



Scepticism

Show me evidence



SKEPTICISM

"THE THING ABOUT USING QUOTES FROM THE INTERNET IS
HOW CHALLENGING IT CAN BE TO CONFIRM THEIR VALIDITY."

-- Abraham Lincoln --

Limited vs. Radical Scepticism

- Philosophers see scepticism as a very *good* thing.
 - (Up to a point.)
- Scepticism makes philosophers concerned when it becomes ‘extreme’, or ‘radical’, and leads to doubt about things like:
 - The reality of the external world
 - The existence of other minds
 - The approximate truth of the best science
 - The existence of the past

An analogy



scepticism

vs.



Radical scepticism

Scepticism vs. Anti-realism

- We will use ‘scepticism’ to mean an *epistemological* claim:
 - “While there is a fact of the matter about A, we do not (and maybe cannot) know whether A is true.”
- Just to be confusing, ‘scepticism’ sometimes refers to *anti-realism* (a metaphysical claim):
 - “There is no fact of the matter about A.”
- E.g. the term “moral sceptic” often refers to a moral anti-realist. (But that’s bad terminology.)

Anti-realism

“There is no God’s Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve.”

(Hilary Putnam, “internal realism”, in *Reason, Truth and History*, 1981, pp. 49-50)

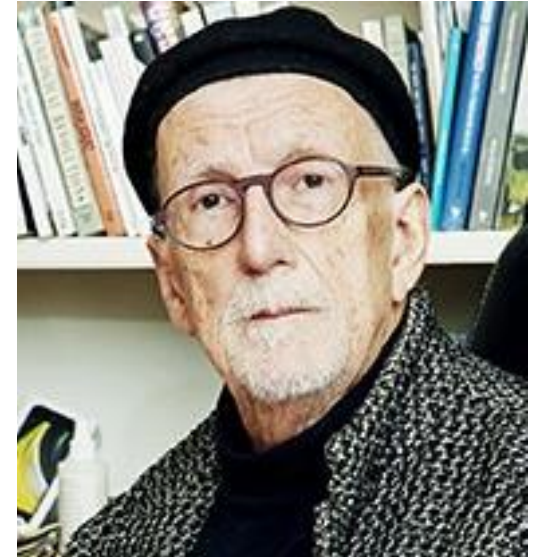
“There is, I think, no theory independent way to reconstruct phrases like ‘really there’; the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its ‘real’ counterpart in nature now seems to be illusive in principle.”

(Thomas Kuhn, *The structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Postscript: Revolutions and Relativism)

An extreme case of anti-realism!

“This insistence on seeing scientific facts as purely social constructions sometimes led Latour to conclusions that were seen as absurd outside the community of social theorists. In 1998, for example, Latour rejected as anachronistic the recent discovery that the pharaoh Ramses II had died of tuberculosis, asserting that the tubercle bacillus was discovered only in 1882 and could not properly be said to have existed before then.”

--*Encyclopedia Britannica*



Bruno Latour

The sceptical point of attack

- Radical sceptics claim that we do not know some propositions p that are usually taken to be known.
- The point of attack is that our belief that p is not *justified*, or not *sufficiently* justified.

Premises that can support scepticism

- Representative realism
 - Sense perception of an external object X requires the construction of an internal representation of X.
- Internalism
 - Knowledge requires that one's belief is justified by evidence that the knower has internal access to.
 - Used in the regress argument, problem of the criterion
- Empiricism
 - There is no innate knowledge, so all knowledge is derived from experience (sensation and reflection).
 - Used in Hume's argument

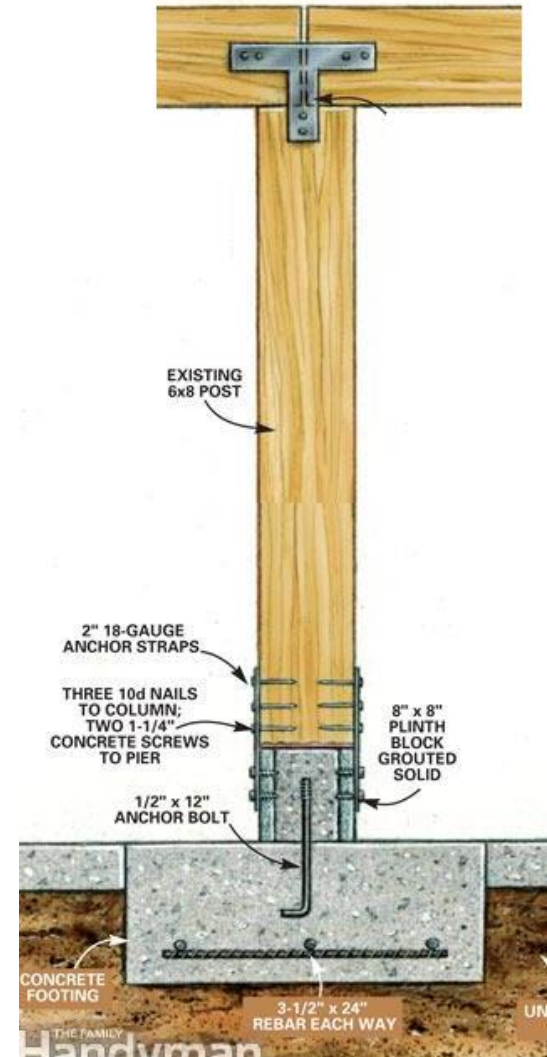
1. Regress argument

1. In order to know something, I must have a good reason for believing it.
2. Any chain of reasons must have one of the following structures:
 - (a) it is an infinite series, or
 - (b) it is circular, or
 - (c) it begins with a belief for which there are no further reasons. But,
3. I cannot have an infinitely long chain of reasoning for any of my beliefs.
4. Circular reasoning cannot produce knowledge.
5. Nor can I gain knowledge by structure 2c, for
 - (a) I would not know my starting beliefs to be true (from 1), and
 - (b) I cannot gain knowledge by deriving it from assumptions that I do not know to be true.

6. *Therefore*, I cannot know anything.

Inference only *transfers* justification

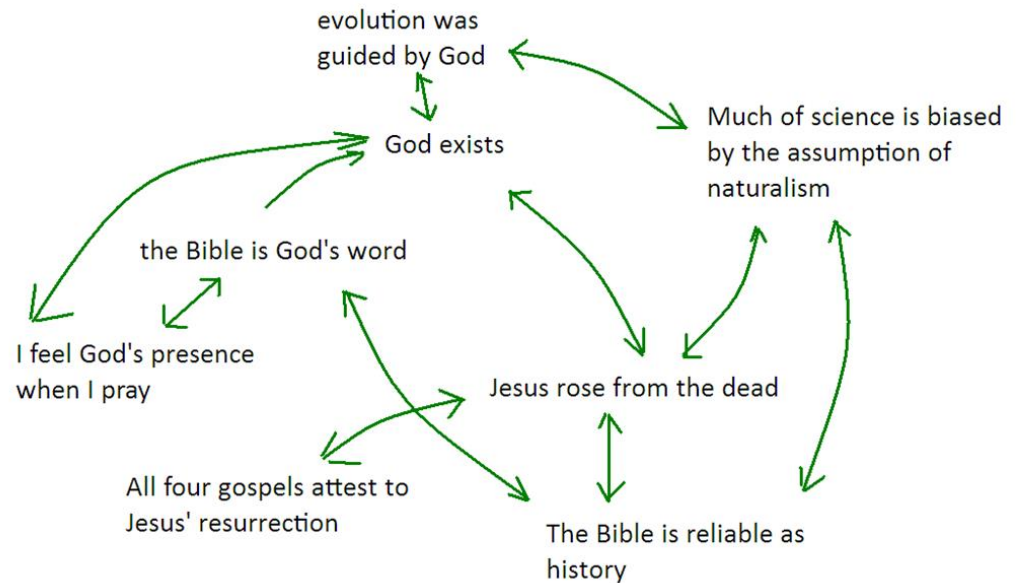
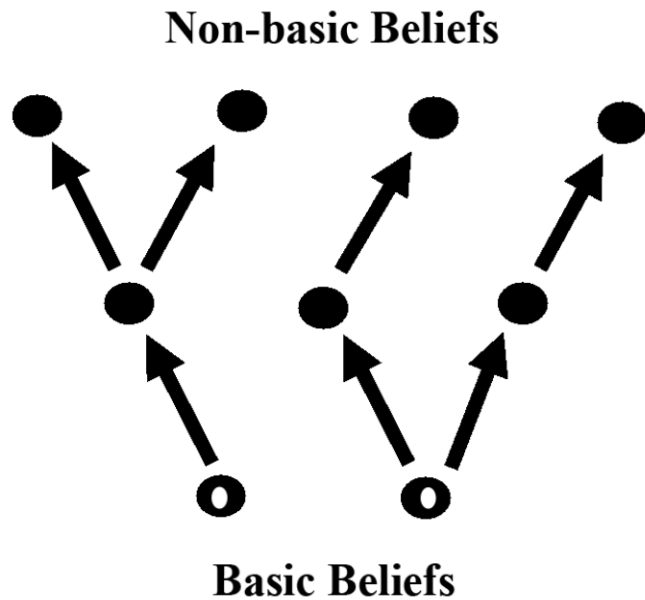
- In construction, we say that a column supports a beam, which supports a floor joist, etc.
- Of course a column doesn't **create** an upward force.
- It cannot support anything, unless it is *itself* supported by something else (e.g. a footing).
- Thus we say that a column merely ***transfers*** support from the footing to the beam.



Responses to the regress argument

- Foundationalism
 - Some beliefs are **foundational**, or **properly basic**.
 - Such beliefs don't require any supporting evidence.
 - They might be “self-evident”, “clear and distinct”, “obvious by the natural light”, known innately, known by rational intuition, or known by direct experience.
- Coherentism
 - Justification arises **holistically** from a coherent web of mutually-supporting beliefs.

Foundationalism vs. coherentism



TIF objection to foundationalism

(TIF = Truth Indicative Feature)

- We can't responsibly endorse a spontaneous belief B unless *we have some reason to think that B is true.*
- But suppose we realise that B is likely to be true because B has some (TIF) \mathbb{F} . Then we're reasoning as follows:

(1) B has \mathbb{F} .

(2) Beliefs having \mathbb{F} are highly likely to be true.

\therefore B is highly likely to be true.

But then B isn't basic!

(assumes internalism)

- N.B. the TIF objection assumes that we are *consciously* arguing in support of belief B, so that we must be consciously aware that B has \mathbb{F} .
- E.g. \mathbb{F} is something like Descartes' "clear and distinct".
- This assumes internalism.

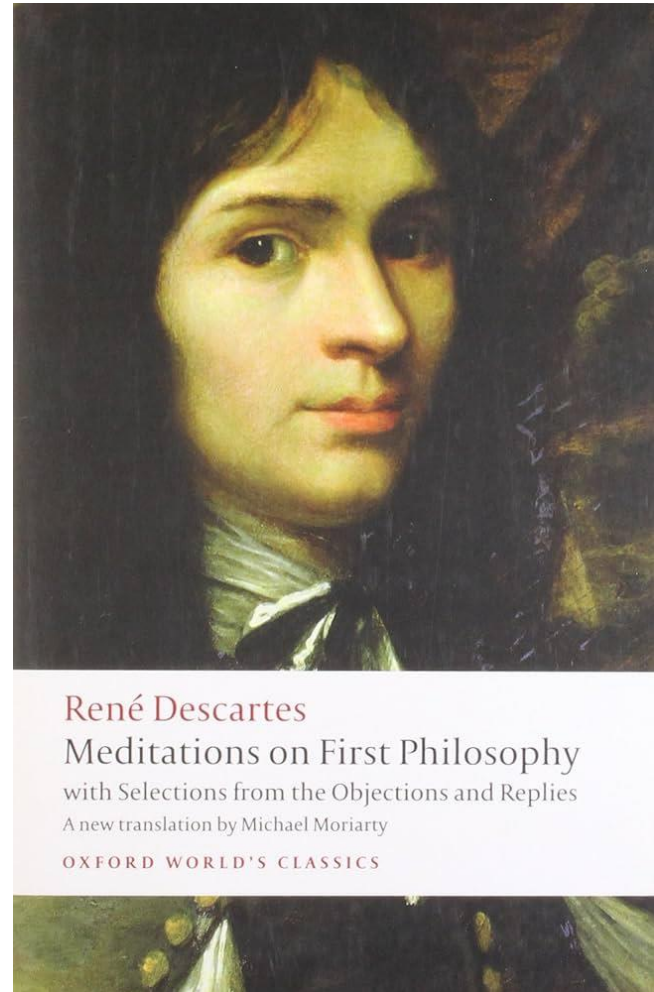
2. The Problem of the Criterion

- The Magic Eight Ball user consulted the 8 Ball when asked if the 8 Ball is reliable.
 - Can we find any better grounds to trust sense perception, reasoning, memory, etc.?

“So you will have to use some other method to verify the reliability of your senses—you will have to rely on some cognitive faculty other than the senses. But—here is the problem—whatever method you try to use to verify that your senses are reliable, the skeptic can always ask why you believe *that* method to be reliable.” (Huemer)

E.g. Descartes' *Meditations*

- Descartes trusted reason “the natural light”, but was sceptical of the senses, so he attempted to give a logical proof that the senses are reliable.



Summary of the *Meditations*

- I exist, since I'm conscious
- Reflecting on this, I see that whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly must be true
- I clearly and distinctly perceive that causes are greater than (or equal to) their effects
- I have an idea of God as a maximally perfect creator of everything else that exists.
- My idea of God is so great that only God could have caused it.
- So, God exists.
- Since God is perfect, he is not a deceiver
- Since God is also my creator, my cognitive hardware (e.g. reason and sense perception) is trustworthy.
- So, the external world exists as I perceive it.

Thomas Reid (*An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, 1764) had an *externalist* response to radical scepticism



“The sceptic asks me, Why do you believe the existence of the external object which you perceive? This belief, sir, is none of my manufacture; **it came from the mint of Nature**; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine: I even took it upon trust, and without suspicion.

...

Thomas Reid
1710 -1796



... Reason, says the sceptic, is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief that is not grounded on reason. ...

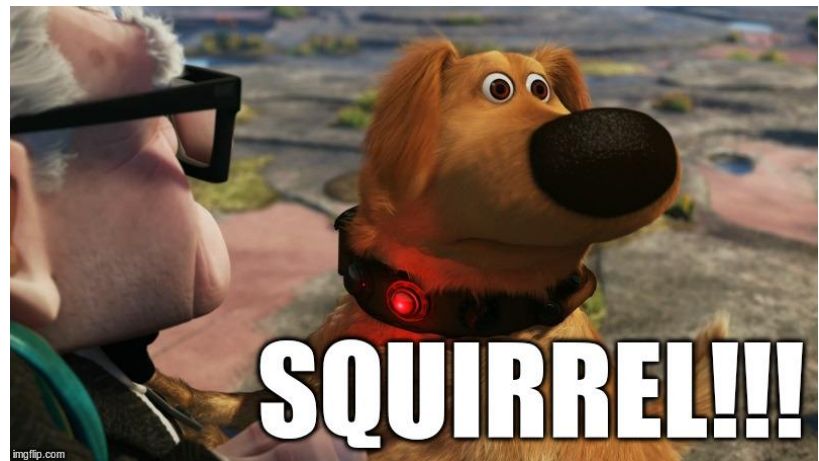
... Why, sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception?—they came both out of the same shop, and were made by the same artist; and if he puts one piece of false ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another?”

Internalism vs. externalism

- These views differ concerning animal knowledge.
 - According to Descartes, could (e.g.) a dog have knowledge of external objects like balls or squirrels?
 - No, because a dog could not understand his “proof” (in the *Meditations*) that the senses can be trusted. (The same goes for most humans!)
 - In that case, any beliefs of a dog, based on the senses, would be unjustified—hence not knowledge.
- Bonjour: “Emma ... knew such things as that there was a squirrel on the other side of the quad (as she skulked carefully toward it, freezing if it should happen to look in her direction)”

Emma the dog

- Externalists say that Emma *can* have knowledge.
 - E.g. Reid would presumably say that Emma’s beliefs, like ours, “came from the mint of Nature”, and so are authorised by God.
 - Hence, they count as knowledge.



Externalism and epistemic duties

- Reid: “This belief, sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of Nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, **if it is not right, the fault is not mine**: I even took it upon trust, and without suspicion.”
- Reid says **we have no duty** to check or verify the reliability of our God-given cognitive apparatus.
 - (This doesn’t mean that we have no epistemic duties at all!)

Externalism and epistemic duties

- In a driving lesson, the instructor teaches the student about various duties, like checking that the road is clear before pulling out.
- Yet the student is expected (probably without any explicit instruction) to trust many other things about the car:
 - It will slow down when the brake is pressed
 - It will turn when the steering wheel is turned (etc.)
- In a similar way, God might impose duties concerning the **use** of our senses and reasoning, even if we have no duty to **check the reliability** of those faculties.

Externalism and trust

- Reid: “This belief, sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of Nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine: **I even took it upon trust, and without suspicion.**”
- Reid probably thinks that God *designed us* to trust our cognitive mechanisms, so this attitude is also authorised.
 - (That being so, such trust isn’t irresponsible.)

Reid on testimony

“The wise author of nature hath planted in the human mind a propensity to rely upon human testimony before we can give a reason for doing so.”

Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man, Essay VI, Chapter 5.

- (If God planted in our minds a propensity to trust testimony, then he probably planted a similar tendency to trust reason and the senses.)

Externalism and trust

- N.B. even Descartes noticed that he has a spontaneous impulse to believe that his senses are providing accurate knowledge of external objects. He said:
- “Nature has apparently taught me to think that [my sensory ideas resemble external objects]”
 - I.e. it’s **as if** God has planted in his mind a propensity to trust his senses.

Locke on human limitations

- Locke wrote the Essay in order to explore both the powers and the *limits* of human understanding:

“If I succeed, that may have the effect of persuading the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things that are **beyond its powers to understand**; to stop when it is at the extreme end of its tether; and to be peacefully reconciled to ignorance of things that turn out to be beyond the reach of our capacities.” (Book I, Ch. 1)

- (He thinks Descartes is guilty of trying to do impossible things.)

BonJour on Externalism

“But in spite of this historical consensus, many recent epistemologists have argued that the internalist conception of justification is fundamentally mistaken, that epistemic justification can depend in part or perhaps even entirely on matters to which the believer in question need have no cognitive access at all, matters that are entirely *external* to his or her cognitive viewpoint.”

Laurence BonJour, *Epistemology*, p. 203

“My conviction is that views of this kind are merely wrong-headed and ultimately uninteresting evasions of the central epistemological issues.” (BonJour, *In Defense of Pure Reason*, p. 1, n. 1.)

Are unjustified beliefs *wicked* or *risky*?

- Clifford's ship owner fails to check that his ship is seaworthy.
 - It sinks, killing everyone on board
 - This is **wicked and sinful**, says Clifford.



- But now suppose that the owner takes the leaky ship himself, and that no one will blame him when it sinks.
 - The ship owner isn't to blame, but he's still dead.
 - Even if Reid is right, that our trust in the senses is authorised by God, isn't it still *risky*?

The Problem of the Criterion

- Huemer:
 - “So you will have to use some other method to verify the reliability of your senses ...”
- How do externalists like Reid respond?
- According to Reid, we don't need to verify the reliability of our senses.
 - Trust in the senses, reasoning, memory is authorised, while trust in the Magic 8 Ball, random hunches (etc.) isn't.

The Regress Argument

- Externalists are likely to be foundationalists, i.e. they say that (properly) basic beliefs stop the regress.
- What about the TIF objection?
- “We can’t responsibly endorse a spontaneous belief B unless we are aware that B has some truth-indicative feature \mathbb{F} .”
 - Externalist response?
- B does need a TIF (authorisation) but **we don’t need to be aware** of that fact.

3. Can You Get outside Your Head?

Empiricism: “Everything you think you know about the external world is dependent on your senses.”

E.g. “the only way of knowing that A causes B (where A and B are any two types of events) is by having some experience of A and B—specifically, you must observe A being followed by B on a number of occasions.”

– Huemer’s light switch example

N.B. Hume was an empiricist.

E.g. can we trust telescopes?



Martin Horky (1610):
Galileo's telescope "worked
wonders on earth, in the
heavens it failed"

1. In order to have knowledge of the physical world, we must be able to know that our sense data are caused by physical objects.
2. In order to know that A causes B, one must have experience of A and B.
3. We have no experience of physical objects.

4. \therefore We do not know that physical objects cause our sense data. (from 2,3)
5. \therefore We have no knowledge of the physical world. (from 1,4)

- Reid's response?
- Other responses?

Sceptical Scenarios

- Some arguments for scepticism are based on “sceptical scenarios”
- These are imagined situations that, if true, would lead to (roughly or exactly) the same impressions (ideas, sense-data) that we have now.
 - The moon landings were faked by NASA.
 - I am a brain in a vat.
 - A Cartesian demon is deceiving me.
 - The earth was created 6,000 years ago, but made to look much older, with deep layers of rock containing dinosaur fossils.
 - Solipsism (etc.)

Sceptical scenarios

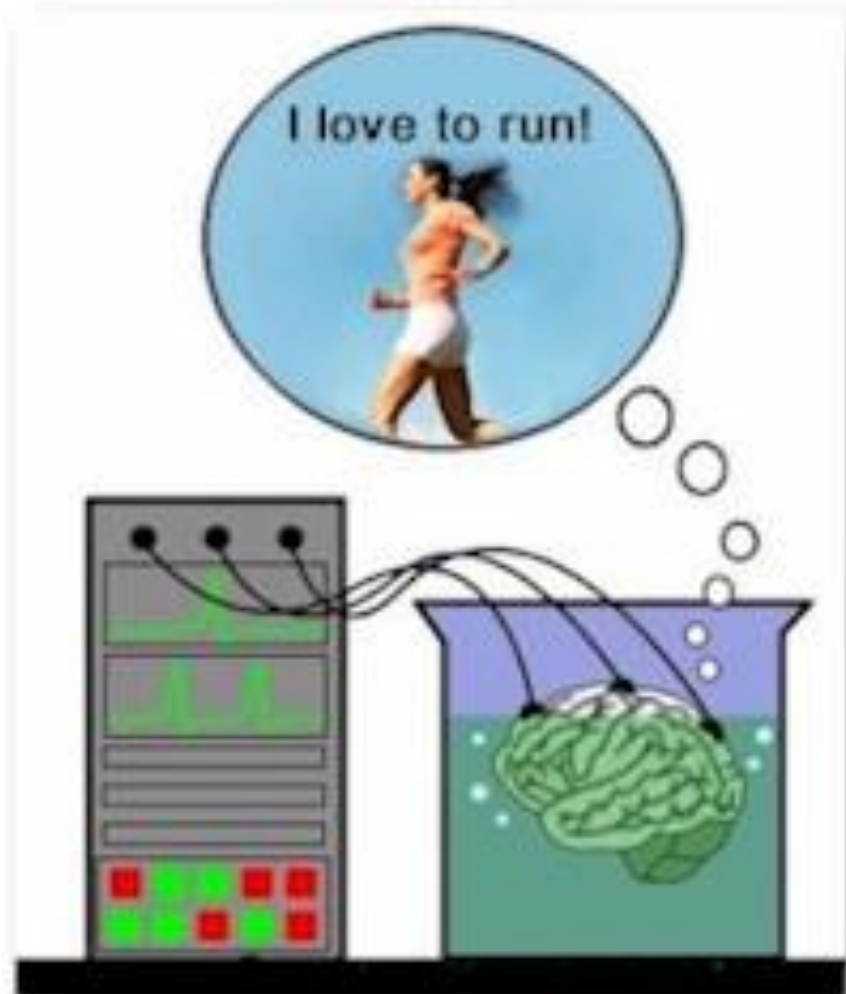
- A sceptical scenario (SK) is a logically possible situation that:
 - a. Is consistent with all available (cognitively accessible) evidence, and
 - b. Is inconsistent with some beliefs that you take to be knowledge.
- E.g. let p = “here is one hand”, and SK = “I’m a brain in a vat”.
 - Then you know that $SK \Rightarrow \neg p$.
 - (Equivalently, you know that $p \Rightarrow \neg SK$.)

E.g. Can we be *sure* this didn't happen?

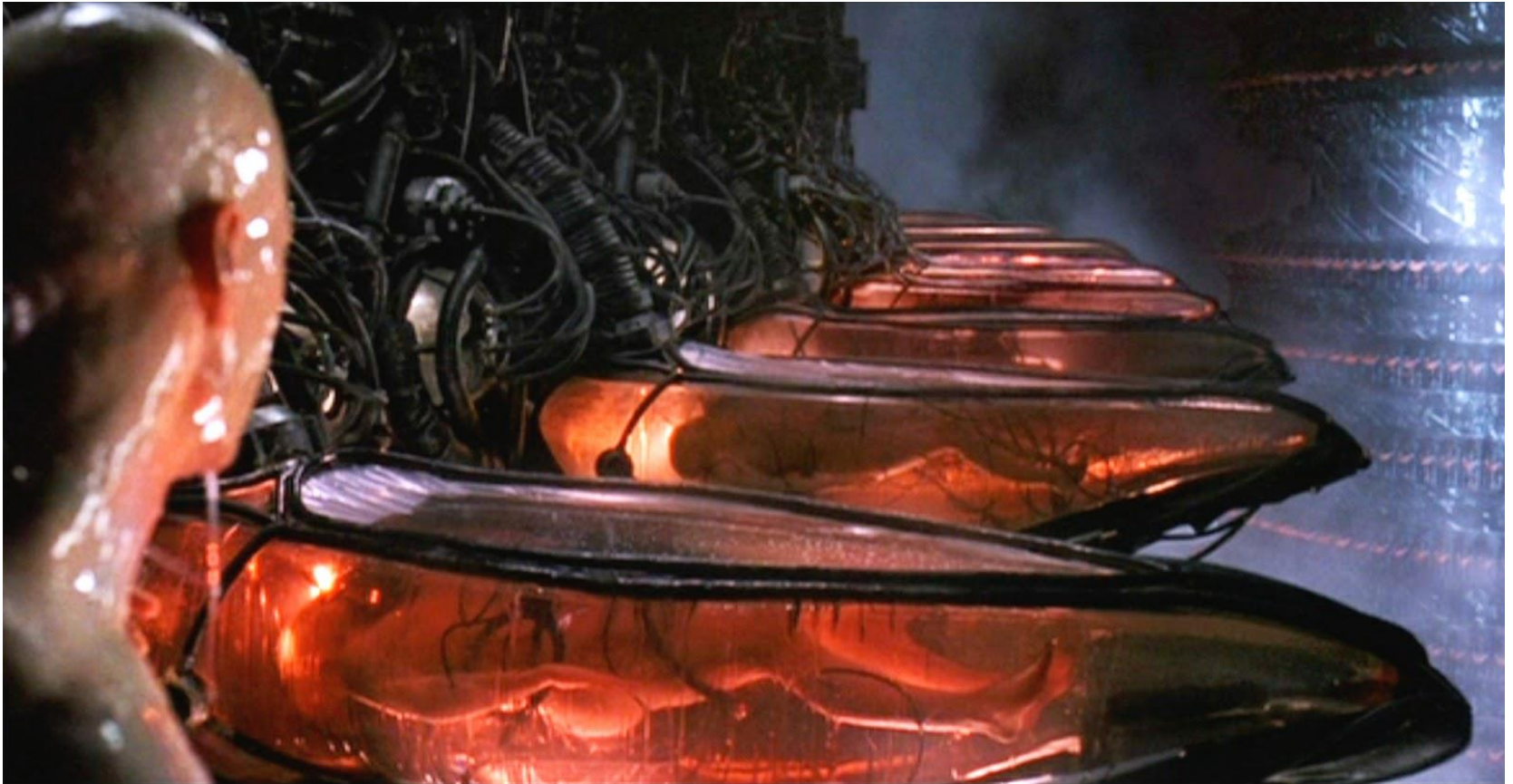


Wait ... I could be a ... *brain in a vat*?

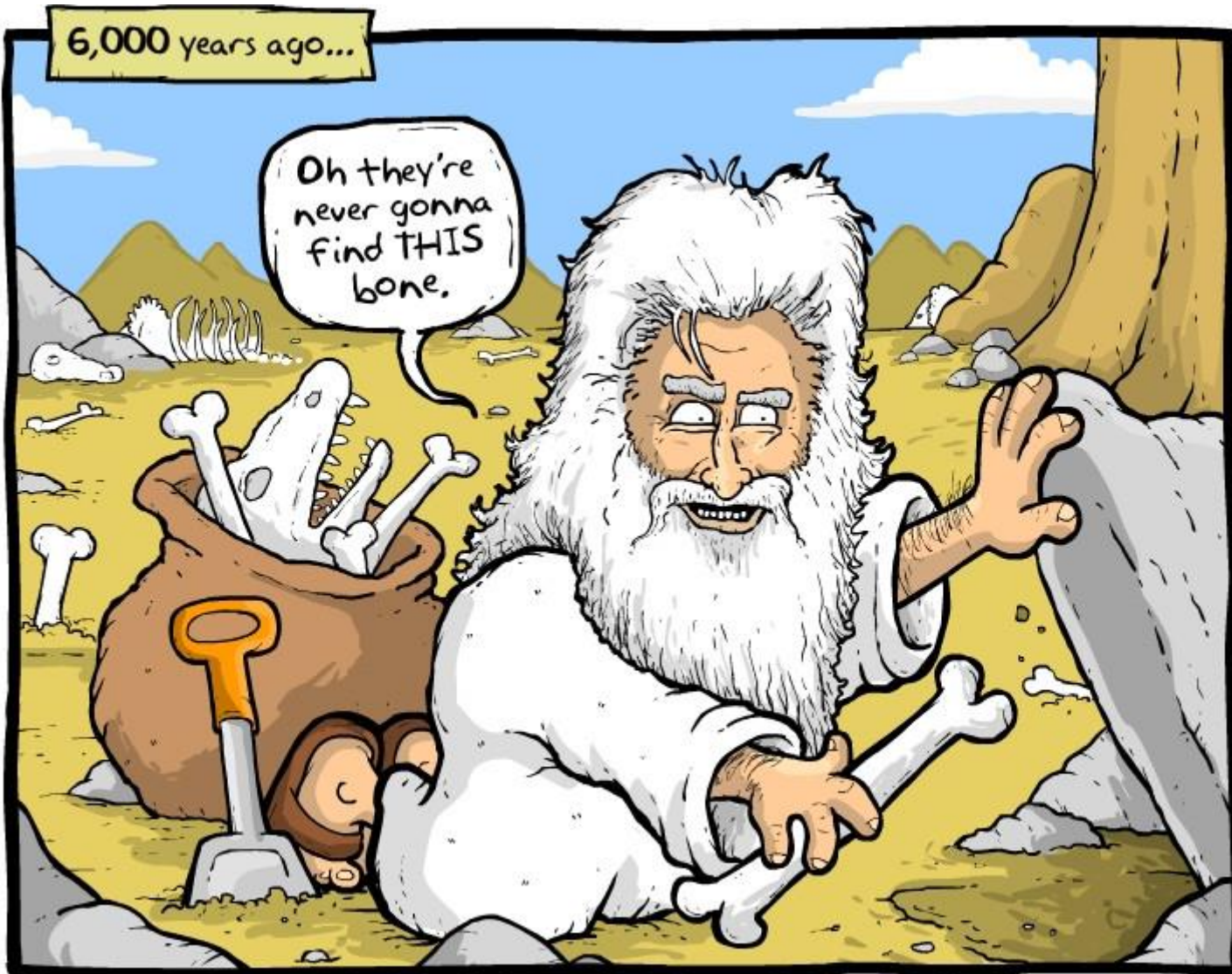
(Hilary Putnam's
version of the
Cartesian demon.)



- Maybe I'm in one of those pods *right now*?



Is there any *evidence* against this?



Deductive closure principle

- The set of propositions one knows, at a given time, is “closed under deductive consequence”.
 - One knows all of the (known) logical consequences of what one knows.
- *If $\{K(p) \ \& \ K(p \Rightarrow q)\}$ then $K(q)$*
- N.B. $p \Rightarrow q$ means “In every possible world where p is true, q is also true.”

Deductive closure principle

- E.g. let $p = \text{“It’s raining”}$ and $q = \text{“I’ll get wet”}$

$K(\text{It’s raining})$

$K(\text{It’s raining} \Rightarrow \text{I’ll get wet})$

$\therefore K(\text{I’ll get wet})$

(Here it’s assumed that I will be going outside without any waterproof covering.)

Transmissibility Argument

- The argument can be applied to any sceptical scenario SK , and any proposition p that is known to be inconsistent with SK .
1. S cannot know that (SK) is false.
 2. p implies that (SK) is false, and S knows this.
 3. If S knows that p is true, and that p implies that (SK) is false, then S can know that (SK) is false.
-
- $\therefore S$ does not know p .

E.g.

1. Fred cannot know that “Fred is a BIV” is false.
2. “I have a hand” implies that “Fred is a BIV” is false, and Fred knows this.
3. If Fred knows that “I have a hand” is true, and that “I have a hand” implies that “Fred is a BIV” is false, then Fred can know that “Fred is a BIV” is false.

∴ Fred does not know “I have a hand”.

E.g.

SK = “Dinosaur bones are fakes, planted in the ground by God”

p = “T. rex existed 90 to 66 million years ago”

G. E. Moore attacks transmissibility

“Is it, in fact, **as** certain that all these four assumptions [the premises of the transmissibility argument] are true, **as** that I *do* know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious? I cannot help answering:

It seems to me *more* certain that I *do* know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious, than that any single one these four assumptions is true, let alone all four.”

Moore, *Proof of an External World*, 1939



- In other words, Moore “does a *modus tollens*” on the sceptic’s *modus ponens*.

Modus Ponens	Modus Tollens
If p then q	If p then q
p	Not q
-----	-----
q	Not p

- Given that I *do* know that this a pencil, I should conclude that one of the premises 1, 2 or 3 is false.
- (E.g. perhaps I *do* know that (SK) is false, or maybe the closure principle is wrong.)

Proof of an external world!

1. Here is one hand
2. And here is another

- ∴ There are at least two external objects in the world.
- ∴ An external world exists.

[N.B. This argument is apparently sound, as the premises are acceptable, and the conclusion follows from the premises.]

- “Nevertheless, many readers are disappointed with Moore’s response. Some think that, in one way or another, it fails to engage the arguments for skepticism. Perhaps the best way to put the complaint about the Moorean response is to say that **it does not explain what is wrong with the arguments for skepticism.** His view implies, quite plausibly, that there is something wrong with them. It is desirable to have an explanation of just what is wrong with them.”
- Richard Feldman

From an externalist perspective

- According to proper functionalism, the premise 1 (S cannot know that (SK) is false) is false, exactly as Moore says. A healthy brain in a normal environment will believe that it is not a brain in a vat.
- According to Nozick, the premise 3 (closure principle) is false.
- Externalist views therefore claim to *complete* Moore's response by diagnosing the flaw in the transmissibility argument.