

The Skeptical Puzzle

On the one hand...

We take ourselves to know many things. For example, here are some things that I take myself to know (and presumably you do too):

- (1) The earth orbits the sun.
- (2) Dinosaurs used to walk the earth, but now they don't.
- (3) Singapore is located in Asia.
- (4) $2+2=4$.
- (5) Jane Austen lived before Marie Curie.
- (6) On average, philosophers make less money than bankers.

We could extend this list on and on. The upshot: we ordinarily take knowledge to be fairly *abundant*.

On the other hand...

There seem to be powerful arguments that seem to support *skepticism*:

Skepticism = The view that we know nothing (or virtually nothing)

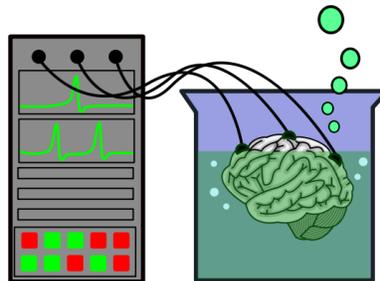
Skeptical Arguments

The standard way of arguing for skepticism is to concoct skeptical scenarios in which we would have the same sensory evidence that we have now, but many of our beliefs would be false. One classic example of such a scenario is Descartes' evil demon scenario:

Evil Demon Scenario. It turns out that virtually all of the things you believe about the external world (that is, the world outside of yourself) are false. Dinosaurs never walked the earth; the earth doesn't orbit the sun; in fact, there is no earth! Rather, 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.

This is just one skeptical hypothesis among many. Here's another:

Brain in a Vat Scenario. You aren't actually sitting in front of a computer right now. In fact, you don't even have a body. You're just a brain in a vat (BIV). Electrodes have been planted on your brain (that is, on you!); thanks to a computer, your brain is being bombarded with sensory stimuli that creates the illusion of being in a classroom.



Here's one way of formulating the skeptic's argument.

- Let O be the ordinary hypothesis that there is an external world (and that you have a body, and you're sitting in front of a computer, etc.).
- Let S be the skeptical hypothesis, according to which either you are being deceived by an evil demon, or you're a brain in a vat.

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.

(C1) So you can't know that O is true. (from P1, P2)

Important Clarification: Note that the skeptic is not claiming that S is in fact true. Rather, the skeptic is saying that you cannot rule out S , and so you cannot know which is true: O or S . In other words, the skeptic is not making a claim about the way the world really is; the skeptic is instead making a claim about our *knowledge* (or the lack thereof).

So we are confronted with a puzzle. On the one hand, we take ourselves to know many things about the external world. On the other hand, we have a seemingly compelling argument that we know virtually nothing (certainly nothing about the external world).

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) Do you agree with the skeptic's argument? If not, where do you think it goes wrong?
- 2) Try to come up with your own example of a skeptical scenario (along the lines of the Evil Demon Scenario, or the Brain in a Vat scenario).