues that externalism makes the demand for reflectively accessible justification unnecessary. We can have knowledge through the reliable functioning of our cognitive faculties, without needing to establish through argument that these faculties are reliable. To this, Stroud replies that externalist theories fail to provide epistemological satisfaction, that is, "a satisfactory general understanding" because they appeal to reliability without requiring that subjects recognise those factors as obtaining (Stroud, 2004, p. 169). A philosophically satisfying account must be something we can know to be true of ourselves. Otherwise, it leaves us in what Stroud calls a "disappointingly second-best position," even if the externalist theory is true (Stroud, 2000b, p. 152).

I will draw on the notion of metascepticism, scepticism about the epistemological enterprise itself, and propose an operational test for distinguishing positions that reform epistemology from positions that tacitly abandon its traditional aims (Section 2). The Sosa-Stroud exchange, often reduced to a technical quarrel about epistemic circularity, serves as the test case (Section 3). Applying the test reveals a surprising symmetry that is easy to miss. Sosa qualifies as a metasceptic on this criterion, yet Stroud's own standard, if truly impossible to meet, may incur the same verdict (Sections 4 and 5). Wright's entitlement theory and Pryor's dogmatism soften the traditional demand without abandoning it. They serve as boundary cases that clarify where reform ends and metascepticism begins (Section 6). Section 7 asks what success in epistemology can coherently amount to once these constraints are acknowledged.

2. THE METASCEPTICISM FRAMEWORK

2.1 Defining Metascepticism

Disagreements about what would satisfy the epistemological project can be illuminated through what Pérez Chico and Sanfélix (2019) call "metascepticism." The term "metascepticism" was introduced by George Pappas in a 1978 article that surveyed varieties of epistemological scepticism. Pappas observed that sceptical challenges could target different aspects of our cognitive situation: some question whether we possess knowledge, others whether our beliefs are justified. A third variety, which Pappas called meta-epistemological scepticism, operates at a different level. It questions the epistemological enterprise itself, asking whether the project of providing a general theory of knowledge can succeed on its own terms. Pappas described this stance as "a sceptical conception about the epistemological enterprise itself, or about a part of that enterprise, or perhaps about some way of conceiving the epistemological enterprise" (Pappas, 1978, p. 310).

As a paradigm case, Pappas cited Leonard Nelson's 1912 essay "The Impossibility of the Theory of Knowledge." Nelson's target was the very idea of a

general criterion of validity. Traditional epistemology, as Nelson understood it, sought such a criterion to determine whether particular cognitions are true. The difficulty arises when we ask about the status of the criterion itself. If the criterion is a cognition, its validity must be established by appeal to some further criterion, and regress threatens. If it is something other than a cognition, we must nonetheless know how to apply it, which presupposes the very epistemic capacities we sought to validate. Nelson concluded that "in a certain sense the theory of knowledge is impossible" (Nelson, 1912/1978, p. 6).

Following Pappas and building on Nelson's diagnosis, Pérez Chico and Sanfélix (2019) identify two conditions that characterise metasceptical positions. First, metasceptical positions identify one or more presuppositions of traditional epistemology and subject them to criticism. Second, such criticism proceeds from an alternative understanding of knowledge, whether explicit or tacit. These conditions will provide the basis for the operational test developed below (Cf. Pérez Chico & Sanfélix, 2019, pp. 192, 194).

2.2 An Operational Test

Metascepticism is meant to classify a certain kind of meta-epistemological stance. Yet the label is easy to overextend. Many proposals in contemporary epistemology adjust methods or shift explanatory priorities. Not every such move amounts to scepticism about epistemology itself. If we lack a constraint on the term, the label risks inflation, covering any departure from a traditional picture, and partisanship, functioning as a disguised verdict rather than an instrument of analysis. Therefore, we need a clean way to mark off reform from metascepticism without smuggling in anyone's preferred standard.

In what follows, the relevant "traditional aim" is introduced as a reconstruction of a prominent strand in early modern epistemology and its reception, a strand that Stroud explicitly formulates as a demand for philosophical satisfaction. The core idea is that epistemology should make it intelligible, for a subject who raises sceptical worries, how knowledge is possible from within her own epistemic position. This strand remains dialectically active in the debate under discussion. It therefore provides a fair target for a diagnostic, without implying that all epistemology must accept it.

The Pappas–Nelson line focuses on revisions to what the enterprise is trying to deliver, rather than on rejecting particular internalist requirements. Metascepticism, in this sense, targets the project-level aspiration to a form of validation or understanding that would resolve the subject's perplexity on its own terms. A diagnostic test should therefore track two things: whether the first-person aspiration is treated as dispensable, and whether that dispensability is defended as principled rather than merely pragmatic.

A position counts as metasceptical when it satisfies two conditions jointly: (a) a willingness, either explicit or argued for, to treat the attempt to resolve the subject's first-person perplexity on its own terms as dispensable for epistemology; and (b) replacement of that aim by an incommensurable success-standard, for example, truth-conducive aptness taken as sufficient even when the subject cannot recognise that the relevant conditions obtain.

A third condition strengthens the diagnosis when present: (c) a defence of the structural impossibility of the traditional standard, for example, the claim that any general vindication of our cognitive faculties must employ those very faculties, so that the aspiration to independent validation cannot be met. Condition (c) is not required for the metasceptical verdict, but when a position embraces it, the verdict becomes harder to resist. Moreover, as I argue below, (c) can generate pressure toward metascepticism even in views that reject (b), if the impossibility claim undermines the very standard the view endorses.

The test yields a classifier that keeps genuine reforms that retain the first-person aspiration on the reform side. It also predicts where disputes will stall. When parties work with incommensurable standards of success, technical disagreements about circularity and related issues become secondary symptoms of a deeper divergence. And it justifies treating entitlement and dogmatism as boundary cases without inflating the concept of metascepticism.

This framework yields plausible verdicts in familiar cases. Rorty's (1979) therapeutic stance satisfies conditions (a) and (b) and often motivates them by something close to an impossibility claim, that is, condition (c). Williams (1996) arrives at a similar verdict by a different path. His critique of "epistemological realism" treats the traditional demand as resting on contestable presuppositions about the context-independence of epistemic facts, thereby satisfying (a) and (b) without necessarily endorsing (c). Quine (1969), for instance, satisfies (b) only. His naturalism replaces the success standard, even if it does not present itself as a rejection of first-person perplexity. Sosa, I argue, replaces the standard and treats circularity as unavoidable at the general level, that is to say, he satisfies (b) and tacitly (c). Stroud rejects the replacement (b), but his view becomes vulnerable to the diagnosis if his satisfaction demand proves structurally impossible to meet— which would amount to incurring (c) by a different route.

3. THE SOSA-STROUD EXCHANGE

The debate between Stroud and Sosa, articulated most directly in Sosa's "Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity" (1994) and Stroud's response "Scepticism, 'Externalism', and the Goal of Epistemology" (2000b; originally published 1994), is often framed as concerning epistemic circularity. The

question is whether Sosa's bi-level epistemology can avoid vicious circularity when subjects use their cognitive faculties to endorse those same faculties.

Sosa's virtue perspectivism, as outlined in *A Virtue Epistemology* (2007) and *Reflective Knowledge* (2009), maintains that there are two grades of knowledge. Animal knowledge requires merely that one's true beliefs manifest reliable cognitive competences without any requirement that the subject possess a reflective perspective on the reliability of these competences. Reflective knowledge requires that the subject attain what Sosa calls an "endorsing perspective" which is a second-order view whereby one appreciates one's first-order faculties as reliable (Sosa, 2009, p. 135). Sosa concedes that the ascent from animal to reflective knowledge relies on and implicitly trusts the use of those very faculties, thus raising the spectre of circularity. But in his opinion such circularity need not be vicious (Sosa, 2009, p. 196).

Compare an ordinary perceiver who uses perception to reach a favourable view of perception's reliability with a crystal ball gazer who uses crystal ball gazing to reach a favourable view of that practice's reliability (Sosa, 2009, p. 196). If both are reasoning circularly, does this leave them in epistemically equivalent positions? On Sosa's reply, perceivers and gazers are not on a par because "gazing is not reliable while perceiving is," so perception can yield knowledge, including knowledge that perception is reliable, whereas gazing cannot (Sosa, 2009, p. 200).

Stroud counters that, on Sosa's own set-up, "what we are aware of in perception is restricted to features of our perceptual experiences," and "the external facts we know as a result of those experiences are nothing we ever perceive to be so." Hence the subject who endorses perception and the gazer who endorses gazing occupy, from within, an analogous predicament. *Modus ponens* on an externalist conditional would equally "license" the gazer's self-vindication (Stroud, 2004, pp. 171-172). For Stroud, even "the best philosophical theory there is" can leave us with "ineliminable dissatisfaction." The demand stems from "the epistemological project itself," not from a hidden allegiance to internalism (Stroud, 2000b, p. 151).

Carter (2020, p. 129) argues that Sosa and Stroud talk past one another because they conceive the relationship between indirect realism and externalism differently. Stroud reads Sosa as committed to the view that perceptual experiences are "epistemically prior" to knowledge of the external world. Carter maintains that this misreads Sosa's externalism. For an externalist like Sosa, "there is no meaningful sense in which whatever perception furnishes us with is epistemically prior to knowledge of an external world, even if it is obviously in some way temporally or metaphysically prior" (Carter, 2020, p. 130). What matters on Sosa's view is that the manifestation of a reliable competence in a correct belief constitutes knowledge (Sosa, 2017, p. 141).

Carter's diagnosis clarifies that Stroud may attribute to Sosa a commitment his externalism does not really require. Yet even if we grant that Stroud misreads Sosa on epistemic priority, the deeper disagreement remains untouched. Stroud's demand for philosophical satisfaction concerns what a theory of knowledge must deliver, and on this point Carter's resolution is silent. A theory can avoid indirect realism entirely and still fail, by Stroud's lights, if it does not render knowledge intelligible from within the subject's own epistemic situation. If we apply our operational test, the question becomes whether Sosa's response to the circularity problem involves replacing the traditional aim with an incommensurable standard, and if so, whether that replacement qualifies as metascepticism in the sense outlined.

4. IS SOSA A METASCEPTIC?

In this section I propose what may be called the metasceptical reading of Stroud's charge. If we apply the operational test, Sosa satisfies both necessary conditions. He treats the attempt to resolve the subject's first-person perplexity as dispensable for epistemology—condition (a). And he replaces that aim with a success standard grounded in objective reliability and competence-manifestation—condition (b). His treatment of circularity, which I examine below, suggests that he also approaches condition (c).

From Stroud's perspective, Sosa's approach leaves the epistemological question unanswered. Stroud seems willing to grant for the sake of argument that Sosa's theory might correctly identify conditions sufficient for knowledge. What Stroud denies is that such identification amounts to the kind of reflective self-understanding that would vindicate our knowledge claims by making it intelligible, from within our own epistemic situation, how knowledge is possible (Stroud, 2004, p. 171).

Sosa's treatment of circularity reveals the basis for condition (c). As he puts it, "[s]ince there is no way to support adequately the view that intuition is reliable, or that perception is reliable, without employing those very faculties; and since the same goes for memory, deduction, abduction, and testimony; therefore there is no way to arrive at an acceptable theory of our knowledge and its general sources" (Sosa, 2009, p. 196). Sosa's move can be seen as extending this line because if circularity is unavoidable, then demanding non-circular vindication amounts to demanding the impossible. He argues that the traditional aspiration for non-circular general vindication cannot be met and adjusts the aim of epistemology accordingly. On the test proposed, this qualifies as metascepticism proper.

For Sosa, this inevitability supports treating faculty-independent vindication as an unreasonable success-condition for epistemology. Epistemic standing can then be assessed in terms of apt performance and reflective endorsement within an ineliminable background of default trust.

5. STROUD'S IMPOSSIBLE STANDARD

5.1 Stroud's Diagnosis of an Unsatisfiable Demand

Stroud's writings reveal a sustained tension between the aspiration to philosophical satisfaction and the recognition that such satisfaction may be structurally unavailable. In Stroud (2000a), he frames the predicament in terms that bear directly on the present argument: "once we really understand what we aspire to in the philosophical study of knowledge, and we do not deviate from the aspiration to understand it in that way, we will be for ever unable to get the kind of understanding that would satisfy us" (Stroud, 2000a, p. 100). Stroud does not say that satisfactory understanding is difficult to achieve, or that it has not yet been achieved. He says that we will be *for ever unable* to achieve it.

The obstacle, as Stroud presents it, arises from the structure of the epistemological enterprise itself. Epistemology as traditionally conceived demands that we vindicate our knowledge from a standpoint that presupposes none of that knowledge. Yet any vindication must employ cognitive faculties whose reliability is part of what we sought to establish. In Stroud's own formulation: "That is where I think the inevitable dissatisfaction comes in" (Stroud, 2000a, p. 120). The dissatisfaction is inevitable because it follows from the demands of the project, from the very generality that epistemology requires of itself.

Stroud locates the problem at the level of the enterprise, and for this reason the difficulty affects externalist and internalist theories alike. He also acknowledges that recognising the structural character of the obstacle does not dissolve the dissatisfaction. Even if we come to see that the epistemological enterprise "is not fully valid, or perhaps not even fully coherent, we will then possess a satisfactory explanation of how human knowledge in general is possible. We will have seen, at best, that we cannot have any such thing. And that too, I believe, will leave us dissatisfied" (Stroud, 2000a, p. 121). This passage is remarkable for its candour. Stroud anticipates the therapeutic move that consists in showing that the demand is incoherent, and denies that it would bring relief.

How does this bear on Sosa's virtue perspectivism? Stroud concedes that externalist theories need not depict us as knowing nothing. If reliability conditions are satisfied, knowledge is present, whether or not the subject recognises this. Yet the question for epistemology concerns understanding: can we grasp how we know in a way that satisfies the philosophical demand for generality? An externalist who applies her theory to her own case finds herself "in the disappointingly second-best position" that Stroud describes (Stroud, 2000b, p. 152). She can say that *if* her theory is true, she knows, but she cannot stand outside that conditional to verify its antecedent without relying on the very faculties whose reliability is at issue. Sosa's response to circularity—accepting that "there is no way to support adequately the view that intuition is reliable, or that perception is reliable, without employing those very faculties" (Sosa, 2009, p. 196)—

concedes the point that Stroud presses. By Stroud's lights, this acknowledgment of circularity leaves the original perplexity intact.

5.2 A Surprising Convergence

If we apply the operational test proposed in Section 2, Stroud clearly rejects condition (b). He refuses to replace the traditional aim of philosophical satisfaction with an alternative success-standard. Where Sosa argues that reliability and apt belief suffice for epistemic success, Stroud insists that they leave the subject's perplexity intact. Yet the textual evidence canvassed above suggests that Stroud accepts, or is committed to accepting, something close to condition (c), the structural impossibility of meeting the traditional demand. Consider again his acknowledgement that the demand may be "not-fully satisfiable" and that recognising this will not dissolve dissatisfaction but merely leave us with the verdict that "we cannot have" what we sought (Stroud, 2000a, p. 121; 2000b, p. 153).

This yields a surprising convergence. In his reply to Sosa, Stroud writes: "What I have tried to identify as a dissatisfaction that the epistemological project will always leave us with is for him something that simply has to be accepted if we are going to have a fully general theory of knowledge at all. He appears to think, as I do, that it is endemic to the epistemological project itself. We differ in what moral we draw from that thought" (Stroud, 2000b, p. 153). The agreement extends further than Stroud's formulation suggests. Both parties accept that the traditional aspiration cannot be fulfilled without circularity. Both accept that circularity is unavoidable at the level of generality the project demands. The difference lies in how each responds to this shared diagnosis.

Sosa's revisionary moral is that since faculty-independent vindication is unavailable, epistemology should not be measured against it. Apt belief produced by reliable competence is all we can ask and all we need. On the test proposed here, this qualifies as metascepticism because it satisfies conditions (a), (b), and (c). Stroud draws a diagnostic moral. The "not-fully satisifiable demand" reveals something important about the epistemological enterprise, and we should "re-examine the source" of that demand (Stroud, 2000b, p. 153). He refuses to replace the aim, which is why he fails condition (b). Yet by his own account, the aim is one that "we will be for ever unable" to achieve.

How should we classify a position that retains an aim acknowledged to be structurally impossible? Stroud's stance resembles that of Nelson, who concluded that "in a certain sense the theory of knowledge is impossible" (Nelson, 1912/1978, p. 6) without thereby abandoning the significance of the questions it raises. The difference is that Nelson presented his conclusion as an explicit impossibility thesis, whereas Stroud presents his as a diagnosis of ineliminable dissatisfaction. Yet the practical upshot is similar: the traditional project cannot deliver what it promises.

If we read Stroud's demand for philosophical satisfaction as requiring a form of validation that his own analysis shows to be unavailable, his position approaches metascepticism by a different route from Sosa's. While Sosa replaces the aim, Stroud retains it while conceding that it cannot be met. The symmetry is imperfect, because while Stroud insists that the dissatisfaction matters even if it cannot be resolved, Sosa argues that we should stop treating it as a deficiency, but both occupy territory that the operational test marks as metasceptical. The difference lies in whether they acknowledge this explicitly. To be sure, Sosa does, but Stroud, characteristically, pauses at the threshold: "I want to conclude that we should therefore re-examine the source of, and so perhaps find ourselves able to resist, the not-fully satisfiable demand" (Stroud, 2000b, p. 153). The word "perhaps" registers the possibility that resistance may fail, in which case Stroud's own standard would incur the verdict he levels against Sosa.[2]

6. BOUNDARY CASES: WRIGHT AND PRYOR

The operational test distinguishes metascepticism from reform by asking whether a position retains the first-person aim or replaces it with an incommensurable standard. Wright's entitlement theory and Pryor's perceptual dogmatism occupy an intermediate position that complicates this distinction. Both attempt to honour the first-person aim while lowering what "from within" must deliver. If they succeed, the dilemma between Sosa and Stroud admits a third option. If they fail, Stroud's standard edges closer to the impossible horn.

Wright's proposal turns on a gap he detects in sceptical arguments. The best such arguments show that we cannot acquire evidence for cornerstone propositions such as that there is a material world, that we are not dreaming or that induction is reliable. What they do not show is that we lack warrant for these propositions. The sceptical reasoning "falls short of the needed sceptical lemma. The conclusion is that I can't get evidence to discount the supposition that I'm right now in the midst of a sustained and coherent dream. The needed lemma is that I don't have any warrant to discount that supposition" (Wright, 2004, p. 169). Wright calls this non-evidential warrant "entitlement." An agent is entitled to accept a proposition when doing so is beyond rational reproach even though she can point to no cognitive accomplishment whose upshot would be evidence for its truth (Wright, 2004, p.

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2   A defender of Stroud might reply that the diagnostic stance is not equivalent to metascepticism. Showing that epistemology cannot deliver satisfaction is not the same as abandoning its questions. Yet the operational test allows for precisely this asymmetry. The test requires only that condition (c) be satisfied alongside at least one of the others. If Stroud's demand proves structurally impossible, and if he continues to hold epistemology to that demand, then either the demand ceases to function as an operative standard—which would approach condition (b)—or the enterprise is held to a standard that cannot be met—which is condition (c) in its purest form. The choice between these readings determines how Stroud arrives at the metasceptical vicinity, not whether he arrives there.

175). The key move distinguishes acceptance from belief. Entitlement confers warrant to trust a cornerstone for the purposes of inquiry, rather than warrant to believe that the cornerstone is true. "It is in the nature of trust that it may be placed, without stigma, in things for which one has no evidence" (Wright, 2004, p. 204). This targets Stroud's satisfaction demand directly. The subject can occupy a rational stance from within—entitled trust—without undertaking the validation that triggers circularity. Wright acknowledges that his varieties of entitlement "fall short of the materials needed for a complete execution of the unified strategy" against ontological scepticism (Wright, 2004, p. 205). The proposal forces a choice on Stroud, because if entitled trust counts as philosophical satisfaction, his objection to Sosa loses force, since Sosa also offers a stance the subject can occupy from within. If Stroud deems it insufficient because it does not secure independent validation, his standard excludes even this softened route.[3]

Pryor's perceptual dogmatism presses a similar strategy in a different key. Where Wright grounds entitlement in the structure of inquiry, Pryor locates justification directly in experience. The dogmatist holds that "when it perceptually seems to you as if p is the case, you have a kind of justification for believing p that does not presuppose or rest on your justification for anything else, which could be cited in an argument (even an ampliative argument) for p" (Pryor, 2000, p. 519). No prior defeat of sceptical alternatives is required, and no meta-assurance about reliability needs to be in place. The central notion is immediate justification according to which you are immediately justified in believing p when "this justification doesn't rest on any evidence or justification you have for believing other propositions" (Pryor, 2000, p. 532). When asked what justifies the belief that there are hands, the natural response is simply "I can see that there are hands" (Pryor, 2000, p. 536). The experience provides prima facie justification that can be defeated but does not depend on antecedent warrant. "[T]o be justified in believing p, you do not need to have the antecedent justification the skeptic's demands. You do not need to have evidence that would enable you to rule the skeptic's scenarios out, in a non-question-begging way" (Pryor, 2000, p. 537).

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3   Sosa has subsequently developed a position that partially converges with Wright's proposal. In response to Liz's (2016) argument that virtue perspectivism leads to trust as the ultimate basis of reflective knowledge, Sosa accepts the diagnosis and develops a notion of "default assumptions" as epistemic attitudes distinct from full belief (Sosa, manuscript; cf. Sosa, 2021, ch. 7). Sosa explicitly acknowledges the surface similarity with Wright's entitlement theory while maintaining that his proposal differs by being embedded in virtue theory. This embedding is what preserves the metasceptical structure. For Sosa, trust is warranted because it is part of an apt performance. The question of whether the subject can validate it from within by independent means does not arise. The trust that Stroud's standard would require is one the subject could recognise as rationally grounded without relying on the very faculties under scrutiny. Sosa's trust, by contrast, is justified externally, by the fact that the performance is apt, even when the subject cannot verify this for herself. The vocabulary shifts toward Wright, yet the structure of the position remains intact. Condition (b) remains satisfied, and condition (c) remains in the background as the rationale for treating the traditional demand as unreasonable.

Pryor explicitly declines the task Stroud sets. He pursues the "modest anti-sceptical project," which aims "to establish to our satisfaction that we can justifiably believe and know such things as that there is a hand, without contradicting obvious facts about perception" (Pryor, 2000, p. 517). This framing is relevant for our purposes because Pryor does not attempt the general explanation Stroud demands. His proposal forces the same choice: if immediate experiential justification counts as philosophical satisfaction, Stroud's objection to Sosa loses force; if Stroud deems it insufficient, his standard excludes even this minimal route.

What do these cases show? They block an easy inference from "not Stroud" to "metascepticism." There are reforms that aim at first-person satisfaction without chasing a non-circular general vindication of all our faculties. They also force a choice for Stroud. If he counts entitlement or dogmatist seemings as philosophically satisfying, then his objection to Sosa loses force. If he deems them still insufficient because they do not secure independence in the strong sense, then his standard excludes even these softened routes and edges back toward impossibility.

When we apply the operational test to these proposals, neither qualifies as metasceptical. Wright and Pryor retain the first-person aim throughout, which means that condition (a) remains unsatisfied. And since they do not substitute an incommensurable success-standard, condition (b) fails as well.

7. CONCLUSION

I have argued that the Sosa-Stroud exchange is better understood as a disagreement about standards of success for epistemology than as a technical dispute about epistemic circularity. Section 2 introduced the notion of metascepticism and proposed an operational test with two necessary conditions: treating the first-person aim as dispensable (a) and replacing it with an incommensurable standard (b). A third condition, the claim that the traditional standard is structurally impossible to meet (c), strengthens the diagnosis when present. Section 3 set out the terms of the exchange. Section 4 applied the test to Sosa's virtue perspectivism. Sosa satisfies both (a) and (b). He treats philosophical satisfaction as an unreasonable demand and substitutes a success-standard grounded in reliability and apt belief. His treatment of circularity as unavoidable brings him close to (c) as well. On the test proposed, this qualifies as metascepticism proper. Section 5 turned the test on Stroud. Stroud rejects (b), since he refuses to replace the traditional aim. Yet since his standard for philosophical satisfaction requires faculty-independent validation, and if such validation cannot be secured, then his position incurs (c) by a different route. The result is a surprising symmetry, namely that both parties may approach metascepticism, though from opposite directions. Section 6 examined Wright's entitlement theory and Pryor's perceptual dogmatism as boundary cases. These

proposals retain the first-person aim while lowering what satisfaction requires. They fail conditions (a) and (b) and therefore do not qualify as metasceptical on the present test. Their existence shows that the choice between Stroud's strong demand and Sosa's replacement is not exhaustive.

The diagnostic test does not determine which standard epistemology should adopt. It is intended to make explicit which standard a given view presupposes, and to explain why arguments conducted at the level of circularity fail to move parties who disagree at the level of success-conditions.

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