# Review: skepticism about the external world

The external world skeptic tries to show that most of what you believe about the world around you is false.

The BIV argument:

1. You don't know that you're not a handless brain in a vat.
2. If you don't know that you're not a handless brain in a vat, then you don't know that you have hands.
3. Therefore, you don't know that you have hands (1, 2).

E (evidence): it seems to you that you have hands

H1 (good case): you have hands

H2 (bad case): you are not a handless BIV

Why should we accept P2?

Closure principle for knowledge:

If P entails Q, then if you know P, you also know Q

Why should we accept P1?

The skeptic gives the following argument:

1. If you do not have any evidence that you are not a handless BIV, then you do not know that you are not a handless BIV.
2. You do not have any evidence that you are not a handless BIV.
3. You do not know that you are not a handless BIV.

Why should we accept 3?

* This is just supposed to be obvious.
* Consider an example: I start believing that I am about to become the richest person on Earth, but have no reason whatsoever to believe that’s true.
* Suppose in fact I am: Bill Gates and Elon Musk are about to give me their combined fortunes.
* I don’t know that I’m about to become incredibly rich, because even though I believe it and it’s true, I am not justified in believing it.
* Justified = I have sufficient **evidence** for believing it = **epistemically** **rational**.

Why should we accept 4?

* What might that evidence be? Suggestion: your evidence that you have hands.
* If you have hands, then you’re not a handless BIV. You can’t be both in the good case and the bad case.
* So your evidence that you are not a handless BIV must be whatever your evidence is that you have hands.
* According to the skeptic, your evidence that you have hands is that it seems to you that you have hands.
* But that’s not evidence that you are not a handless BIV, says the skeptic, because if you were a handless BIV it would still seem to you as if you have hands.
* The fact that it seems to you that you have hands, does not give you any evidence that helps you figure out whether you’re in the good case or the bad case.

# Moore’s response

Moore’s response to the skeptic:

It seems to me that … I can now give a large number of different proofs [that the external world that we believe exists does exist], each of which is a perfectly rigorous proof; and that at many other times I have been in a position to give many others. I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, ‘Here is one hand’, and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, ‘and here is another’. And if, by doing this, I have proved ipso facto the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.

Moore rejects the skeptic’s claim that I do not have any evidence that I am not a handless BIV (4) above

* I fact, I have overwhelmingly convincing evidence.
* It’s obviously true that I have hands and any sane person in the room with me would agree that it’s obviously true.
* If the skeptic wants to deny that, then the skeptic is being ridiculous, and we shouldn’t take their argument seriously.

**Discussion question:** is Moore’s “proof” convincing?

Moore’s deeper philosophical point: we should be much more confident that “I have hands” is true than we should be of any philosophical premise. To support premise 2 of the BIV argument above, the skeptic appealed to some philosophical assumptions about the nature of knowledge, such as that my evidence for believing that I have hands is that it *appears* to me that I have hands, and that to know I have hands on the basis of that evidence I need to have some additional evidence that the BIV hypothesis is false.

More generally, whenever you are presented with a valid argument with plausible premises, you always have two options: accept the conclusion, or reject one or more of the premises. Moore’s point is that the skeptic’s conclusion is obviously absurd, but his premises (while compelling) are not obviously true – so we should reject one of the premises.

Two ways to respond to the skeptic:

1. Try to refute the skeptic on their own terms by giving an argument that appeals only to premises the skeptic will accept
2. Don’t worry about that, and instead just try to give an argument that will satisfy *us* that the skeptic is wrong. Moore thinks this is extremely easy to do.

Moore goes for the second strategy. He’s not trying to convince the skeptic that they’re wrong. He’s trying to convince us that we are justified in believing that the skeptic is wrong.

Chalmers’ strategy is different. Chalmers thinks we can refute the skeptic.

# Chalmers

Explain the matrix scenario

The brain is massively deluded, it seems. It has all sorts of false beliefs about the world. It believes that it has a body, but it has no body. It believes that it is walking outside in the sunlight, but in fact it is inside a dark lab. It believes it is one place, when in fact it may be somewhere quite different. Perhaps it thinks it is in Tucson, when it is actually in Australia, or even in outer space.

Neo's situation at the beginning of The Matrix is something like this. He thinks that he lives in a city, he thinks that he has hair, he thinks it is 1999, and he thinks that it is sunny outside. In reality, he is floating in space, he has no hair, the year is around 2199, and the world has been darkened by war. There are a few small differences from the vat scenario above: Neo's brain is located in a body, and the computer simulation is controlled by machines rather than by a scientist. But the essential details are much the same. In effect, Neo is a brain in a vat.

The Matrix hypothesis

Let's say that a matrix (lower-case "m") is an artificially-designed computer simulation of a world. So the Matrix in the movie is one example of a matrix. And let's say that someone is envatted, or that they are in a matrix, if they have a cognitive system which receives its inputs from and sends its outputs to a matrix. Then the brain at the beginning is envatted, and so is Neo.

Let us call the hypothesis that I am in a matrix and have always been in a matrix the Matrix Hypothesis. Equivalently, the Matrix Hypothesis says that I am envatted and have always been envatted.

So Chalmers thinks the Matrix hypothesis = the BIV hypothesis

Why should take the Matrix hypothesis seriously

https://futurism.com/are-we-living-in-a-computer-simulation-elon-musk-thinks-so

Chalmers:

* This is usually taken to be a skeptical hypothesis, just as the BIV/evil demon hypothesis are skeptical hypotheses. It’s supposed to show that most of what you believe about the external world is false.
* Chalmers thinks that, in fact, it’s not a skeptical hypothesis. The Matrix hypothesis is entirely consistent with things like “I have hands” being straightforwardly true.

Chalmers’ thesis statement: “I will argue that the hypothesis that I am envatted is not a skeptical hypothesis, but a metaphysical hypothesis. That is, it is a hypothesis about the underlying nature of reality.”

Chalmers’ thesis:

On the DVD case for the movie, one sees the following: Perception: Our day-in, day-out world is real.

Reality: That world is a hoax, an elaborate deception spun by all-powerful machines that control us. Whoa.

I think this view is not quite right. I think that even if I am in a matrix, my world is perfectly real. A brain in a vat is not massively deluded (at least if it has always been in the vat). Neo does not have massively false beliefs about the external world. Instead, envatted beings have largely correct beliefs about their world. If so, the Matrix Hypothesis is not a skeptical hypothesis, and its possibility does not undercut everything that I think I know.

Explain how this response is different from Moore’s response.

* Chalmers denies that there is any inconsistency in the two hypotheses. They can both be true at the same time.
* In the argument, “I have hands” should be interpreted as meaning something that is entirely consistent with “I am a handless BIV”

The Matrix hypothesis is equivalent to the set of the following three hypothesis.

1. Creation hypothesis: physical reality was created by beings outside physical space-time.
2. Computational hypothesis: physical processes are fundamentally computational.
3. Mind-body hypothesis: our cognitive systems are separate from physical processes, but interact with these processes.

Matrix hypothesis is not a skeptical hypothesis:

Importantly, nothing about this Metaphysical Hypothesis is skeptical. The Metaphysical Hypothesis here tells us about the processes underlying our ordinary reality, but it does not entail that this reality does not exist. We still have bodies, and there are still chairs and tables: it's just that their fundamental nature is a bit different from what we may have thought.

In this manner, the Metaphysical Hypothesis is analogous to a physical hypotheses, such as one involving quantum mechanics. Both the physical hypothesis and the Metaphysical Hypothesis tells us about the processes underlying chairs. They do not entail that there are no chairs. Rather, they tell us what chairs are really like.

The creation hypothesis

The Creation Hypothesis is not a skeptical hypothesis. Even if it is true, most of my ordinary beliefs are still true. I still have hands, I am still in Tucson, and so on. Perhaps a few of my beliefs will turn out false: if I am an atheist, for example, or if I believe all reality started with the Big Bang. But most of my everyday beliefs about the external world will remain intact.

The computational hypothesis

The Computational Hypothesis is not a skeptical hypothesis. If it is true, there are still electrons and protons. On this picture, electrons and protons will be analogous to molecules: they are made up of something more basic, but they still exist. Similarly, if the Computational Hypothesis is true, there are still tables and chairs, and macroscopic reality still exists. It just turns out that their fundamental reality is a little different from what we thought.

The situation here is analogous to that with quantum mechanics or relativity. These may lead us to revise a few "metaphysical" beliefs about the external world: that the world is made of classical particles, or that there is absolute time. But most of our ordinary beliefs are left intact.

Likewise, accepting the Computational Hypothesis may lead us to revise a few metaphysical beliefs: that electrons and protons are fundamental, for example. But most of our ordinary beliefs are unaffected.

The mind-body hypothesis

The Mind-Body Hypothesis says: My mind is (and has always been) constituted by processes outside physical space-time, and receives its perceptual inputs from and sends its outputs to processes in physical space-time.

The Mind-Body Hypothesis is not a skeptical hypothesis. Even if my mind is outside physical space-time, I still have a body, I am still in Tucson, and so on.

At most, accepting this hypothesis would make us revise a few metaphysical belies about our minds. Our ordinary beliefs about external reality will remain largely intact.

Questions:

1. The Brain in a Vat hypothesis is supposed to be a skeptical hypothesis: a hypothesis according to which most of your beliefs are false. Chalmers thinks it is not a skeptical hypothesis: it is consistent with almost everything you believe being true. Is he right?
2. Can you think of any beliefs you have that would be false if you were a brain in a vat? Does that show that Chalmers is wrong?
3. How might the skeptic putting forward the BIV argument respond to Chalmers?