The Problem of the External World
External World Skepticism

Consider this painting by Rene Magritte:

Is there a tree outside?
External World Skepticism

Many people have thought that humans are like this—our perceptions of the world only tell us about the electrical impulses interpreted by our brain, not whether or not those correspond to the way reality is outside ourselves.

Put another way, we know that we perceive the world to be a certain way, but we don’t know what causes these perceptions.
External World Paradox

1. If I know that there are objects other than myself (such as trees or people), then I know I am not dreaming or in the matrix.
2. I don’t know I am not dreaming or in the matrix.
3. Therefore, I don’t know there are objects other than myself.

Leci n’est pas une pipe.
External World Paradox*

Of course, the same argument seem to go through even if we just want rational belief...

1. If I have reasons to believe that there are objects other than myself, then I have reasons to believe I am not dreaming or in the matrix.
2. I don’t have reasons to believe I am not dreaming or in the matrix.
3. Therefore, I don’t have reasons to believe there are objects other than myself.

Leci n’est pas une pipe.
Responses

- There are a number of ways one could respond, but all of them seem to have serious problems.
- One option might appeal to *practical reasons* for believing there is an external world—but there doesn’t seem to be any more expected rewards or problems if we believe that it is a computer simulation.
- Another option might be to say that we just prefer to believe there is an external world, and while this choice may be *arational*, it is not *irrational*—it is not clear that choosing beliefs in this way is either possible or rationally acceptable, but it is also deeply unsatisfying to say that the only reason I think there are things other than myself is because I want to.
- A third option is to accept *idealism*, the view that there is nothing more to reality than our perceptions; the question of our perceptions corresponding to something else is inconceivable. As Berkeley put it, “to be is to be perceived.”
Direct Realism

- Idealists solve the paradox by denying any gap between perceptions and reality.
- The other way to deny this is to support direct realism and say that all our perceptions correspond to external reality.
- The obvious problem for this view is that we have experiences (dreams, hallucinations) in which we perceive things that don’t correspond to reality.
- A secondary problem is that it seems to conflict with modern neuroscience which says that the correct electrical signals could simulate reality for us.
- The challenge for direct realism is to make room for false experiences while still allowing that we directly perceive objects outside ourselves, and it is not clear that they can do this.
Descartes

The problem of external world skepticism is most famously associated with Descartes’ *Meditations*. In the *Meditations* Descartes proposes that if we can prove that there is a God, then we can escape skepticism. Suppose we grant that there is a God for the moment (because looking at his proof is tedious). His argument can then be summarized:

1. God would not allow me to be deceived in a way I cannot avoid.
2. I cannot avoid believing things I see clearly and distinctly.
3. Therefore, I cannot be deceived in my clear and distinct perceptions.
Internalism vs. Externalism

- It is commonly held that someone knows something if and only if they believe, it is true, and they have good reason to believe it. But there are open questions as to how exactly to spell out the “good reason” component.
- It is clear that true belief is not enough for knowledge. If you study hard for the midterm, and someone else brings in a magic 8-ball, you may both believe your answer to a question, and you may both be right, but there is clearly a sense in which you knew the answer and the other person didn’t.
- One assumption of the brain-in-a-vat argument that this difference between true belief and knowledge is something mental/experiential.
- This assumption fits with our experience; we often gather evidence until we can see that a belief is justified. We can then see the connection between our evidence and the belief.
- This assumption is known as *internalism*.
Internalism vs. Externalism

- Suppose that the difference between true belief and knowledge was not its internal justification, but instead depended on how the belief was brought about.
- The magic 8-ball is not a source of knowledge, not because it doesn’t feel like knowledge, but because it is a bad way to come to believe things.
- Our senses, on the other hand, might be a perfectly good way to arrive at beliefs.
- The claim that the difference between true belief and knowledge is something outside our mental activity is called externalism.
- If externalism is true, it could be the case that we know something, even if we do not (or cannot) know that we know it.
- The externalism can answer the brain-in-a-vat argument by saying that we know there are trees around us, even though we cannot provide any evidence that favors this hypothesis over others.
Internalism vs. Externalism

- To reiterate the point, on internalist accounts, you know when you are justified, because the justification is within your own mind. We know internally that we can’t rule out brain-in-a-vat scenarios, so we are not justified in believing there is an external world.
- On an externalist perspective, our beliefs may be formed in the right sort of way without us ever knowing it internally. Thus, it could be the case that we know things without knowing we know them.
- Is this a good response or is there something unsatisfying about it?
- Is it acceptable that the externalist can claim to know things, even though they cannot in principle distinguish between real perceptions and hallucinations or dreams?
Huemer gives what he thinks is a good argument against this type of response:

1. All my beliefs are formed by some method.
2. I am justified in accepting a belief formed by method M only if I first know that M is reliable.
3. I do not have an infinite series of belief-forming methods.
4. Thus, all my beliefs must rest on beliefs formed by methods whose reliability has not first been established. (1, 3)
5. Therefore, none of my beliefs are justified. (2, 4)