

# Escaping Descartes scepticism quicksand

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## 1 Introduction

How do we know something is knowledge. And is that definition compatible with Descartes assumption of knowledge in his first meditation? That was a bit of a leading question. We will examine why people who subscribe to scepticism appear to get stuck in quicksand arguing about knowledge. And subsequently how Stroud manages to falsify the dream argument by refuting one of the conditions Descartes thought to be necessary.

## 2 Main body

Before we jump into why we can't accept Descartes conditions, where exactly does knowledge come from. Both Descartes and Stroud agrees that our physical senses account for a great deal of knowledge. With Descartes sitting in front of a fireplace with a pen in his hand, he has knowledge of himself. And Stroud having heard much information about the common cold, he has knowledge of causes for the illness. However Descartes begins to doubt that he can trust the senses because they have fooled him before. Even in the best case scenarios when you are sure to be comfortable and your factory senses are in order; this could all be a life like dream, and none of this is real. Descartes argues in his meditations that since his senses has deceived him before he cannot trust them anymore:

*'I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things; I shall remain obstinately attached to this idea, and if by this means it is not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of any truth, I may at least do what is in my power, and with firm purpose avoid giving credence to any false thing'*  
(Descartes 1664, 8)

With his doubt Descartes has lost the entire world. His appeal to God in later meditations is largely dismissed by philosophers. Descartes has created mental quicksand, where if you become a sceptic you are stuck and the more you fight, the better grip it has on you.

That was the case at least until Stroud deconstructed scepticism<sup>1</sup>. He outlined three questions that could disprove Descartes scepticism:

*‘Is the possibility that Descartes might be dreaming really a threat to his knowledge of the world around him?’*

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

*And is he right in his ‘discovery’ that he can never know that he is not dreaming?’* (Stroud 1984, 14)

Of these the first is not interesting because it is intuitively wrong, but difficult to formalize, probably due to our poor definition of knowledge. The second and third are interesting; the second is his disproof of scepticism, and the third is the reason why so many get stuck in intellectual quicksand of scepticism.

The third question is also supposed to be the main focus of this essay. But I don’t have so much to say about it. Which, from experience means either that I have a poor grasp of the concept, or a high understanding of the subject. In this case I’m presupposed to the latter. Stroud only touches on question three on page 20 through 23. His argument (and Descartes too) is that if you are in a dream, then you have no way of proving that you actually are in a dream. Even a ‘test’ that you are in a dream cannot by definition be verified. A common saying in western culture is that you can pinch yourself to get out of a dream. But if you learned this in a the reality we are in now, how can you know this is not a dream. Even a surefire test cannot be verified, how do you know you didn’t just dream the state of affairs. In recent pop-culture Christopher Nolan’s Inception dealt with dreams and how to test that you are in reality or a dream. Each dream infiltrator had an object, a totem, that only they knew the exact characteristics of. By examining their totem they could determine if they were in a dream or reality. But as Stroud argues, there is no way of verifying the result of the examination. Even if the whole examination process was somehow secure and verifiable, what if the fake dream totem had by chance the exact characteristics of the one in reality. There is just no way of verifying state of affairs. That is Stroud’s reasoning. Descartes was right, you have no way of knowing that one is not in a dream. This has been the quicksand so many philosophers inadvertently walked straight into following Descartes arguments.

### 3 Conclusion

So how do we avoid the quicksand? That’s easy, we follow Stroud’s example and deny the condition that we have to know that we are not dreaming in order to have knowledge. This is such a good argument I can’t believe Descartes wasn’t hit over the head with it after releasing his meditations.

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<sup>1</sup>I don’t know for certain that it is the case that Stroud was the first to validly invalidate Descartes condition, but he does claim that not much attention has been given to his second question(Stroud 1984, 23), and I trust the faculty of Humanities at UiO to present the curriculum chronological and not include copy cats and fraudsters.

Stroud uses an example where you see a goldfinch in the garden. You don't have to know 'it's not a canary' to know that it is a goldfinch. This seems so obviously wrong when it's spelled out. Even Descartes with his rationalism should have disregarded this condition. Take for instance ' $1+1=2$ ', we know that in of itself, not because ' $1+1=3$ ' is not true. If we were to follow Descartes condition then we would have been required to know that it is not a canary, or *any* other thing. We would have to be omniscient if we were to have any knowledge. As Stroud puts it:

*Nobody would know anything about the world around us. If, in order to know something, we must rule out a possibility which is known to be incompatible with our knowing it* (Stroud 1984, 30)

If Descartes would have spelled out this extreme conclusion of his reasoning, then I genuinely believe his thesis would've only garnered a fraction of the supporters it eventually got. For me this is the final nail in the coffin for scepticism. But I would like to add a big asterisk to that. I've found I'm quite impressionable when reading philosophy. Agreeing whole heartily with one thesis, only to agree with it's antithesis with as much or even more vigour the next session. For now at least scepticism is falsified.

## References

- [1] Stroud, Barry. *The significance of philosophical scepticism*. University of California, Berkeley, 1984.
- [2] Descartes, René. *Discourse On Method ; and, Meditations on First Philosophy*. Indianapolis :Hackett Pub. Co., 1993.