Stroud’s *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* and Lewis’ *Elusive Knowledge*  
Lectures Notes by David Frost

1. When I see a bird in my garden, I say I know it is a goldfinch because it is yellow. But, since canaries are also yellow, to say that I know it is a goldfinch I must also or first know that it is *not* a canary. Or, in any case, Barry Stroud argues as much in his book, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. \(^1\) “In claiming to know it is a goldfinch I was, so to speak, committing myself to knowing that it is not a canary” [S, p. 29]. The goldfinch and canary episode serves as an example of perfectly acceptable criteria of knowledge of the external world (in the form: “to know something you must first know that something else is not the case”). This criterion might be expressed in a more general form and with greater precision as follows:

To know that X is to know that ~P, where P implies ~X.

In other words, in order to know that some state of affairs, call it X, is in fact the case, we must know that a possibility does not obtain, namely the possibility, call it P, which would make it such that X was not the case. And all defeating possibilities of this kind must known not to obtain.

So, for example, to know that *that* is a goldfinch I must know that it is not a canary, since if it were a canary that would exclude its being a goldfinch. Or: To know that I am holding this piece of paper in my hand I must know that I am not dreaming, since if I were dreaming I would not be actually holding this piece of paper in my hand. Or: To know, again, that I am holding this piece of paper in my hand I must know that I am not in the Matrix since if I were in the Matrix I would not really being holding this piece of paper in my hand, instead I’d be in a vat of goo being fed experiences by a system of computers.

Now, we should consider the canary case in juxtaposition to the dreaming case, the latter being Descartes’ famous thought-experiment. When we consider these two cases we might be tempted to see them as analogous. The analogy would be:

\(^1\) Hereafter, S.
‘Know goldfinch’ is to ‘Know not canary’
as
‘Know holding piece of paper’ is to ‘Know not dreaming’

I suggest that it is worthwhile to challenge this analogy. Perhaps the following is the more proper analogy:

‘Know goldfinch’ is to ‘Know not canary’
as
‘Know holding piece of paper’ is to ‘Know not holding (e.g.) a piece of balsawood’

I’ll try to suggest that challenging the first analogy by considering the second analogy can be a fruitful intellectual exercise on the road to appreciating the problem of philosophical skepticism. It will lead to a deeper appreciation than the considerably deep appreciation Stroud offers in his book.

2. To continue to discuss, then, why I think the first analogy is not entirely appropriate, let me introduce the ‘contrast space’ terminology. This will help demonstrate the difference between the analogy Stroud draws and my ‘balsawood’ analogy. What is a contrast space? To take an example in the form of a question: “Why did you rob the bank?” the journalist asked Willy Sutton. “Because churches don’t have any money,” Sutton replied humorously, while basing his contrast space on ‘bank’ rather than on ‘robbing’. The journalist wanted to know why he robs, period; or why in general he robs. Sutton, however, thought she asked why he robbed banks, rather than robbing something else like a church. He answered that he robbed the bank instead of the church because that is where the money is, without answering why he robs. That is to say, he did not really answer the question. He changed the contrast space. What was at issue changed because he took the contrast space of the question to revolve around bank rather than rob. So a contrast space marks the list of implied alternative answers to the question. Consider: what kind of answer did the journalist expect? What was the question (and the possible answers built-in) that Sutton actually answered?
3. To conduct a more revealing discussion of the notion of contrast space I wish now to discuss J.L. Austin’s notion of a “special reason” as cited in Stroud. Austin’s notion of a special reason is, I believe, closely related to what I am calling a contrast space. Austin would say you need to have a special reason that “dreaming” would obtain in the given circumstances before challenging the knower that he might “just be dreaming”. Austin said that you also had to have a “special reason” to ask whether a goldfinch was not a goldfinch and rather a canary; and a “special reason” to ask whether you were not truly holding a piece of paper but merely dreaming that you were.

That the first case needs a special reason may not be so clear. Why do I need a special reason to ask you how you know it’s a canary and not a goldfinch? Well, it’s not that you need one, but that there is such a special reason embedded, perhaps unnoticed by you, in your line of questioning regarding the goldfinch possibility. After all, there are other possibilities that might follow from just the same words in that question. For instance, when you ask, “Is that truly a goldfinch?” you might mean, “is it not a canary?”, or you might mean, “is it not a stuffed goldfinch?”. Which one you are actually asking after highlights the contrast space of your question; and the special reason is why you posed such a question and not another. Your special reason in the first case is that canaries too are yellow; and your special reason in the second case would have to be something like the fact that you happen to be situated in a taxidermist’s garden or in Disneyland, someplace where fakery might occur. It is in this way that Austin’s argument says that you have to have a special reason to suggest that you might be dreaming. He goes on to say that you have to have just awoken, or that you must be prone to narcolepsy et cetera.

4. I believe that the point made by Austin is an interesting one. Stroud might think so too. But Stroud attacks it. Stroud says that he wishes to grant Austin all of his arguments but then goes on to try to show that what Austin is calling a special reason only obtains regarding the social acceptability of making a claim and not the truth of the claim itself. Stroud says that the special reason for demanding of a knower anything is indeed internally coherent, but that its external application to situations of knowledge claims is illegitimate. The special reason, Stroud says, is operant only in the realm of the acceptability of making such demands. It’s really an issue of politeness, or “acceptable assertability”, Stroud seems to say. Austin’s
gambit isn’t going to prevent skepticism about our knowledge of the external world, Stroud is saying. Just because no one has impolitely challenged your knowledge doesn’t mean that you know what you claim to know. It’s not as if we can coherently say that you know what you claim to know right up until someone impolitely challenges you on it at which point you stop knowing it. Or it is?

5. Let me suggest my own example, which will help us think about special reasons and contrast spaces and ‘acceptable assertability’. When leaving a hotel I want to make sure the closet is empty before we go. So I check and then say, “Yes, the closet is empty.” But then my colleague looks at the closet and says, “It’s not empty. There are hangers in there still, and bits of dust, and the carpet is still in the closet.” Was my statement that the closet was empty the false one or was his? Or are we merely debating in terms of what is acceptable to say – in most cases going to such extraordinary detail as he does being unacceptable? Is my claim acceptable but false and his socially unacceptable but true? I think I’d argue that my statement, “The closet is empty” is true, and not just true enough for usability in life or for the purposes of leaving our hotel. My interlocutor’s (my colleague’s) sense of ‘empty’ here is different enough from the one I was using that whether the statement “the closet is not empty because there is dust in it” is true or not doesn’t change the truth or falsity of my original statement, that the closet is empty of our clothes and belongings. The contrast spaces are different; the meaning is different: we were talking about different things. This is not to say that we use two different meanings of the word empty, but rather that the sense of the question was answered by my statement and not by my interlocutor’s. He changed the contrast space mid-stream, so to speak. The meaning is different when the contrast space is different because the contrast space defines what we are talking about. One sentence can be true and the other false without contradiction because they are referring to different contexts or contrast spaces.

6. I will know move on to David Lewis’ essay “Elusive Knowledge” which can help my position. First, note that you might have been tempted to say that the closet was in reality not empty but that we say it was empty because to deal with the endless details of the true nature

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2 Hereafter, D.
of things would be to suffer paralysis. We cannot attend to these minute details, so we sort of ‘round up’ in everyday life; but in questions of knowledge and truth we aim to dig deeper and be more exact. This is exactly the place we were in with Stroud’s attack on Austin – a difference between knowledge seeking and more lazy, acceptable daily habits. It’s the same place we were before I brought in my closet example.

With Lewis I can say that it was true for me and my interlocutor’s context at the time of my question that indeed the closet was empty; and with Lewis I can also say that at the new context created when my interlocutor changed the contrast space, it was true that the closet was not empty. It is easiest to understand changes in context in terms of shifts in time and with Lewis we can see that contexts are fundamental to knowledge claims and, further, there is something we can say coherently about those moments in which context is completely collapsed so that it appears as if we know nothing. Lewis calls this context, “epistemology.”

7. David Lewis’ essay “Elusive Knowledge” is anthologized in the ‘Contextual Response’ section of the DeRose and Warfield book, Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader. But the first thing to say about Lewis is that he disavows any theory of knowledge that would suggest that standards for justification are context-dependent. He argues more explicitly about what can be properly ignored. Indeed, what we have properly ignored when making a truth claim defines a conceptual field, but Lewis does not call this a context. He calls it a possible world; it’s the world in which we have ignored certain possibilities that would de-legitimize our truth claim.

Lewis suggests that we not attempt to build a theory of knowledge based on ideas of justification, because justification is not sufficient and it is what opens us up to skeptical arguments in the first place. Instead, Lewis charts a course between fallibilism (a “true-enough” position) and skepticism (a “there’s no truth” position) by positing rules that would allow us to add a soto voco proviso (a provision added under the breath) to the clause in the definition of knowledge about knowledge being closed under strict implication. Strict implication is what Stroud meant by his notion that to know something you must know that something else is not the case. Put more precisely, knowledge being closed under strict implication means that you know that X if and only if [hereafter: iff] you know ~P, in which P is all the cases in which ~X. Lewis argues for a definition of knowledge that, as he writes,
holds that, “S knows that X iff S’s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-X – Psst!—except for those possibilities that we are properly ignoring” [p. 225]. Lewis spends most of the rest of the paper suggesting convincing rules for when we can ignore properly.

An example will make this clearer. S comes to believe that a piece of plywood is flat by eyeballing it. But S knows that a piece of plywood is flat by using a level to eliminate the very real possibility of error that his eyes might not correctly guessimate the flatness. Yet he is simply ignoring the possibility that a demon might be deceiving him, that he might be a brain in a vat, that under a microscope it doesn’t look flat, and that the level might have been manufactured incorrectly. These are possibilities that Lewis says we can ignore and he explains the rules that govern our proper ignoring. To continue with our example, the microscopic bumpiness of the same piece of plywood, which we said we knew to be flat by the level, undermines that knowledge. Under the microscope, it no longer appears flat. But Lewis says that what is different now is important: we are now not ignoring what was validly ignored before; we have changed contexts. (The word is too useful to drop; Lewis himself returns to using it at the end of his essay.)

The special character of this ignoring is made clearer in Lewis’ discussion of the rules which govern it. We do not have the time to look at all of them, but one very special character trait of this ignoring is that we can ignore only as long as we do in fact ignore. For example, once someone suggests that the level might have been manufactured incorrectly we must eliminate the possibility that it was so mis-manufactured or else we don’t know what we thought we knew. The real force of Lewis’ possible worlds of what has been properly ignored comes into higher relief when we ask the following question: Before someone suggested that the level might have been inaccurate did we know or not know that the piece of plywood was flat? This is the same form of problem we’ve been dealing with in all the variety of metaphors and examples we’ve used, especially the empty closet example. Lewis has a way to explain them all in terms of possible worlds or contexts of proper ignoring. Epistemology, Lewis will say, is the collapsing of contexts. It is the paying attention to every

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3 For instance, “The premise ‘I know that I have hands’ was true in its everyday context, where the possibility of deceiving demons was properly ignored. The mention of that very possibility switched the context midway” [D, p. 235].
last thing which might have been ignored in a certain world or context. This is so because epistemology is “the investigation of the ignoring of possibilities. But to investigate the ignoring of them was ipso facto not to ignore them” [p. 231]. Lewis’ thought here exhibits a marvelously wide range of explanatory power. It explains why we are always open to skepticism (and it explains this from within epistemology itself) and sets the stage for notions of possible worlds which might allow us to say we have knowledge within a certain context.

For the empty closet example, my interlocutor certainly broke the contrast space when he considered carpet-in-the-closet as making the closet not empty. But he has a right to, because his special reason is he decided to consider the carpet, or better, because he decided to do epistemology.

It is the wile of the philosopher to pay attention to every thing which might have been ignored properly in a particular possible world. But it is important to recognize that to change the contrast space, to move from one world to another, is to change the reality, in any meaningful sense, in which we were inquiring. The skeptical philosopher, who seemed to hold all the cards, must (after Lewis) recognize what he does when he collapses contexts. It is valid to do so, but the contexts were valid as well.

8. A good way to consider the idea that certain other contexts besides the context of doing epistemology might be valid is to extend Stroud’s planespotter story. Take the plane spotter example, then: Is the spotter’s statement true when he says that he knows the plane he sees is an F because he has checked the guidebook and it’s a match? Stroud introduces the idea that rules on how to recognize a G plane were left out of the guidebook because they were not useful or would only cause social confusion in the war effort. The plane that the spotter thinks is an F may, as far as he can know with this new information, be a G. So does that make his earlier claim, which rested on the guidebook alone, false? That’s the crux of this thought-experiment which Stroud adapts from his colleague Thompson Clarke. What brings the stakes into high relief is that there is a time differential between a context in which we knew X and the one after the introduction of an ignored possibility (introduced through the
philosopher’s right to do epistemology, through the philosopher’s wile, i.e., the revised guidebook) in which we cannot say we know X.

Well, of course, I must agree with Stroud that, with this new knowledge, one must admit that the planespotter does not know whether the plane is an F or a G. But the really important question is: without that knowledge, i.e., in a world where that knowledge was properly ignored, was it true that the plane was an F, was it true that the planespotter knew it was an F? Before answering, let me say that the smaller time differential is misleading. The thought experiment should be extrapolated. Imagine that the guidebook represented all of our scientific knowledge. When Newton made statements about the nature of space and time, were these statements false in any meaningful way? Or were they true until Einstein’s ‘discovery’ of the curvature of space-time? In some sense to change the guidebook is to change not the question or statement but the environment and context of the statement – to change the only reality to which the statement could possibly correspond truly. When Stroud introduces the guidebook, he moves as if from Newton’s world to Einstein’s.

Rather than asking about the knowledge of the planespotter before and after the revised guidebook, we can ask whether Newton truly knew a fact X through his laws of gravitation such as they were, or whether he did not truly know because he did not account for the curvature of space-time. (You can choose from a large variety of similar stories in the progress of scientific knowledge. Perhaps Newtonian mechanics and Quantum mechanics is a more popular differential.) I am tempted to say that Newton did know and I back up my saying that with aspects of Lewis’ discussion. However, I must heavily qualify what I can say about what Newton knew.

In fact, in his essay Lewis steers clear of any such third person ascriptions of knowledge. The right answer to the question, nevertheless, is not simply, “No, Newton did not know.” The skeptic would say with Stroud, “No, Newton did not know,” but that is not subtle enough. Rather, 1) I would like to argue from concepts provided by Lewis for a way to answer this question with a heavily qualified Yes; 2) I would like to show that a simple, unqualified No which Stroud would give is actually a more difficult position to maintain than he realizes. (To foreshadow: to say No is to practice epistemology and practice it as the collapsing of all
contexts, but without realizing epistemology is the collapsing of all contexts; it is to get wrong something fundamental about our knowledge and the world.)

9. In an important passage in Lewis’ essay, he explicitly says that knowledge as he is defining it is “an unclaimable sort of knowledge” [D, p. 233]. In this passage I basically take him as saying that he would not claim, after the introduction of the revised guidebook, that the planespotter knew the plane was an F when the revised guidebook suggests it is a hitherto impossible G. Lewis is avoiding having to say something like, “In Newton’s own time he knew space-time was not curved; his correct laws of gravitation told him so,” which is not something that we actually say. We say something more like this: “Newton produced a very impressive theory that predicated much more under one theory than possible before. It was wrong, but it was a very good attempt.” In fact, Lewis’ discussion of knowledge allows him to make these kinds of statements. Put briefly, Lewis has given up the traditional analysis which operated in terms of justification; and instead operates in terms of proper ignoring – the more destructive possibilities eliminated in this way the more stable knowledge is. Newton’s was a very stable knowledge. So, more to the point, Lewis does not allow himself to say that Newton knew X when X is later falsified by Einstein as Lewis knows it was.

But there is a sense in which Newton did know something in a correct way. And Lewis is helpful here. It is not the case that we can – knowing better now – say that Newton knew, but it is essential that Newton be able to say he knew. If he cannot, then nothing is ever true. If Lewis himself is not saying ‘in Newton’s world Newton knew’ in his “Elusive Knowledge” essay, I think I can say it here. Lewis’ ideas about the definition of knowledge being under strict implication within contexts and his ideas about epistemology as the collapsing all contexts, allow us to realize although not say that within Newton’s context he did in fact know. Again, I can’t say that he knew. And I don’t. But Lewis’ theory allows him to have been right when he said he knew. And more importantly, it allows me to know things now, even though very likely I will be proved wrong later.

And importantly, it allows me to know the closet is empty, at least until you say, “it’s not empty it’s got carpet in it.” In this way, it allows me to know that it is a goldfinch if I know
it’s not a canary. But indeed it suggests that I do not know it is a goldfinch if I don’t know it’s not a dream-image goldfinch, which I can never rule out, dreams being what they are. However Lewis philosophically *explains* this. He says to introduce the dream possibility is to collapse all contexts and perform the imaginative task of destroying all knowledge with epistemology. But Lewis also allows us moments of true knowledge which ought to remain intact at least until epistemology begins. So to continue with our examples: Lewis’ thought allows the planespotter to know it’s an F until the revised guidebook is introduced; and then he doesn’t know it’s an F. And it allows me to utter truthfully whatever propositions of physics that I might today utter which in 100 years will seem naïve.

So, we’ve already arrived at my second point. You can see that if Stroud denies that Newton himself in his own time could say that he knew X, then Stroud is committed to an idea wherein we never know anything; or wherein we never utter true knowledge claims. We are situated within an overarching history of an always possibly changing guidebook. For Stroud, this must imply that our guidebook is never giving us a basis for certain truth. In this way Stroud’s whole case says we never utter true statements. His change of context applies itself retroactively. But Lewis’ insight is to draw limits to said application. For, we call the spotter’s statement “that is an F” true in his context but defeasible if a new guidebook arrives; *and* we maintain a theoretical definition of knowledge which says that his statement is true then (in that world), even if later disproven by a new guidebook. Stroud on the other hand practices epistemology without knowing what it means to practice epistemology.