

Week 8 Notes

Philo 101 Online | Hunter College

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1 Skepticism

Until now, this course has been focused on topics in ethics and political philosophy. From here on, we turn to two of philosophy's other main areas, epistemology and metaphysics. Metaphysics is the study of the nature of the world and our place in it, and epistemology is the study of our attempts to find out about the world. We begin the study of skepticism, which is one of the central topics in epistemology.

Local skepticism about some topic is the idea that we don't know as much about that topic as we tend to think we do. Extreme versions of local skepticism deny that we know anything about the topic in question. For example: a skeptic about climate change is someone who denies that most or all of what we think we know about climate change is genuine knowledge. By contrast, philosophers have typically been more interested in *global* skepticism, which is the idea that nearly all of what we think we know is not genuine knowledge.

Here I will briefly review some of the traditional and contemporary arguments for skepticism, and then consider some reasons why philosophers have found skepticism to be an interesting topic to think about.

2 Descartes

René Descartes is one of the first great modern philosophers. This is because he set the agenda for many of those who came after him. Much of the philosophy of the last several hundred years can be understood as a conversation about how to respond to questions that Descartes raised. In the second half of this course, we will pursue themes raised by Descartes in his short work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

We'll look at a larger chunk of the *Meditations* next week, in which several of Descartes' positive theories are stated. This week, we consider just his first meditation, which is a famous defense of global skepticism, presented in the form of three increasingly powerful arguments.

2.1 The Sensory Unreliability Argument

Descartes' arguments all work by cutting off our knowledge at its source, which is our sensory connection to the world around us. If we have genuine knowledge of the world around us, this is where we get it. And so Descartes' first strategy is to point out that our senses are sometimes unreliable.

Whatever I have accepted until now as most true has come to me through my senses. But occasionally I have found that they have deceived me, and it is unwise to trust completely those who have deceived us even once. (Descartes, 2017, 1)

You can probably think of a time when your sense gave you unreliable information. Maybe you thought you saw a friend out of the corner of your eye, only to realize that you had misperceived someone else. Or, here's another favorite: dip a pen or a pencil into a glass of water, and notice that it will seem to be bent. In situations like these, our senses are feeding us misinformation. But, Descartes argues, this gives us some grounds on which to doubt any particular belief that we got from our senses. After all, that belief might have been the result of an undetected error.

Although this argument gives us *some* reason to doubt what we learn from our senses, it seems open to a fairly clear response. We seem to be quite good at figuring out when our senses are deceiving us, and at correcting accordingly. The kind of ignorance that arises from sensory malfunctions is usually short lived.

2.2 The Dream Argument

Descartes' next argument is significantly more powerful. It relies on the observation that it is not always possible to tell when one is having a dream. And so, for all you know, you are dreaming right now.

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! ...As I think about this more carefully, I realize that

there is never any reliable way of distinguishing being awake from being asleep. (Descartes, 2017, 1–2)

But since we also know that dreams often put us in fantastical scenarios that seem normal when we're experiencing them, this raises the possibility that any one of our current beliefs about how the world works may be a mere figment of our imaginations:

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. Suppose, indeed that I don't even have hands or any body at all. (Descartes, 2017, 12)

This may seem ridiculous, but consider the fact that we sometimes dream about flying, or about being disembodied, and don't realize that we're dreaming. So, isn't it possible that you're *actually* disembodied, and just currently dreaming that you have a body? This line of thought seems to endanger nearly all of the knowledge that we seem to have.

2.3 The Evil Demon Argument

The dream argument has its limits. Descartes points out that we never invent anything wholly from scratch in dreams; everything we encounter there is built out of raw material from our waking lives.

Still, it has to be admitted that the visions that come in sleep are like paintings: they must have been made as copies of real things; so at least these general kinds of things—eyes, head, hands and the body as a whole—must be real and not imaginary. For even when painters try to depict sirens and satyrs with the most extraordinary bodies, they simply jumble up the limbs of different kinds of real animals, rather than inventing natures that are entirely new. If they do succeed in thinking up something completely fictitious and unreal—not remotely like anything ever seen before—at least the colours used in the picture must be real. Similarly, although these general kinds of things—eyes, head, hands and so on—could be imaginary, there is no denying that certain even simpler and more universal kinds of things are real. These are the elements out of which we make all our mental images of things—the true and also the false ones. (Descartes, 2017, 2)

This seems to show that some of what we have must be information rather than misinformation, even if we can't tell which is which. Nothing is *completely* a product of our imaginations.

This brings Descartes to his third and most powerful form of skepticism, which is usually called the *evil demon* argument. He considers the possibility that some supernatural creature has set out to deceive him.

So 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, 2017, 3)

This is an even more powerful skeptical argument than the dream argument because Descartes need no longer admit even that his experiences are scrambled mixtures of real things that he has experienced. Instead, they may have another source—namely, an evil supernatural being's malicious interference. If you were in that situation, it might seem to you just as your real life does. And so every piece of evidence that you are currently doing your readings for philosophy class is also a piece of evidence that you are under the spell of an evil demon who wants you to think that you're doing your readings. You have no better reason to believe the former than the latter.

3 Contemporary Skepticism

There is no universally agreed upon response to skepticism, although we will consider a few ways to respond (including Descartes' own response) next week. Skepticism continues to be a bizarre and unsettling philosophical problem. Of course, contemporary skeptics aren't primarily worried about an evil demon. They've replaced the demon with other knowledge-robbing villains: mad scientists and artificial intelligences.

Consider the possibility that you are nothing but a brain in a vat in a mad scientist's lab. The scientist has mapped out the functions of the human brain in such a way that they can read all of the signals that your brain would normally send to your body (if you had a body), and mimic all of the signals that your body (including your sense organs) would send back. So, when you make a decision to "turn your head to the left", the scientist changes up the information being sent to your brain's visual system in the appropriate way. Since all of your experiences are caused by brain activity, a scientist who had perfected the art of mimicking the right brain activities could give you the illusion of a perfectly coherent life that was under your control, despite the fact that you were nothing more than a brain. In this scenario, everything you think you know would be false. And yet everything you've ever experienced is compatible with such a scenario. You have no evidence whatsoever that this isn't reality for you.

The Matrix uses a variation on the brain-in-a-vat scenario as its central premise. In the world of the film (spoiler alert), humans have been enslaved by artificial intelligence, which is using them as a power source. To keep them from figuring out the truth, the humans are kept in a state that, from their subjective points of view, is indistinguishable from the late-1990's. But of course, they are actually living in tubes filled with pink goo, at some unspecified future time. Of course, the movie is designed to make us all think about the fact that we have no good evidence that we aren't in those tubes of pink goo, too.

The latest trend in skeptical thinking deals with the possibility that you are a computer simulation. The twist is that this line of thought doesn't merely purport to show that it is possible that everything you think you know is false; it purports to show that this is quite likely. The idea goes like this. Human brains are nothing more than complex physical systems. Suppose, as seems likely, that minds are nothing more than the products of these systems. Many philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists now tend to think of our brains as biological computer hardware. Human thought, including conscious experience, is just the software that is running on this hardware. Let us suppose that's the right way to think about what minds are. The thing about software is that the same software can run on all sorts of different hardware. I can run Microsoft Word on a Windows PC that stores information on a spinning magnetic hard drive, on a Mac with a solid-state drive, on an Android phone with flash memory, and so on. It stands to reason, then, that the software that is running on your brain—i.e., your mind—could also run on some other computer hardware. We probably don't have a computer powerful enough

to do this at the moment, but computers get faster all the time. It seems likely that some computer scientist of the future *will* have a fast-enough computer to simulate your mind, including your conscious experiences. And a few generations of hardware after that, another computer scientist might have the computing power to simulate hundreds of billions of minds all at the same time. Again, suppose that this will indeed come to pass. Well, in that case, someone who is having experiences like yours has to ask themselves the following question: “Is it more likely that I am the real thing or a simulation?” And they might go on to reason as follows: “Since there was only ever one real thing, but there will presumably be billions of simulations, it seems much more likely that I am one of the simulations.”

If we buy into all of the complicated assumptions of the premise—and many philosophers who’ve thought about it very carefully do grant the premise—then this is certainly the most powerful skeptical argument ever dreamt up. After all: it doesn’t merely show that you can’t be sure about what’s real; it purports to show that there’s only a one-in-a-billion chance that you know what’s real.

For the reasons I’ve just given, the Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom (2003) has recently argued that at least one of the following conclusions is true: (1) human civilization will come to an end some time soon, before computers become advanced enough to simulate human minds; (2) the technologically advanced humans of the future won’t be curious enough about us that they’ll bother to simulate our minds; or (3) we almost certainly exist within a computer simulation.

4 Why Think about Skepticism?

One common response to skeptical arguments can be put as follows.

Even if I know nothing, and even if most of my beliefs are false, so what? There’s nothing I can do about this, and no obvious way in which I should change how I act as a result. So, if we’re finished pondering skepticism now, I’m going to get back to what I was doing before.

There’s something to this. If it is true that we are part of a simulation, there is presumably nothing we can do about that. And it’s hard to worry about the possibility that I don’t exist when my stomach starts grumbling and it’s time for lunch. Even Descartes recognized this:

This will be hard work, though, and a kind of laziness pulls me back into my old ways. Like a prisoner who dreams that he is free, starts to suspect that it is merely a dream, and wants to go on dreaming rather than waking up, so I am content to slide back into my old opinions... (Descartes, 2017, 3)

So, why should we bother to think about skepticism? Well, one reason is that it is interesting to do so. Not everything we do needs to be justified in terms of its practical utility. Some intellectual pursuits are valuable on their own terms. Contemplating one of the central puzzles of human existence seems like it might belong in that category.

But there are also some other reasons. As Christopher Grau points out in his essay, thinking about skeptical scenarios can teach us important lessons about our own values. *The Matrix* is presented as a very disturbing, dystopian movie. I'm guessing that the possibility that you're a computer simulation creeps you out a bit as well, if you're taking it seriously. But why? If the simulation is subjectively indistinguishable from the real thing, with just as much pleasure and just as much pain, why should you care if the deep truth of the matter is that it's all an illusion? Grau's answer is that we care about some things even more than we care about pleasant experiences, and that we would lack these things even in very pleasant simulations.

Descartes has another kind of reason for facing up to skepticism. As we'll see next week, he is not ultimately a skeptic. He wants to rebuild our knowledge, and to show how it is structured, with the most fundamental building blocks first, and the rest built on top. He is what we'll call a *foundationalist*—someone who thinks that our knowledge is organized into a hierarchical structure. For Descartes, then, skepticism is a way of clearing the ground for his foundation. In the opening lines of *The Meditations*, he puts it as follows:

Some years ago I was struck by how many false things I had believed, and by how doubtful was the structure of beliefs that I had based on them. I realized that if I wanted to establish anything in the sciences that was stable and likely to last, I needed—just once in my life—to demolish everything completely and start again from the foundations. (Descartes, 2017, 1)

Next week, we'll see what he builds, now that he has opened up a bit of epistemological real estate to do it in.

References

Bostrom, N. (2003). Are you living in a computer simulation? *Philosophical Quarterly*, 53(211):243–255.

Descartes, R. (2017). *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Early Modern Texts. Translation by Jonathan Bennett, <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1641.pdf>, 2017 edition.