

The Skeptical Thought and Its Dissolution

Ryan Simonelli

October 6, 2017

Skepticism is *not* irrefutable, but palpably senseless, if it would doubt where a question cannot be asked.
For doubt *can* only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is an answer, and this only where something *can* be said (Wittgenstein, *TLP*, 6.51).

Abstract

Many authors, perhaps most notably Wittgenstein, have claimed that philosophical skepticism is, in some sense, senseless. If this is correct, and there is no genuine skeptical thought to be thought at all, then one sort of anti-skeptical strategy ought to be to simply attempt to think through the apparent skeptical thought until it “dissolves” upon one. In this paper, I pursue this anti-skeptical strategy. Drawing on Thompson Clarke, I consider what it would take to genuinely entertain the question of philosophical skepticism. I then attempt to do that, showing that, fully thought through, there’s no genuine thought to be pondered: the apparent “something” that was the so-called “skeptical thought” dissolves into a nothing. I conclude by drawing on Wittgenstein’s later work to clear up any confusion that may linger after completing this exercise.

1 Introduction

Philosophical skepticism, in the restricted sense in which I’ll use the expression here, is the thought that the world might not exist outside of one’s own experience. The question of philosophical skepticism is the question of how, considering your own case, you know that such a thought isn’t so. Barry Stroud, someone who’s thought as seriously about skepticism as anyone in contemporary philosophy, writes, “The worst thing one can do with the traditional question about our knowledge of the world is to try to answer it. If you get that far, it’s too late.” (2000b, p. 57). On

Stroud's understanding, the "traditional question of our knowledge of the world" is something that we could try to answer, but which we should not. The reason that we should not try to answer it, according to Stroud, is that the question rests on a presupposition about our knowledge of the world such that, if we grant it to the skeptic, the skeptical conclusion would follow. This presupposition is what Stroud (2009) speaks of as the "restricted" conception of experience, the idea that "all possible experience is equally compatible with the existence and with the non-existence of the external world," (1984, 179). Stroud thinks that, if you grant this much to the skeptic, then the skeptical conclusion, that we can't really know that the world exists outside of our own experience, would follow. This is what he calls "the conditional correctness of skepticism." Stroud's approach to skepticism, then, is to reject the presupposition on which the question of skepticism rests and from which skepticism follows: the restricted conception of experience.¹

Stroud's claim that philosophical skepticism is "conditionally correct," however, stands in tension with a claim of one of his philosophical heroes: Wittgenstein's claim that skepticism is "palpably senseless," (*TLP*, 6.51). After all, if something is senseless, it can't be correct or incorrect, categorically or conditionally. Of course, nonsense might follow from something, but that just means that the thing from which that nonsense follows is nonsense as well. The methodology of this paper is based on taking both Stroud's and Wittgenstein's claims seriously. If Stroud is right that skepticism follows from the restricted conception of experience and Wittgenstein is right that skepticism is senseless, then this suggests the following sort of anti-skeptical strategy: rather than attacking the restricted conception of experience directly, one might, for dialectical purposes, *grant* that conception of experience to the skeptic, try to ponder the skeptical thought, and show that, when you try to think the thought through, it dissolves upon you. This strategy would illustrate that the real reason you

¹A helpful overview of this line of thinking in Stroud can be found in Bridges (2016).

should not try to answer the traditional question about our knowledge of the world is not because it's based on some premise you should reject, but, rather, because there is no such question to be sensibly asked in the first place. At least, that's the thought I propose here. The two philosophical figures that guide the progression of this thought are Thompson Clarke, on the one hand, and Wittgenstein, on the other, Clarke to bring the (apparent) skeptical thought into view, and Wittgenstein to dissolve it.²

2 The Path to Philosophical Doubt

Skepticism, of the particular sort with which we'll concern ourselves here, has its roots in Descartes. In the *Meditations*, Descartes describes himself as sitting in front of a fire in his nightgown. That is what he takes his situation to be at the beginning of the *Meditations*. In the first mediation, however, he ends up doubting all of what he takes for granted. Reflecting on his current experience, he entertains the thought that he might be dreaming. He recalls having dreams so vivid that he cannot pinpoint any marks and features that would distinguish the experiences that he's had in those dreams from the experiences that he's had when he's awake. Not being able to distinguish his present experience from the sort of experience that he'd be having while dreaming, Descartes concludes that, for all he knows, he might be dreaming. He can't rule it out. Since he can't rule out that he's dreaming, he concludes that he cannot know whether he is actually sitting in front of a fire in his nightgown or whether he's just dreaming that he is. All of the experiences that seem to be of things in the world outside of him, may, in fact, be the mere experience of dreams. It could actually be so, he thinks, that, for all that seems to be on the basis of experience, none of it really is. It might all be mere experience.

²The extent to which my dissolution aligns with Clarke's potential "dissolution" though the consideration of the paradox of arising out of the skeptical question (which I will not discuss here) I'll leave for the reader to decide.

The circumstances in which Descartes considers the possibility that he might be dreaming are perfectly normal circumstances. He is not on drugs or epistemically incapacitated in any other way. Rather, he is in as clear of a state of mind as he could ever be, and, even in such a state, he concludes that he cannot know that a world exists outside of his own experience. Now, the fact that Descartes finds himself in such a predicament is not just supposed to be a fact about him. We are not to think, as Stroud puts the thought, “What a peculiar man Rene Descartes is. He cannot tell whether he is awake or dreaming,” (p. 272). Rather, we are supposed to feel the force of his considerations in our own case. His epistemological predicament, we are supposed to see, is our predicament. Considering it in your own case, you are supposed to find that, no matter what you take to be so on the basis of your experience, you cannot know that you are not dreaming, and thus, you can never know that there really is a world outside of your experience. For instance, it may seem to you that you are sitting at your desk, but, for all you know, even though it seems as if there is a chair that you are sitting on that is independent from your experience, this might not be so. It might all be mere experience. That is the skeptical thought.

A negation of the skeptical thought considered here, a thought which rules out the apparent possibility that it propounds, could be expressed by the sentence, “I know that I am not dreaming now.” In his fascinating essay *The Legacy of Skepticism*, Thompson Clarke observes that, in certain everyday contexts, such a sentence which, on the face of it, appears to express such a negation, is perfectly assertable. Clarke has us consider the following scenario:

Suppose a scientist is experimenting with soporifics, himself the guinea-pig. He is in a small room. He keeps careful records. Experiment #1. “1:00 P.M. Taking x dose of drug Z orally . . . 1:15 P.M. Beginning to feel drowsy. I am not focusing clearly on . . . 6:15 P.M. I’ve been asleep but am wide awake now, rested and feeling normal. I know, of course, that I’m not dreaming now, but I remember, while asleep, actually thinking I was really awake, not dreaming. I dreamt I was a boy living with my parents (dead now for

two years). The 'experience' seemed very real. At first, as I was gradually waking up, I could hardly believe that I had been dreaming," (p. 758).

The scientist here, in saying "I know that I'm not dreaming now," does not speak wrongfully. Does he thereby answer Descartes' question? Clearly, it seems that he does not. We may recognize the scientist as entitled to utter this sentence while maintaining that the skeptical question of concern to Descartes has not thereby been answered. The reason for this, according to Clarke, is that the scientist's remarks here, occur within a context that he calls the "plain." As such, when the scientist says "I know that I'm not dreaming now," the sort of possibility that the scientist is considering and ruling out is a *plain* possibility. By contrast, the possibility Descartes considers and finds himself unable to rule out is what Clarke calls a *philosophical* possibility. There are thus different possibilities to be ruled out by the same sentence depending on whether it is uttered in a plain context or a philosophical context. The plain and philosophical thoughts that can be expressed by the sentence "I know that I am not dreaming now" are what Clarke calls "verbal twins," (p. 756).

The distinction between plain and philosophical possibilities might be articulated as follows. Plain possibilities are considered relative to a context that is, by and large, taken for granted. When the experimenting scientist considers the possibility that he is dreaming, he takes for granted all sorts of facts about who he is and what he is doing. He knows that he is a scientist, that one activity in which he's engaged is experimenting with soporifics, that, in the context of this activity, he is apt to drift off to sleep without knowing himself to do so, and so on. The possibility that he might, at that moment, be dreaming is considered relative to this context that is taken for granted, and, relative to this context, he is entitled to rule that possibility out, since he knows that the effects of the drug with which he is experimenting have worn off. As such, the thought that he expresses by saying "I know that I am not dreaming now," ruling out this possibility, is a plain one. Contrast this with a distinctively philosophical way of thinking. Being

a philosopher, in Clarke's sense of the term, is to approach questions, not relative to an everyday context that is taken for granted, but to try to think about things *absolutely*. The philosopher "steps outside the circle of the plain," stepping back and surveying the world as a whole and his relation to it. Stepping back in this way, he takes nothing for granted. His inquiry is not relative to what he already takes for granted, but, rather, absolute, objective in a way that the plain man's is not. The *philosophical* question of skepticism is then posed in this distinctively philosophical context.

Philosophizing, on Clarke's construal, involves "stepping outside the circle of the plain" so as to see things objectively. Such a notion is only intelligible given a certain conception of what it is to employ concepts to think about things in the world. It is a conception of the conceptual in which three criteria are met:

1. Our concepts are either self-sufficient units or aspects of a conceptual scheme which is, in its entirety, a self-sufficient unit. That is to say, concepts don't depend on non-conceptual items, for instance the things we engage with in our practices or even the practices themselves, to be what they are.
2. There are, independent of our concepts, non-conceptual items that may or may not fall under the various concepts that we have and which are fully separate from the concepts under which they fall.
3. We can, apart from constructing concepts, stand back from the actual employment of concepts and think about whether or not some item, for instance one with certain sensible qualities, meets the criteria it would have to meet to be counted as falling under some concept (p. 761).

I'll call a conception of the conceptual that meets these three criteria a "detached" conception of the conceptual.³ It is this conception, Clarke claims, that makes possible the sort of absolute objectivity to which the philosopher aspires. The reasons for thinking this seem straightforward enough. First, if our concepts were inextricably tied to the things we engage with in our practices, then our thinking would be essentially

³Clarke calls such a conception a "conceptual constitution of the standard type" (760-761). Though the use of this name works for Clarke, given his dialectical purposes, the dialectic shows that the name is ultimately inapt, for, as we'll see, such a conceptual constitution is not only not "standard" but not even coherent.

constrained by these ties, and we wouldn't have any way of stepping back from our practical engagement with things and getting objective perspective on them. Second, if there weren't any non-conceptual items, then, clearly, there'd be no objectivity at all, since our thoughts wouldn't be about anything other than themselves. Finally, if we couldn't stand back from employing our concepts and think about the features of things in virtue of which we classify them as this or that, then there'd be no way of taking our conceptual classifications to be objectively correct. We can think of the detached conception as just that conception that enables the philosopher to take an external perspective on the world, to detach himself from it, as it is given to him, and see what to make of it. Taking this perspective is supposed to be precisely what allows for the sort of objectivity for which we aim in philosophy. It is in this context that the distinctively philosophical question of skepticism arises.

Consider again Descartes. Descartes' question is not about whether or not a particular state of affairs obtains *in* the world, for instance, whether he has drifted off to sleep in his armchair. Rather, the question is about *the world as a whole*. What Descartes asks, in a perfectly normal physiological state (i.e. not experimenting with soporifics), if he can know whether or not he is dreaming, the thought that he is considering is not a plain thought, indexed to a way for things to be that is taken for granted, but a philosophical thought, taking nothing for granted except what he cannot possibly doubt, his immediate experience. His aim in the *Meditations* is to call into doubt everything that he takes for granted, to step back from all of his normal employments of empirical concepts to things in experience and ask what grounds he has for actually employing these concepts. He finds, at least in the first mediation, that, given what he has to work with, he can find no such grounds. As such, he is left wondering whether anything that he takes to be so about the world on the basis of his experience really is so. He is left in a skeptical predicament of a distinctively philosophical sort.

3 A Brief Descent Into Nonsense

Let's now try to ask the skeptical question that Descartes invites us to ask. Considering just your own case, could it be that you are dreaming? On the face of it, there's no clear reason to answer this question negatively. Dreaming, it seems, is simply a state that one can be in or not be in. Using italics to mention concepts rather than use them, we might say that the concept *dreaming* applies to some particular individual just in case they are in the state of dreaming. To be in the state of dreaming is to be in a state in which one is undergoing experiences while asleep. Dreams are stretches experiences that one has when one is in that state, united, perhaps loosely, by some narrative. The concept *dream* applies to some such stretch of experiences.

Now, when we apply the concept *dreaming* in our everyday usage of concepts, we generally take it that the individual to whom it is applied was previously awake and then has fallen asleep, that they will wake up, that they know of the world outside of that dream, that they're in a state that lots of other people have been in, and so on. However, these facts about our everyday employment of the concept *dreaming* do not seem to imply that the concept *dreaming itself* has these entailment relations internal to it. As we've said, whether the concept *dreaming* applies or does not apply to a particular individual depends just on whether or not that individual is in a certain state—namely, dreaming. This is a state in which one is asleep and undergoing experiences. Now, there is a notable difference between *being* asleep and *having gone* to sleep. Though, when we usually say that someone is “dreaming,” we run these two things together, when speaking philosophically, we should tease them apart. Dreaming, as we've articulated it, only has the former implication, not the latter. So, if the concept *dreaming* currently applies to you, this fact does not itself imply that you've went to sleep, that you'll wake up, that there is a world you outside of this dream with which you are acquainted, or any of that—it simply means that you're

dreaming. To make this fact clear, we can form a *philosophical* version of the plain concept *dreaming*, call it *dreaming**, which is the concept of a state of being dreaming you might have for which there is no implication that you ever went to sleep or will wake up, that you know anything of a world outside of your dream, and so on. It is not so much a new concept, but rather, an explicitly sharpened version of the everyday concept. It applies to you just in case you are dreaming.

Even though, in our everyday practices, when we say that someone is dreaming, we usually mean to imply more than just that *dreaming** applies to them (for instance that they've gone to sleep, that they'll wake up, and so on), *dreaming** seems intelligible. Furthermore, it seems that, for all you know, you might be dreaming in this sense. It is perfectly compatible with your all of your experiences that you are dreaming*. Experiences themselves don't guarantee that you're not dreaming*. To see this, suppose you're not dreaming*. If you're not, there might be a dream* in which you have experiences that are indistinguishable from the ones you're having now. Simply given these experiences, there'd be no way of telling for sure whether or not you're dreaming*. Given that this is so, it is reasonable to conclude that, for all you know on the basis of your experience, you might be dreaming*. Now, it is part of the concept of dreaming* that the experiences one has while dreaming* are not experiences of anything independent of the dream* that one is having. A dream*, as we've said, is just a stretch of experiences that one has while asleep. Accordingly, if the concept *dreaming** applies to you, there's no way to infer that there is, in fact, a world outside of your experience of which you have any acquaintance at all. Thus, the question, "How do I know the world exists outside of my experience?" seems to be genuine ponderable. Let's try to ponder it.

The fact that you're considering *dreaming**, the philosophical concept, and not *dreaming*, the plain concept, means that you're considering a possibility that is not essentially indexed to some context of wakefulness that you take for granted. So, the

concept itself does not entail that, if it is correctly applied to you, you'll wake up from this dream, finding yourself having dozed off, ingested some drug, or something of that sort, thereby realizing that what you took to be experiences of an external world in some dreaming state turned out to be mere dream experience. To require that there be some world outside of the dream to which the thought can be contextualized would be to consider a plain, not a philosophical, thought. It would be to take for granted a stable way for things to be, and then, relative to what is taken for granted, consider a possibility in which you are dreaming. Of course, in the imagined case of waking up from this dream that you're having, the details of the particular world that is taken for granted are left unspecified, since you are not in a position to specify those details, given that you are currently in a dream. Still, you still take for granted that there is *some* world into which you'll wake from this dream. To shift from considering this plain possibility to considering the philosophical possibility, consider that, were you to wake up from this dream into some world, the question that you're dreaming could arise there as well, and so on and so forth. Seeming to wake up from a dream would do nothing to resolve the question of whether you're dreaming. It could all be one big dream. This is just to emphasize the point that being such that *dreaming** applies to you does not itself imply that there is anything that isn't a dream into which you'll wake.

While the philosophical concept *dreaming** does not imply that you've ever been awake and acquainted with any world outside of the dream you're having, it does imply that the apparently real world is, in fact, all just mere dream experience. Once again, dreams are mere stretches of experience. So, the question is, *could all of this be mere dream experience?* This is the possibility that the skeptic would have you imagine, and, given what we've just said, it seems that it is indeed a possibility. However, when you actually try to imagine what it would be for this possibility to be actual, it becomes increasingly difficult to say what it is that you're trying to imagine.

Any articulation of how it is that the scenario you take yourself to be imagining is really a *dream* will ineliminably make reference to being *awake*, but the philosophical concept *dreaming** is such that you have no reference point of wakefulness by which to consider it. You might try to articulate this possibility in some other way, but none of your plain concepts, for instance *hallucination* or *illusion*, will help you do so. All of these concepts get their footing by contrasting normal, non-hallucinatory, non-illusory, waking experience with the mere experience that they characterize. Our understanding of these concepts rests on our understanding of their application in a world that is not merely a dream, a hallucination, or an illusion. However, in the case we are trying to consider, we have no such reference point. As such, if we try to make philosophical versions of these concepts, *hallucination** and *illusion**, we won't be able to distinguish them from each other or from *dreaming**, since we understand their distinctness by understanding they characterize different sorts of states and events in the world in which we apply them. Thus, the philosophical possibility we are trying to imagine is simply the possibility that everything is mere experience. Yet, once again, our purported grasp of the *mereness* of the experience in question implicitly hinges on our being able to contrast it with everyday waking experience, and, once again, we don't have a such a reference point with which to work here. It seems like there is *something* we're trying to imagine, but we keep coming up short in trying to make sense of what it is.

If you keep trying to understand this thought, you'll be simply left with the thought that, whatever you take there to be, none of it really is. What, however, do you take yourself to be thinking in trying to think this thought? What would it be for everything that you take there to be to not be? To you, everything that you take there to be is everything that there is. To imagine the possibility that none of it really is would be to imagine that everything, really, is nothing. Could everything really be nothing? In reflecting on this question, you might take yourself to be having some sort of

paradoxical philosophical doubt in which you question the reality of everything in the deepest possible sense, while fully acknowledging that you can't quite articulate what it is that you're doubting or even make sense of it yourself. The question that you take yourself to be asking, it seems, is such that it can't be asked. Instead of just not asking it, letting it go, you might think that there is something quite deep about it, not just a bit of philosophical confusion. You might think that the fact that there is this question that can't be asked is itself some deep thing that you've stumbled upon in pondering philosophical skepticism. In taking there to be something deep here, you might find yourself stuck on the question of what it is, repeatedly trying to get a grip on it, but repeatedly unable to do so. You try to retrace your steps, thinking the question through, and, when you stumble again upon the conclusion that the question cannot so much as be asked, you see again the absurdity of the thing that you're trying to do, namely, ask the question of what it is. After all, a question that can't be asked can't be pondered either—the only thing to do with such question is to let it go. Yet *that*, you think, *is* the deep thing you were trying to think. There seems to be this strange line of thought that undoes itself here and affirms itself in its very own undoing. *What*, however, *is* this line of thought? Thinking it through, it seems that there's *something* that shows up here, but what is this "something" of which we seem to be speaking? The strange thing is that the word "something," as it is used here, could just as well pick out *nothing*, since the line of thought that purports to give the word "something" sense undoes itself. If this "something" is, it must negate itself, and so it cannot be. *What*, then, *is it?* This question is what we might call "the riddle."

4 The Way Out of the Fly Bottle

The riddle recurs insofar as you keep trying to answer it, and, if you keep thinking through the above line of thought in an attempt to do so, you might find yourself

seemingly “stuck” in this way of thinking. At its heart, there might seem to be the following paradox. There’s *something* that arises at the end of the skeptical line of thought, but, whatever it is, it can just as well be described as *nothing* since the line of thought which gives the word “something” sense undoes itself. So, what is this something which can just as well be said to be a nothing? This question, the riddle again, might seem to give expression to a paradox. Of course, like most paradoxes, the apparent paradox here is not a genuine one. To see our way out, let’s turn to Wittgenstein, who might respond to the riddle as follows:

It’s not a Something, but not a Nothing either! The conclusion was only that a Nothing would render the same service as a Something about which nothing could be said. [We just reject] the grammar which tends to force itself on us here.

The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always to serve the same purpose: to convey thoughts—which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or whatever. (PI §304, p. 109e)

Now, I’m taking Wittgenstein quite out of context here, but his words can be straightforwardly applied to our current situation. The paradox that we seem to have gotten ourselves into only seems coherent insofar as we think it’s coherent to treat everything as an object of thought so that we can philosophically reflect on the world as a whole and our relation to it. We can only take this attitude if we think we can treat language and thought as functioning to serve only one role: describing and classifying objective things and states of affairs from a standpoint outside of them, forming concepts and characterizing nonconceptual items from an external perspective on them. The “way out” of the paradox is simply to reject the grammar that seems to force it upon us. This grammar is what I’ve called the “detached conception of the conceptual,” a conception of the conceptual in which our application of concepts to things in the world is intelligible completely independently of our active engagement with things in the world and with others with whom we share it. To reject the grammar is to see that speaking

and thinking are activities that are fundamentally woven into the lives we live and practices in which we engage. We can indeed think objectively about things outside of us and convey these thoughts to others. That is indeed one practice in which we can engage. But it does not make sense to think of ourselves as being such that we could engage in this practice while engaging in no others. We engage in all sorts of practices, and our capacity for thought cannot be understood apart from our being engaged in a whole bunch of them.

This basic Wittgensteinian point about concepts and practices, suggesting what we might call an “engaged conception of the conceptual,” is a central theme that runs throughout the *Philosophical Investigations*. With this point in mind, we can reflect on the apparent thought that snowballed into this nonsense: the thought that it could all be but a dream, or, more precisely, a dream*. First, let’s make some remarks about our everyday concept *dream*. When I apply the concept *dream* to the experiences I had last night while I was asleep, I am exercising a conceptual capacity that I can employ, potentially at least, across a range of cases. I take the particular dream that I had last night to be one thing to which this concept can be applied, but I also take an indefinite number of other things to be such—the dreams I’ve had in the past, those I’ll have in the future, the dreams that you’ve had, and so on. This concept is a concept that we share, and we can employ it to express thoughts that can play a role in the practices in which we engage. I can say to you, “I had a crazy dream last night,” and you’ll know what I mean. Our understanding of this concept is not intelligible apart from its being at least potentially integrated into the lives that we live and the practices in which we engage. It is in the context of these lived activities and public practices that this concept finds its home of application. In understanding how it is to be applied in our practices, understanding how the expression “dream” can be used in such a way that it plays a role in these practices, we grasp the concept. Our practical mastery of the use of the expression “dream” consists in our mastery of the public practices in

which it is employed. It is in understanding how these practices go, an understanding that we have by actually engaging in them, that we understand the how to apply the concept *dream* to our dreams and those of others. On the other hand, *dream** can *have no* application. There's nothing it could be to employ this apparent concept in such a way that it plays a meaningful role in public practices at all. As such, there's nothing that it is to employ it in a meaningful expression of a thought. Any apparent expression of thought that seems to do so, including any of those above, in fact, lacks sense.

5 Conclusion

The approach to skepticism that has been taken here has been, not to *solve* it, but to *dissolve* it. This is an approach to philosophical problems characteristic of Wittgenstein and various philosophers following in his tradition. It is articulated perhaps most clearly in the work of James Conant under the heading of a “resolute reading” of some portion of Wittgenstein’s work. Consider how Conant describes a resolute reading of the stretch of passages in the *Philosophical Investigations* that go under the heading of “the private language argument”:

A resolute reader of this stretch of Wittgenstein’s later work will want to begin by pointing out that Wittgenstein does not say that there cannot be a private language. The discussion of private language (like so many passages in Wittgenstein’s later work) begins with an invitation for us to try to imagine something. The point of the exercise of trying to imagine ‘a private language’ is to work through ‘the seeming possibility’ here—to try to think it all the way through—until we find it dissolves on us. The transition from latent to patent nonsense is the point of the exercise: the task is to help us see how the seeming possibility (of a ‘private language’) dissolves under the pressure of an attempt to work out what ‘it’ (seemingly) requires. What makes a reading of this bit of Wittgenstein’s text ‘resolute’ (in my parlance) is that it follows all the way through on such an exercise to the point where the apparent something dissolves into a nothing, (2004, p. 187)

The strategy that Conant describes in this passage is precisely the sort of strategy that

we've taken here in response to the question of skepticism. What we've done is try to imagine the thought proposed by the skeptic. Trying to imagine this proposed thought, we followed the skeptical line of thinking through until an apparent something, originally called the "skeptical thought," dissolved into a nothing, as the expression itself lost its sense entirely. Having done this exercise, we can now entitle ourselves to the following conclusion. Skepticism is not irrefutable, but palpably senseless.

Of course, the above conclusion applies only to what I've called, following Clarke, "philosophical" skepticism. I have not made any claim about the various sorts of "plain" skeptical scenarios that we might imagine and credit with some degree of plausibility. For instance, I do not take anything I've said here to rule out the sort of scenario depicted in the movie *The Matrix*. That scenario, though perhaps quite implausible, is still, I think, intelligible. Note, however, how the game changes once we have this distinction at hand. Insofar as we explicitly understand the scenario as a plain one, there must be some plain context to which our consideration of it is contextualized, and it is relative to this context that we can evaluate the plausibility of the scenario. For the Matrix scenario to obtain would be for there to be some intelligent beings in a non-virtual world who have constructed a program that produces a virtual world, for this virtual world to be the world in which we live, and for each of us living in this virtual world to have a correlate non-virtual body in the non-virtual world. Such a scenario does seem intelligible. Is it plausible? How would one go about making a program that produces a virtual world as rich as the one in which we are supposed to be living? What sort of computing power would be required to do this? What motivation would intelligent beings have to actually undertake such a project? The scenario is only intelligible insofar as we can pose these questions, and, to actually pose them, we have to take for granted a whole bunch of things that we know about the world and our place in it. Taking this knowledge for granted, the question about whether the Matrix scenario is actual is still an interesting question, but it does not

have the character of Descartes' question. It does not call everything that we know into doubt.⁴ No genuinely intelligible question, I have claimed, can do that.

References

- [1] Bridges, Jason. 2016. "Skepticism and Beyond." *Sképsis* 7: 76-99.
- [2] Conant, James. 2000. "Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein," in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read, pp. 174-217.
- [3] Conant, James. 2004. "Why Worry about the Tractatus," in *Post-Analytic Tractatus*, ed. Barry Foster. Ashgate.
- [4] Chalmers, David. 2005. "The Matrix as Metaphysics," in *Philosophers Explore the Matrix*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [5] Clarke, Thompson. 1972. "The Legacy of Skepticism," *The Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 69, No. 50. pp. 754-769.
- [6] Stroud, Barry. 1984. *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. Oxford University Press.
- [7] Stroud, Barry. 2000a. "Doubts on the Legacy of Skepticism," in *Understanding Human Knowledge*. Oxford University Press. pp. 26-37.
- [8] Stroud, Barry. 2000b. "Reasonable Claims: Cavell and the Tradition," in *Understanding Human Knowledge*. Oxford University Press. pp. 51-70.
- [9] Stroud, Barry. 2009. "Skepticism and the Senses." *European Journal of Philosophy* 17, no. 4: 559-570.
- [10] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1922) 2003. *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. New Edition, trans. C.K. Ogden. Barnes & Noble.
- [11] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1953) 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. Fourth Edition, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Shulte. Blackwell Publishing.

⁴Indeed, for this reason one might follow Chalmers (2005) in thinking of the Matrix hypothesis not as a *skeptical* hypothesis at all, but merely as a *metaphysical* hypothesis.