

# Class Two: Cartesian Skepticism and Responses

Philosophy and Science Fiction - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 Skeptical Scenarios, Skeptical Arguments, and Anti-Skeptical Strategies

- **Epistemology:** The study of knowledge and justification. Do we really know what we normally take ourselves to know? If so, how?
- **Skeptical Scenarios:** Scenarios in which we're radically mistaken in our beliefs about the world around us, paradigmatically, cases in which all of the things we normally take to exist as things outside of us and which we seem to perceive don't really exist.
- **Skeptical Argument:** Aims to show that we lack knowledge in any of our beliefs about the world around us, since we can't rule out that we're in a skeptical scenario in which those beliefs would be false.
- **The General form of a Skeptical Argument:** Where  $p$  is some common-sense proposition about the world (such as "I'm holding a bottle") and  $S$  is a skeptical scenario (such as that I'm dreaming).
  1. If, for all I know,  $p$  is false, then I don't know  $p$ .
  2. If I'm in  $S$ , then  $p$  is false.
  3. For all I know, I'm in  $S$ .
  4. So, for all I know,  $p$  is false.
  5. So, I don't know  $p$ .
- **Anti-Skeptical Strategies:** Most philosophers want to say that we know things about the world around us, and so think there must be *something* wrong with the above argument.

## 2 Descartes on Skepticism

- **Who is Rene Descartes?**
  - Philosopher and mathematician from the 1600s.
  - Connected algebra and geometry through the invention of the Cartesian Coordinate system.
  - Responsible for the modern form of mind-body dualism.
  - Responsible for the problem of skepticism in its modern form.
- **The Point of the *Meditations*:** Call everything into doubt so as to be able to re-arrive at only what is truly justified on rock-solid foundations.
- **Descartes's Dreaming Scenario:**

"Often in my dreams I am convinced of just such familiar events—that I am sitting by the fire in my dressing-gown—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!"
- **Dreaming as a Skeptical Scenario**

"Suppose then that I am dreaming – it isn't true that I, with my eyes open, am moving my head and stretching out my hands."

- **Descartes’s Evil Demon Scenario:** An even *more* radical scenario, intended to bring about an even greater doubt:

“I shall suppose that some malicious, powerful, cunning demon has done all he can to deceive me—rather than this being done by God, who is supremely good and the source of truth. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely dreams that the demon has contrived as traps for my judgment. I shall consider myself as having no hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as having falsely believed that I had all these things. I shall stubbornly persist in this train of thought; and even if I can’t learn any truth, I shall at least do what I can do, which is to be on my guard against accepting any falsehoods, so that the deceiver— however powerful and cunning he may be—will be unable to affect me in the slightest.”

- **Descartes’s Anti-Skeptical Strategy:** A rather wild, roundabout argument that goes roughly along the following lines:

- Begins with a proof of himself through the famous “I think, therefore I am.”
- Goes on to prove the existence of God from the fact that he has an idea of God.
- Then argues that material objects must exist since they really seem to exist and God would have made him have this inclination. So, if they don’t exist, God’s a deceiver. But God’s not a deceiver, so they do.

The first step is very influential, but, beyond this, practically no one in the history of philosophy has thought is a good way to respond to skepticism, and so we’ll look at some more persuasive attempts.

### 3 Towards Sci-Fi Skeptical Scenarios

- **Problems with the Dreaming Scenario:** Is the dreaming scenario actually a good skeptical scenario? Aren’t there things that we can do to determine whether we’re dreaming or awake?

- Flip a light switch and see if the lighting changes.
- Look at a bit of writing or a digital clock.

- **Problems with the Evil Demon Scenario:** Is it too far out there for us to have a real grip on? Recall Dennett’s description of the scenario as belonging to a class of scenarios that are:

So “outlandish [. . .] we may wisely decline to conclude *anything* from them. Our conviction that we understand the issues involved may be unreliable, an illusion produced by the vividness of the fantasy.”

- **The Matrix as a Skeptical Scenario:** If we’re in the Matrix, the things that seem to be in the world around us, things like bottles, desks, chairs, and so on, don’t really exist.

- Some quotes suggesting this:

**Morpheus** You’ve been living in a dream world, Neo.

**Neo:** I have these memories from my life. None of them happened

**Spoon boy:** Do not try and bend the spoon. That’s impossible. Instead ... only try to realize the truth.

**Neo:** What truth?

**Spoon boy:** There is no spoon.

**Neo:** There is no spoon?

**Spoon boy:** Then you’ll see, that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself.

- **A Few More Sci-Fi Skeptical Scenarios:**

- You think you're a human being, living a normal life. In fact, however, you're an alien in the arcade "Blipz and Chitz" who has just put on the helmet for the game "Roy," in which you forget that you've ever put on a helmet and live the entire life of a man named "Roy." When you die, you'll awake in Blipz and Chitz realizing that this whole life was just a short video game run.
- You think you're a human being, living a normal life. In fact, however, you're an alien who has just taken inhaled a large dose of a psychedelic drug, and, when you die, you'll awake to your actual alien friends realizing that this whole life was a three hour wastion trip.
  - \* From a fun thread in Reddit's /r/WritingPrompts: [https://www.reddit.com/r/WritingPrompts/comments/6xngfe/wp\\_when\\_you\\_die\\_you\\_wake\\_up\\_in\\_an\\_alien\\_world/dmhcs18/](https://www.reddit.com/r/WritingPrompts/comments/6xngfe/wp_when_you_die_you_wake_up_in_an_alien_world/dmhcs18/)
- You are a completely simulated being, living in a completely simulated universe, constructed by non-simulated beings as an experiment to better understand how life and consciousness could have emerged from the initial conditions of the universe.
- Your apparent life is the momentary experience of a "Boltzman Brain," a brain-like entity that has momentarily sprung into existence due to random quantum fluctuations.
  - \* See: <https://bigthink.com/hard-science/boltzmann-brain-nothing-is-real/>
- **Question:** Any other scenarios come to mind?
- **A Question to Keep in Mind:** Will the response that we give to skepticism, considering these different scenarios, be the same in each case? Or will it vary depending on the specific scenario we're considering?

## 4 Russell's Response to Skepticism

- **Russell's Aim:** Russell wants to show that we have very good reason to believe in the *independent existence of objects*:
 

"[I]f we cannot be sure of the independent existence of objects, we shall be left alone in a desert—it may be that the whole outer world is nothing but a dream, and that we alone exist. This is an uncomfortable possibility; but although it cannot be strictly proved to be false, there is not the slightest reason to suppose that it is true. In this chapter we have to see why this is the case," (7)
- **The Basic Argument:** An inference to the best explanation:
  - We may doubt the existence of independent objects, but we can't doubt our immediate sensory experiences ("sense-data") and thoughts.
  - Experiences are always changing, but they change in certain regular and predictable patterns.
  - The simplest and so best explanation of these patterns of experiences is that they are caused by independent objects that behave in predictable ways.
- **A Relatively Modest Conclusion:** It's not *impossible* that the apparent world be mere fantasy; it's just that our sense experiences are more simply explained by the hypothesis that they're caused by independent objects:
 

"In one sense it must be admitted that we can never *prove* the existence of things other than ourselves and our experiences. No logical absurdity results from the hypothesis that the world consists of myself and my thoughts and feelings and sensations, and that everything else is mere fancy. In dreams a very complicated world may seem to be present, and yet on waking we find it was a delusion; that is to say, we find that the sense-data in the dream do not appear to have corresponded with such physical objects as we should naturally infer from our sense-data," (7).
- **Discussion Questions:**

- Is Russell's response to skepticism too weak to satisfy us? What of the basic skeptical argument? Is the skeptical conclusion that we don't know anything about the external world ruled out by Russell's weak response to skepticism?
- Suppose we are in the Matrix. Wouldn't bits of computer code be able to play the same explanatory role? What does that have to say about Russell's response to skepticism or the Matrix scenario as a purportedly skeptical scenario?

## 5 Moore's Response to Skepticism

- **Moore's Proof:** Unlike Russell, Moore thinks we can prove the existence of external things:  
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.
- **Moore's Three Requirements:** It's a genuine proof because:
  - The premises are different than the conclusion.
  - The premises are known to be true.
  - The conclusion follows from the premises.
- **The Obvious Response:** Sure, *if* you had proven that there's a hand, then you may have proven the existence of external things. But you haven't proven your premise that there's a hand!
- **Moore's Basic Response to the Response:** Look, if you want a proof that can be applied to any particular thing that proceeds from completely neutral premises that don't suppose the existence of any such things, you're not going to find one. But that's no reason to think that we don't know such things as that we have hands.
- **The Moorean Shift:** From a skeptical *modus ponens* to an anti-skeptical *modus tollens*:
  - **The Skeptical Modus Ponens:**
    1. If don't know I'm not in the Matrix, I don't know that this is a hand.
    2. I don't know I'm not in the Matrix.
    3. So, I don't know that this is a hand.
  - **Moore's Anti-Skeptical Modus Tollens:**
    1. If don't know I'm not in the Matrix, I don't know that this is a hand.
    2. I know that this is a hand.
    3. So, I know I'm not in the Matrix.
  - **A Third Possible Argument Form?:**
    1. I know that this is a hand.
    2. I don't know I'm not in the Matrix.
    3. So, it's not the case that if I don't know I'm not in the matrix, I don't know that this is a hand (i.e. this being a hand is compatible with my being in the Matrix).

**Question:** Which of these argument forms do we want to endorse?

## 6 Further Questions

- Does it matter? Is there a reason to prefer truth about the reality when might it be the case that "ignorance is bliss," as Cypher says? Would it be irrational to go back and take the blue pill, rather than the red pill? We'll consider these questions in more detail next time.