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Radical Scepticism and the Epistemology of Confusion

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The lack of knowledge—as Timothy Williamson (2000) famously maintains—is *ignorance*.¹ Radical sceptical arguments, at least in the tradition of Descartes, threaten universal ignorance. They do so by attempting to establish that we lack any knowledge, even if we can retain other kinds of epistemic standings, like epistemically justified belief. If understanding is a species of knowledge, then radical sceptical arguments threaten to rob us categorically of knowledge and understanding in one fell swoop by implying universal ignorance. If, however, understanding is *not* a species of knowledge, then three questions arise: (i) is ignorance the lack of understanding, *even if* understanding is not a species of knowledge? (ii) If not, what kind of state of intellectual impoverishment best describes a lack of understanding? (iii) What would a radical sceptical argument look like that threatened *that* kind of intellectual impoverishment, even if not threatening ignorance? This paper answers each of these questions in turn. I conclude by showing how the answers developed to (i-iii) interface in an interesting way with Virtue Perspectivism as an anti-sceptical strategy.

1. IGNORANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

Does ‘ignorance’ best characterise a lack of understanding (as it characterises a lack of knowledge), *even if* understanding is not a species of knowledge? One might initially think so. Assume—as has been argued variously by Jonathan Kvanvig (2003), Alison Hills (2009), Duncan Pritchard (2009), and others—that the satisfaction conditions for understanding something, X, aren’t met simply by knowing propositions about X.

Even on this assumption, we might nonetheless think that a lack of understanding implies ignorance. Just consider the student who fails to understand basic algebra.

¹The knowledge/ignorance contrast, while crucial to Williamson’s project in *Knowledge and its Limits*, also plays an important theoretical role in his earlier work on vagueness. See for example Williamson (1992).

Isn't this student in a state of ignorance, and isn't this ignorance implied by his lack of understanding, *regardless* of whether it would be implied by what he fails to know?

On this way of thinking, Williamson's dictum that the lack of knowledge is ignorance would need an important qualification²: ignorance would be best understood as a *wider* kind of intellectual impoverishment than *merely* a lack of knowledge, one that is implied disjunctively: (i) in all those cases where knowledge is lacked (consistent with Williamson's claim that the lack of knowledge is ignorance) and (ii) in all (or at least some) cases where *something else* (whatever understanding requires that is not secured by knowing—call this, ' α ') is lacked.

Such a suggestion runs in to immediate problems, however. Let Σ be a set of propositions that constitute a subject matter. A subject's S's lacking ' α ', with respect to Σ , is compatible both with (i) S's knowing some, or all, of the propositions $p_1, p_1 \dots p_n$ in Σ ; as well as with (ii) S's not knowing all or even some of these propositions. If the disjunctive view is to be read as maintaining that lacking ' α ' implies ignorance only in those cases where one lacks knowledge of the (relevant) propositions $p_1, p_1 \dots p_n$ in Σ , then the disjunctive account simply collapses into Williamson's simple dictum; for in this case it would be a lack of knowledge, rather than a lack of ' α ', that is ultimately responsible for the ignorance in question. But, if we are to read the disjunctive account as maintaining that lacking ' α ' implies ignorance in some cases where the relevant knowledge (constituting the subject matter) is present, then we lose our grip on any important contrast between knowledge and ignorance, by attributing ignorance even when one is maximally knowledgeable.

One might balk at this dilemma and suggest that we should differentiate between two species of ignorance: *propositional* ignorance and *objectual* ignorance. A subject S is propositionally ignorant, with respect to a proposition, p, if and only if S fails to know that p. A subject is objectually ignorant, with respect to a subject matter, X, if and only if it's not the case that S understands X.

Williamson's view that the lack of knowledge is ignorance might then be repositioned as the claim that the lack of knowledge is (merely) propositional ignorance *but* not objectual ignorance; this repositioning of Williamson's dictum is compatible with maintaining furthermore that objectual ignorance, *but not propositional ignorance*, is implied by a lack of understanding. In this respect, the view that the lack of understanding is (a species of) ignorance could be maintained, *even if* a lack of understanding isn't said to imply propositional ignorance.

²A comparatively more radical departure from the standard view of ignorance as a lack of knowledge has been proposed in a series of papers by Rik Peels (2010, 2011), according to whom ignorance should be identified more narrowly with a lack of true belief than with a lack of knowledge. For a defence of the standard view of ignorance against Peels' criticisms, see Le Morvan (2012).

Such a move, however, generates a problematic result to do with how ignorance is *overcome*. Consider the following ‘antidote’ thesis:

Antidote: Knowledge is the antidote to ignorance in the following sense: necessarily, if a state of intellectual impoverishment, I, is an *ignorance* state, then, I can be overcome through the acquisition of knowledge.

In slogan form, *Antidote* says that always and everywhere knowledge can overcome ignorance.³ The view just canvassed, however, must allow for the possibility of some ignorance states such that, for a thinker who is in them, there is *no* possible knowledge such that, *even if the thinker had that knowledge*, the thinker’s having that knowledge would overcome that ignorance. But this is a strange result; it seems very much like countenancing the possibility of some disease states such that, for a patient who is in them, there is no cure such that, *even if the diseased patient had that cure for that disease*, the cure would overcome that disease.

Granted, something other than knowledge might be needed to overcome certain *forms* of ignorance. Sometimes we use the term ‘ignorant’ pejoratively to refer to individuals with defective *capacities* or defective *habits* as opposed to defective *states*, per se. Defective capacities and habits might require *training* in addition to knowledge to overcome them. For ignorance states, though, it’s hard to see how it’s not the case that knowledge is enough.

The discussion to this point suggests that to the extent that someone who doesn’t understand (e.g.,) algebra is in an ignorance state, what *explains* this ignorance state is most plausibly a lack of knowledge. If understanding is a species of knowledge, then a lack of understanding is *always* ignorance. If understanding is *not* a species of knowledge, however, then when one lacks understanding, one’s intellectual impoverishment will not always be a matter of ignorance, even if it sometimes so happens to involve it. For in cases in which one fails to understand even when they maximally know, there’s simply nothing they’re ignorant of. Lewis Carroll’s (1895) notorious pupil is intellectually impoverished in a serious way, but he’s not ignorant.

A consequence of these conclusions is that if understanding is *not* a species of knowledge, then the following analogy is an entirely open one, and one that needs filling:

Knowledge is to ignorance as understanding is to _____?

³That is, for any given ignorance state, I, of a subject, S, there is a set of propositions, Σ , such that I would be overcome if S were to know all the propositions, $p_1, p_1 \dots p_n$, of Σ .

2. IGNORANCE AND CONFUSION

How do we go about filling in the blank? It will be helpful at this point to think about what we can say *positively* about ignorance. It is the lack of knowledge, sure, but it is not *everything* that is the lack of knowledge. (A house lacks knowledge, absent any thinkers, but the house is not ignorant. Nor are the dead.)

“The lack of knowledge is ignorance” should be read with a domain restriction: the lack of knowledge, *by those capable of knowledge*, is ignorance. Who is capable of knowledge? Answering this allows us to make this domain restriction more precise. Minimally, one is capable of knowledge if one is capable of belief.⁴ And so the core idea can be put more informatively: the lack of knowledge, *for those capable of at least belief*, is ignorance.

For Williamson, *mere* belief (alternatively: ‘botched knowing’) is what is residual when there is a maladaptation of mind to world.⁵ Mere belief is one (but not the only) *species* of ignorance, one that essentially involves a failed attempt at knowledge. Not all ignorance states, however, implicate knowledge attempts. A believer might be ignorant that *p* because she has never *considered* *p* before, and so fails to know *p*. Even so, we restrict the domain of “the lack of knowledge is ignorance” with reference to those cases where what we regard as actual attempts at knowledge are at least possible.

Is one capable of understanding if one is capable of belief? If understanding is a species of knowledge, then yes; and this is exactly what we should expect given that, if understanding is a species of knowledge, a lack of understanding is ignorance. But if understanding is not a species of knowledge, one might be capable of belief even if *not* capable of understanding. For if understanding is not a species of knowledge, and understanding requires a thinker’s being in an ‘ α ’ relation to a subject matter where being in that relation isn’t secured by knowing facts, then there might be a demon in epistemic hell who preys on the ‘ α ’ condition, leaving knowledge intact. Whenever one is about to make the kind of cognitive attempt that when successful results in the satisfying of ‘ α ’, the demon always preempts this attempt by manipulating the subject’s brain. A thinker who is imperilled by *that* demon is capable of belief (and so capable of both knowledge and ignorance) but is not capable of understanding.

What this suggests is that one is capable of understanding not if one is capable of belief, but if one is capable of making an α -attempt (or perhaps, if one is capable of belief *and* capable of making an α -attempt.)

⁴This claim, to be clear, does not involve any commitment to the idea that capability of belief *ensures* any knowledge. Rather, being capable of belief ensures one just of being *in the market for* knowledge. One can be in the market for knowledge and (due to being in a bad environment) not actually attain it. Even in such a situation, though, one’s belief capacities make one knowledge capable.

⁵Williamson (2000, 1).

In the contemporary epistemology of objectual understanding, the very idea of making an α -attempt is often captured in terms of *grasping*.⁶ For example, according to Kvanvig (2003), one understands something, X, only when one grasps, of the body of propositions (at least some of which must be true) comprising X, their explanatory and coherence-making relations.⁷ The term ‘grasping’ is dangerously ambiguous between a success reading and a performative reading. On the performative reading, grasping is an attempt at understanding, one that is neutral between success and going awry (e.g., suppose one is in command of a range of X-relevant explanatory and coherence-making relations, but of the *wrong* explanatory and coherence-making relations, leading one to be disposed to make the wrong kinds of inferences, predictions, etc.). On a performative reading, understanding implies not just grasping but successful grasping. On a success reading, grasping is implicitly successful in the way understanding demands.

We are in a position to say something now about how to fill in our blank: knowledge is to ignorance as understanding is to _____. The lack of knowledge, for those capable of belief, is ignorance, where belief is a knowledge attempt⁸, and where *mere* belief is both (i) a botched instance of what it is attempting (knowledge) as well as a species of ignorance. By parity of reasoning, a *species of* what fills in our blank will be something that’s both an attempt at understanding, and such that a *mere* instance of it is both (i) a botched instance of what it is attempting (understanding) as well as a species of what it is the understanding-capable individual lacks when she lacks understanding.

Mere (performative) grasping fits this description. Knowledge is to belief as understanding is to mere performative grasping (hereafter, p-grasping). Mere belief is a species of ignorance, the lack of knowledge, and mere p-grasping is a species of *what* which is the lack of understanding?

I submit that the best candidate here is *confusion*—and thus, that knowledge is to ignorance as understanding is to confusion; a *lack* of knowledge, for those capable of belief, is ignorance, and a lack of understanding, for those capable of p-grasping (as opposed to: those capable of belief), is confusion.⁹

⁶For an overview, see Gordon (2017).

⁷For an knowledge-based account of objectual understanding, where basing relations between known propositions render the need for a separate grasping condition otiose, see Kelp (2015).

⁸Note that one needn’t be a ‘knowledge-firster’ to accept the position that belief is a kind of botched knowing; the use of this idea accordingly doesn’t involve any antecedent commitment to regarding knowledge as a theoretical primitive.

⁹The analogy requires one caveat. Whereas one who has never made an attempt at believing a proposition, *p*, can nonetheless be ignorant with respect to *p*—our 16th century ancestors ignorant with respect to propositions only recently learned about quantum mechanics, and which they’d never considered—it seems less felicitous to say that those who have never made an attempt to p-grasp some phenomenon are

Confusion is more complicated than ignorance. There are three fundamentally different ways in which p-grasping might miss the mark of understanding. First, one might have bad *inputs*; in such a case, even a competent grasp of the coherence and explanatory relations between these bad inputs falls short of understanding. Second, one might have good inputs, but grasp the wrong kind coherence and explanatory relations (competently or otherwise) between these good inputs. Third, one might have good inputs, and grasp the *right* coherence and explanatory relations between these good inputs, but do so incompetently. Call the first sort of confusion *wayward* confusion, the second *misguided* confusion, and the third *misapprehended* confusion.

3. RADICAL SCEPTICISM AND CONFUSION

What would a radical sceptical argument look like that targeted understanding by threatening *confusion*, even if not by threatening ignorance? We can envision (at least) three varieties of such an argument, varieties which threaten wayward, misguided and misapprehended confusion respectively.

Our first step to this end will be to articulate a general kind of understanding-based sceptical scenario I'll call a *confusion hypothesis*. Descartes' demon is a deceiving demon, one that threatened ignorance via threatening deception. The demon that will be relevant to our purposes will be not a deceiving demon, but an *obfuscating* demon, one who threatens confusion by threatening (various kinds of) defective p-grasping.

Ours will not be the first *non-deceiving* demon that's been of interest to epistemologists. Here it will be instructive to briefly consider Jonathan Schaffer's (2010) description of his 'debasement demon':

More precisely, the debasing demon can be conjured by acceptance of the following three plausible claims: (1) Knowledge requires the production of belief, properly based on the evidence (2) Any belief can be produced on an improper basis (3) It is always possible, when a belief is produced on an improper basis, for it to seem later as if one had produced a belief properly based on the evidence.... Given (1)-(3), the following sort of doubt may arise. For any given belief, the debasing demon may ensure

confused about that phenomenon, even if they are capable of making such an attempt. I'd like to submit two lines of response on this point. Firstly, it's plausible that being confused about a phenomenon is, in some cases, compatible with having never made an attempt to p-grasp that phenomenon. Early *Homo Sapiens* were plausibly confused with respect to the phenomenon of lightning and fire despite (initially at least) having yet to make a genuine attempt to understand it. Secondly, those unconvinced that there are any such cases are welcome to read the operative claim as qualified in the following way: a lack of understanding, for those capable of, and have made some attempt at, p-grasping, is confusion. Thanks to Christoph Kelp for discussion on this point.

that it was produced on an improper basis (by (2)). She may then make it later seem to the believer as if he had produced the belief properly (by (3)). And the result is that the believer becomes debased, in that his belief fails to satisfy the basing requirement for knowledge (as per (1)). So now I might wonder, do I actually know that I have hands, or was I merely guessing? (2010, 232).

Note that Schaffer's demon is one that imperils us intellectually not by preying on the world (as did Descartes' deceiving demon, leaving our minds intact while disconnecting the world from our representations of it) but on our *cognising itself*, viz., by debasing our beliefs in ways undetectable.¹⁰

We are in a position now to conjure the obfuscating demon in a structurally analogous way. By parity of reasoning:

4. Understanding a subject matter requires successfully grasping the coherence and explanatory relations between the propositions that make up that subject matter, where this requires (i) good inputs; (ii) grasping the *right* coherence and explanatory relations between these good inputs; and (iii) competently grasping the right coherence and explanatory relations between these good inputs.
5. Any episode of p-grasping can fail any of the requirements (i-iii).
6. It is always possible, when p-grasping fails any of the requirements (i-iii), for it to seem later as if one's p-grasping satisfied that requirement.

We may then argue analogously via Schaffer's template strategy as follows: Given (4-6), the following sort of doubt may arise. For any episode of p-grasping, the obfuscating demon may ensure that it failed any of the requirements (i-iii) (by (5)). She may then make it later seem to the thinker as if her p-grasping satisfied (i-iii)). And the result is that the thinker becomes *confused*, in that her grasping fails to satisfy requirements that are necessary for understanding (as per (4)). So now I might wonder, do I actually understand organic chemistry, or am I merely confused?¹¹

The most virulent confusion hypothesis is one on which the obfuscating demon preys on *all three* of (i-iii), causing a thinker to become confused thrice over: the thinker suffers all at once from *wayward* confusion, *misguided* confusion, and *misapprehended* confusion. In this woeful scenario, one p-grasps (i) bad inputs and (ii) grasps the wrong coherence and explanatory relations between these bad inputs (e.g.,

¹⁰For a criticism of Schaffer's treatment of the basing relation in this sceptical argument, see Bondy and Carter (2018).

¹¹This is of course an embellishment of Schaffer's (2010, 232) own reasoning, applied to the present case.

relations other than those that actually hold between these bad inputs); and (iii) does so incompetently.

What is required to rationally dismiss that one is imperilled in any, or all, of these ways? What, exactly, is the intellectual gain one makes by doing so?

4. PERSPECTIVAL VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY

At this point, it will be helpful to register carefully a point of connection between two epistemic plights. Firstly, the plight of an ordinary thinker who is very confident she understands basic organic chemistry. She *thinks* she grasps perfectly well how the relevant connections hang together. But she doubts whether she can rule out definitively that she is the victim of any (or all) of the obfuscating demon's confusion scenarios. And this is because doing so would require some kind of assurance that her cognition is not being distorted even when she seems to grasp matters obvious to her.

Now compare this thinker's situation with the plight of Descartes' atheist mathematician, who can clearly ascertain certain axioms of basic geometry, but who—as Descartes tells us—can't rule out definitively that he is deceived even on what seems most evident. Here is Descartes (1641/1984) in the Second Set of Replies to the *Meditations*:

The fact that an atheist can be “clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles” is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness of his [cognitionem] is not true knowledge [scientia]. . . . Now since we are supposing that this individual is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident (as I fully explained). And although this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone else raises the point or if he looks into the matter himself. So he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists (1641/1984, 101).¹²

On Descartes' epistemology, what the atheist mathematician possesses in this circumstance is *cognitio*, what he attains via the deployment of his reliable faculty of rational intuition. But from Descartes' perspective, this thinker still falls short of 'true knowledge' or *scientia*, which requires an infallible assessment that what is evident to him through the exercise of rational intuition cannot be mistaken.

Here are Ernest Sosa's (2009) reflections on this situation:

Since Descartes wants not just reliable, truth-conducive *cognitio*, since he wants the enlightened attainment of reflective *scientia*, he needs a defense

¹²This passage is quoted also in Sosa (2009, 140).

against skeptical doubts that target his intellectual faculties, not only his faculties of perception, memory, and introspection, but even his faculty of intuitive reason, by which he might know that $3 + 2 = 5$, that if he thinks then he exists, and the like (Sosa 2009, 141).

Of course, the need for such a defence—one that would afford him additional intellectual security not gained by *cognitio* alone—led Descartes down a dubious path (replete with a proof of a non-deceiving God) generally dismissed as an intractably flawed ‘Cartesian Circle’.

However, according to Sosa, there is something fundamentally right about the structure of Descartes’ project; the problem with it is principally its *rationalist content*, one firmly committed to both internalist rationalism and infallibilism.

Here is what Sosa thinks Descartes gets right. Descartes is right to think that there is a certain kind of valuable epistemic standing (*cognitio*, for Descartes, *animal knowledge*, for Sosa) that is secured simply by deploying faculties with a certain kind of epistemic pedigree (for Descartes, infallible rational intuition, for Sosa, fallible but reliable competences like perception, memory, etc.), and where this positive epistemic standing does *not* require any antecedent appreciation of those very faculties *as having* that positive epistemic pedigree. And furthermore, Sosa thinks that Descartes is right that we can then *use* such faculties to gain a second-order perspective, one through which we may appreciate those faculties *as having* that status, and in doing so place that first-order status in a competent second-order perspective, raising *cognitio* to the level of *scientiae* for Descartes, and *animal knowledge* to the level of *reflective knowledge* for Sosa.¹³

And so Sosa’s Virtue Perspectivism, like Descartes’ epistemology—itself a kind of *Rationalist* Perspectivism—advert to a two-tiered, perspectival structure, where the ascent from lower to higher knowledge marks an intellectually valuable transition attained through competent (i.e., reliably sourced) reflection on one’s epistemic position.¹⁴ But—and here’s the crucial difference—whereas Rationalist Perspectivism is both *internalist* and *infallibilist* in character, Sosa’s Virtue Perspectivism is both *fallibilist* and *externalist*. For Sosa, the intellectual value of what a thinker can attain via trusting the deliverances of reliable albeit fallible competences at the first order can be improved upon substantially *without* certainty or infallibility ever entering the

¹³According to Sosa ‘[...] animal knowledge does not require that the knower have an epistemic perspective on his belief, a perspective from which he endorses the source of that belief, from which he can see that source as reliably truth-conducive. Reflective knowledge does by contrast require such a perspective’ (2009, 135).

¹⁴As Sosa himself puts it, ‘In structure virtue perspectivism is thus Cartesian, though in content it is not’ (2009, 194). For more detailed discussion of the connections between Rationalist Perspectivism and Virtue Perspectivism, see along with Sosa (2009), Reed (2012) and Carter (Forthcoming).

picture. What's needed is just that the reliability of one's first-order competences the exercise of which yield first-order animal knowledge are placed in a competent (viz., reliable), *even if fallible*, second-order perspective. This is what's needed to *know* that one's intellectual faculties are reliable.

The comparison between Rationalist Perspectivism and Virtue Perspectivism offers a unique vantage point from which to return to the respective situations of Descartes' atheist mathematician and our own thinker who, despite impeccably grasping organic chemistry, is faced with the niggling worry that her grasping might be imperilled via any one of the three confusion hypotheses canvassed.

I think both Descartes and Sosa will agree that our thinker's position can be improved upon, and I think they are right. And that this is so *even if* we make explicit that the subject's p-grasping of the subject matter that is organic chemistry satisfies (i-iii) in condition (4) above. Improving upon this position on the Rationalist Perspectivist programme would require infallible certainty (let's set aside how this would be acquired, e.g., via proof of a non-deceiving God or otherwise) *that* one's grasping-relevant competences can't possibly lead to (any of the three) forms of confusion the obfuscating demon might bring about. If we take *this* requirement as a valid one, it is not evident that it will in fact be met (any more than that any thinker can in practice achieve *scientia* by Descartes' own demanding lights, as in the case of the atheist mathematician.¹⁵)

By contrast, Virtue Perspectivism offers an *attainable* way to improve both the atheist mathematician's knowledge *and* our own thinker's understanding, and moreover, to defend these respectively in the face of sceptical doubts. In the former case, what's needed is (in short) not certainty or God, but just *more* animal knowledge directed to the subject's own epistemic position—viz., knowledge the mathematician can gain through the deliverances of her reliable rational faculties. This accumulated body of animal knowledge then furnishes the mathematician (no less than any ordinary perceiver) with a reliable kind of 'broad coherence'¹⁶ with reference to which she can then reliably and competently¹⁷ come to know her that faculties are reliable.

¹⁵For an excellent discussion of whether such certainty is needed for the kind of intellectual stability it is appropriate to aspire to, see Reed (2012). As Reed sees it, the kind of stability Descartes sought might well be unattainable, but nonetheless, Sosa is mistaken in thinking that merely by assimilating his own externalist, fallibilist virtue epistemology within the kind of perspectival structure characteristic of Rationalist Perspectivism, that Sosa's reflective knower attains that same level of stability, one that would be capable of quelling doubt.

¹⁶See Sosa (1997) for an extended discussion of the role of broad coherence within the virtue perspectivist's picture.

¹⁷In Sosa's more recent work, e.g., Sosa (2015), he has gone further to articulate the *structure* of second-order competence within his bi-level virtue epistemology, which he calls alternatively 'reflective competence' and 'metacompetence'. Important to his view is that these meta-competences have the same structure as first-order competences. They are reliable dispositions with an 'SSS' structure. See, for

A development of the above story is the central task of Sosa's *Reflective Knowledge* (2009), and it's beyond the scope of what I can do here to attempt a full defence—or for that matter, even a full presentation—of the view. I want to instead envision a new application of the model. For when one's *understanding* is threatened in the face of radical confusion hypotheses of the sort canvassed, there is a principled and viable move from within the Virtue Perspectivist's general framework to make in response.

In outline, the Virtue Perspectivist story I'm envisioning will go as follows: what our chemist needs to bolster her understanding of organic chemistry in the face of sceptical challenge (viz., a confusion hypothesis) is not certainty or God, but just *more understanding* directed to her own epistemic position—viz., understanding of the sort that our organic chemist can gain through the deliverances of the very kinds of reliable faculties that we've already stipulated characterise her reliable (along all three dimensions, (i-iii)) p-grasping. This accumulated body of understanding can then furnish our chemist (no less than, by analogy, the ordinary perceiver, or the atheist mathematician) with a reliable kind of broad coherence with reference to which she can then reliably and competently grasp not *only* organic chemistry (as she did before), but now also her own *grasp* of it. The result is, accordingly, a form of *reflective understanding* that goes beyond the understanding she possessed before. This is the story available from within a Virtue Perspectivist framework.

5. FURTHER DISCUSSION

How, then, should we judge this story as faring against the obfuscating demon? There are broadly two kinds of line we might take here, one that is pessimistic and another that is optimistic. Fortunately, in this case, the optimistic perspective is also the realistic one.

On the pessimistic side—one I don't subscribe to—consider things from the point of view of a longtime critic of Virtue Perspectivism as an anti-sceptical strategy: Barry Stroud.¹⁸ As Stroud sees it, *fallible* second-order assurance is no assurance at all¹⁹; fallible second-order assurance is based in sources that would be just as they are when one is in a bad case.²⁰ As such, fallible second-order assurance is perfectly compatible with the persistence of doubt—a point that has been highlighted more recently by Baron Reed (2012). Transposed to our own case specifically: the kind of second-order assurance one acquires by reliably grasping one's own *grasp* of a subject matter is such that the basis of this assurance would be the same that one would have even

example, Sosa (2010).

¹⁸See, for example, Stroud (2004, 1989).

¹⁹For a forceful expression of this line, see Stroud (2004, 171–2).

²⁰For a detailed defence of this way of thinking about fallibilism, see Reed (2002).

if one were, say, the unwitting victim of one of our three confusion hypotheses. According to the pessimistic line, then, the very persistence of such doubt and the kind of cognitive vulnerability that it implies mean that the sceptical threat to our chemist's understanding raised by the obfuscating demon is *not* such that ascending from regular understanding to reflective understanding does much to disarm it.²¹

This envisioned pessimistic line, however, misses the mark. To appreciate why, remember that our chemist already understands organic chemistry, *ex hypothesi*, in virtue of p-grasping along all three success dimensions. This was never in dispute. What she was said to *need* was a defence against sceptical doubts that target her intellectual faculties (those which source her p-grasping) by calling them into question.

Virtue Perspectivism, it should be emphasised, offers exactly such a defence, even if it is not of the sort that would be sought by an epistemic internalist like Stroud. After all, what the Virtue Perspectivist's framework can explain is how—by ascending from understanding to reflective understanding—a thinker can gain a *grasp of the grasp she has* of what she understands, and thus, to appreciate her own grasp of organic chemistry as reliable. Crucially, as long as our chemist is *in fact* reliable at the second-order (whether she's aware of this reliability or not), then she's now got just what we initially said she needed: a defence against sceptical doubts targeting her p-grasping, p-grasping she now reliably grasps as reliable. Granted, reaching a position from which she can defend against sceptical doubts is *not* such that the attaining of that position thereby immunises her from the possibility of doubting herself. But to think that defending against sceptical doubts requires that it be impossible that one doubt herself²² is a confusion in itself.²³

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²¹Faced with this kind of pessimistic worry, one might be lured to either (i) a disjunctivist approach to understanding, according to which there is no common factor with respect to what one p-grasps in the good case as opposed to the bad case; or (ii) to some kind of internalism that embraces the mythology of the given. Here is not the place to adjustate disjunctivist approaches in epistemology (or for that matter, internalist responses to scepticism). My view is simply that the kind of problem articulated here can in fact be deal with in a straightforward way from within the externalist Virtue Perspectivism framework.

²²For further discussion on this point, see Carter (Forthcoming).

²³Thanks to Genia Schönbaumsfeld and Pierre Le Morvan for helpful comments on a previous version of this paper. Thanks also to Christoph Kelp, Mona Simion and participants at a COGITO Epistemology Work in Progress seminar at the University of Glasgow for feedback and discussion.

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