Can We Reason Our Way Out of Skepticism?
Direct Responses to the Skeptic

Skeptical Arguments: Recap

Evil Demon Scenario. All of your experiences that seem to represent an external world are hallucinations that have been induced by an extremely powerful demon bent on misleading you.
Brain in a Vat Scenario. All of your experiences are caused by a powerful computer program, which generates electrical impulses that communicate with nodes attached to your brain. (Your brain = you, by the way: you're just a brain in a vat hooked up with electrodes).

O = ordinary hypothesis that there is an external world.
S = skeptical hypothesis, according to which you're being deceived by an evil demon, or you're a brain in a vat, etc.

Skeptical Argument
  (P1) You have no way of ruling out S.
  (P2) If you have no way of ruling out S, then you can't know that O is true.
  Ccl) You can't know that O is true. (from P1, P2)

Direct Responses to the Skeptic
Direct responses to the skeptic aim to either prove that the skeptical hypothesis is false – or, a bit less ambitiously, that we have good reason to think that the skeptical hypothesis is false.

Moreover, direct responses attempt to prove this using premises that don't beg the question against the skeptic.[1]

Descartes' Response
While Descartes is perhaps most famous for raising the skeptical argument, Descartes also went on to offer a direct response to the skeptic later in the meditations.

Descartes thought he could prove that an all-good God exists. Furthermore, Descartes argued, an all-good God would not allow him to be hopelessly deceived, and so he could conclude that skeptical hypotheses were false.

We won't go into Descartes' arguments for the existence of an all-good God in detail; suffice to say that many philosophers have not been persuaded of these arguments. This raises the question:

- Can we give a more compelling direct response to the skeptic – one that does not rely on any controversial religious of theological arguments?

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[1] Later in this course we'll discuss more indirect responses, which either (i) rely on premises that the skeptic wouldn't accept, or (ii) only purport to show that if O is true, then we can know that O is true.

Inference to the Best Explanation
A different direct response to the skeptic comes from *Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE)*.

The starting observation here is that sometimes two hypotheses are both logically consistent with the evidence, but one of them provides a better explanation for the evidence.

> *First Example: Crumbs*
> You come into the kitchen in the morning and you see a plate with some crumbs left on it. Here are two hypotheses:
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> - One of your roommates made a snack in the middle of the night and didn't clean up after themselves.
> - A burglar broke into your apartment in the middle of the night, made a snack, and didn't clean up after himself.
>
> Both hypotheses are logically consistent with your evidence (that is, your observation of the crumbs on the plate. Still, it seems that the first hypothesis provides a better explanation of the evidence than the second hypothesis.
>
> > *Question to think about:* What makes the first hypothesis better than the second?
>
> *Second Example: Helicentrism vs. Geocentrism*
> At the time Copernicus developed his heliocentric model of the solar system, versions of the Ptolemaic geocentric model were also consistent with all of the astronomical observations. However, the Ptolemaic model required positing "epicycles": small circles in which various celestial bodies were thought to moves. By contrast, the heliocentric model did not require positing epicycles. Many people concluded that the heliocentric model was a better explanation of the data than the geocentric model.
>
> > *Question to think about:* What makes the heliocentric model a better explanation of the data than the geocentric model?

Two plausible criteria on what makes one theory better than another:

Simplicity: Other things being equal, the simpler the theory, the better it is.[2]
Explanatory Comprehensiveness: Other things being equal, the more of the data that the theory explains, the better it is.[3]

IBE Responses to Skepticism: The ordinary hypothesis O (that the external world exists) provides a better explanation of our evidence than the skeptical hypothesis S.

Two ways of developing this response:
i)   Deny P2) of the skeptic's argument: Even though we cannot conclusively rule out S, we can still know O is true. We can know O is true because it provides a better explanation of the data than S.

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[2] *Compare with Occam's Razor:* Don't posit entities beyond necessity.
[3] Note that these may not be the only criteria that matter! Can you think of other criteria that may be relevant when choosing between two different explanations of a set of data?

ii) More concessive option: Concede that the skeptic is right that we can't **know** whether *O* is true. But maintain that we can still be **justified** in believing that *O* is true, and insist that this is all that really matters.

Big Question: What makes *O* a better explanation of our data than *S*?

One way of approaching the Big Question is to go back to our criteria of what makes one theory better than another (e.g., simplicity, explanatory comprehensiveness). Could we use these criteria to argue that *O* is a better explanation of our evidence than *S*?

Is *O* a Simpler Theory than *S*?
Here's one way one might try to argue that *O* is a simpler hypothesis than *S*:

- Whenever *O* posits a chair, the Brain in a Vat Scenario posits a virtual chair (or a chair program).
- Whenever *O* posits a cat, the Brain in a Vat Scenario posits a virtual cat (or a cat program).

Generalizing, it seems that for every object that *O* posits, the Brain in a Vat scenario will posit a corresponding object. However, the Brain in a Vat scenario posits some additional objects: *a vat, a supercomputer hooked up to a brain, whatever scientists are controlling the supercomputer, whatever world they inhabit*, etc. Arguably, *O* does not posit any objects that correspond to these entities. So arguably this makes the Brain in a Vat Scenario less simple than *O*.

> *Question:* Do you find this convincing? Are there any versions of the skeptical hypothesis that are equally simple – or even simpler – than *O*?

Is *O* a More Explanatorily Comprehensive Theory than *S*?
Second, one might try to argue that *O* explains *more* of the evidence than S does.

Russell's Proposal: Perhaps S doesn't really explain any of our data at all. Russell asks us to imagine that we appear to see a cat in a room. We leave the room to return many hours later. We then have the appearance of the same cat; it now appears to be mewling and agitated.

Russell claims that the ordinary hypothesis *O* provides a straightforward explanation of these appearances:

- It explains why the same cat appears both earlier (prior to leaving the room) and later (after returning). According to *O*, external objects exist in a way that does not depend on our perception.
- It also explains why the cat now appears to be agitated; according to *O*, animals require food, and grow agitated if they do not receive it for long periods of time.

By contrast, Russell argues, *S* does not explain any of these appearances:
- If *S* were true there would be reason to expect the same cat to appear on returning home: if there is no real cat causing the appearance, why doesn't the cat-appearance just disappear permanently?
- If *S* were true, there would also be no explanation for why the cat now appears to be agitated; after all, cat-appearances don't get hungry, so what explains why it appears to be agitated?

A Worry for Russell's Proposal: Can we concoct a version of the skeptical hypothesis that explains the appearances just as well as *O* does?

Questions for Discussion Groups:

1) Do you think the ordinary hypothesis *O* provides a better explanation of our data than the skeptical hypothesis *S*? Why or why not?

2) IBE arguments assume that we should prefer simpler/more explanatorily comprehensive theories. But should the skeptic grant this? Could the skeptic also be a skeptic about inference to the best explanation?