

CAN I KNOW THAT ANYTHING EXISTS UNPERCEIVED?

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ABSTRACT: It is well known that G.E Moore brought about a revival of Realism with his classic “The Refutation of Idealism.” Three decades later W.T. Stace wrote an unfortunately less famous paper, “The Refutation of Realism.” In that paper, Stace claims that “we do not know that a single entity exists unperceived.” This paper provides an interpretation of Stace's argument and maintains that it has yet to be adequately addressed by contemporary epistemology.

KEYWORDS: W.T. Stace, realism, knowledge, scepticism

I understand by a sceptical argument one which argues that we do not know or have no reason to believe something which most people take fore-granted. In W.T Stace's article, “A Refutation of Realism,”¹ he puts forward a sceptical argument for the conclusion that “*we do not know that a single entity exists unperceived.*”² In this paper I reconstruct his argument, distinguish it from other sceptical arguments which have been more thoroughly discussed and demonstrate that no adequate refutation of that argument has been offered to date. Sections 1 and 2 interpret Stace's goals and argument. Section 3 distinguishes Stace's argument from sceptical arguments that are more frequently discussed. Section 4 considers replies which were given to Stace, arguing that none of them is satisfactory. Section 5 considers contemporary epistemological ideas, arguing that none of them can be made into a cogent criticism of Stace's argument. Stace's argument thus constitutes a sceptical argument which philosophers have not yet satisfactorily addressed.

1. Stace's Goal

Stace resolves to provide a refutation of Realism, by which he understands the following thesis:

¹ W.T. Stace, “The Refutation of Realism” (1934), in *Philosophical Scepticism*, eds. Charles Landesman and Roblin Meeks (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 114-124.

² Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 116.

Realism. Some entities sometimes exist without being perceived by any finite mind.³

The word 'finite,' here is crucial for Stace because he thinks that without that word, Realism implies that some entities exist without being perceived by an infinite mind – God, and it is not clear that all of those who accept Realism would accept that.⁴ There may be Theistic philosophers who think of themselves as Realists and yet would shy away from the idea that there are any objects that are not perceived by God, since that might be taken to imply that “*some entities exist of which God is ignorant*,”⁵ and that would conflict with God's omniscience. But the inclusion of the word 'finite' also builds a lot into Realism that is paradigmatic of Idealism. Realism, so understood, is entailed by Berkeley's Idealism. We must, therefore, distinguish two kinds of Idealism. One sort says that nothing exists unperceived by finite minds. Call this Subjective Idealism. The other says that nothing exists unperceived by *some* mind, where this includes a postulated infinite mind which perceives the whole universe at all times. Call this Absolute Idealism. Absolute Idealism has most frequently been defended by either the argument that the concept of an unperceived entity is incoherent or else that a thing which exists unperceived is inconceivable. Berkeley's master argument was an argument of this kind. Subjective Idealism is the result of the sort of argument we are presently elaborating on behalf of Stace.

In any case, Stace thinks we can leave God out of the discussion and so we shall. Stace next focusses on a particular entity:

In front of me is a piece of paper. I assume that the Realist believes that this piece of paper will continue to exist when it is put away in my desk for the night and when no finite mind is experiencing it. He may also believe that it will continue to exist even if God is not experiencing it. But he must at least assert that it exists when no finite mind is experiencing it...and therefore to refute that proposition will be to refute Realism.⁶

So much for Stace's goal. He wants to refute Realism as I have defined it above. He proposes to do so by focussing on the example of the piece of paper in front of him, and if he can show that the paper does not exist when unperceived by any finite mind, he will have refuted Realism. But Stace admits that he has no way

³ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 115.

⁴ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 115.

⁵ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 115.

⁶ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 115.

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to prove that the paper does not exist unperceived.⁷ For all he knows, his piece of paper might exist unperceived. Instead, he will raise an epistemological objection to Realism:

I shall inquire how we could possibly know that unexperienced entities exist, even if, as a matter of fact, they do exist. And I shall show that there is no possible way that we could know this and that therefore we do *not* know it.⁸

That is:

(1) We do not know that Realism is true.⁹

He compares the epistemic situation of Realism to that of the proposition that there is a unicorn on Mars:

I cannot prove that there is no unicorn on Mars. But... there is not the slightest reason to suppose that there is one...¹⁰

2. Stace's Argument

Stace begins the argument for (1) by returning to the piece of paper in front of him. Suppose that he is, at this moment, experiencing it. At this moment, he knows that it exists. But how can he know that it existed last night when it was in his desk while he was asleep and when no-one was experiencing it?¹¹ One might think that the difficulty arises even if we allow that someone was experiencing the paper, so long as it was not Stace. The question before us is, how can *Stace* know that the paper existed when it was in his desk and he was asleep? It does not seem to matter whether we allow that I was in Stace's office, looking at the paper, while he was asleep. But notice that in such a situation, Stace could come to know that the paper still existed last night by virtue of my being a trustworthy source and telling him that I saw the paper in his desk at that time. However, if no-one experienced the paper last night when it was tucked away in Stace's desk, then Stace cannot come to know through testimony that the paper existed then; and if Stace cannot know it by testimony, how can he know it?

⁷ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 115.

⁸ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 116.

⁹ He also argues that we have "*not the slightest reason for believing that they do exist*" (Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 116), but I leave this aside for now.

¹⁰ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 116.

¹¹ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 116.

Stace endorses the Empiricist claim that there are only two sources of human knowledge about the sensible world – sense perception and inference:

(2) The only sources of human knowledge about the sensible world are sense perception and inference.¹²

Stace argues that neither source can be used to arrive at knowledge of the unperceived existence of the paper. He dismisses sense perception in just a few lines:

I obviously cannot know by perception the existence of the paper when no-one is experiencing it. For that would be self-contradictory. It would amount to asserting that I can experience the unexperienced.¹³

This argument is compelling, but some care is needed to spell it out. It is not quite right to say simply that I cannot experience the un-experienced. There are objects which are presently un-experienced which I could experience. I have never experienced the underside of my sofa, and presumably no one is presently experiencing it. It is therefore un-experienced at this moment, T1. I could, if I chose, lift the sofa and look underneath and thereby experience it at a later time, T2. Hence, I can experience objects which are presently un-experienced. Of course, once I am experiencing them, they are no longer un-experienced. What Stace is getting at is that I cannot experience something *at the same time* as it is un-experienced. The significance of this is difficult to state clearly. Consider the paper in Stace's desk while he is asleep. At that time, it has the property of unperceived existence.¹⁴ What I cannot do is perceive that property. I cannot perceive the property of unperceived existence, in the paper or in any other object, because in the very act of perceiving the paper I make the paper such that it no longer has the property of unperceived existence.

This leaves Stace with inference. If he is to know that the paper exists when it is unperceived in his desk, he will have to legitimately infer this from some known premises. Stace is quite sceptical about this possibility:

How can I possibly pass by inference from the particular fact of the existence of the paper now, when I am experiencing it, to the quite different particular fact of the existence of the paper yesterday or tomorrow, when neither I nor any other

¹² Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 116.

¹³ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 116.

¹⁴ Existence is not a property, but unperceived existence surely is. It does add to the description of a thing to say that it exists unperceived.

mind is experiencing it?¹⁵

Stace points out that to prove (2), he need not argue that no such inference is possible.¹⁶ Unless Realists can actually produce the inference, Stace's point that we do not, at current know that Realism is true, will be vindicated.

Stace is not content with this alone, and resolves to prove that the required inference cannot be had. He first considers enumerative induction in which what is observed to be true of a seemingly representative sample of Xs is inferred to be likely true of so far unobserved Xs. The problem he sees is that since we have never observed the property of unperceived existence even a single time, there is no sample from which we can infer that future instances exist. "*Induction is generalization from observed facts, but there is not a single case of an unexperienced existence having been observed on which could be based the generalization that entities continue to exist when no one is experiencing them.*"¹⁷ Thus:

(3) There is no cogent inductive inference to unperceived existence.

With enumerative induction ruled out, Stace passes directly to deduction. Deductive inference, Stace says, "*depends on the principle of consistency.*"¹⁸ What he means by this is that if $P \rightarrow Q$, we can only prove Q on the assumption that P. Deductive inferences require starting premises and if there is no reason to accept the starting premises, the best a deductive argument can reveal is that the premises and the denial of the conclusion are mutually inconsistent. Yet, this by itself cannot tell us whether the conclusion is true or the premises false.

In consequence, if it is to be maintained that a deductive argument can be given which shows that Realism is true, or specifically that Stace's paper exists unperceived in his desk, it must be the case that the following are logically inconsistent:

(4) The paper exists whilst being experienced by Stace.

(5) The paper does not exist when no one is experiencing it.

It must be the case that (4) $\rightarrow \neg(5)$, or that (5) $\rightarrow \neg(4)$. Stace insists that there is no inconsistency between (4) and (5) and says in support of his claim that "*If I*

¹⁵ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 117.

¹⁶ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 117.

¹⁷ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 117.

¹⁸ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 117.

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*believe that nothing whatever exists or ever did or will exist, except my own personal sense-data...there is absolutely nothing internally inconsistent about it.*¹⁹

Stace here assumes that because he can imagine a state of affairs in which (4) and (5), it must be logically possible that (4) and (5) obtain together. This does not follow, but it is plausible that one's ability to imagine a world in which P, so long as one is sufficiently attentive and detailed about what the possible world in question is like, is as good a reason as we ever get to suppose that P is logically possible, other than knowing that P actually obtains. If Stace is right that it is logically possible that (4) and (5) both obtain, then there can be no deductive argument that Stace's paper exists unperceived in his desk. Hence:

(6) There is no valid deductive inference to unperceived existence.

Stace concludes that “*by no reasoning at all*”²⁰ can he infer the unperceived existence of his paper.

Having proven that neither sense perception nor inference can allow Stace to know that his paper exists unperceived, Stace concludes that he cannot possibly know that that the paper exists unperceived and so he does not know that it does. Since Stace cannot know that his paper exists unperceived, no one knows that any object exists unperceived.

This is how Stace presents his objection to Realism. We may reconstruct the argument as follows:

Stace's Argument

Emp. I can only know about the sensible world by perceiving it or by inferring from what I perceive.

NoPer. I cannot perceive the property of unperceived existence.

NoInf. I cannot reliably infer the property of unperceived existence.

I do not know that anything exists unperceived.²¹

¹⁹ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 118.

²⁰ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 118.

²¹ Let U be the proposition that something exists when unperceived; K be “knows that,” S be any subject; P is the property of “having perceived” and I is the property of “having inferred” or “being able to infer.” *Emp*, *NoPer* and *NoInf* entail the conclusion:

[[K(S, U) → [P(S,U) ∨ I(S,U)]] (*Emp*)

¬P(S,U) (*NoPer*)

¬I(S,U) (*No Inf*)

Therefore, ¬K(S,U)

Stace says nothing in defense of Emp, but I take it to be a claim to which most of us are initially attracted. What other sources might there be? It might be that there is a priori knowledge of some sort, but very few philosophers would be prepared to maintain that such knowledge was about the sensible world, as opposed to about logic, mathematics and, maybe, some areas of philosophy.

NoPer is supported by Stace's argument that the property of unperceived existence cannot be perceived because that is a contradictory task.

NoInf I take to be the most controversial premise. Stace makes a strong case for the claim that I cannot reliably infer unperceived existence by enumerative induction or deduction, but this only entails *NoInf* on the assumption that those two are the only reliable forms of inference. Stace fails to notice a form of inference which is discussed much more explicitly than it was in his day – inference to the best explanation. It might be that the unperceived existence of the piece of paper I placed in the drawer is the best explanation of various things which I do know. *Perhaps* that is right, but there are still several problems. First, no-one has to my knowledge articulated that argument in any detail. Second, partly owing to the first issue, it is not at all obvious that unperceived existence really would be the best explanation of, say, all of the things which we do perceive, as opposed to some sort of Berkeleyan Idealism, Subjective Idealism, a computer simulation hypothesis or some other hypothesis. Many philosophers have been pessimistic about the explanatory credentials of the external world hypothesis as opposed to these alternatives²² and it is not clear how these assessments would change, if at all, when the issue is unperceived existence as opposed to the external world. Lastly, reliance on inference to the best explanation to escape the paradox commits us to the claim that inference to the best explanation is truth conductive, and it is far from clear how *this* could itself be known if it is true at all. A satisfying solution to the paradox which appeals to inference to the best explanation must explain in detail what the criteria are for 'best' explanation; how unperceived existence really is the best explanation as opposed to some competitors; how it could be known that inference to the best explanation is truth-conductive without presupposing that anything exists unperceived. This has not yet been done.

²² William Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), Matthew Gifford, "Skepticism and Elegance: Problems for the Abductivist Reply to Cartesian Skepticism," *Philosophical Studies* 164, 3 (2013): 685-704, Ram Neta, "Skepticism, Abductivism, and the Explanatory Gap," *Philosophical Perspectives* 14, 1 (2004): 296-325, Enc Berent, "Is Realism Really the Best Hypothesis?" *Journal of Philosophy* 87, 11 (1990): 667-668.

3. Unperceived Existence and the External World

Stace's Argument is one against our knowing that anything exists unperceived. Several other sceptical arguments are against our knowing that there is an external world. For example, the following argument has been much discussed:

The Underdetermination Argument

(7) For all S , p , q , if S 's evidence does not favor p over some incompatible hypothesis q then S does not know that p .

(8) My evidence does not favour the proposition that I am sitting at my desk over the incompatible hypothesis that I am dreaming.

(9) I do not know that I am sitting at my desk.²³

Stace's Argument is distinct from this argument since Stace's argument does not include any premise about evidence favouring hypotheses, nor does it contain any reference to well known sceptical scenarios. For the same reason, Stace's Argument is distinct from the Closure Argument,²⁴ since that argument requires the premise that "knowledge" is closed under known entailment. Stace's Argument does not require any premises about the meaning of "knowledge;" its first premise is one about the *sources* of knowledge.

There is also at least an apparent difference in the conclusions of Stace's argument and these others. Stace's argument aims at the conclusion that we cannot know that anything exists unperceived, whilst the Underdetermination and Closure arguments aim at the conclusion that we cannot know that there is an external world. Yet, most contemporary discussions of these arguments say almost nothing about what is meant by "External World," contenting themselves with a few examples. "This is a hand" and "I am sitting at my desk" are typically regarded as propositions about the external world. G.E Moore once characterized things in the "External World" as things which occupy space which satisfy these two criteria:

(10) could exist without anyone perceiving them.

(11) could be perceived by more than one person, in contrast with sense experiences, pains and similar phenomena.²⁵

²³ Jonathan Vogel, "Skeptical Arguments," *Philosophical Issues* 14, 1 (2004): 426–455.

²⁴ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), 172–217.

²⁵ George Edward Moore, "Proof of an External World," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25,

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Moore contrasts things in the external world with things in the internal world which, according to Moore, do not occupy space and cannot exist unless they are perceived. Ram Neta remarks that this is “*as close as anyone in the contemporary discussion of skepticism about the external world has got to characterizing them.*”²⁶

If this is what is meant by “external world,” then Stace's Argument has a different conclusion than Underdetermination and Closure arguments. Those arguments, on this interpretation, aim at showing that we cannot know that there is anything which *could* exist without anyone perceiving it, where “could” is understood in terms of logical possibility. Stace's argument aims at showing that we cannot know that there is anything which *does* exist without anyone perceiving it.

In this way, the form of Scepticism defended by Stace's Argument is logically posterior to the Scepticism which is defended in Closure and Underdetermination Arguments. After it is explained how we know that there is an external world – that there is anything which could exist unperceived, the sceptic moves to the claim that we do not know that anything does exist unperceived.

That the argument is logically posterior to the more widely discussed forms of sceptical argument does not take anything away from Stace's Argument. It does not make it any less interesting than Underdetermination or Closure Arguments. I certainly believe that there are many things which *do actually exist* when unperceived by me. I do not merely believe that it is logically possible that the rest of my apartment still exists even though I am presently facing the wall. I believe that the rest of my apartment does exist behind me. More generally, I do not merely believe that there could be things outside of my immediate experience. I believe that there surely are such things – that there is a whole world which goes on even whilst I am experiencing only a minute fraction of it. If Stace is right, however, I do not know any of this.

5 (1939): 273-300.

²⁶ Ram Neta, “External World Skepticism,” in *Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present*, eds. Machuca and Reed, 635.

4. Stace Replies to Realists

I turn now to consider ways in which the argument might be criticized. I consider first suggestions from Stace's contemporaries and Stace's replies. Then I move on to some contemporary ideas.

After laying out his argument, Stace considers a reply by Perry which accuses the Idealist of inferring from the fact that we do not know of the existence of unobserved entities, that there are no unobserved entities.²⁷ The critic charges that this is a fallacious inference, but Stace retorts that this does absolutely nothing to show that Realism is true. It is fallacious to argue that because we have never seen a unicorn on Mars that therefore there is no unicorn, but this does nothing to prove that there is one.

He next discusses an argument due to Lovejoy:

The same uniform causal sequences of natural events which may be observed within experience appear to go on in the same manner when not experienced. You build a fire in your grate of a certain quantity of coal, of a certain chemical composition. Whenever you remain in the room there occurs a typical succession of sensible phenomena according to an approximately regular schedule of clock time; in, say, half an hour, the coal is half consumed; at the end of the hour the grate contains only ashes. If you build a fire of the same quantity of the same material under the same conditions, leave the room, and return after any given time has elapsed, you get approximately the same sense-experiences as you would have had at the corresponding moment if you had remained in the room. You infer, therefore, that the fire has been burning as usual during your absence, and that being perceived is not a necessary condition for the occurrence of the process.²⁸

Stace thinks that Lovejoy has begged the question by assuming that "*the law of causality continues to operate in the universe when no one is observing it.*"²⁹ It is not clear to me that Lovejoy does this. Lovejoy describes what would happen over an hour if I were to light the fire and stay in the room. Then he describes what would happen if I were to light the fire and leave the room, returning an hour later. He then writes that I can infer that the fire has been burning during my absence. Stace criticises Lovejoy because, just like the case of unobserved objects, no one has ever observed an unobserved process either. Moreover, for the same

²⁷ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 118.

²⁸ Arthur Lovejoy, *The Revolt Against Dualism* (Illinois: Open Court, 1929), 268.

²⁹ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 119.

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reasons as we rehearsed in the case of unobserved objects, no inference can be made from what we observe to the existence of unobserved processes. Stace concludes:

There is absolutely no evidence (sense-experience) to show that the fire went on burning during your absence, nor is any inference possible. Any supposed inference will obviously be based on our belief that the law of causation operates continuously through time whether observed or unobserved. But this is one of the very things which has to be proved.³⁰

Why does any inference have to be based on the law of causation? Did Lovejoy not just provide an inference which makes no appeal to the law of causation? It at least does not do so explicitly, and Stace does nothing to make the appeal explicit. Stace rightly says that there is no logical inconsistency in the fire existing when you observe it, ceasing to exist when you stop, and then ashes existing at a later time when you return and this rules out a deductive inference all together.³¹ It seems to me that Stace is thinking of Lovejoy's argument as an inductive one. He is thinking that Lovejoy wants to use the case where I observe the fire for its whole duration as part of a sample of similar observations from which I can generalise that fires behave that way generally, even unobserved ones. Understood this way, Stace is right. We can only make an inductive argument like that on the assumption that the law of causation constrains what will happen to the fire when I leave, since that law would dictate that the fire continue burning as opposed to disappear. Stace rightly points out, that the fact that the law of causation operates when unobserved, is part of what needs to be proven if Realism is to be proven.³²

³⁰ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 120.

³¹ Stace, "The Refutation of Realism," 120.

³² What forces Stace to construe Lovejoy's argument as inductive is that he does not recognise inference to the best explanation as a legitimate form of inference. If he did, he could construe Lovejoy's argument as the suggestion that the fire's continued unobserved burning is the best explanation of (i) the observations made if we watch the fire for the whole hour and (ii) the fact that the initial observation made and the final observation made if we start the fire and come back in an hour are almost exactly the same as the corresponding observations if we watch for the whole hour. The prospects of an argument of this sort are worth investigating, but Stace never construes Lovejoy thus. As a result, Lovejoy's argument is seen as inductive and dismissed as fallacious.

Next, Stace considers the objection G.E. Moore raised in “The Refutation of Idealism,”³³ an objection well known for reviving Realism in philosophy. The objection emphasises that there is a distinction between the object of my perception and my awareness of that object. I am presently looking at what I call a 'hand.' The object of my perception is the 'hand,' but my awareness of it is something distinct. If I look instead at my laptop, the object of my perception is the laptop, but the two perceptions – of my hand and my laptop – also have something in common which we call awareness. I am aware of the laptop in perception, and aware of the hand in perception. Moore uses the example of a perception of green and distinguishes there between the awareness of green and green itself. Since green is not the same thing as awareness of green, it is possible that the green (or the hand or the laptop) exists without the awareness.

In fairness to Moore, these reflections were aimed at Idealists who held that it was *necessarily* true that nothing exists unperceived. Against that view, it was sufficient to point out that the object of perception is logically distinct from the awareness of it, and so the former might possibly exist without the latter. Stace's reply to Moore is just to abandon the necessity claim. He says that while it is true that the object of perception is distinct from the awareness of it, it might be a contingent fact that the two never come apart.³⁴ It might be a contingent fact that greenness, laptops and hands only exist in conjunction with the awareness of them and cease to exist when the awareness of them ceases. In fact, Stace says, this is just what the evidence suggests, “*since we never have evidence that green exists except when some mind is aware of green.*”³⁵

From this discussion of Realist arguments, Stace concludes that all of the arguments commonly thought to support Realism are fallacies.³⁶ He ends by discussing the suggestion that belief in unperceived existence is a 'primitive and instinctive belief.' He has no respect for primitive beliefs, saying of them that they are simply beliefs we have held for a long time,³⁷ and that having held a belief for a long time is no reason to suppose that it is true. Stace doubts the existence of instinctive beliefs at all, because it seems to imply that at some stage in our evolutionary history, we just acquired, spontaneously – not as a result of

³³ George Edward Moore, “The Refutation of Idealism,” *Mind* 12, 48 (1903): 433-453.

³⁴ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 121.

³⁵ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 121.

³⁶ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 121.

³⁷ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 121.

perception, but completely out of the blue – the belief that things exist unperceived. Even supposing that this did happen, Stace thinks the mere fact that a belief was acquired in this way is no reason to think that it is true. In fact, he thinks that the appeal to instinct is a desperate “*admission of the bankruptcy of Realism.*”³⁸

5. Other Possible Solutions

I turn now to discuss contemporary epistemological theories. These theories have usually been aimed at Underdetermination, Closure or other sceptical arguments. They have never, to my knowledge, been offered as a response to Stace's Argument. Nonetheless, if I can show that none of the most popular epistemological ideas provides any clear and powerful criticism of Stace's argument, the case will be made that Stace's argument deserves renewed attention.

Externalism

Stace frequently objects to Realism on the grounds that there is no reason to believe it. This might be thought to import an Internalist assumption to the effect that knowing that P requires being aware of a reason for believing that P. Whether Stace would have accepted this definition of 'knowledge' I am unsure – I am still less sure whether he would have thought this was the 'ordinary' meaning – but it does not matter, because Stace's argument arises even given an Externalist definition of 'knowledge.' Follow Goldman³⁹ in saying that S knows that P if and only if S believes that P, it is true that P and S's belief that P was produced by a reliable process. Stace's Argument remains. *Emp* can be interpreted as making the claim that the only human *reliable processes* of belief formation about the sensible world are sense perception and inference from sense perception, and this is every bit as plausible as it would be given a different, more Internalist definition.

Concerning *NoPer*. It is still a contradiction to suppose that we could perceive the property of unperceived existence, and on the assumption that sense perception is only a reliable cause for beliefs about things perceived, *NoPer* stands. Concerning *NoInf*, the argument for it can easily be interpreted as an argument against the possibility of a reliable inference.

³⁸ Stace, “The Refutation of Realism,” 123.

³⁹ Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

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Contextualism

Contextualism I understand to be the thesis that the standards for truly saying of someone that they have 'knowledge' vary depending on the context. In some contexts, a set of speakers can rightly require S to meet higher standards in order to be correctly considered as 'knowing' than another set of speakers requires of S in a different context.⁴⁰ Suppose that is true. I cannot see how it helps with Stace's argument. Stace's argument involves the claim that there is no reliable source *at all* for the belief in unperceived existence. It is not just that the belief fails to be certain, or fails to meet some highly demanding standard. Rather, the problem is that the belief apparently fails to meet even the weakest standard of reliability you might plausibly suggest. Hence, if Emp, NonPer and NonInf are true, there is no context at all in which it is true to say that anyone knows that anything exists unperceived.

Closure Denial

A number of philosophers have tried to deal with sceptical arguments by denying that 'knowledge' is closed under known entailment.⁴¹ Such a solution is no help here because Stace's Paradox does not presuppose closure for 'knowledge.' In fact, it does not presuppose any contentious theory about the semantics of 'knowledge.'

Disjunctivism

Disjunctivism is the doctrine that the mental state involved in a case of veridical perception is different from the mental state involved in a hallucination, even when the two states are subjectively indistinguishable for the person who has them.⁴² This has been thought to help rebut sceptical arguments which try to convince us into accepting a veil of perception between ourselves and the world, only to conclude that we are stuck behind the veil and knowledge of the world is impossible. Whether or not Disjunctivism is true and whether or not it helps us at all concerning the arguments to which it is addressed, it is of no help with Stace's argument. It might be that the mental state that I am in in a veridical case of

⁴⁰ Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism and Skepticism," *Philosophical Issues* 10, 1 (2000): 94-107.

⁴¹ Nozick, *Philosophical explanations*, 172-217.

⁴² Duncan Pritchard, "McDowellian Neo-Mooreanism," in *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, and Knowledge*, eds. Adrian Haddock and Fiona Macpherson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 283-310.

perception is different to the mental state I am in when I am hallucinating, but Stace's argument makes no reference to hallucination or even to the possibility of errors in sense perception.

Phenomenal Conservatism

Michael Huemer advocates a doctrine he calls Phenomenal Conservatism:

(12) If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p.⁴³

Many objections have been raised against Huemer's position. For the sake of argument I am prepared to grant him all of the contentious ground. Let us assume, for now, that there are such things as "seemings" as is required by Huemer's epistemological principle. Let us assume that such seemings exist in ordinary cases of sense perception, memory and even moral and rational intuition, as Huemer claims. Let us even assume that these seemings really are sufficient for the justification of the propositions which seem to the subject to be true. Granting all of this, Phenomenal Conservatism of the sort which would address Stace's argument would amount to a rejection of Empiricism. It would postulate a distinct faculty which gives us information about the world even when we are not experiencing it. It would claim that we can have seemings about the world while we are not experiencing it, and that would be what allows us to know – or at least have some justification to believe – that things exist while unperceived.

The problem is that phenomenologically, I severely doubt that there are any relevant seemings. Consider again the case in which I have put a piece of paper in the drawer for the night. When I introspect, I might be able to find a memory seeming – I seem to remember putting a piece of paper in the drawer. Yet, this seeming does not justify the proposition that there is a piece of paper when no one is experiencing it. I might be able to find current sensory seemings to the effect that there is a laptop in front of me. Yet, again these seemings do not justify the relevant proposition. I have, lastly, a strong inclination to believe that the piece of paper exists even though no-one is perceiving it, but a strong inclination to believe that P is not a seeming in Huemer's sense – since for Huemer, seemings are sui

⁴³ Michael Huemer, "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74, 1 (2007): 30.

generis *experiences*.⁴⁴ In this sense of “seeming,” I cannot find a seeming that the piece of paper still exists while unperceived.

Moreover, if there were such seemings it would be inexplicable why we ever need to go and look if anything is where we believe it to be. I could simply rely on my seemings to tell me, for example, how many cars are parked outside of my house, even though I am at present too far away from the road to see. Of course, I cannot do this, and the fact that I cannot suggests that there are no such seemings. I am sure that the Phenomenal Conservative could find some explanation of the fact that I cannot rely on my seemings in such a case. He could claim, for example, that I only get seemings about the currently unperceived when I satisfy some further condition, C, where the absence of C explains why it is that I cannot rely on seemings to figure out how many cars are parked outside. This explanation will inevitably be ad hoc, and the simplest explanation of the fact that I cannot rely on special seemings to tell how many cars are outside of my house without looking is that there are no such seemings, and to find out what exists in a region outside of my immediate experience, I must rely on sense perception.

Note that I am not here denying the existence of seemings tout court. I have already conceded for the sake of argument that there are seemings in all of the areas Phenomenal Conservatives have typically postulated them. I am denying, however, that there are any *relevant* seemings which pertain to parts of the world presently unperceived by the subject.

6. Conclusion

I have shown here that Stace's argument in “The Refutation of Realism” may be reconstructed to form a powerful sceptical argument. I distinguished it from the more widely discussed sceptical arguments and demonstrated how a variety of potential criticisms are of no force. I did not try to criticize the argument myself, but I did suggest that inference to the best explanation was the most obvious place to look, although much work would have to be done to make that solution work. As far as I can see, unless such a proposal can be worked out, Stace's Refutation of Realism succeeds in showing that there is no way to know that anything exists unperceived.

⁴⁴ Huemer, “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,” 30-55.