The Problem of the External World
External World Skepticism

Consider this painting by Rene Magritte:

Is there a tree outside?
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 Skepticism

- Descartes famously created this problem while implementing his *method of doubt* in the Meditations
- Descartes wanted to know what he could not possibly doubt, and because he can dream any sensory thing, all his sensory beliefs are suspect.
- Ultimately, Descartes lands on the indubitable claim that he exists, since doubting requires a doubter
- He eventually adds to this that he cannot doubt that he is having certain sensory perceptions
- Are these truly undoubtable? If so, are there other things that cannot be doubted?
- Candidates for that list might include
  - Definitional truths (e.g. “all bachelors are unmarried”)
  - Logical truths (e.g. *modus ponens*
  - Mathematical truths (e.g. 2+3=5)
  - Moral truths (e.g. “there is an objective reason not to cause pain”)
- The problem is, it is not clear how to move from these truths to truths about an external world
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.
External World Paradox*

**Solution 1**

Accept the conclusion. One can never actually know anything (one can only fail to falsify). Because of the overwhelming evidence, one should merely say that belief in the external world is highly rational.

However, the same argument seems 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.
Other Reasons to Believe

Solution 2

I should believe that there is an external world for *practical reasons*. Believing in an external world allows me to function better within the world.

- It is not clear to me what benefit one actually gets for believing that our perceptions represent reality as opposed to merely being caused by a computer program.
- However, this does raise a different potential solution:

Solution 3

I believe there is an external world because I want to. Since no evidence can be given either way, it is not an irrational choice but instead is an *arational* choice.

- It is not clear that it is possible to choose one’s beliefs in this way, but even if it is, it feels like a deeply unsatisfying answer to the problem.
Solution 4: Idealism

I cannot be wrong in my representation of the world because there is nothing more to reality than our perceptions—there is nothing to which to compare my perceptions other than more perception.

- Idealists solve the paradox by denying any gap between perceptions and reality.
- This seems difficult to accept, but it does inspire a similar position which attempts to remove the gap in a different way.

Ceci n’est pas une pipe.
Solution 5: Direct Realism

Perception works by experiencing objects in external reality, not by perceiving mental representations of external reality. Thus, I know about trees and people because I experience them.

- 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

Solution 6: God

I can generally trust my senses because there is a God would not let me be deceived.

- In the Meditations (where this whole problem came from) Descartes proposes this solution
- One problem is that it is difficult to prove the existence of God without appealing to the external world
- The other obvious problem is that we are often deceived, so clearly God does not always prevent us from being deceived.
- Descartes says that the source of our error is that we believe things on insufficient evidence.
- So long as we could have figured out the answer, God is not wrong to let us be deceived (since we simply reasoned badly). However, if we are dreaming or in the Matrix, we are systematically deceived such that we could not have possibly come to true beliefs, so God would have done something wrong to us.
Solution 6: God

I can generally trust my senses because there is a God would not let me be deceived.

- We can sum up Descartes’ argument:
  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 distinctily.
  3. Therefore, I cannot be deceived in my clear and distinct perceptions.
What is the Proper Base?

Let a *properly basic belief* be one that one is rational to believe until one is given a reason to think it is false (called a “defeater”)

**Solution 7: Properly Basic Beliefs**

My beliefs in objects around me that make up an external world are properly basic.

- Descartes is interested in finding the foundations out of which we can build knowledge.
- According to Descartes, the beliefs that we can start from are the ones that cannot be doubted (such as that I am doubting) and we must build all the rest of our knowledge from those.
- However, one could dispute that “indubitable beliefs” is actually the proper starting point.
- We still do want to start from things we know, since starting from other places is not going to lead us to knowing more things.
Internalism vs. Externalism

- It is commonly held that someone *knows* something if and only if they believe it, 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.

- Descartes assumes that for us to have a good reason to believe something, it must either be indubitable or it must follow from logical reasoning and our evidence.

- Since on this view the difference between a mere true belief and knowledge is entirely mental, it is an example of internalism.

- If Descartes is right, the only fair starting place is with the indubitable beliefs, and, as we have seen, that seems to result in massive skepticism.
Internalism vs. Externalism

- Suppose that the difference between true belief and knowledge was 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 an unreliable 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.
- Thus, it is at least possible that I know there is a tree outside, even if I do not know that I know it.
Internalism vs. Externalism

- If externalism is true, we will not always be able to tell which of our beliefs count as knowledge and which do not.
- This opens the door to saying that the beliefs we form based on our senses are properly basic—we can use them as a knowledge base until we are given a reason to doubt them.
- Given externalism, the fact that I cannot prove that I am not hallucinating a tree does not entail that I do not know there is a tree in front of me (since that belief might have been formed in the right way).
- Given internalism, I know I cannot rule out that I am in a Matrix, so I know that I cannot know there is a tree outside.
- 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.
Properly Basic Beliefs

• The idea put forth in Solution 7 is that the foundations of our knowledge are much wider than Descartes imagined, and that it in fact includes sensory beliefs.
• One could reasonably worry that since we have times when we hallucinate, the solution would entail that we have to count as knowledge things that clearly should not count as knowledge.
• Thus, the externalist needs to say that not every sensory experience produces knowledge—we in fact have defeaters for many sensory experiences (such as seeing something at a distance, seeing it when very tired, etc.). The claim is merely that no such defeater exists for our sensory beliefs at large.
• Of course, one could object that Matrix scenarios themselves supply such a defeater, but absent any reason to think we are in the Matrix, the externalist does not have to treat it as a defeater.
Are Moral Beliefs Properly Basic?

- So what else should be included as a properly basic belief?
- One can make a compelling case for moral beliefs. Consider, you have a certain visual experience of someone being bullied because they are different.
- On the basis of your visual experience you naturally and automatically form the belief that there are people in front of you.
- Also on the basis of your visual experience, you get angry and form the belief that that action was wrong.
- It seems like, if we are going to treat one belief as knowledge, then we have to count the other as well.
- **Objection:** Assuming our basic sensory beliefs are right, we can use them to develop instruments, read those instruments and then eventually reach scientific conclusions about the nature of physical reality. While we cannot do science without assumptions about our sensory beliefs, we at least have a systematic way to study which are accurate once we assume many are accurate. There does not seem to be an equivalent situation with respect to morality.
Other Candidates for Properly Basic Beliefs

- There are other minds (sensory beliefs only tell me that there are objects, not that those objects have conscious experiences)
- The world is more than five minutes old (and in general, memory beliefs)
- Free will (after all, I experience it all the time)
- That certain inferences (like induction) are valid