A Critique of External World Skepticism

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Abstract

Philosophers since ancient Greece have forwarded and debated various skeptical theses. Contemporary philosophers continue this tradition of vibrant and compelling dialogue. The most common form of skepticism considered in contemporary academic philosophy is called "external world skepticism." This skeptical argument seeks to deny claims that we know about the external world on the grounds that to know of the external world one must show that other possible explanations of our experiences must be known to be false. In my paper, I will explore some well-known arguments for external world skepticism (i.e., Descartes' Dream Hypothesis and Putnam's Brain in a Vat Hypothesis) and, in so doing, I will offer my own counterarguments against each argument. More broadly, I will reject the presuppositions of the skeptic's argument, developing a principled criticism of those presuppositions recently attributed to Quine that will serve as a basis for my own argumentation against external world skeptical hypotheses.

Introduction

In order to understand external world skepticism, it is necessary to delineate the disparate forms of philosophical skepticism. That being said, the first goal of this paper will be just that: a delineation of the varying forms of philosophical skepticism. Once this is accomplished, I will then explore some well known external world skeptical hypotheses and argue that all skeptical hypotheses depend on the closure principle. Thirdly, I will also explore some well known responses to external world skepticism and argue that they are ultimately unsatisfactory. Lastly, I will argue, like Quine and Wallis, that it is necessary to reframe the debate in order to combat the skeptic, and I will offer some further argumentation for why external world skeptical hypotheses are less viable explanations of our sensory input.

Forms of Philosophical Skepticism

Primarily, there are two varieties of philosophical skepticism: the first is Pyrrhonian Skepticism[1] and the second is Cartesian Skepticism.[2] The former type of skeptic claims that an agent S cannot know whether it is the case that S knows any proposition or it is not the case that S knows any proposition, whereas the latter claims that S *cannot* know *any* proposition. Pyrrhonian Skeptics deny that one can know the epistemic status of one's beliefs regarding the external world and tend to argue that the belief that one knows any given proposition never exceeds a rough evidential parity with the belief that one does not know that belief. Thus, one's belief that one knows that, say, the sky is blue, never exceeds the evidence for the belief that one does not know that the sky is blue. On the other hand, Cartesian Skeptics deny that one's beliefs regarding the external world can attain the epistemic status of knowledge. In other words, one's evidence that the sky is blue never proves sufficient for the belief to count as knowledge. To reiterate, the Pyrrhonian Skeptic claims that one cannot know whether it is the case that S knows any proposition p or it is not the case that S knows that p; whereas the Cartesian skeptic claims that S *cannot* know that p. Further bifurcations of the Pyrrhonian Skepticism and Cartesian Skepticism have been made by other philosophers like Klein (1981), but I will restrict discussion in this paper to the two most general varieties of these skeptical theses (pp. 5-12).

Two Hypotheses of External World Skepticism

There is plethora of hypotheses of external world skepticism to draw from, but I will focus on two particular hypotheses, namely Descartes' Dream Hypothesis (Descartes, 1993, p. 14) and Putnam's Brain in a Vat Hypothesis (Putnam, 1981, Chapter 1). Although each hypothesis is formulated differently, the conclusion (that either the Pyrrhonian Skeptic or the Cartesian Skeptic arrives at) is premised with the same claim, viz., that S cannot know that the external world exists because S cannot justifiably deny the relevant possible world posed by the skeptic (or any other for that matter) as one might intuitively do on the basis of one's sensory input. This is because *the deliverances of the senses provide insufficient or inadequate evidence for the extrapolation/judgment*

traveling from sensory experience to the existence of objects, events, and properties with the corresponding properties [hereafter claim (ψ)].

Descartes' Dream Hypothesis

The claim that *our senses sometimes mislead us* [hereafter claim (φ)] is a seemingly intuitive claim, but what follows for philosophers like Descartes from this claim is not. Descartes (1993) concludes that he should withhold his assent from any class of judgments that are not certain and indubitable. Further, the variation of reliability of any particular sensory faculty is irrelevant; it does not matter whether the agent's perceptual circumstances are ideal or less than ideal. The mere *possibility* of sensory deception, regardless of the agent's perceptual circumstances, is enough (for Descartes) to withhold assent. But on what grounds does Descartes withhold assent to the wider class of judgments that are based on sensory input even in the most ideal circumstances? At first glance, this follows from Descartes' Dream Hypothesis:

> How often does my evening slumber persuade me of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! But right now my eyes are certainly wide awake when I gaze upon this sheet of paper. This head which I am shaking is not heavy with sleep. I extend this hand consciously and deliberately, and I feel it. Such things would not be so distinct for someone who is asleep. As if I did not recall having been deceived on other occasions even by similar thoughts in my dreams! As I consider these matters more carefully, I see so plainly that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep. As a result, I am becoming quite dizzy, and this dizziness nearly convinces me that I am asleep. (p. 14)

If Descartes, or anyone for that matter, cannot tell whether he or she is dreaming or awake, then he or she cannot justifiably deny this relevant possible world alternative (to an external world); relevant in the sense that the alternative is plausible and possesses the same explanatory power for what one perceives as the external world.

Of course when Descartes (1993) revisits the Dream Argument in "Meditation Six" he dismisses the Dream Hypothesis as hyperbolic doubt (p. 59). Whether someone is dreaming or awake is indeed something an agent is able to distinguish; there are dissimilarities between the two that allows the agent to know which is which. As Descartes points out, dreams are not congruent with the memories of being awake. For example, I might dream that my head is made of clay and all the "facts" of my dream may corroborate this, but upon waking I will see that my head is not made of clay and further that every waking memory I have will serve to support the contrary.

There are further arguments for how one can know whether or not one is dreaming, but they will not be explored here.[3] Even so, the hard line skeptic can grant the aforementioned difference because claim (ψ) makes these differences inconsequential. As Stroud (1984) points out, S's dreams are incompatible with S's knowing insofar as it does not necessarily follow that if S is dreaming that S knows that p, then S knows that p. Further, if S knows that p, then S must know that he or she is not dreaming (pp. 1-38).

There must be some evidence whether S knows if he or she is dreaming, but such evidence is not available to S. Why? Because one's knowledge of whether or not one is dreaming is based on empirical evidence i.e., evidence derived from the senses. Thus the belief that S knows that p (in this case whether or not S is dreaming) is based on empirical evidence e; the problem now arises that the justificandum (i.e., the thing to be justified) e requires its own justification. This of course creates a vicious regress and there is seemingly no empirically based evidence that can serve as a basic justificational belief for the proposition that S knows that p (that S is not dreaming). One's reasons (evidence) against the dreaming hypothesis (possibility) do not support a certain and indubitable judgment that one is not dreaming. The skeptic counters Descartes' argument by asking: "How do you know that your waking memories, which serve as a basis for your dismissal that you are not dreaming, are not in fact the product of dreams?" To summarize, knowing that one is not dreaming is a necessary condition for knowing that the external world exists, but, given the Cartesian framework of knowledge (i.e., that S must know that p indubitably), this is not possible;

S can never know, without doubt, whether or not he or she is dreaming because knowledge derived from the senses cannot form a necessary and sufficient foundation of knowledge that would give *S* incontrovertible evidence to determine whether he or she is dreaming; or more broadly, *S* does not have evidence and cannot possibly garner evidence (on the basis of empirical knowledge) that would eliminate the relevant class of possible worlds. Thus, the skeptic conclude**s** either that *S* cannot know that the external world exists (the Cartesian Skeptic), or *S* has no better reason to believe that the external world exists than to believe that it doesn't exist (the Pyrrhonian Skeptic).

Putnam's Brain in a Vat Hypothesis

The Brain in a Vat Hypothesis isn't premised with any claims such as claim (φ), although this claim implicitly supports the Brain in a Vat Hypothesis or any skeptical hypothesis for that matter. The stronger claim that might follow from claim (φ), namely claim (ψ), is not only implicit but necessarily part of the structure of the hypothesis. Claim (ψ) is readily adopted by Putnam (1981) and thus the Brain in a Vat Hypothesis becomes remedied through philosophical inquiry alone; the sciences are not up to the task because they are wholly reliant on the senses and consequently cannot circumvent claim (ψ). Putnam's solution will be discussed in the next section thoroughly, but for now, allow me to introduce the hypothesis:

> [I]magine that a human being … has been subject to an operation by an evil scientist. The person's brain … has been removed from the body and placed in a vat of nutrients which keeps the brain alive. The nerve endings have been connected to a super-scientific computer which causes the person whose brain it is to have the illusion that everything is perfectly normal. There seems to be people, objects, the sky, etc.; but really all the person … is experiencing is the result of electronic impulses traveling from the computer to the nerve endings. The computer is so clever that if the person tries to raise his hand, the feedback from the computer will cause him to 'see' and 'feel' the hand being raised.

> Moreover, by varying the program, the evil scientist can
> cause the victim to 'experience' (or hallucinate) any
> situation or environment the evil scientist wishes. He can
> also obliterate the memory of the brain operation, so that
> the victim will seem to himself to have always been in
> this environment. (pp. 5-6)

Putnam (1981) expands on the hypothesis by supposing that this is not
uniquely one person's plight, but the entire plight of all humans, or even
further, all sentient beings. In this scenario, we are all connected to each
other via these super-scientific computers, so that the hallucination of all
sentient beings is collective and interdependent. It might also be the case
that there actually is no evil scientist behind the scenes and that this just
happens to be how the world works.

Like the Dream Hypothesis, the Brain in a Vat Hypothesis
specifically and stipulatively proves consistent with all of one's
experiences. Thus, one faces a paucity of empirical evidence to support
the external world hypothesis over the Brain in a Vat Hypothesis. In
order for S to know that p (in this case that the external world exists), S
must also know that he or she is not a brain in a vat. S, on the basis of
any e, can never know that he or she is not a brain in a vat; therefore S
does not know that the external world exists. The fact that S cannot
eliminate the relevant class of possible worlds is enough for the skeptic
to conclude either that: (1) S has no better reason to believe that the
external world exists than to believe that it doesn't exist (the Pyrrhonian
Skeptic) or (2) S cannot know that the external world exists (the
Cartesian Skeptic).

What might be evident by now is that although both skeptical
hypotheses have different formulations of a relevant possible world, each
argument relies upon the same premises. What might also be evident is
that the argument's structure can be generalized to accommodate *any*
skeptical hypothesis. Specifically, the arguments offered for both classes
of skeptical positions rely completely upon claim (ψ) [*the deliverances of
the senses provide insufficient or inadequate evidence for the
extrapolation/judgment traveling from sensory experience to the
existence of objects, events, and properties with the corresponding
properties*] and what philosophers call "the closure principle." According

to the closure principle, if one knows some proposition, then one must also know the obvious deductive consequences of that proposition. Thus, one can make the argument explicit as follows: (here S symbolizes the agent, *s* symbolizes any relevant skeptical hypothesis, such that if *s* then ~*p*, and *p* symbolizes any positive proposition about the existence and nature of objects, properties, or events in the external world):

If *S* knows that *p*, then *S* must know that ~*s*
S does not know that ~*s*
Therefore, (α) *S* does not know that *p*
Therefore, *S* cannot know that *p* or *S* cannot know whether it is the case that *S* knows that *p* or it is not the case that S knows that *p*

There have been issues raised with the closure principle, but they go beyond the scope of this paper.[4] Let us for now grant that there are no issues with the argument's validity. Even granting the validity of the argument, the closure principle supports only one conclusion.

Consider what I call the *inverted closure principle of external world skepticism*. It goes like this (the previous abbreviations apply):

If *S* knows that *s*, then *S* must know that ~*p*
S does not know that ~*p*
Therefore, (ά) *S* does not know that *s*

Immediately it should be apparent that claim (α) and claim (ά), in a sense, negate each other. For if *S* does not know that the external world exists because of *s* or that, for example, he or she is not a brain in a vat because the external world might exist then *S* cannot know either of the two propositions (following this logical structure). So what can *S* conclude? *S* can only conclude that *S* has no better reason for believing that the external world exists or that he or she is a brain in vat.

Rejoinders to External World Skepticism

In the remainder of the paper I will consider two rejoinders to the skeptical argument offered in the philosophic literature, which I call; *the pragmatic rejoinder* and *the semantic externalist rejoinder* respectively.

Putnam makes the basic argument for the semantic externalist rejoinder, while James makes the basic argument for the pragmatic rejoinder. I will also consider a third rejoinder, which I will call the consistency rejoinder; one finds the basic motivation for the consistency rejoinder in Quine (1969) and Wallis (n.d.).[5] I argue that the semantic externalist rejoinder and the pragmatic rejoinder prove inadequate responses to the skeptical argument. In contrast, I assert that the consistency rejoinder provides a more adequate response to the skeptic.

The Semantic Externalist Rejoinder
Putnam (1981) follows his skeptical Brain in a Vat Hypothesis with his argument for why he believes that it fails to be a relevant possible world alternative (pp. 7-15). The basic argument is that if an agent claims that "I am a brain in a vat", then the possibility that he or she is indeed a brain in a vat cannot possible be true. The statement "I am a brain in a vat" [hereafter claim (θ)] in the brain vat world is a self-refuting claim; self-refuting, because its truth value implies the opposite truth value. Here is a quick example of a self-refuting claim:

> The statement in this rectangle is false (ω)[6]

If claim (ω) is true, then it is false and if claim (ω) is false, then it is true. Thus claim (ω) is a self-refuting claim. Putnam argues that claim (θ) is self-refuting because implicitly imbedded in claim (θ) is the claim that "I am not hallucinating that I am a brain in a vat." But because I am indeed a brain in a vat (i.e., "I am hallucinating that I am a brain in vat"), then claim (θ) is false, if anything else. Therefore, because I can say claim (θ), I am necessarily *not* a brain in a vat. What we have here is a case of *failure to refer*, meaning that claim (θ) can never refer to actual objects picked out in the world like 'a brain' or 'a vat', only 'the hallucination of a brain' or 'the hallucination of vat'. And because I am indeed hallucinating that I am a brain in a vat, when I say claim (θ), I am actually not referring to objects in the real world. Thus if I am an agent in the brain vat world, when I say claim (θ) it is self-refuting.

It should be mentioned that Putnam's argument cannot be generalized to combat *all* skeptical hypotheses, which is why I believe it

is an unsatisfactory response. Let's consider Descartes' Dream Hypothesis again. The claim "I am in a dream world" [hereafter claim (μ)] does not create the same self-refutation. The claim that "I am not dreaming that I am in a dream world" is not implicitly imbedded in claim (μ), whereas its converse is. Thus, saying claim (μ) in the dream world does not prove to be problematic. So even if we take Putnam's argument to be correct in the case of the brain vat world, it fails in other relevant possible worlds such as Descartes' Dream Hypothesis. Putnam's argument can be further restricted by modifying the relevant class of possible worlds.

Consider that the semantic problem disappears if we remove the sentient beings from the hypothesis. In this new hypothesis, perhaps there are brains in vats, but these brains have no consciousness per se. What they experience is still electronic impulses, but there is no cognition on the parts of the brains. Consequently, in this brain vat world, it is entirely deterministic: everything is fed to these brains via the super-scientific computers and any cognition on their part (e.g., the thought of "I wonder if I am a brain in a vat") is actually the product of the super-scientific computer. Thus, cognitive processes are illusionary and amount only to continuous pre-programmed flows of data from the super-scientific computer. Now, to avoid the same problem raised by Putnam (i.e., that the computers will fail to refer to the external world objects), let us reintroduce the evil scientist. Because the evil scientist is ultimately response for the streaming bits of data we know as external world objects and because he lives in an external world wherein these objects actually exist, there is no failure to refer. The evil scientist thinks of objects like "a brain" or "a vat", programs them in the super-scientific computer and the brains "think" of these objects. And because the brains and super-scientific computers cannot cognize, the reference chain (from the electronic impulses fed to the brains to the external world) is preserved.

The Pragmatic Rejoinder

The second rejoinder I will discuss is based on the pragmatists' response to the external world skeptic. More specifically it is a response by James (2009) to irresolvable metaphysical questions in general, although it is

also applicable to Cartesian and Pyrrhonian forms of external world skepticism. James utilizes what he calls *the pragmatic method* to deal with disputed metaphysical questions:

> The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many? – fated or free? – material or spiritual? – here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method is such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right. (pp. 22-23)

So in the previously mentioned cases i.e., the Dream Hypothesis and the Brain in a Vat Hypothesis, both hypotheses prove to be empty because there is no practical difference between the hypotheses being true or false (i.e., an external world does exist or another hypothesis is correct). Whether I am a brain in a vat, in a dream world or in the real world makes no practical difference to my experiences, so questions like: "Does an external world exist?", "Am I a brain in a vat?" etc., are empty questions. James also makes a point to comment on the etymology of the word 'pragmatic' to emphasize the pragmatic method; its meaning derives from the Greek word "prassein" meaning "to do, to act"[7]. Therefore, skeptical hypotheses are meaningless if there would be no affect on the person's actions.

James' pragmatic method is straightforward, but is it satisfactory? Do we, or better yet, *can* we say that questions like "Does an external world exist?" and "Am I a brain in a vat?" are vacuous? The implications of knowing that I am a brain in a vat are not to be taken lightly. It is hard to argue that if anyone was privy to that information that they would carry on in their lives exactly as they would upon learning an answer to

another empty question like: "How much does nothing weigh?" If the person was deeply religious, how would this information affect his or her religious convictions? Would they say "Oh? That's fine, knowing I am a brain in a vat doesn't affect my religious convictions in the least!" or would they be profoundly disturbed by the news? Verily there wouldn't be any actions the knower could make that would change the reality of the situation, but that doesn't mean that his or her life would not be radically changed. These questions only appear to be empty in the absence of answers; not because there are no answers to be had.

Another problem with the pragmatic method is that it is not clear that its implementation always gets us to well reasoned metaphysical conclusions. For example, James (1907) employs his pragmatic method to argue that religious beliefs are true (Chapter X). Religious beliefs, for James, are a case of risk management in which the believer or non-believer must weigh the benefits and costs of religious beliefs. James argues that there are clear benefits to religious beliefs. Thus it follows that because religious beliefs have a practical benefit in our lives that they are true. For now let us grant that religious beliefs have a clear benefit, although this claim is highly suspect. Even with this allowance, the conclusion is still not well reasoned for all cases. Here is a quick counterexample: when I was young I believed in the Easter Bunny because there were clear practical benefits for me to do so (i.e., Easter baskets) and clear practical costs that I was not aware of if I stopped believing (i.e., my parents wouldn't have to buy me any more Easter baskets); therefore it follows that the Easter bunny was real.

The Consistency Rejoinder
What makes skeptical hypotheses compelling, if anything, is the current way the debate is framed. The current conditions for knowledge are such that in order for S to know that p, S must know that p indubitably. But, as suggested above, that S can know that p indubitably seems a quixotic pursuit. S must satisfy impossible conditions in order to know that p; therefore S cannot know that p or S has no better reason to believe that p than to not believe that p. In effect, the skeptic proves victorious because the skeptic seduces one into accepting his or her framing for the debate, viz., by framing epistemic evaluation in terms of certainty. S is hard

pressed to show that he or she knows that *p* on the basis of empirical evidence because such inferences, being ampliative in nature, cannot preserve the certainty of immediate experience. Epistemic certainty cannot do what one, following the skeptic's lead, wants it to do, viz., to serve as the sole epistemic basis for all world building i.e., reasoning about the existence and nature of the external world. While the skeptic demands that all world building demonstrate certainty in the guise of knowledge of the falsity of alternative skeptical hypotheses, ought one to accede to the skeptic's demand?

There has to be another way, a better way, to combat the skeptic. For any skeptical hypothesis that is combated, as the above hypotheses were, are easily modified to accommodate their rejoinder. In a sense, the combatant by cutting off one "hypothetical head" only creates another one. Thus not only does the skeptic always have an answer, but his or her arsenal of skeptical hypotheses is seemingly limitless. If there is an infinite amount of skeptical hypotheses that one must rule out in order to know that the external world exists, then there is no way to combat the skeptic. That is why a reframing of the issue is requisite.

To do this, one must first realize, as Quine did, that any skeptical hypothesis is not metaphysically and ontologically innocent. Further, one must also realize that not only must the external world skeptic assume the same ontology presented by our immediate senses or *based on our senses there appears to be an external world* [hereafter claim (γ)], but he or she must also make the metaphysical assumptions necessary to give his or her own hypothesis the same explanatory power as the external world. In the brain vat world, the skeptic must assume claim (γ), but he or she must also assume that *they (and possible everyone else) is a brain in a vat* [claim (β)], that *they (and possible everyone else) is plugged into a super-scientific computer* [hereafter claim (ρ)], that *there is an evil scientist controlling it all* hereafter claim (λ)], etc. Consequently, every other metaphysical commitment the skeptic makes become an extra layer of metaphysical assumptions that are *not necessary* to explain our immediate sensation. The scientist merely claims claim (γ) on the basis of empirical evidence and scientific theories; whereas the brain vat skeptic claims claim (γ) & claim (β) & claim (ρ) & claim (λ) on the basis of claim (ψ). Logically then, the advantage goes to the former; even if

claim (β) & claim (ρ) & claim (λ) are collapsed into one claim. Also to note, not only is claim (γ) the absolute minimum claim, but it (by itself) is the most consistent with an external world. There is absolutely no evidence for any further metaphysical claims [such as claim (β) & claim (ρ) & claim (λ)] that is corroborated by claim (γ). Therefore an external world is a necessary and sufficient explanatory "hypothesis" for claim (γ).

Endnotes

[1] See Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter (Ed.). (2004). *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

[2] Cartesian Skepticism has gone under many names (e.g., Academic Skepticism, Ancient Skepticism, Outer Skepticism, Direct Skepticism), but in each case it holds that the skeptic believes that S cannot know that p.

[3] See Suter, Ronald. (1976). "The Dream Argument." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, pp. 185-194.

[4] See Dretske, Fred. (1970). "Epistemic Operators." *The Journal of Philosophy*, pp. 1007-1023.

[5] Wallis, Charles. (n.d.). "Gavagai Redox or 'Epistemology Naturalized' Through Lockean Spectacles." Unpublished manuscript, CSULB.

[6] I borrowed this example directly from Martin, Robert M. (2002). *There Are Two Errors In The The Title of This Book*. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press Ltd., p. 86.

[7] Online Etymology Dictionary. Retrieved from http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=pragmatic

Acknowledgments

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