

## External World Skepticism

**1. Introduction:** Philosophy (literally, “love of wisdom” – *philo sophia*) is the study of the most fundamental questions about reality. Broadly, we ask three kinds of questions:

- (1) The Knowledge Question: How do I know about the world?
- (2) The Reality Question: What is the nature of the world?
- (3) The Value Question: What should I do in the world?

Roughly, these correspond to the three main branches of philosophy:

- (1) Epistemology – the study of knowledge
- (2) Metaphysics – the study of the nature of reality
- (3) Ethics – the study of morality

We will begin our course with the knowledge question. Last time, we saw Descartes approach it by asking the question: How do I know that I’m not dreaming now? Now consider an updated version of that question, with the following story:<sup>1</sup>

**The Brain in a Vat:** You stumble upon a secret laboratory full of scientists. A friend of yours lies unconscious on an operating table. The scientists are removing her brain. They submerge the brain in a vat of fluid nutrients, and then attach various wires to the brain. The scientists see you, and one of them begins to speak:

“We have the ability to stimulate this brain to make it have whatever experiences we want it to have,” the scientist says. “Right now, your friend thinks she is walking to class. But, she is not. The experiences that she is having are all merely occurring in a computer simulation—but one that is SO real, that it is indistinguishable from reality. Just now, your friend thinks she has arrived at her class, but—as you can see—her body is actually lying on an operating table without its brain, and her brain is right here in this vat of fluids, with wires coming out of it.”

You are stunned speechless. Before you can even grapple with what you’ve just been told, the scientist adds one more thing:

“Actually, that is not the whole truth. The truth is that none of THIS is real. Nothing you are experiencing RIGHT NOW is real. We actually abducted you three months ago and removed YOUR brain. Right now, your brain is actually the one that is submerged in a vat of nutrients, being stimulated by a computer program to make you think that you are seeing your friend having her brain removed. We figured that programming this experience into your simulation was the easiest way to let you know what we’ve done to you. And now you know the truth.”

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<sup>1</sup> There is a rich tradition in both Eastern and Western philosophy here. Chalmers mentions the Chinese story of Zhuangzi dreaming he is a butterfly; the Indian story of Vishnu causing Narada to have the (illusory?) experience of living out an entire lifetime as the woman Sushila; and Greek philosopher Plato’s story of prisoners chained in a cave who think that shadows on a wall are all of reality – until one of the prisoners escapes and leaves the cave.

Question: What would you do if this happened to you? Would you believe it? How could you tell if they were lying? If the simulation is really capable of delivering experiences that are *just as real and vivid* as those in the real, physical world, then life in the vat would be *indistinguishable* from life in reality. There would be no way of knowing whether you were presently in the simulation, or in the real, physical world.

**2. External World Skepticism:** But wait: For all YOU know, YOU might presently be in a computer simulation RIGHT NOW. How could you know that you're not?

**Knowledge** is something like **justified, true belief**. For example, if you *know* that class is in room 142, then this means that:

- (a) You *believe* that class is in room 142.
- (b) It is *true* that it's in room 142.  
(You can't know something false. For example, if it turned out that class is actually in room 124, apparently you *didn't* know where class was!)
- (c) You have some good *reason* for believing it.  
(If you were just making a random guess with no good reason, "It's in room 142!", and just *happened* to be correct, we wouldn't call this knowledge.)

Perhaps you *believe* that you are not in a simulation now. And who knows, maybe you're right – maybe it's *true* that you're not in a simulation now. But what is your *reason* for believing this? What is your evidence?

You can point to things like your hands and your chair, and tap on them, and say "See! These things are real! They are made of physical matter! This proves that I am not in a simulation!" – But that would be exactly the same sort of "evidence" that you could provide even if you WERE a brain in a vat, living in a computer simulation...

The skeptic's claim is that this fact undermines our ability to have any justification for any of our beliefs whatsoever, about the external world—and therefore, no knowledge.

Why? Well, consider: The evidence, or phenomena to be explained are our sensations, our experiences of things that seem to be hands, and tables, and trees, and friends. But, there are two hypotheses—two possible explanations of this evidence:

**(H1) The External World Hypothesis:** There are physical hands, and physical tables, trees, friends, etc., and these are the causes of our experiences.

**(H2) The Simulation Hypothesis:** We are living in a computer simulation. There are programmed, *simulated, virtual* hands, tables, trees, friends, etc., and *these* are the causes of our experiences.

Notice that both of these hypotheses explain our evidence EQUALLY WELL. That is, if H1 were true, it would perfectly explain why we have the kinds of experiences that we have. And likewise, if H2 were true, it would also perfectly explain why we have the kinds of experiences that we have.

But notice: If H1 is true, then it is TRUE that you have hands, and there are tables and trees, and so on. But if H2 is true, then you're mistaken about all of these things. You don't really have hands. And there's not really a table in front of you. Etc. Simply put, **you might be mistaken about everything.**

**Illustration: The Jury:** Why does this matter? Well, imagine that you are a jury member in a murder trial. The victim was killed by blunt force around midnight. The evidence equally supports the conclusion that the killer was either Peggy with a crowbar, or Sue with a hammer. Imagine it plays out this way in the courtroom:

Jury says, "We find Peggy guilty. The killer was Peggy!"

Judge asks, "But have you ruled out Sue?"

Jury: "Not, it totally could've been Sue. All of the evidence we have is totally consistent with Sue being guilty too. Nevertheless, we find Peggy GUILTY!"

Would it be reasonable for the jury to convict Peggy? Answer: No! When you have two competing explanations, both of which explain the evidence equally well, then you cannot rationally accept one of them as the truth **until you have ruled out the other one** as false! Rather, **you should suspend judgement.** It's unjust to convict Peggy, because *you might be mistaken about her guilt!*

But, that's essentially the situation that YOU'RE in with respect to the world!

You say, "I know that I am in the real, physical world, and therefore have hands, and am sitting at a table."

Skeptic asks, "But, have you ruled out the possibility that you are a BIV?"

You: "No, I totally might be a brain in a vat. All the evidence I have is totally consistent with me being a BIV, in which case, <I have hands> and <Here is a table> would be false. Nevertheless, I know that I am in the real, physical world and do have hands!"

The skeptic's claim regarding H1 and H2, the External World Hypothesis and the Simulation Hypothesis (or, the Dreaming Hypothesis, or the Evil Demon Hypothesis, etc.) is this: You cannot "convict" – i.e., place your convictions in the belief that your experiences are caused by a real, physical world – until you have ruled out the possibility that you are in a simulation. But that is impossible. Therefore, it is impossible to have justified beliefs (and therefore knowledge) about the external world.

As Chalmers puts it,

“If we don’t know whether or not we’re in a virtual world, and if nothing in a virtual world is real, then it looks like we cannot know if anything in the external world is real. And then it looks like we can’t know anything at all about the external world.”

In Argument Form:

### **The Argument for External World Skepticism**

1. You are not justified in believing that you are not in a simulation.
2. If you are not justified in believing that you are not in a simulation, then you are not justified in believing that you have hands. (*or anything about the external world, such as that there is a tree outside of your window, you live in Virginia, go to W&M, etc.*)
3. Therefore, you are not justified in believing (and therefore you do not know) that you have hands. (*more generally, you don’t know anything about the external world*)<sup>2</sup>

**The Jury Again:** The argument seems correct. Just consider it in the context of the jury:<sup>3</sup>

1. You are not justified in believing that Sue innocent.  
(*because all of your evidence is perfectly consistent with Sue’s guilt as well as Peggy’s*)
2. If you aren’t justified in believing that Sue is innocent, then you aren’t justified in believing that Peggy is guilty.  
(*in order to be justified in believing that Peggy is guilty, you need to first rule out the possibility that Sue is guilty instead; i.e., rule out the possibility that you are mistaken about Peggy’s guilt*)
3. Therefore, you aren’t justified in believing that Peggy is guilty.

**3. What Now?** We have just seen an argument for **external world skepticism**. This is the belief that **we do not know anything about the external world**.

Note that this is NOT the view that we ARE in fact in a simulation, or that the external world is NOT real. Consider the jury case. The correct conclusion is NOT that SUE is guilty. Rather, you should just **believe nothing**. You should **suspend judgment**. The skeptic is like an agnostic, rather than a theist or an atheist. Maybe you have hands. Maybe you don’t. You’ll never know. So, you should believe nothing at all about it.

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<sup>2</sup> [If you are having trouble seeing why premise 2 is true, note that it’s logically equivalent to the following statement (whose truth may be more obvious): <If you ARE justified in believing that you have hands, then you ARE justified in believing that you are not in a simulation.> (For, if you have hands, then this ENTAILS that you are not a BIV, since BIV’s don’t have hands; so if your belief about your own hands is justified, then so is your belief that you are not a BIV.) More generally, note that ANY two statements of the form <If P, then Q> and <If NOT-Q, then NOT-P> are logically equivalent. That is, they mean the same thing. For example, the following two statements are logically equivalent, and mean the same thing: (i) If you are 21 or older, then you can legally drink alcohol. (ii) If you **cannot** legally drink alcohol, then you are **not** 21 or older.]

<sup>3</sup> Chalmers uses a knockoff iphone example. Imagine that you have an iphone, and claim to know, <I have an iphone>. But maybe there are some very clever, cheap knockoffs that look just like the real thing. Can you rule out the possibility that your phone is a knockoff? No? Then you don’t actually know whether you have an iphone or not.

...This is very, very bad. If the skeptic is correct, then we can never acquire knowledge about the external world. We cannot even have justified BELIEFS about it! (i.e., none of our beliefs about the external world will ever be rational, or supported by any evidence) If that is correct, then all of philosophy, all of science, and indeed—even your ordinary everyday decisions based on ordinary beliefs like “This bread will nourish me rather than poison me” will be unjustified. Pretty much all of our beliefs will have no rational basis whatsoever (with the exception of those about my own inner, mental world).

Pyrrho of Elis was perhaps the first external world skeptic (~300 BC). Legend has it that, having no beliefs about the external world, he would walk toward cliffs, or into (horse-drawn) traffic, or toward ravenous wolves. (An agnostic about the world has no more reason to believe that a wolf will harm him than help him. Perhaps walking toward a wolf will be followed by the sensation of eating pizza, or hearing a symphony, or receiving a back rub, or being mauled. There is no evidence one way or the other.) He would have quickly died, except that his students looked after him.<sup>4</sup>

If the skeptic’s argument is sound, then **we have but two choices:**

- (1) **Live like Pyrrho** (putting rocks in our mouths, walking into traffic, etc.)
- (2) **Live irrationally** (acting on the basis of beliefs that are not justified)

We might have SOME reason for believing that this sandwich will nourish us, or that this bit of floor will support our weight, or that this next lungful of air will not poison us. (Perhaps feels good to believe it, or maybe we want it to be true.) But, these beliefs will not be rational. (Similarly, I might believe that I have a magical, invisible pet unicorn simply because I WANT this to be true, and it makes me FEEL good – but, without any evidence that actually SUPPORTS this belief, my belief will be irrational.)

...I don’t know about you, but both of those options seem terrible! What is more, skepticism is antithetical to my life’s pursuit! (philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding about the world) It’s antithetical to you paying for a college degree! (If you’re paying us in order to acquire knowledge, and knowledge is impossible, then why don’t you just cut out the middleman and dump your money straight into the toilet!?)

You can see why, if we are to get on with our lives, skepticism MUST be defeated!

(Watch some videos on this topic, here: [The Brain in a Vat](#) ; [Intro to Skepticism](#).)

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<sup>4</sup> Diogenes Laertius tells us, in his biography of Pyrrho, that Pyrrho:

“adopt[ed] a most noble philosophy ... taking the form of agnosticism and suspension of judgement. ... He led a life consistent with this doctrine, going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not, and, generally, leaving nothing to the arbitrament of the senses; but he was kept out of harm’s way by his friends who, as Antigonus of Carystus tells us, used to follow close after him.” (§§9.61-62)