# 2 Skepticism

## 2.1 Ordinary Doubt versus Philosophical Skepticism

Doubt is the questioning attitude towards the truth of a statement.

> You may doubt that Qin is a real lecturer. Maybe he is just someone interested in teaching and pretends to be a lecturer.

### Ordinary Doubt

A common feature of ordinary doubts is that the grounds for doubt can be removed, at least in principle.

> You may ask Qin to show his staff card. You may even take him to the Registry Office and ask the staff there to verify that Qin is a real lecturer.
> Qin may not be cooperative when you try to check his identity. He may refuse to show you the card. He is very likely to refuse to go to the Registry Office with you.
> But in principle, there is a way to remove your ground for doubt. You at least know how to resolve the question whether he is a real lecturer.

Having an ordinary doubt always assumes that you know some statements of the same kind. In other words, ordinary doubts assume knowledge.

> You can doubt that Qin is a real lecturer. But while you doubt, you are taking for granted that the University exists, that it issues cards to its staff, or that the Registry Office staff are real employees of the University and will not say Qin is a lecturer unless he really is one.

### Philosophical Skepticism

Philosophical skepticism is the doubt of a whole class of statements.

> You may be a skeptic about Santa Claus.
> You may think God does not exist.
> You may doubt that astrology can tell you about the future.
> You may think that we do not have knowledge about moral right and wrong.

Ordinary doubt is only possible when there are undoubted things of the same kind.

However, in philosophical skepticism, the whole class of statements are doubted. We can (presumably and arguably) no longer use one statement from the class to judge whether another is true.

> If you live in a computer-simulated world (as in the film Matrix), and you see a man walking into the classroom, then you cannot go to the Registry Office to check whether he is a real lecturer or even whether he really exists, because your checking would also be part of the computer-simulated world.
> If someone thinks that no moral statement is objectively true, it is useless for you to tell her that, since “you should not eat babies” is objectively true, at least one moral statement is

objectively true.

## 2.2 Cartesian Skepticism

Cartesian Skepticism is a form of philosophical skepticism about the external world. It doubts whether we can have any knowledge about the external world.

In his *Meditations* I&II, Rene DesCartes sets out to look for a solid foundation for his knowledge.

He tries to find some beliefs of which he can be absolutely certain (1). **Absolute certainty is DesCartes's requirement for knowledge.**

He thinks that, if he cannot be "entirely certain" about these beliefs, then he should "withhold belief" in them. (2)

The beliefs DesCartes has in mind are the beliefs he "received from or through the senses" (seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, etc.) He observed that his senses sometimes mislead him. (3) **DesCartes's target is empirical knowledge of the external world.**

But even when we only focus on our clearest beliefs, such as that we are sitting in a chair, it is still possible that we are merely dreaming sitting in the chair.

He assured himself that there exist no ways by which we can distinguish dream from reality. (5)

But isn't it that you must have seen something when you were awake so that you may dream of anything? (6)

But perhaps an evil demon (or, if you like, the evil scientist who attaches my brain to a super computer) is deceiving me all the time, creating the illusion of the sky, the earth, and everything else I perceive. (12)

### Cogito ergo Sum

DesCartes himself if no skeptic. After raising the skeptical hypothesis, he set out to refute skepticism.

He wrote, if I perceive this chair, even if I am deceived by the demon my entire life, it is still *me* who is deceived. Therefore, *I* exist. Even if not my body, at least my mind exists. (3)

I cannot know for certain that I eat and walk. But I can be certain that I think. However, I can only be certain that I exist when I'm thinking. It is possible that, whenever I'm not thinking, I do not exist at that time. (6)

A joke:
*DesCartes, sitting at the local bar, has already had a few glasses of wine.*

*Bartender: Sir, would you like another?*
*DesCartes: I think not.*
*And he disappears.*

Recall that the task DesCartes sets for himself at the beginning of the book is to find something he can be absolutely certain of. Now he claims to have found one. Whenever he doubts, he must exist, because it is *he* who doubts. (9, 15)

Hence, the famous saying "Cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am.").

**Stroud's Analysis of Cartesian Skepticism**

Barry Stroud (1984), *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* discusses three questions about DesCartes's dream argument (Meditation I).

***Q1 Is the possibility that DesCartes might be dreaming really a threat to his knowledge of the world around him?***

Stroud begins with the common sense that dreaming that P does not thereby make us know that P.

He observes that this is not merely because P may be false, because even if P is true, we still do not know that P. The problem is that there is no real connection between what is true and what we believe to be true in dream.

> Even if DesCartes is really sitting by the fire when he dreams that he is sitting by the fire, he does not thereby know that he is sitting by the fire.

He admits that sometimes what really happens does cause us to dream the same thing. But even in these cases, we cannot claim to have knowledge of what is happening.

> The sound of a door banging may cause me to dream that a door is banging.

Stroud clarifies that, by saying "when we dream P, we do not thereby know that P", he does not mean that dreaming P and knowing P cannot happen at the same time. The point is only that we do not "thereby" know P.

> When you dream that 2+3=5, you also know that 2+3=5.
> When you dream that the Sun is larger than the Earth, you also know that the Sun is larger than the Earth.

***Q2 Is DesCartes right in thinking that he must know that he is not dreaming if he is to know something about the world around him?***

If it is true that we can know something (e.g. the Sun is larger than the Earth) even when dreaming, then it seems that we do not need to know that we are not dreaming in order to know that there is a chair under you.

But Stroud thinks that this is not correct, because to know that the Sun is larger than the Earth when we are dreaming, we need to already know that before we dream.

But in order to know that before we dream, we need to first know that we were not dreaming back then when we acquire the information about the sizes of the Sun and the Earth.

Yet if DesCartes is right, then we cannot know back then that we were not dreaming.

***Q3 Is DesCartes right that he can never know that he is not dreaming?***

Now the question turns on whether we really cannot know whether we are dreaming.

Stroud agrees with DesCartes conditionally. He said that, *if* DesCartes is right in thinking that knowing we are not dreaming is a necessary condition for knowing anything about the world, then we really have no way to tell whether we are dreaming.

In other words, Stroud's own stance is that if your answer to Q2 is "yes", then your answer to Q3 must also be "yes".

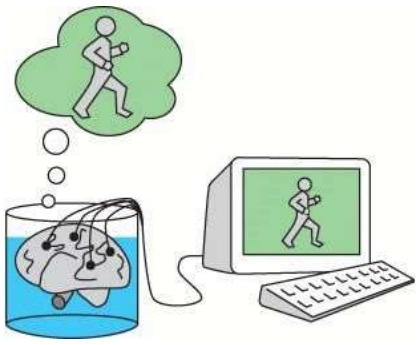
To put this point in argumentative form:

> The sensory experience we get now we could also get when dreaming.
> To know that I am not dreaming, I need to know that the sensory experience is real, not only dreamt.
> To test whether the sensory experience is real, not only dreamt, I need to know that the test is real, not only dreamt.
> To test whether the first test is real, not only dreamt, I need to know that the second test is real, not only dreamt.
> ……
> Therefore, if knowing that one is not dreaming is a condition for knowing anything about the world, then we cannot know that we are not dreaming.

## 2.3 Skeptical Hypothesis

The argument for Cartesian Skepticism can be expressed in a way that relies on a Skeptical Hypothesis. Consider the following form of philosophical skepticism.

> P1 If you do not know not-H, then you do not know O.
> P2 You do not know not-H.
> C Therefore, you do not know O.



In the above argument, H stands for the skeptical hypothesis, such as "you are dreaming", or "you are a bodiless Brain-In-a-Vat (BIV) attached to a super computer which feeds you with all the experiences and

memories you currently have" (Putnam 1981).

O stands for some statement you ordinarily hold yourself to know, such as "there is a chair under you", or "I am a student".

Here's one such argument.

> If you do not know that you are not a BIV, then you do not know that there is a chair under you.
> You do not know that you are not a BIV.
> Therefore, you do not know there is a chair under you.

**The skeptical hypothesis H is supposed to describe a situation in which your experience is subjectively indistinguishable from real life.**

> If you were a BIV, your experience would be undistinguishable from real life. There is no way you can test whether you are a BIV or not.

Note that for the argument to work, you do not need any evidence for the claim that you really are a BIV. Neither is it necessary that you really are a BIV. All you need is the uneliminated possibility that you are one.

Since this argument works equally against the same class of ordinary belief, it puts the whole class in doubt.

### 2.4 Refuting Skepticism

Philosophers have devised various ways to attack the skeptical argument head on. Some of these ways are suggested directly by the structure of the skeptical argument.

#### Denying P2

**DesCartes** himself is not a skeptic. He denies the second premise, arguing that he does know that he exists (a piece of knowledge not challenged by skeptical hypothesis).

G.E. Moore raises an **example of ordinary knowledge**, that he has hands, claiming that this belief of his is more certain than any of the premises used to support the skeptical conclusion. We can reconstruct his argument as follows.

> P1 If you do not know not-H (that you are not a BIV), then you do not know O (that you have hands).
> P2 You do know O (that you have hands).
> C Therefore, you do know not-H (that you are not a BIV).

Some defer to **Inference to the Best Explanation**, which roughly says that we should believe in the explanation that makes best sense of our experience. Skeptical hypotheses are generally worse than our available scientific explanations, so we should not believe them.

**Externalism** (e.g. Reliabilism)

**Coherentists** argue that the coherence (roughly, the mutual support) of a set of beliefs offers justification for them. Skeptical hypothesis offers no good explanation of anything. It neither supports, nor is supported by, other beliefs of ours. Our belief set is better justified if it does not include the skeptical hypothesis. So, I'm justified to think that I'm not a BIV.

## Denying P1

**Contextualism** argues that the standards for the truth of knowledge attributions vary with the context. Even though we admittedly do not know the skeptical hypothesis to be false in philosophical contexts, we can still know ordinary things in ordinary contexts, where the standard is lower.

Dretske proposes a **Tracking Account**, which asserts that knowledge is true belief that is based on experience which, in the nearest possible worlds in which the belief is false, wouldn't be there. In other words, knowledge is belief that successfully tracks truth within a certain neighbourhood of possibilities. But knowledge of ordinary facts does not require us to track remote possible worlds such as the ones described by the skeptical hypothesis.

> Painted mule pretending to be zebra case

**Fallibilism** asserts that knowledge does not require absolute certainty. The belief must be true. But it is not necessary that we eliminate every possibility of error. Since P1 suggests that knowledge of P entails knowledge of everything that is incompatible with P, it is a form of infallibilism.

## Self-Refutation

Hilary Putnam's **semantic externalism** has it that what a word means depends on causal interactions between us and the world.

> "Water" refers to H2O for Earth people, and XYZ for Twin Earth people.

So, according to Putnam, BIVs do not mean the same as we do, when we both think "I'm a BIV".

He argues that this sentence is always false, whether uttered by humans or BIVs, because

> If you are a BIV, then your sentence means that you are a B*iV*, which is false.
> If you are a human, then your sentence means that you are a BIV, which is false.

But Putnam's objection to skepticism loses power, if the skeptical hypothesis were that we have been humans all along, until very recently being converted to BIVs. In this case, our words mean as they do, because we have causally