

# Are Skeptical Scenarios Really Skeptical?



**EPISTEMOLOGY:  
UNIT 1 (SKEPTICISM), WEEK 4**

# The Threat of Massive Error



- *Question:* Why do we find skeptical scenarios (e.g., the brain in a vat hypothesis, the demon hypothesis) disturbing?

# The Threat of Massive Error



- *Question:* Why do we find skeptical scenarios (e.g., the brain in a vat hypothesis, the demon hypothesis) disturbing?
- *One Answer:* It seems that if the skeptical scenario were true, then we'd be mistaken about lots and lots of things.

# The Threat of Massive Error



- For example, here are some things you presumably believe right now:
  - You are sitting in front of a computer.
  - You are in Singapore.
  - You have hands.
  - You are in causal contact with genuine physical objects, and with other people.

# The Threat of Massive Error



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  - You are sitting in front of a computer.
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It seems that if you are in fact a brain floating in a vat, then all of these beliefs of yours are false.

# The Threat of Massive Error



- For example, here are some things you presumably believe right now:
  - You are sitting in front of a computer. **✗ FALSE**
  - You are in Singapore. **✗ FALSE**
  - You have hands. **✗ FALSE**
  - You are in causal contact with genuine physical objects, and with other people. **✗ FALSE**

It seems that if you are in fact a brain floating in a vat, then all of these beliefs of yours are false.



- **Threat of Massive Error:** If the skeptical hypothesis is true, then the vast majority of our ordinary beliefs about the world are false.

# Questioning the Threat of Massive Error



- In “The Matrix as Metaphysics”, Chalmers questions **Threat of Massive Error**.
- Chalmers argues that even if the skeptical hypothesis is true, the vast majority of our ordinary beliefs about the external world can still be true.

# Questioning the Threat of Massive Error



- For example, Chalmers thinks that even if it turns out that you are a brain in a vat, the following beliefs of yours can still be true:
  - You are sitting in front of a computer. ✓ TRUE
  - You are in Singapore. ✓ TRUE
  - You have hands. ✓ TRUE
  - You are in causal contact with genuine physical objects, and with other people. ✓ TRUE

# Questioning the Threat of Massive Error



- For this reason, Chalmers thinks that we shouldn't even describe the skeptical hypothesis as *skeptical*.
- Rather, we should think of the skeptical hypothesis as a *metaphysical hypothesis* – that is, a hypothesis about the underlying nature of reality, which is nonetheless consistent with the vast majority of our ordinary beliefs about the world.

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument

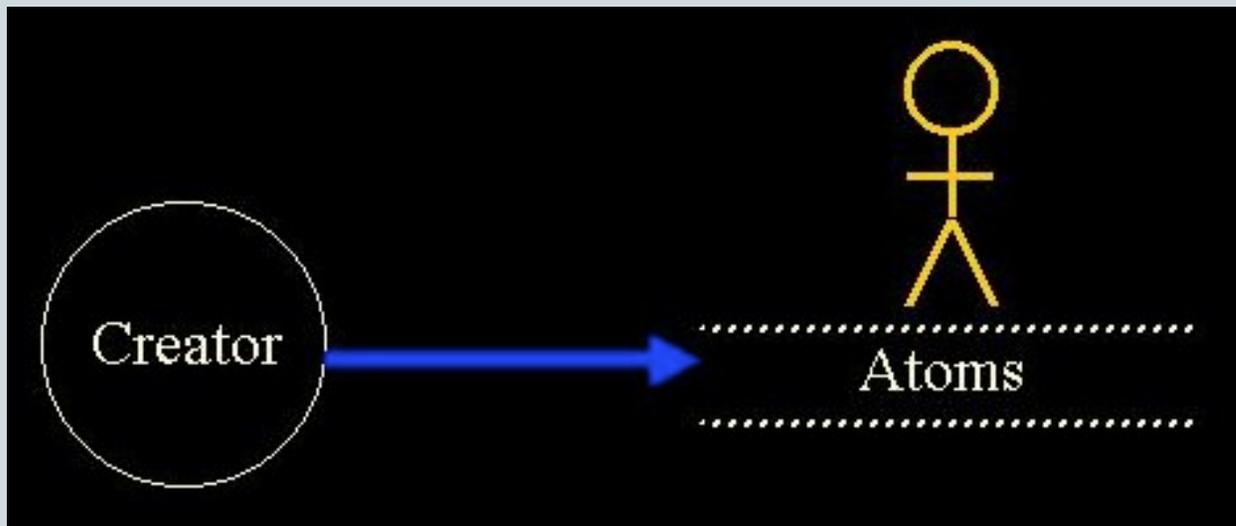


- Extended version of Chalmers' paper, available at <https://philpapers.org/rec/CHATMA>.

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



- Consider the following hypothesis:
- **(1) The Creation Hypothesis:** Physical space-time and the things in it were created by beings outside of physical space-time.



# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



- **(1) The Creation Hypothesis:** Physical space-time and the things in it were created by beings outside of physical space-time.
- **Q:** Is this a skeptical hypothesis? That is, if the Creation Hypothesis turned out to be true, would most of our ordinary beliefs about the world be false?

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument

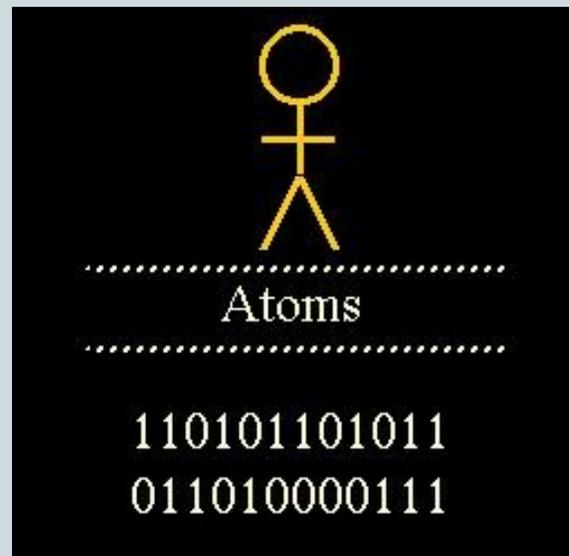


- **Q:** Is this a skeptical hypothesis? That is, if the Creation Hypothesis turned out to be true, would most of our ordinary beliefs about the world be false?
- **Chalmers' Answer:** No! After all, lots of religious believers believe in the Creation Hypothesis. But these religious believers are not skeptics. More generally, the Creation Hypothesis is a hypothesis about where the world comes from; it doesn't entail that our beliefs about the world are false.

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



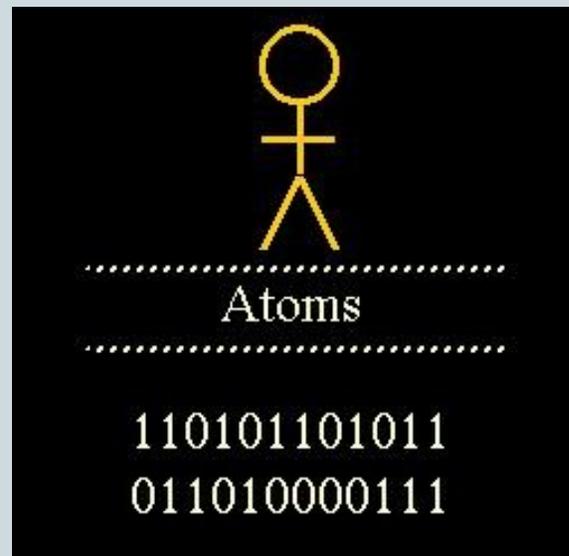
- Next, consider the following hypothesis:
- **(2) The Computational Hypothesis:** All of the physical processes throughout space-time are constituted by underlying computational processes.



# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



- i.e., Physics as we know it is not the fundamental level of reality. Just as chemical processes underlie biological processes, and microphysical processes underlie chemical processes, so there is another level of reality that underlies microphysical processes: a computational level.



# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



- **(2) The Computational Hypothesis:** All of the physical processes throughout space-time are constituted by underlying computational processes.
- **Q:** Is this a skeptical hypothesis? That is, if the Computational Hypothesis turned out to be true, would most of our ordinary beliefs about the world be false?

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



- *Q:* Is this a skeptical hypothesis? That is, if the Computational Hypothesis turned out to be true, would most of our ordinary beliefs about the world be false?
- *Chalmers' Answer:* No! While not widely believed, some people take the computational hypothesis seriously – these people are not skeptics.

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument

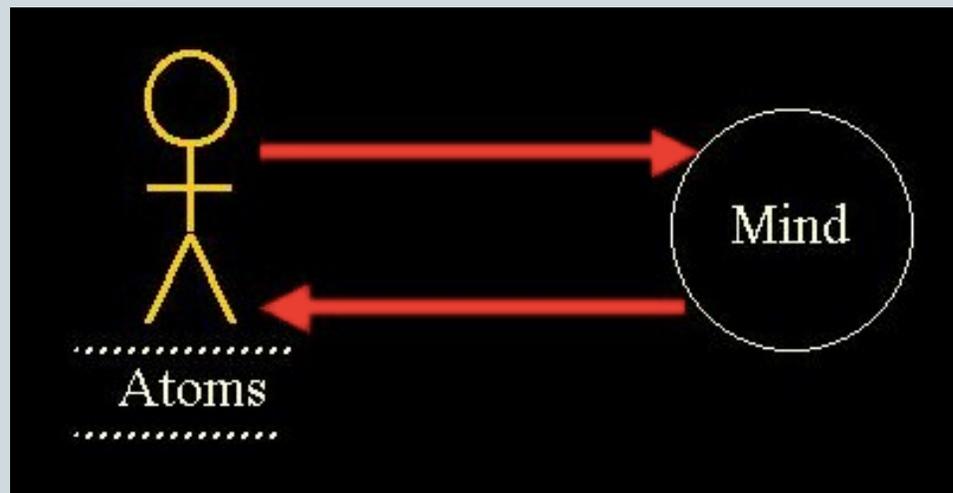


- *An analogy:* When we discovered the level of electrons and quarks, we didn't stop believing in tables and chairs. We just made a new discovery about what tables and chairs are made out of. Similarly, if the Computational Hypothesis turned out to be true, we wouldn't stop believing in tables and chairs. Rather, we would have made a further discovery about what tables and chairs are made of.

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



- Next, consider:
- **(3) The Mind-Body Hypothesis:** My mind is constituted by processes outside of space-time. However, it interacts with physical space-time, by receiving perceptual messages from space-time and sending output messages to processes in space-time.



# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



- **(3) The Mind-Body Hypothesis:** My mind is constituted by processes outside of space-time. However, it interacts with physical space-time, by receiving perceptual messages from space-time and sending output messages to processes in space-time.
- **Q:** Is the Mind-Body Hypothesis a skeptical hypothesis?

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



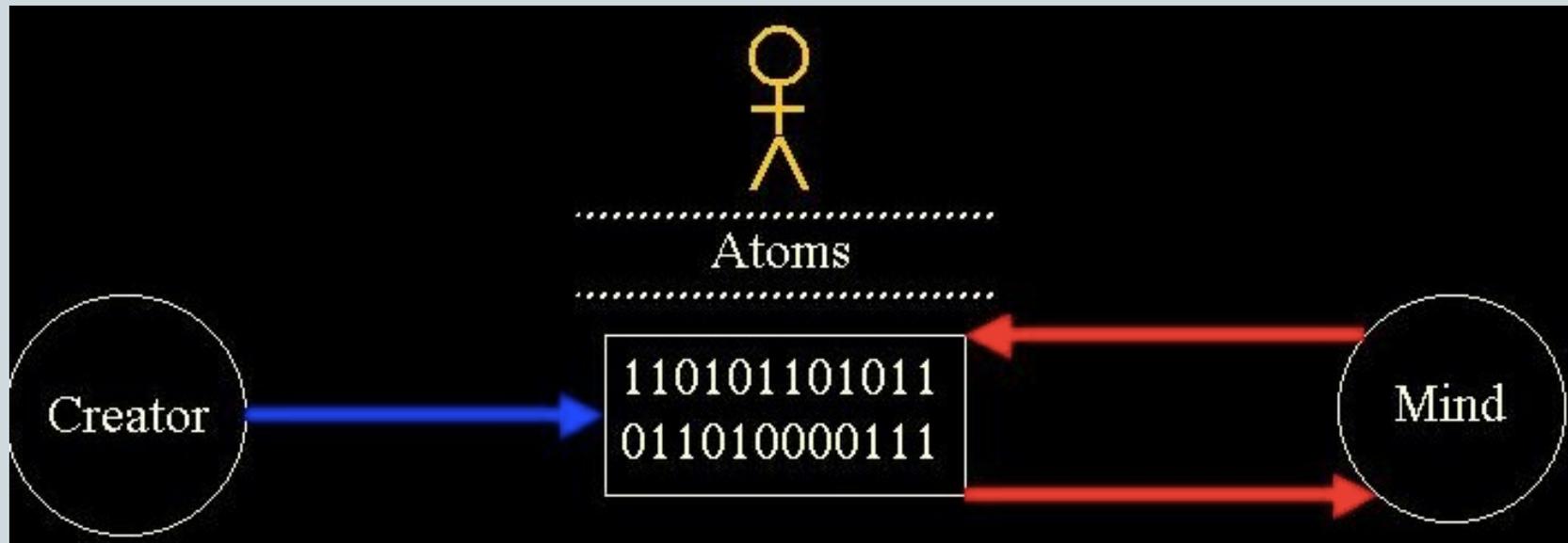
- **Q:** Is the Mind-Body Hypothesis a skeptical hypothesis?
- **Chalmers' Answer:** No! Many people have believed a version of the Mind-Body Hypothesis (for example, Descartes). This didn't make such people automatically skeptics. Just because it turns out that my mind is distinct from physical space-time doesn't make my beliefs about physical space-time false.

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



Finally, put these different hypotheses together:

- **Combination Hypothesis** = Creation Hypothesis + Computational Hypothesis + Mind-Body Hypothesis



# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument

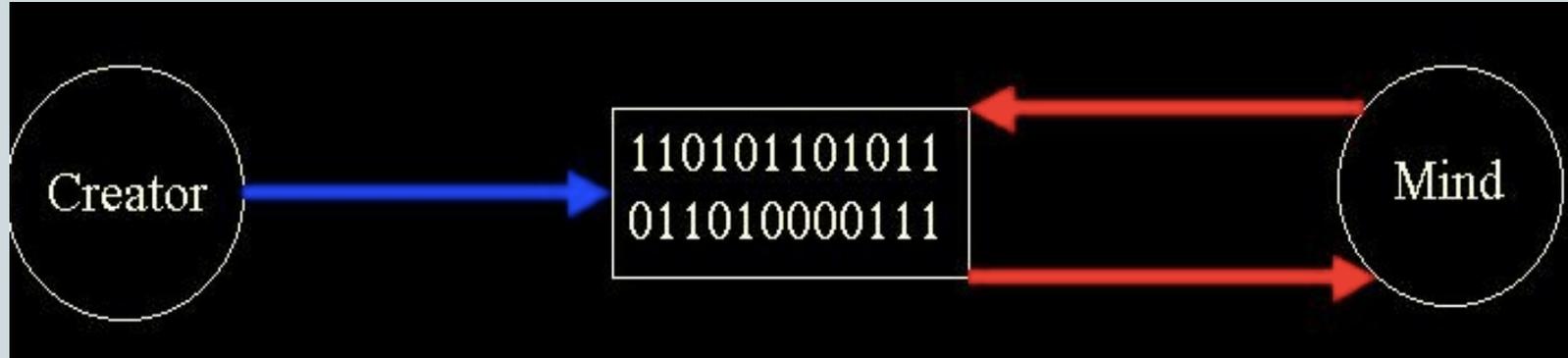


- *Q:* Is the combination hypothesis a skeptical hypothesis?
- *Chalmers' Answer:* No! If none of the components of the Combination Hypothesis are skeptical hypotheses, then their combination shouldn't be either.

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



- But, Chalmers argues, the BIV/matrix hypothesis is just a version of the Combination Hypothesis!

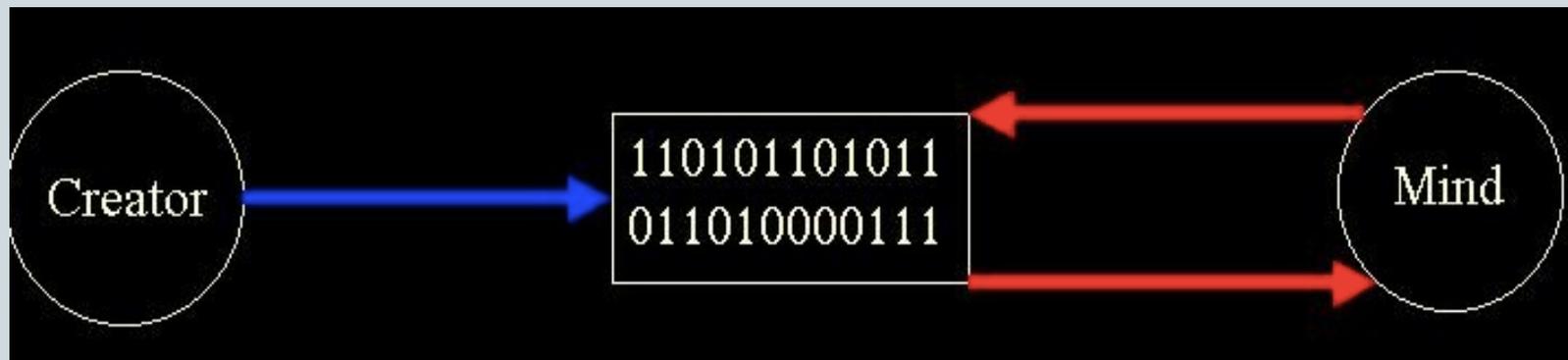


- So if the Combination Hypothesis is not a skeptical hypothesis, then neither is the BIV/matrix hypothesis.

# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



- More generally, Chalmers argues, the Combination Hypothesis does not threaten the truth of our ordinary beliefs (e.g., my belief that I have hands, or that Singapore is an island, etc.). And so neither does the Matrix/BIV hypothesis: even if we were BIVs, most of our ordinary beliefs would still be true.



# Reconstructing Chalmers' Argument



- More generally, Chalmers argues, the Combination Hypothesis does not threaten the truth of our ordinary beliefs, e.g.:
  - You are sitting in front of a computer. ✓ TRUE
  - You are in Singapore. ✓ TRUE
  - You have hands. ✓ TRUE
  - You are in causal contact with genuine physical objects, and with other people. ✓ TRUE
- And so neither does the Matrix/BIV hypothesis: even if we were BIVs, most of our ordinary beliefs would still be true.

# Questioning the Threat of Massive Error



- For this reason, Chalmers' rejects:
- **Threat of Massive Error:** If the skeptical hypothesis is true, then the vast majority of our ordinary beliefs about the world are false.
- *Question to think about:* Do you find Chalmers' argument convincing? Can you think of any objections to his line of reasoning?



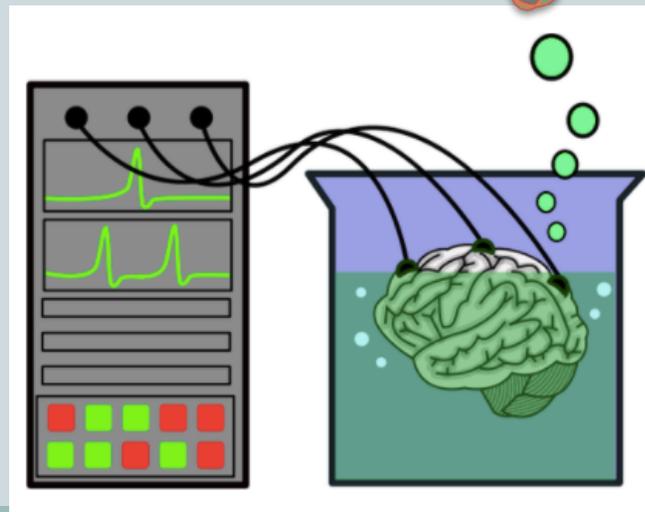
- Potential Objections...

# Objection



- *Objection:* Suppose I am looking what appears to be a tree and I say, “There is a tree over there.” It turns out that I am actually in a vat in a lab, with no trees near me. So isn’t what I said [/believe] false?

There’s a tree  
over there.

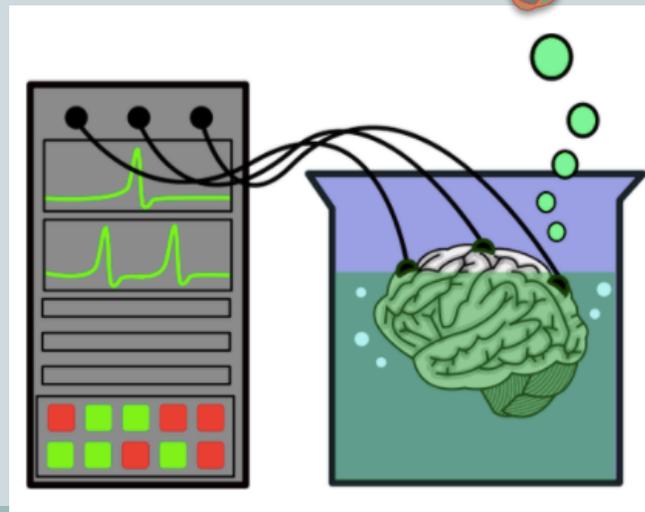


# Reply



- *Reply:* When the BIV uses the word, “tree”, they mean something different than when the unenvatted person uses the same word.

There's a tree over there.



# Reply



- That is:
- **In unenvatted English, “tree” refers to trees.**
- **In Vat-English, “tree” refers to certain tree-like features of the computer program.**
- So when the BIV says, “There is a tree over there”, what they are saying is true after all!



- The idea that the BIV is speaking a different language than the unenvatted person might strike some of you as bizarre.
- But some philosophers have given independent arguments for much the same conclusion – arguments that rely on considerations in philosophy of language.

# A Detour in Philosophy of Language



- CAUSAL THEORY OF REFERENCE

# Causal Theory of Reference



- **Alien Art.** On a distant planet, intelligent extraterrestrials have invented their own form of abstract art. They make paintings that happen to look exactly like trees on earth. However, the extraterrestrials have never seen actual trees (their planet has no trees, and they haven't come into contact with earth).



# Causal Theory of Reference



- **Alien Art.** On a distant planet, intelligent extraterrestrials have invented their own form of abstract art. They make paintings that happen to look exactly like trees on earth. However, the extraterrestrials have never seen actual trees (their planet has no trees, and they haven't come into contact with earth).
- **Intuition:** While aliens' paintings *resemble* trees, the paintings are not paintings *of* trees (they do not *represent* trees, or *refer* to them).

# Causal Theory of Reference



- **Intuition:** While aliens' paintings *resemble* trees, the paintings are not paintings *of* trees (they do not *represent* trees, or *refer* to them).
- *Explanation:* The aliens have never been in causal contact with trees. This explains why their paintings are not *about* trees.

# Causal Theory of Reference



- **Twin Earth.** Imagine a planet much like ours, Twin Earth. Just like on earth, the lakes, rivers, and streams of Twin Earth are filled with a clear liquid that people can drink (and in which fish swim, etc.). However, it turns out that this liquid has a different chemical structure than  $H_2O$ ; let's call it "XYZ".



# Causal Theory of Reference



- Now, imagine that an Earthling named Oscar points to a glass filled with  $H_2O$  and says, “There is some water.” At the same time, Oscar’s Twin Earth counterpart – Twin Oscar – points to glass filled with XYZ and also says, “There is some water.”



# Causal Theory of Reference



- Now, imagine that an Earthling named Oscar points to a glass filled with  $H_2O$  and says, “There is some water.” At the same time, Oscar’s Twin Earth counterpart – Twin Oscar – points to glass filled with XYZ and also says, “There is some water.”
- **Intuition:** Both Oscar and Twin Oscar made true statements. In Oscar’s mouth, “water” refers to  $H_2O$ , whereas in Twin Oscar’s mouth, “water” refers to XYZ.

# Causal Theory of Reference



- What explains this difference in reference? According to Putnam, Oscar's use of "water" refers H<sub>2</sub>O because he has been in causal contact with H<sub>2</sub>O. Twin Oscar's use of "water" refers to XYZ because Twin Oscar has been in causal contact with XYZ.

# Causal Theory of Reference



- Putnam takes these intuitions to support:
- **Causal Theory of Reference:** The referent of a word (or concept) is whatever entity stands in an appropriate causal relation to that word/concept.

# Causal Theory of Reference



- Putnam takes these intuitions to support:
- **Causal Theory of Reference:** The referent of a word (or concept) is whatever entity stands in an appropriate causal relation to that word/concept.
- One consequence of this theory is that two people can be in internally indistinguishable mental states, and yet they mean two different things by their words/concepts (consider Oscar vs. Twin Oscar).

# Causal Theory of Reference



- As Putnam puts it: “Meaning just ain’t in the head!”

# Causal Theory of Reference meets BIVs



- *Applying the causal theory:*
- The BIV's use of "tree" will refer to whatever entity stands in a suitable causal relation to the BIV's use of "tree".
- But the BIV has not been in causal contact with trees, but only with computer programs simulating trees.
- So this gives one way of supporting Chalmers' contention that the BIV's use of "tree" refers to computer programs and not real trees.

# Causal Theory of Reference meets BIVs



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- So this gives one way of supporting Chalmers' contention that the BIV's use of "tree" refers to computer programs and not real trees.

## Further Objections



- *Objection:* Even if Chalmers is right that the BIV/matrix scenario is not really a skeptical scenario, this doesn't give us a sufficiently general response to skeptical worries, since we can come up with other skeptical scenarios that are genuinely skeptical (and not merely metaphysical).
- For example...

# New Matrix Scenario



- **New Matrix Scenario:** I was recently created, along with all my memories, and was put in a newly-created matrix.
- Compare with Rinard's Momentary BIV Hypothesis.

## New Matrix Scenario



- **New Matrix Scenario:** I was recently created, along with all my memories, and was put in a newly-created matrix.
- *Chalmers' Reply:* This is not a global skeptical hypothesis – it does not entail that all – or even most – of my beliefs are false. It just entails that my beliefs about the past are false.

# Local Matrix Scenario



- **Local Matrix Scenario:** I am hooked up to a computer simulation of a fixed local environment in a world.

# Local Matrix Scenario



- **Local Matrix Scenario:** I am hooked up to a computer simulation of a fixed local environment in a world.
- *Chalmers' Reply:* Again, this is not a global skeptical hypothesis – it does not entail that all – or even most – of my beliefs are false. It just entails that my beliefs about what is going on outside my immediate surroundings are false.
  - Could also appeal to IBE to try to rule out the Local Matrix Scenario.

# Questions for Discussion Groups



- 1) Do you agree with Chalmers that the **Threat of Massive Error** is false? Discuss whether Chalmers' reply works for the full range of skeptical scenarios.
- 2) Even if Chalmers is right that the BIV has largely true beliefs about their world, do these beliefs count as knowledge? For example, when the BIV forms the belief that there is a tree in front of it, does this belief amount to knowledge?

## Preview of what's to come...



- So far we have been focusing on skepticism – the idea that we do not know many of the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know.
- But what is knowledge, anyway? What is the difference between knowledge and true belief?
- This will be the topic of our next unit...