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THE SKEPTICAL DEAL WITH OUR CONCEPT OF EXTERNAL REALITY[*]

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Abstract
The following paper contains a new refutation of the skeptical argument concerning our knowledge of the external world. The central idea is that the argument fails because it presupposes ambiguous attributions of reality. Once these ambiguities are identified, they make the argument either trivial or equivocal. Differently from others, this refutation does not lead us to undesired results.

Since Descartes, the so-called *argument from ignorance* concerning the external world[1] is one of the most puzzling skeptical arguments ever created. In order to be prepared to construct it we need to make use of some general skeptical hypothesis about the external world. Examples of them are as follows:

(1) I am dreaming the external world.
(2) I am hallucinating an external world.
(3) I am a soul being deceived by a malign genie, who makes me believe that I am living in this world, which in fact does not exist (the Cartesian version).
(4) I am a brain in a vat, linked to a supercomputer that makes me believe that I am living in a real world, when in fact this is only an implemented program of virtual reality (the main contemporary version).

Typical of such skeptical hypotheses is that their truth is at least logically possible. Indeed, it seems that we are not even able to *know* that they are false.

[*] I would like to thank professor Richard Swinburne for his sympathetic criticism.
[1] See Peter Unger (1975), chap. 1. See also Neil Gascoine (2002: 9-10).

Now, considering the trivial statement "I have two hands", and the skeptical hypothesis "I am a brain in a vat"[2], we can build the following instance of the argument from ignorance about the external world:

I

1. If I know that I have two hands, then I know that I am not a brain in a vat.
2. I don't know whether I am not a brain in a vat.
3. Therefore: I do not know whether I have two hands (1, 2 MT).

Indeed, if I cannot know that I am not a brain in a vat, how can I know that I *really* have two hands?

Since the statement and the skeptical hypothesis can change, calling *p* any trivial statement about the external world such as "I have two hands", "This table exists", "There are stones"… calling *K* the operator for knowledge, and *h* any skeptical hypothesis, the general form of the argument can be rendered as the following *modus tollens*:

[2] The skeptical hypothesis of brains in vats can face anti-skeptic arguments based on semantic externalism. However, these arguments are controversial and limited in their conclusion, since they are ineffective against others skeptical hypotheses like those of the dream or of the hallucination. See the seminal argument from Hilary Putnam (1981), chapter 1. For a critical account, see Anthony Brückner (2003). The underlining idea of the brain-in-vats anti-skeptical argument is that they cannot have thoughts about real things like water, vat, brain, etc. because they lack *causal* contact with these real things or their components. Since we have these thoughts, we cannot be brains in vats.

Nonetheless, it may be argued that this anti-skeptical argument gains its apparent strength only by ignoring that the ways of reference can be quite crooked. We admit that there must be something externally real, which is the ultimate source of reference, but this something does not need to be what is experienced or inferred as to be referred to. It seems to be reasonable, for example, that thoughts of brains in vats of water, for example, have a reference, even if water does not exist. To see this, let's suppose that the first source of the brain's idea of water is the fictive water experience produced by the program of the supercomputer. These organized sense-impressions are not causally unrelated with real things! They were causally originated, say, by the thoughts of its programmers about water, which combine their ideas of properties like wetness, liquidness, transparency, causally originated by their own experiences in the dry planet Omega, where they never saw water… It seems that Putnam undervalues the plasticity of language. (If you believe in Putnam's argument, you can replace the brain-in-vat occurrences in my examples by some other skeptical hypothesis.)

A

1 $Kp \rightarrow K{\sim}h$

2 $\sim K{\sim}h$

3 $\therefore {\sim}Kp$ (1, 2 MT)

At first view, this argument seems to be compelling: Since I cannot know that I am not a brain in a vat, it seems that I cannot know the reality of anything in the external world, which includes whether I really have two hands or not.

Nonetheless, the argument from ignorance cannot be so compelling, for we can apply a *modus ponens* in order to build a converse anti-skeptical argument, which might be called the *argument from knowledge* concerning the external world. Below is its logical form:

B

1 Kp

2 $Kp \rightarrow K{\sim}h$

3 $\therefore K{\sim}h$ (1, 2 MP)

And here is an instantiation:

II

1. I know that I have two hands.
2. If I know that I have two hands, then I know that I am not a brain in a vat.
3. Therefore: I know that I am not a brain in a vat. (1, 2 MP)

Both arguments seem to be similarly compelling. Which is the right one, the skeptic or the anti-skeptic? In this paper I will reject both these alternatives, for I think that both arguments are equivocal. I intend to justify this claim with the help of a long argument with three stages: in the first stage, I will show that all lines of both arguments involve attributions of external reality, which can be made explicit. In the second, I will analyze the concept of external or objective reality, showing that it has at least two different senses, one

belonging to the ordinary life, the other belonging to the unusual context of skeptical hypotheses. Finally, in the third stage I intend to show that the attributions of external reality slip inadvertently from one sense to the other in the course of both arguments, which can be clearly shown in the forms where these attributions are made explicit. These slides of sense make both arguments equivocal and therefore fallacious.

1. Making Explicit the Attributions of External Reality Involved in the Arguments

The first thing to be noted is that attributions (or disattributions) of external, objective or concrete reality or existence are always considered in each line of the arguments from ignorance and knowledge, though usually in an implicit way. Indeed, all the stages of the arguments depend on implicit consideration of attributions of external reality, for what the argument from ignorance says is that because of the lack of knowledge of ~*h* we are unable to know the reality of the external world, and that because of the lack of knowledge of the reality of the external world we are unable to know the reality of any state of affairs belonging to it, unable, therefore, to attribute external reality to anything stated by *p*.

In both arguments, what I mean by *Kp* is that I know the external reality, the concrete existence of the fact represented by *p*. Therefore, the conclusion ~*Kp* of the argument from ignorance amounts to the same as the conclusion that I do not know that *p in reality* is the case. Such attribution of external reality involved in the trivial statement *p* may be more or less explicit. So, when *p* is the statement "This table is real (or exists)", the attribution of (external) reality is explicit. However, when *p* is "I am holding a piece of chalk", what this statement means is "I am *really* holding an *externally real* piece of chalk". Such attributions of external reality remain usually implicit, because the fact that they are always involved makes superfluous to spell them. (The case is like that of statements; one does not need to make explicit the illocutionary act of stating by saying, "I state *p*"; since so many of our utterances involve statements, saying "p" is usually enough.) A way to see the attributions of external reality implicitly involved in knowledge claims concerning the external world is to deny that we know the external reality of what is said in the utterances. It is blatant nonsense to say, "I know that this table is real, but I do not know whether it is

real or not"; but it is no less a nonsense to say, "I know that I am holding a piece of chalk, but I do not know whether it is (externally) real or not; indeed, I do not know whether I am really holding anything". This result could not be different: as *Kp* is a statement about the external world, the attribution of external reality to its factual correlate must be if not said, at least implicitly involved in the statement.

Once we have seen this, the argument (I) instantiating (A) can be stated in a way that makes explicit the assumptions concerning the external reality:

I-a

1. If I know that I have two (*externally*) *real* hands, then I know that I am not a(n) (*externally*) *real* brain in a vat.
2. I do not know whether I am not a(n) (*externally*) *real* brain in a vat.
3. Therefore: I do not know whether I have two (*externally*) *real* hands. (1, 2 MT)

On the other hand, the argument (II) instantiating (B) can also take a form that makes explicit the attributions of external reality:

II-a

1. I know that I have two (*externally*) *real* hands.
2. If I know that I have two (*externally*) *real* hands, then I know that I am not a(n) (*externally*) *real* brain in a vat.
3. Therefore: I know that I am not a(n) (*externally*) *real* brain in a vat. (1, 2 MP)

These arguments only make explicit what is already assumed in (I) and (II), namely, their concern with the external reality. Later on, I intend to show that the attributions of external reality in both arguments have a different meaning in the premises and in the conclusion, which makes them equivocal. However, this work demands, previously, a detailed examination of the meanings of expressions such as 'external reality' or 'objective existence'.

2. Carnap's Semantic Distinction and its Limits

In the search of an analysis of the concept of external or objective reality in its relation to skepticism concerning the external world we may wonder whether Rudolph Carnap's famous distinction between external and internal questions of existence or reality would be of some help. His distinction applies to all domains of knowledge, but it is its application to what he calls the 'world of things' (the external world) which interest us here. The most usual questions about reality or existence concerning the external world are what he calls *internal* questions. In this case, he writes:

> …to recognize something as a real thing or event means to succeed in incorporating it into the system of things at a particular space-time position so that it fits together with the other things recognized as real, according with the rules of the framework.[3]

Therefore, when we ask ourselves whether the Statue of Liberty really exists, or whether there is a Santa Claus, we are stating internal questions, which are well-succeeded in including a thing among others belonging to the external world in the first case, but not in the second.

However, Carnap also holds that philosophers may ask about the existence of the thing-world in itself, about the reality of the external world as a whole. For him to ask whether our-external-world-as-a-whole really exists, understanding this as an internal question of existence, would be misleading. It would be to state a metaphysical question that is unverifiable and consequently senseless – for an internal question can be answered, and therefore stated, only when it is about things related one another within the system, and never when it is about the system as a whole. For Carnap, a question about the existence of the world of things would only make sense when understood as an *external* question, which concerns merely our decision to use a linguistic framework about the world of things (the thing-language). This acceptance, however, is not the result of a cognitive decision, but of a pragmatic one, based on factors like expedience, fruitfulness and efficiency of the framework.[4]

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[3] R. Carnap (1958: 207).
[4] Ibid.: 214.

Although Carnap's distinction is certainly not without a difference, it does has its own flaws, already pointed out by philosophers such as Barry Stroud[5] and P. F. Strawson,[6] who have convincingly argued that the problem of the reality of the external world as a whole cannot be reduced to the mere status of non-cognitive linguistic decisions. In order to see that there is more to the question than what is supposed in Carnap's distinction, consider the following statement showing a pervasive ambiguity in our attributions of reality to the external world:

(1) I know that the (external) world is real.

This statement is ambiguous. It might mean

(1a) I know that our external world *has* reality,

but sometimes it can also mean that I know that this is *the* external world, or

(1b) I know that our world (against any skeptical hypothesis) is *the* ultimately real one.

The difference between (1a) and (1b) starts to be clearer when we consider what truth-value we would give to each statement. Consider the negation of (1a):

(~1a) I do not know whether our external world has reality.

Surely, most of us would agree that (1a) is true, whereas (~1a) is false. I know, we all know that *our* external world has reality in the sense that it *contains*, that it is *full* of reality. This truth can be denied only metaphorically, as when the poet T. S. Eliot refers (in "The Waste Land Part III – The Fire Sermon") to the foggy London as an unreal city.[7]

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[5] Barry Stroud (1984), chap. 5.
[6] See P. F. Strawson's comment's on Stroud in his (1985: 7).
[7] "Unreal city under the brown fog of a winter noon" (Eliot, 1963:60-65).

But with statement (1b) is a different case; it seems to be false. To see this more clearly consider its denial:

(~1b) I do not know whether our world (against any skeptical hypothesis) is the ultimately real one.

Statement (~1b) seems to be true, because we feel that we do not have epistemic resources to reject the logical possibility that, unknowingly for us, a skeptical hypothesis about the external world is true and its reality is only virtual.

In contrast with (1b), (1a) cannot be shown to be false, even if it is true that I am a brain in a vat or a soul deceived by a *malign genie.* Even if a skeptical hypothesis were true, I would still be right in thinking that the world I am experiencing is *a perfectly real one*, and not something like, for example, the limited world experienced when I see a movie-picture or the faint world of my dreams.

Our question now is: what kind of relation could be found between Carnap's distinction and the present distinction between two cases of attributions of reality? At first we have the strange feeling that the sense (1a) of the statement "The (external) world is real" has to do with an internal question of reality, while the sense (1b) has to do with an external question of reality. However, since both statements concern the whole world of things, it is obvious that the attribution of reality in both of them should be answering an external question of reality, to be established as the result of pragmatic decisions... But in this case, why do we distinguish (1a) from (1b), regarding the first true and the second false? Why are we ready to attribute cognitive status to (1a) but not to (1b)? In what follows next I will delineate an analysis of the concept of objective reality that allows an answer to these questions.

3. Introducing a New Semantic Distinction

My own strategy to analyze kinds of attribution of external reality is inspired in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. I will assume two very plausible semantic insights from him. The first one is the view that a difference in the way of using or employing an

expression corresponds to a difference in its sense or meaning.[8] Attention to the praxis of our language shows that there are many more of such differences than we are usually aware of, being this lack of awareness if not the only source of philosophical problems (as Wittgenstein sometimes seems to think), at least a relevant source of philosophical misunderstandings, particularly in the case of non-substantive riddles such as the skeptical ones.[9]

The second insight is his view that the criterial rules for the application of an expression are *constitutive of its meaning*; an expression without criteria for its application is devoid of meaning, and when we change the criteria for the application of an expression, we change its meaning (its form of application, its way of use).[10] The first semantic insight is related with the second by the fact that it seems that when we speak about ways of use we are speaking about the rules determining the singular (spatiotemporally located) uses of expressions, and the criterial rules are rules determining the singular uses of expressions. In order to make explicit the criteria for the application of an expression, we can make use of a criterial analysis methodologically, as a way to explain the meaning of conceptual expressions.

Applying the first insight to the external and internal questions, it might be suggested that in the usual case, when we ask or answer an internal question about existence, we are using the concept of external existence in one way, which is different from the way we use the concept of external existence to ask or answer an external question. Consequently, we are applying the concept of external existence or reality in different senses. So, when we

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[8] Wittgenstein's thesis was stronger, since in many cases he *identified* meaning with use. See his 1983*a*, sec. 43. More precisely, he identifies meaning with *ways of use* (*Gebrauchsweise*) or *application* (*Verwendungsweise*) of words, and not with their episodic uses (see 1983*b*: sec. 61). This allows us to identify these *ways* (*Weise*) with semantic rules (or combination of rules) determining the episodic uses. Examples of such rules would be the so-called criterial rules, which will be considered further on in this text.

[9] This is why Wittgenstein has much to say about skepticism, though I am not espousing his views on this issue here.

[10] For Wittgenstein, criteria "give our words their common meaning" (1958: 57). His doctrine about criteria is scattered in his manuscripts. Important passages are in (1958: 24-25), (1983*a*: sec. 354), (1984: sec. 438), (1979: 28). It is worth to note that the thesis that criteria are constitutive of meaning would have no point if we had in mind the objectively given criteria. However, by criteria he also means *criterial rules* (or combination of rules), which are semantic and verificational rules, and not the objectively given criteria that might satisfy these rules or not, making them applicable or not. For an investigation of criterial rules and their semantic role, see G. P. Baker (1986: 194-225). See also the last chapter of P. M. S. Hacker (1986).

ask an internal question, for example, whether the Statue of Liberty really exists, we are using the expression ‘really exists’ in a sense which is different from the sense they have when we ask whether the external world as a whole really exists and it is not, for example, a fiction produced by a supercomputer.

Calling the sense or kind of attribution of reality usually linked with the internal question the *inherent* one, and the sense or kind of attributions that should be linked with the external question – concerning the reality of the world against the possibility that any skeptical hypothesis is true – the *adherent* one, we can find some linguistic clues confirming this semantic distinction. A linguistic feature of the inherent sense is that the words ‘real’ or ‘exists’ can be replaced by the word ‘actual’. A further linguistic feature is that instead of saying that something is real or exists, we can in this sense also say that it *possesses* reality, that it *has* or *is full of* reality: the piece of chalk that I am holding is actual, it has, it possesses reality. However, the same does not apply to the concept of adherent reality: one cannot affirm that a world that is adherently non-real (like the world of the brain-in-a-vat) does not have these properties. Such a world could be actual, possessing (inherent) reality, although remaining adherently non-real.

The proposed distinction can be confirmed, made precise and deeply investigated when considered in terms of criteria. In what follows I will apply a criterial analysis to conceptual expressions like ‘external reality (or existence)’ or ‘objective reality (or existence)’ (expressing kinds of attribution of reality) in order to distinguish more adequately the inherent from the adherent senses, beginning with the first.

4. The Inherent Senses of ‘External Reality’

Let us consider, searching for criteria, the conceptual expressions used for the attribution of external or objective reality or existence in the supposed inherent sense. The primary use of these expressions seems to be when we ask whether things in the external world around us really do exist, since we first become acquainted with them. According to our understanding of Wittgenstein, we are allowed to suppose that the inherent sense of the conceptual expressions used for the attribution of external reality around us is constituted

by criterial rules for this attribution. Such rules would tell us that only with the satisfaction of certain *criteria of external reality* would we be enabled to apply expressions like 'is externally real', 'exists objectively', 'is actual', 'is concrete' in the inherent sense. But can we find these criteria?

My claim is that criteria for the inherent sense of attributions of reality exist indeed. They have been considered by many influential thinkers. So, according to the representationalist Locke, our opinions about material objects are justified by properties linked with our ideas of senses like their involuntary character, by their orderly and coherent fit together reflecting law-governance, and by their awareness from others.[11] According to the imaterialist Berkeley, ideas firmed by imagination are faint, indistinct and also entirely dependent of the will, while ideas perceived by sense are vivid and clear and have no dependence of our will.[12] For Hume too, perceptions of real things enter with most force and violence into the soul, differently from the faint images of them in thinking and reasoning.[13] For Kant, the conformity to the law (*Gesetzmäsigkeit*) of all objects of experience is what defines the formal aspect of nature.[14] For J. S. Mill the external (material) world is made of continuous or warranted possibilities of sensation, following from one another according to laws.[15] According to Gottlob Frege, the main criterion of *objectivity* is the interpersonal access, followed by the independence of will, while the main criterion of *reality* is the spatial and/or temporal location; hence, the realm of *objective reality* is for him built by those things that are interpersonally accessible and spatially and/or temporally given.[16] In a paper G. E. Moore summarizes the properties of external reality saying that real is what is independent of the mind, what is verifiable by others, what is always connected with certain other things, having in this way certain causes, effects and accompaniments (I would say, following regularities), and what has the highest degree of reality.[17] Finally, a psychologist such a Sigmund Freud suggested that a new born is moved

[11] John Locke (1975), book IV, chap. 11.
[12] George Berkeley (1948-57: 235).
[13] David Hume (2000), Book I, section 1.
[14] Immanuel Kant (1997), § 16.
[15] J. S. Mill (1889), chap. XI.
[16] Gottlob Frege (1918-19: 58-77).
[17] G. E. Moore (1953).

by the *principle of pleasure*, looking always for immediate satisfaction and unable to distinguish the external from the internal world. Only gradually the child learns that the external world, differently from the world of his imagination, does not follow his will, what forces him to learn how to postpone the satisfaction of his instincts and in this way to replace the principle of pleasure for a new one, namely, the *principle of reality*.[18]

Indeed, since our childhood we learn to distinguish external reality from appearance by means of criteria such as the greatest intensity of sensation, independence of will and interpersonal access, and it seems to be a *conceptual truth* that world-states without these properties should be said to be non-real or non-existent. Although it was already argued that criteria like these are useless, since none of them is sufficient,[19] it is easy to join them and to claim that together they are strong enough to be conclusive. Doing this in a non-systematic way, we can say that things around us – using the word 'thing' in the widest sense, in order to include objects, properties, conditions, states of affairs, events, processes, etc. – are real when:

1. the sensible experience of them has the *greatest intensity*,
2. they remain *independent of our will*,
3. their experience is *co-sensorial*,
4. they are *interpersonally checkable* to anyone.
5. they are submitted to *regularities* (external things follow regularities such as those imposed by natural laws, social norms, etc.).

In order to make a correct or justified application of predicates like '…is externally real', '…exists objectively' in their primary inherent sense, namely, attributing reality to things in the external world around us, at least these standard criteria of reality must be satisfied. Let us suppose, for example, that I hold a piece of chalk and say "The piece of chalk I am holding is real", or simply "I am holding a piece of chalk". As far as it is assured that the

[18] Sigmund Freud (1958).
[19] So complains Lawrence Bonjour against the criteria of reality proposed by Locke. See Bonjour (2002: 130-5).

criteria (1) to (5) are being satisfied, I am allowed to think that the piece of chalk isn't a figment of my imagination, but something externally real or objectively existent in the inherent sense. Indeed, in order to be true the utterance "The piece of chalk I am holding is (externally) real" must satisfy criterion (1) because the intensity of the sensations is maximal, unlike those of a dream. It must satisfy criterion (2) because the chalk is independent of my or your will (we cannot make it disappear like a mental image). It must satisfy criterion (3) because it is co-sensorially experienciable: I can see, touch, smell it. It must satisfy criterion (4) because its experience can be the object of interpersonal checking, that is, actual or earlier experience ensure us that it can be recognized as the same by any other knowing subject (usually we cannot share an hallucination; collective hallucinations are possible, but they are usually restricted to few persons). Finally, a real piece of chalk must also satisfy criterion (5) because it must show the regularities of objects following natural laws: the chalk scribbles, it is breakable, if dropped it falls, while imaginary chalks can float in the air, etc. When we attribute reality to things in the world it is because we are assuming that they satisfy these criteria directly to our senses (as in the case of opaque medium-sized dry goods) or indirectly, by means of some kind of sensible effect (as in the case of mesons and electromagnetic waves). Being all these criteria satisfied, the piece of chalk must be unavoidably seen as inherently real. It is in this way that we succeed to incorporate a thing among other things into a space-temporal system of things according to the rules of the thing-language (in this case the criterial rules) as Carnap requires for his internal questions of existence,

There is a further semantic point about the inherent sense of our conceptual expressions for external reality, which is ignored in Carnap's approach. It is not improper to use concept-words like 'real' or 'exists' in order to claim that our external world *as a whole* is objectively real or exists externally, in so far as by 'our external world' we mean something like the mereological sum of the things we think that satisfy our standard criteria of external reality. These things are not only those objects, properties, conditions, states of affairs, events, processes, etc., that in the present moment are satisfying (directly or not) our standard criteria of external reality (like this computer monitor and the electric energy that illuminates it), but also all the other things that are not presently experienced, but which we

have good reason to suppose they would, under appropriate circumstances, satisfy our standard criteria, and that consequently can also be seen as actual. This is the case of all things that we have already experienced, but which are now too distant or inaccessible to us to be (directly or indirectly) experienced. This is also the case of many things we know to satisfy the criteria only via testimony from others. And this is surely also the case of many things that certainly exist but that were not (and probably will never be) experienced by none of us. My claim is that we can inductively infer, beginning with the successive experience of things around us, which satisfy the standard criteria of inherent reality, that there is presently a whole world of things that in a potential way satisfy the same criteria, although they are not being presently experienced.

Using the word 'experience' not only to refer to direct experience, but also to the most indirect ones, and having in mind only the inherent sense of external reality or existence, a rough attempt to reconstruct the reasoning that leads to the commonsensical conclusion that our external world as a whole exists, that it is real in the inherent sense, can be formulated as follows:[20]

1. Many things that are presently experienced satisfy the criteria of external reality (our bodies and the external things around us).
2. Most things that we have experienced in the past have successively satisfied the criteria of external reality.
3. (inductively from 2) There are things that were experienced in the past and, although they are not being experienced now, they (are still able to) satisfy the criteria of external reality.
4. We are always experiencing *new* things around us that satisfy the criteria of external reality.
5. (inductively from 4) There must be non-experienced things that (are able to) satisfy the criteria of external reality.

[20] A precise and detailed reconstruction of the ways we get knowledge of the external reality could demand empirical investigation of how the concept of external reality is learned, etc. Since my purpose here is only to answer the skeptics, a rough reconstruction must be sufficient.

6. Testimony is a reliable way to knowledge.
7. There is much testimony of things that satisfy the criteria of external reality.
8. (deductively from 6 and 7) There must be many non-experienced things that satisfy the criteria of external reality, this being known via testimony.
9. (deductively from 1, 3, 5 and 8) There is a totality of things, some of them are (a) presently experienced things, satisfying our criteria of external reality, some of them are (b) things not being experienced now, although we know they satisfy our criteria of external reality, since they have satisfied these criteria in the past, some of them are (c) things still unknown, but able to satisfy our criteria of external reality, for we are always experiencing new things satisfying these criteria, and some of them are (d) non-experienced things that satisfy the criteria of external reality via testimony.
10. What we mean by the idea of our external world as a whole is an enormous amount of things, some of them are (a), some are (b), some are (c), and some are (d).
11. (deductively from 9 and 10) Our external world as a whole satisfies the criteria of external reality.
12. What satisfies the criteria of external reality is (inherently) real.
13. (deductively from 11 and 12) Our external world as a whole is (inherently) real.

This is, if you wish, our proof of the external world. Although this argument is only a rough approximation, it is plausible enough for our purposes, for it seems very plausible that we know that our external world as a whole has reality, that it is actual, that it is inherently real as the sum of all things that we believe to satisfy (or that are able to satisfy, which amounts to the same) our standard criteria of external reality. I call all levels of generalization that go beyond the present experience of our surroundings the *extended inherent senses* (uses, ways of application) of our conceptual expressions for external reality, in contrast with what we might call the *primary* inherent sense.

The importance of the extended inherent attributions of reality is that when generalized to the whole world they seem to capture what is meant by the plain man, when he says things that appear to be philosophically naïve like “It is obvious that the external world (as a whole) exists” or “Only a madman would doubt the reality of our world”. He is intending

to say that we have a good inferential basis to believe that the whole world, as a sum of its presently experienced, already experienced, and yet non-experienced constituents, is able to satisfy the criteria of inherent reality and therefore actually exists. The existence of an extended inherent sense of reality can explain why we think that the statement (1a), which states that we know that our external world *has* reality, is true, for (1a) is the widest expression of this sense; it also explains why we have the strange feeling that it answers an internal question of existence.

The inherent senses of the concept of external reality are familiar and non-problematic. Their examination shows that Carnap was mistaken as he thought that one cannot meaningfully pose something of a kind similar to an internal question about the reality of our world as a whole, since this question would be unverifiable and metaphysical. He thought this because with the internal question he had in mind only the primary inherent sense of our attributions of external reality, along with some near extensions of it, without visualizing the possibility of its inductive generalization to the whole world. However, we have already seen how, based on an inductive process that begins with the satisfaction of the standard criteria of reality, we may arrive at the justified knowledge that the whole external world referred by us is real.

5. The Adherent Attributions of Reality

Let us suppose that I take a drug that for some hours produces in me a perfect hallucination of a world like ours. Afterwards I can say to myself: “This was a world of my imagination, not the real one”, for I have reasons to think so. In this case I am not disattributing reality in the inherent sense, because the standard criteria of reality were satisfied. In this case, I suggest, I would be disattributing reality in the *adherent* sense of the word.

What are the criteria for this adherent kind of attribution of reality? We can explore this point by imagining skeptical thought-experiments. For instance if we suppose that one morning I wake up in a completely different environment, with a different body and surrounded by strange creatures. They explain to me that until now I have not lived in the real world. They tell me that in the whole of my previous life I was a brain in a vat,

monitored by a supercomputer simulating the external reality. They say that this is a usual pedagogical procedure to foster mind diversity on the planet Omega, where each new brain receives, in its brain formation, a different program, which in my case happened to be the "Philosophy Lecturer on Earth". But now, they explain further, my brain has been implanted in a real body, and I will have to live my life in the really real world. Since all my further experiences turn out to be in full agreement with the explanations given to me, I gradually come to the conclusion that what they say is true, that the world I have experienced until now was not the real world, but indeed a virtual one.

It is important to see that I can find criteria leading me to this adherent disattribution of reality. However, they have nothing directly to do with the standard criteria for any inherent sense of external reality! For the highest intensity of experience, the independence of the will, the co-sensoriality, the possibility of interpersonal access, etc., were all already given to me when I was living my life as a brain in a vat on Earth, as much as now on the planet Omega. I can even say that my world – as I was a brain in a vat – was actual, it had reality, neither more nor less than the world being presented to me now. Consequently, my conclusion that my previous world was not the real one is achieved by means of adherent criteria of reality, which can be summed up as *the coherence of the new information with the new and old experiences I have lived*. The old world was not adherently real, although only relatively to the new one. The criteria are also very different and the only link between them is that the criteria of reality in the adherent sense are used to choose between two conflictive realities that already satisfy the inherent criteria of reality, differentiating one of them as an illusion-making by-product of the other.

A further thought-experiment can show that we can imagine criteria working in order to suggest that not only the past, but also the actual and the future world is not the (adherently) real one. Let us suppose that in the civilization of the planet Omega, instead of the death penalty, criminals are condemned to live their remaining lives as brains in vats. After hearing the penalty, the criminal is put to sleep and his brain is removed and immersed in a vat, where he can live a perfectly normal wicked life, although being disturbingly conscious that he is living in a virtual world where all reality is produced by a supercomputer. The person will live in a world that is perfectly real (actual) in the inherent sense, but one which

he *knows* that is and will remain virtual, namely, not real in the adherent sense. (This should not sound so strange: we can have a bad dream and, being half-awake, based on our awareness and memories, assure ourselves that we are only dreaming.) Also here we can have criteria for the adherent non-reality of a world relatively to another, and in this sense to know that one of them is not the real one.

Something similar might be said about some disattributions of adherent reality concerning *parts* of the world. In an experiment with artificial reality, a person uses a special glove to close his hand around the holographic projection of a cup of tea. Inherent criteria like intensity, co-sensoriality, even interpersonality, might be satisfied. In this way the holographic projection gains some inherent reality. But the fact that the person knows that it is an experiment, along with the circumstances surrounding them, serves as a criterion to make him sure that the cup of tea he is holding is adherently unreal relatively to the external world as it is known. In this way, the adherent reality of what is represented by the statement *p* can be also contested.

Against examinations such as these it could be objected that such criterial knowledge that the external world or even parts of it are adherently real or unreal is rather feeble. It could be, for example, that the new world from our first example was another figment of reality, just as the first one, only that a new program, called "Being awaken from a life as a brain in a vat", is implemented in the place of the old "Philosophy Lecturer on Earth" program. It is also possible that my past life until this event was in the real world, and that my brain was extracted from my head by aliens and then put in a vat, where the new program was implemented. It is even possible that the person in our third case is a brain in a vat and the supposed holographic projection is the only real thing he is having access to, with the help of a robotic arm, outside his artificial world! In conclusion: diversely from the cases of the standard criteria of inherent reality, which are non-defeasible when in fact given, the criteria for adherent reality are defeasible, even when in fact given, what means that we can't really know whether a world is *ultimately* the real one.

In order to answer this objection, we need to distinguish between two conceivable uses or senses of adherent attributions of reality: a *relative* one, considered in our thought-experiments with skeptical hypotheses, and a *non-relative* or *ultimate* or *absolute* one. The

sense of a word is relative when it is gained by contrast within a context. The word 'small', for example, has a relative sense; a baby elephant is small relatively to elephants, but it is big relatively to a mice.[21] The same is the case with the concept of external reality as it is considered in the skeptical thought-experiments. Its sense is relative, gained only within the context created by a skeptical hypothesis that has been shown to be true in the light of the given evidences, even when taking into consideration that such evidences can be always defeated by new ones. I sustain that this relative sense of our adherent attributions of reality, though not very helpful, is legitimate, since we can conceive of criteria for it.

Consider now the supposed non-relative or ultimate or absolute sense of our adherent kinds of attributions of reality. It should answer the question whether our world is ultimately the real one, beyond any possibility of doubt arising from skeptical hypotheses. It seems clear that such criteria for ultimate reality cannot be truly available to us. Therefore, the answer to the objection that we cannot really know that a world is adherently real, for the criteria for adherent reality are defeasible, is affirmative, as far as we understand it as concerning its ultimate adherent reality, though not when we understand it as concerning its relative adherent reality against the background of a skeptical scenario that has shown to be the case. Reflection on this shows why we think that the statement (1b), saying that we know that (independently from any skeptical hypothesis) our world is the ultimately real one, must be false. We cannot possibly know so much because we lack criteria to know that the external world is ultimately real or that any skeptical hypotheses are false or, when we have evidences for their truth, that they could not be defeated by others that could be also defeated and so *ad indefinitum*. From this we may conclude that we are also unable to know that parts of our external world are ultimately real in the adherent sense, a conclusion that extends itself to any *p* statement. Indeed, we cannot know whether our hands are *ultimately* real.

Carnap would certainly give another answer to this question. He would say that we in fact attribute ultimate reality in the adherent sense to our external world as the result of a *posit*, of a *pragmatic decision*, based on grounds like expedience, fruitfulness and efficiency of a linguistic framework. However, as Stroud has convincingly argued, not only

[21] Irwing Copi (1972: 93).

does there seems to be no valid alternative to the thing-language, but also it does not seem to make any sense the idea that the existence of the external world depends on our decision to adopt a linguistic framework.[22]

More plausibly, David Deutsch has argued for the greater simplicity of the hypothesis that our world is the ultimately real one. According to him, skeptical hypotheses require a world that is actually far more complicated than the idea that our world is the real one, for they are *parasitic* to the first one. This would require more complexity than the external world as it is known. Consequently, the skeptical hypothesis is not as simple and economical as what he calls the commonsense view, and should be rejected for this reason.[23] However, simplicity is an epistemic virtue insofar as it is *theoretical*, as when we make comparison between scientific theories with similar scope. Simplicity does not seem to be an epistemic virtue when it is factual simplicity, concerning concrete states of affairs. Compare the claim that there is only one egg in the basket with the claim that there are twelve eggs. Because the first alternative is factually simpler, it is not more probable than the second. Similarly, since the simplicity considered by Deutsch is factual rather than theoretical, it does not seem to count as a reason for the truth of the statement that the reality of our external world is the ultimate one.

It seems also that we are really unable to know the ultimate adherent reality or unreality of an external world. But we should not be afraid of this conclusion, since it shows itself as an inoffensive truth when we think that we do not have any criteria for knowledge here and since expressions without criteria are devoid of meaning. If we accept this, then the statement "The external world is ultimately real" (in the adherent sense) is as devoid of sense as the statement "The whole world (with all things within) doubled its size in the last night", which, being unverifiable, is useless like the loose wheel in the machine, to use a metaphor from Wittgenstein. The statement "We do not know whether the external world is (ultimately) real" is like the statement "We do not know whether the whole world doubled its size in the last night", which might not be completely senseless, but is vacuous enough to be inoffensive. Our world counts for us through the quality of being inherently real

[22] Barry Stroud (1984), chap. 5.
[23] David Deutsch (1995).

(intense in the highest degree, independent of the will, public, etc.) and not of being the adherently real world in the ultimate sense, for we would never be in the condition to know it.

Why is it then that the question whether our external world is adherently real in the absolute or ultimate sense does not *seem* devoid of meaning? In my view all that we have here is an impression of meaning that can arise from two sources. The first is the confusion of the adherent with the extended inherent sense of our attributions of reality to the whole world. In the last sense is perfectly correct to say that our external world is real. There seems to be, however, a deeper source, which is a confusion of the relative sense of the adherent attributions of reality – only possible against the background of skeptical hypotheses in the imaginary case in which they show themselves to be true – with an absolute or ultimate sense of these attributions, which is devoid of criteria, but which is at stake when we ask whether our external world (or part of it) is in the adherent sense *the* real one. Our access to the relative sense of attributions of reality, provided by the consideration of skeptical hypotheses, added with our lack of awareness of these fine semantic distinctions, leads us to see the absolute or ultimate sense of attributions of reality as it were something meaningful, when it is in fact only a semantic *fata morgana*.

6. Recapitulating What We Have Learnt So Far

The result of our investigation is that we have:

(α) The *inherent senses* of attributions of external reality, based on the standard criteria of reality (1) to (5). These inherent senses form a scale that begins with the primary inherent sense and continues with various degrees of extended adherent sense, culminating in its application to the whole world. These senses can be explained as follows:

(α1) The *primary inherent sense* of the conceptual expressions for external reality. This sense is basically constituted by the application of criterial rules for the satisfaction of the standard criteria presently given to us, when we acknowledge reality to things around us. (Example: my hands, this paper, this table, are real.)

(α2) The *extended inherent sense* of the concept-words for external reality. This sense extends inductively the application of standard criteria of reality to what is not presently experienced, concluding that there are also many non-presently given things which also satisfy them. In this sense we can say that our world as a whole, or great extensions of it, have reality, actuality. The plain man is appealing to this sense when he claims: "Of course the external world is real; were it not real, it would not be our external world". (When this sense is meant, it also answers affirmatively a kind of internal question of existence about the whole thing-world, *pace* Carnap.)

(β) The *adherent sense* of concept-words for external reality. In this sense, conceptual expressions for external reality do not have ultimate criteria for their application, which deprives them of meaning. Consequently, we can't know whether our external world is ultimately real, and we can't know whether the skeptical hypotheses are ultimately false or even true. Nevertheless, it seems that the question concerning the ultimate reality of one world is meaningful. For if this were not the case, how would we make sense of skeptical hypotheses? In my view the meaningfulness of the questions concerning the ultimate adherent reality is an illusion. These questions seem to be meaningful because of the fact that in the skeptical context we are still able to conceive of criteria for using the concept of external reality in a *relative* adherent sense. So one would have some criteria of coherence to deny the reality of the experienced world of a brain-in-a-vat relatively to the new world where he or she is presently living, as we can see in films like *Matrix* and *The Real Thing*. But this should not mislead us into thinking that an ultimate or absolute attribution of adherent reality could make sense. Indeed, the relative adherent sense, which is valid only against backgrounds like those of a dream or of a skeptical scenario, seems to replace all that might be meant by external questions of existence.

Finally, we are now prepared to advance our general thesis about the skeptics. When he says that we do not know whether the external world is real, he is allowed to say this by considering the concept of external reality in its supposedly adherent (non-relative) sense. Indeed, we cannot know so much. Based on this he can even infer that we are unable to know the *adherent* reality of any trivial proposition *p*, which is true but trivial. Nonetheless, the skeptic cannot, based on this, infer that we don't know *p* in its inherent reality, namely,

in its actuality, independence, publicity, since the things constituting our world continue to satisfy the standard criteria of external reality. As we will see, this is precisely what the skeptic is trying to do.

7. Refuting the Argument from Ignorance

Now we come to the last stage of our argument, which consists in applying the semantic distinctions between different kinds of attributions of reality to the skeptical and anti-skeptical arguments. Consider first the expanded form of the argument from ignorance (dropping the dispensable word 'external' for clarity):

I-b

1. If I know that I have two *real* hands, then I know that I am not *in reality* a brain in a vat.
2. I do not know whether I am not *in reality* a brain in a vat.
3. I don't know whether I have two *real* hands. (1, 2 MT)

At first sight, this more explicit form of the argument is also flawless. However, it is easy to show that in this form – and consequently also in its original form – the argument cannot stand up. This is done by making the kinds of attributions of reality explicit. By doing this we get two straight ways of interpreting the attributions of reality that make sense, or at least seem to make sense, a weaker and a stronger.

(a) Under the weak interpretation of the attributions of reality in the argument, the skeptic is trying to convince us that we cannot know that all our knowledge of things belonging to the external world are not part of an universal illusion. In this case, all the attributions of reality in the argument would be understood as coherently belonging to the *adherent* sense as it is shown in the following formulation:

I-c

1. If I know that I have two (*adherently*) *real* hands, then I know that I am not *in* (*adherent*) *reality* a brain in a vat.
2. I do not know whether I am not *in* (*adherent*) *reality* a brain in a vat.
3. I do not know whether I have two (*adherently*) *real* hands.

The premises 1 and 2 are understood as involving adherent attributions of reality, what makes them true, producing a sound argument (which would not be the case if the attributions of reality in them where inherent). Indeed, it is true that ultimately I can't know that I am not in an adherent sense of reality a brain in a vat, following from this that I do not know whether anything in the world is ultimately real in the adherent sense, including that I have two adherently real hands. Nonetheless, the conclusion that we cannot know the ultimate adherent reality of those things is trivial and wholly inoffensive. As we have already seen, to deny the knowledge of the ultimate adherent reality of our world amounts to the same as to deny that we know that the whole world doubled its size in the last night or to deny that we know that someone died the day after tomorrow or that a stone is proud. Lacking criteria for their truth, such statements are devoid of sense and to deny our knowledge of them is to deny nothing. The impression that we are loosing something important is false, arising from the confusion with the special case of relative attributions of adherent reality, which can be made against the improbable background of a skeptical scenario that has shown to be the case. This last case would be meaningful, but it is not what is considered when we say that we cannot know whether that world (or a part of it) is ultimately real, that is, intending with this to assert that our knowledge of its reality is immune to any skeptical hypothesis. On the other hand, in this weak interpretation of the argument, our knowledge of the inherent reality of any state of affairs in the world, which would affect our lives, remains unchallenged.

(b) In my view what the skeptic is trying to convey does not exhaust in this minor point. Taking advantage of our lack of awareness of the two senses of reality involved, he is puzzling us by suggesting a strong interpretation of the argument, according to which I also cannot know the reality of *p* in the usual inherent sense, or, in the case of our example, that

I cannot know that I have two (inherently real) hands. He is suggesting that we do not know any state of affairs from our world in its reality, that is, as something having the maximal perceptual intensity, independence of will, truly interpersonal access, etc. and that the plain man is wrong when he claims to know that he has two real hands or that our world really exists! The feeling of awkwardness caused by the argument from ignorance results mainly from this suggestion.[24]

However, in the interpretation (b) the argument is fallacious. Here it leads us to inadvertently slide from the understanding of the words 'real' and 'reality' in the adherent sense in the first and second premises, to the understanding of the word 'real' in the inherent sense in the conclusion, which makes the application of the *modus tollens* wrong. To explain this better we can write the argument more explicitly as follows:

I-d

1. If I know that I have two (*adherently*) *real* hands, then I know that I am not *in* (*adherent*) *reality* a brain in a vat.
2. I do not know whether I am not *in* (*adherent*) *reality* a brain in a vat.
3. I do not know whether I have two (*inherently*) *real* hands. (1, 2 MP)

The premises here are the same as in the argument (I-c). But the condition of inherent reality involved in the conclusion makes the argument equivocal, because the kinds of attribution of reality are different in the premises and in the conclusion. Only through inadvertently going from an adherent to an inherent use of the attributions of reality arrives the skeptic to the surprising suggestion that we are not able to know that we have two real hands in the relevant inherent sense.

Finally, using '*ir*' to indicate the inherent attribution of external reality in the statement, and '*ar*' to indicate the adherent attribution of external reality, the stronger form of the argument for ignorance can be symbolized as follows:

[24] In fact, religions have contrasted our world with the real one, beyond our senses, and much of the philosophical tradition, from Plato to Plotinus, treated our world as a less real one.

A'

1 *Kpar* → *K~har*

2 *~K~har*

3 *~Kpir* (1, 2 MT)

The unavoidable conclusion from this reasoning is that the most incisive form of skeptical argument about the external world either is sound, but inoffensively trivial, or is invalid, since it rests on a subtle fallacy of equivocation, which falls apart when confronted with a sufficiently careful semantic analysis of what is involved in the ordinary senses of our words.[25]

8. Refuting the Argument from Knowledge

Now, we turn to the argument from knowledge. Here too, we can find a weak and a strong interpretation of the argument. In the weak interpretation, all attributions of reality are inherent, leading in the argument (II) to the conclusion that I know that I am not in inherent reality a brain in a vat, a conclusion that is devoid of sense, as much as the conclusion of (I-c).

In the important strong interpretation of the argument, making explicit kinds of attribution of reality that make sense and that are able to make the premises true, we can now write the argument (II) as follows:

II-b

1. I know that I have two (*inherently*) *real* hands.
2. If I know that I have two (*adherently*) *real* hands, then I know that I am not *in* (*adherent*) *reality* a brain in a vat.

[25] It would be hurried to approach my proposal to contextualism. I am not basing my considerations on the different strengths of knowledge. See Keith DeRose (1995: 1-52). Neither am I sustaining that context changes the "angle" of scrutiny (Michael Williams (1996)). What I am doing is to change the focus from the concept of knowledge to the concept of external reality, investigating then its (contextually relative) uses or senses in terms of criteria of application, which is not incompatible, for example, with moderate foundationalism.

3. Therefore: I know that I am not *in* (*adherent*) *reality* a brain in a vat. (1, 2 MT)

Even though the premises are true, I can't use the *modus ponens* to state the conclusion that I know that it is ultimately true that I am not a brain in a vat, since the attribution of reality in the first premise can be only inherent.

Here too we can state the argument symbolically in a way that shows that it is fallacious, since it is equivocal:

B

1. *Kpir*
2. *Kpar* → *K~har*
3. *K~har* (1, 2 MP)

Finally, it is interesting to submit G. E. Moore's famous argument against idealism to this kind of analysis, since his argument is a variation of the argument from knowledge. Here are his words:

> I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, "Here is one hand", and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, "And here is another". And if, by doing this, I have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in a number of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.[26]

Since Moore is explicit in saying that he is not intending to refute the skeptics, but to prove the real existence of the external world, what he is intending to say can be rendered as:

1 I know that I have two *inherently real* hands.
2 If I know that I have two *inherently real* hands, I know that there is an *inherent reality* around me (at least concerning my hands).
3 I know that there is an *inherent reality* around me. (1, 2 MP)

[26] G. E. Moore (1939: 165-6).

There is nothing wrong with this argument, which is to me a practical instantiation of the first stages of the rough proof of the external world already presented by us, hinting therefore in its direction. Consequently, Moore's argument has some force against the idealist, as he originally intended, so far as the idealist (like the skeptics) is trying to convey the idea that our world is made from the matter from which the dreams are made. However, this argument would be too weak if used to prove the falsity of any skeptical hypothesis, since they are concerned with reality in the adherent sense.[27]

We conclude that both the argument for knowledge and the argument for ignorance are misguided attempts to prove what can't be proved; we can know neither as much nor as few. This is the way the skeptical and the anti-skeptical problems about the reality of the external world can be completely dissolved, I hope, as a kind of linguistic-conceptual philosophical bewilderment.

9. The Argument from Ignorance Concerning our Past Reality

A similar argument from ignorance can be applied to restricted forms of skepticism, like that about the past. Consider Bertrand Russell's remark that it is possible that our whole world and ourselves, with all our memories, were created five minutes ago.[28] Can we know that this hypothesis is false? Apparently not. In this case, how can we know whether anything was the case before these five minutes? The argument from ignorance concerning the past can be stated as follows:

III

1 If I know that the French revolution occurred in 1789, then I know that the world existed before five minutes ago.

2 I do not know whether the world existed before five minutes ago.

[27] Until this point I agree with Charles Landesman's defense of G. E. Moore in his (2002), chap. 9-11.
[28] See Bertrand Russell (1989), lecture 9.

3 Therefore: I do not know whether the French revolution occurred in 1789. (1, 2 MT)[29]

Our answer to this skeptical argument is like the others. We need to distinguish between two senses of our attributions of reality to a past occurrence. The first is an *inherent* sense, which depends on the insertion of our past occurrence in our historical framework. In this sense I can claim to know that the French revolution really occurred in 1789, because of documentary evidence that remits us to the inherent reality of this past historical occurrence. What allows this claim is once again an extended application of our standard criteria for external reality, this time applied to the past. The criteria for the inherent reality of historical occurrences are evidences of memory, testimony, documentary and physical historical evidences, etc. But as such they are *criteria of criteria*, because they work as indirect ways to warrant that the past was real in the inherent sense, that is, that the past occurrence would satisfy our usual inherent criteria of reality (like the highest intensity of experience, independence of will, intersubjectivity, etc.) for observers like us placed in the past. Indeed, to say that the French revolution occurred in 1789 amounts to the same as to say that the historical evidence shows that if observers like us were living in the right time and places, we could experience the satisfaction of the usual criteria for external reality concerning the events that constituted the French revolution.

However, there is another sense of real existence, which is adherent. This sense is external to our historical framework and could only arise in the context of a skeptical hypothesis. Let us suppose, for example, that God created us and the whole world five minutes ago, with all our memories and forged historical evidences. In this adherent attribution of reality, we cannot really know, neither that the world existed before five minutes ago nor that the French Revolution really occurred in 1789. Indeed, in the adherent sense there is no way to achieve a knowledge of the ultimate reality of the past, except a relative one, in this case we have the unexpected evidences for the truth of the skeptical hypothesis, which makes the occurrences of the last five minutes the (adherently) real ones.

[29] Certainly, we can construct an anti-skeptic *modus ponens* counterpart of this argument too, which is correspondingly equivocal.

The clue for answering the skeptics is the same here: the skeptical argument is an attempt to confuse us, sliding equivocally from our ignorance of the adherent reality of our past to the ignorance of the inherent reality of historical occurrences as a conclusion. What follows is the most natural interpretation of the argument (because it seems sound and informative), when reconstructed in a way that exposes its equivocal character:

III-a

1 If I know that the French revolution *really* occurred in 1789 (in the *adherent* sense of *reality*), then I know that the world was (*adherently*) *real* before five minutes ago.
2 I do not know whether the world was (*adherently*) *real* before five minutes ago.
3 Therefore: I do not know whether the French revolution *really* occurred in 1789 (in the *inherent* sense of reality). (1, 2 MT)

For the soundness of the argument true premises, dealing with adherent senses of reality, were chosen. But we cannot really apply the *modus tollens* to them in order to get the conclusion because the sense of our attribution of reality in the conclusion is different from the sense of this attribution in the premises, which makes the conclusion equivocal. Moreover, the argument would remain equivocal in the case we understand the senses of reality in the first premise as inherent. And although the argument would be sound and unequivocal if all the attributions of reality were understood as adherent, the conclusion would be trivial, for we do not need any argument to be aware that we cannot ultimately know that the French revolution occurred in 1789.

10. Why the Principle of Closure Seems to be Endangered

Sometimes the problem we have dealt with is abbreviated to form three statements composing an inconsistent set:

(1) Kp,

(2) $K(p \rightarrow \sim h)$,

(3) $\sim K \sim h$.

This is paradoxical because although each of the three statements seems to be true, one of them must be always false. So, the skeptical denies (1) since he accepts $\sim K \sim h$, which with $K(p \rightarrow \sim h)$ entails $\sim Kp$. The anti-skeptic denies (3) since he accepts Kp, which with $K(p \rightarrow \sim h)$ entails $K \sim h$. There are also more neutral philosophers who reject the link (2) in order to accept (1) and (3).These philosophers do this by rejecting the principle of closure under known entailment, which says that "$Kp \ \& \ K(p \rightarrow q) \vdash Kq$". Since the principle of closure is intuitive, and since $K(p \rightarrow q)$ seems to be the same as $(Kp \rightarrow Kq)$, so that the principle turns out to be "$Kp \ \& \ (Kp \rightarrow Kq) \vdash Kq$", which seems not only intuitive but also obvious, the rejection of this principle is a high price to be paid.[30]

By submitting this paradox to our analysis of the kinds of attributions of reality, our conclusion is that the three statements can be true without the impairment of the principle of closure. The argument is the following. Based on our analysis, the first statement, Kp, is true only when understood as attributing *inherent* reality to what p asserts. The third statement, $\sim K \sim h$, is true when understood as concerning lack of knowledge of the ultimate adherent reality of the world considered by h. The second statement, $K(p \rightarrow \sim h)$, would be true when the reality of the antecedent and the consequent were both seen as adherent. This is shown by the following instantiation:

(1') I know that I have two *inherently real* hands.

(2') I know that if I have two *adherently real* hands, then I am not an *adherently real* brain in a vat.

(3') I don't know whether I am not an *adherently real* brain in a vat.

[30] The validity of the principle of epistemic closure was challenged by some non-skeptic arguments, particularly those of Robert Nozick (1981: 240-5), and Fred Dretske (1970). My treatment of the skeptical problem lets this principle untouched.

We can from (2') and (3') conclude (4'), "I don't know whether I have two adherently real hands". Nonetheless, since from this it does not result in the denial of (1') nor the denial of (3'), the set is not only formed by true statements, but is a consistent one.

If our argument is correct, then the contemporary forms of the skeptical and anti-skeptical arguments about our knowledge of the external world only seem to make sense, not because of lack of logical syntax, but because this syntax is used without enough semantic and pragmatic reflection.

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