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The Dreamer Awakes: Semantic and Metaphysical Presuppositions
in Skepticism about Knowledge of the External World

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ABSTRACT

The Dreamer Awakes: Semantic and Metaphysical Presuppositions
in Skepticism about Knowledge of the External World

Edmund William Coates

Barry Stroud sees global skepticism, in regard to our
knowledge of the external world, as a threat to the claims of
modern epistemology. An exchange between Susan Haack and
Richard Rorty illustrates the situation of contemporary
epistemology. For Michael Williams, the skeptic trades on
presuppositions of traditional epistemology; we can avoid the
skeptic by adopting contextualism. Williams is, in turn,
countered by Ron Wilburn. Wilburn argues for a cross-
contextual structure of second-order beliefs, a structure
that would support the skeptic. An argument of G.E.Moore's
leads to reflection on the contingency of the special
authority we have over our beliefs about our experience.

For Hilary Putnam, the skeptic trades on presuppositions in
the theory of reference. Drawing an alternative account of
reference from Ludwig Wittgenstein's work, Putnam refutes a
standard skeptical thought-experiment. Putnam focuses on the
contemporary version of this skeptical scenario, that
describes a world made-up of brains in a vat. Jane McIntyre
argues against Putnam's refutation. McIntyre's argument
fails, as does Paul Coppock's attempt to counter Putnam's
refutation by means of a parody. Still, Putnam's success is
limited. He leaves the skeptic clear avenues to continue her
attacks.

In gratitude to my parents

Edmund William Coates

Micheline (Lapointe) Coates

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INTRODUCTION

The skeptic claims to base her attacks on our own descriptions of our intellectual and practical enterprises. As thinkers engage in an activity, they formulate descriptions of the activity, its products, and its wider consequences. We value such knowledge for its own sake. As well, morality demands that we seek a measure of perspective regarding our actions in the world and our relations with others. Finally, these descriptions allow us to act more effectively (for example, as we grasp the principles of an art or craft). The skeptic argues that either our descriptions are wrong or we fail to achieve the results that we claim for our enterprises.

Global skepticism as to our knowledge of the external world was a key opponent at the birth of modern epistemology (most famously in Descartes) and continues to threaten epistemology today. To progress, the epistemologist must either refute the skeptic's threat, or show that what seems to be a threat is in fact irrelevant to the fulfilment of epistemology's ambitions. This thesis reviews a number of philosophical reponses to the global skeptic and finds them all wanting. So long as we are without an answer to the skeptic, our self-descriptions and our enterprises lie under threat. However, the progressive exchanges with the skeptic suggest which types of answers might be fruitful; just as the encounter with the skeptic refines our accounts of mind, reference, experience, and epistemic authority.

The thesis's first chapter has five sections. The first

section uses an exchange between Susan Haack and Richard Rorty to illustrate the instability in contemporary epistemology which gives continuing relevance to the skeptic's questions. The second section examines Barry Stroud's argument for the significance of skepticism. The third section examines Michael Williams' contextualist answer to the skeptic. The fourth section reviews the foundationalism, of second-order experiential beliefs, with which Roy Wilburn seeks to counter the contextualist and reinvigorate the skeptic. The conclusion of the first chapter examines weaknesses in the cross-contextual structure that Wilburn needs to find among the second-order beliefs. Notably, this structure, and the resulting cohesiveness of the second-order beliefs, would give the skeptic a privileged position; a perch from which to question the legitimacy of our claims to knowledge of the external world. Wilburn overlooks how the purportedly stable structure, on which the privilege of the second-order beliefs would rely, builds on the sand of the first-order beliefs. Reacting to an argument by G.E.Moore, the first chapter reflects on the contingency of the special authority we have over our beliefs about our experience. This reflection prepares the way for the second chapter's attack on a key skeptical presupposition (the skeptic's presupposition that the content of our beliefs can stay unchanged despite change in the nature of the external world).

The thesis's second chapter has three sections, preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. This chapter

examines Hilary Putnam's refutation of global skepticism as
to our knowledge of the external world. The introduction sets
the stage, by examining the lessons Putnam draws from
verificationism. Notably, Putnam draws his attention to
practice from the classical pragmatists' and logical
positivists' verificationism.

In order to explain skepticism, as well as to show the
plausibility of skeptical doubts, the skeptic typically
relies on thought-experiments. These hypotheses sketch a
situation wherein an erstwhile knower draws her supposed
perceptions of the external world from a ground which
actually has a character radically different from the
character she takes the ground to have. Where an evil demon
wreaks a massive deception on Descartes' mind, the
contemporary skeptic pictures a computer stimulating a brain
in a vat.

The first section of the second chapter sets out Putnam's
version of the vat hypothesis, then the section responds to
Paul Coppock, who denies that Putnam's brains-in-vats count
as thinkers. Coppock fails to establish his denial. Even were
the Coppock right, Putnam would still be entitled to dismiss
the skeptic.

The second chapter's second section reviews the accusation of
incoherence which Putnam levels at the skeptic's hypothesis.
The section's axis is Putnam's case against what he terms
magical theories of reference. This case proves key in

Putnam's attack on brains-in-vat based skepticism. In particular, Putnam uses a thought-experiment to free his reader from the notion that an image (whether mental or external) will necessarily refer to a particular object or property. Then, Putnam draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein for a practical, dispositional account of concepts. Putnam uses this account as the basis for the theory of reference which he proposes as a replacement for the magical theory.

The third section of the second chapter criticises a classic response to Putnam (a response exemplified by Jane McIntyre). Finally, the section reviews Paul Coppock's attempted parody of Putnam's argument and the section explains why the parody fails.

The thesis's conclusion shows why Putnam's success is limited. He leaves the skeptic enough room to continue her attacks.

CHAPTER ONE

The Skeptic's Question

1.0 Analytic Epistemology and Irony

Susan Haack criticises Richard Rorty's repudiation of analytical epistemology in her 1995 paper "Vulgar Pragmatism: An Unedifying Prospect."[1] When Haack condemns Rorty's views as first relativist, then tribalist and cynical, she relies on our being able to give content to the idea of non-epistemic truth, as she relies on the postulation of such truth as the underwriter of justification. Rorty replies to Haack by questioning her assumptions relating to truth and by examining a part of her own epistemology. After reviewing the exchange between Haack and Rorty, we will see that both the analytic epistemology represented by Haack and the repudiation of analytic epistemology represented by Rorty leave us with unanswered questions. These very questions will be sharpened by the challenges of the external world skeptic, as voiced by Barry Stroud in the following section. The skeptic continues to threaten central claims of modern epistemology

Haack makes three charges against Rorty: he ignores the fact that our believing something means we take it to be true; while he rejects the notion that we properly assess our canons for warranted belief by the extent to which these canons lead us to the truth, he also fails to give us sound arguments for this rejection; and finally he presents us with

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[1] in <u>Rorty and Pragmatism</u>. ed Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press. 1995. 126-147.

an unedifying role for the ex-epistemologist.[2] According to Haack, Rorty's rejection of epistemology is based on a false dichotomy, one which presents what is in fact a nuanced question as a stark choice between either accepting a certain type of foundationalism or abandoning epistemology in favour of Rortian irony.[3]

Rorty sees analytic epistemology's foundationalist project as wrong-headed. The project's fruitless character is revealed by the work of W.O.Quine and Wilfrid Sellars. Sellars punctures the "myth of the given" (according to which we can appeal to causal foundations in our justifications). Quine shows that we do not even have a clear explication of what knowledge based entirely on meanings, on conceptual grounds, or on the analytic might be. Sellars and Quine would accordingly cut off the avenues by which we could claim to have basic beliefs, beliefs serving as the Archimedian point which grounds the justification of the rest of our belief systems.[4]

Haack gives short shrift to the criticisms in which Rorty underlines the historical contingency of our epistemological questions, just as she dismisses the criticisms he bases upon the dominance of certain metaphors in our epistemological discussions. She says that, at best, these arguments show that our present approach to the questions of knowledge and

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[2] Ibid., 139.
[3] Ibid., 127.
[4] Ibid., 129.

truth is not the only choice. When Rorty shows that we need not conceive of the questions of epistemology in one particular way, he falls far from demonstrating that our way of conceiving the issues is wrong-headed.[5]

Haack clarifies Rorty's relationship to foundationalism when she distinguishes between three types of foundationalism.[6] She grants that two types of foundationalism are fatally flawed, although flawed for reasons other than those brought to bear by Rorty. Haack dismisses the foundationalist who grounds justification of our belief-sets on the purported certainty of beliefs which are the direct product of experience; as she dismisses the foundationalist who would derive the canons of warrant and truth purely via conceptual analysis. But Haack argues that Rorty leaves unscathed the foundationalists who tie justification to a notion of truth beyond mere subjectivity and convention.

Haack then lays out a spectrum of philosophical conceptions of truth: from the absolutist realism of the "grandly transcendental," to Peircean pragmatism's "truth at the end of enquiry," to the irrealist extreme of Rorty's "what you can defend against all comers".[7] By flagging six points along the spectrum of theories of truth, Haack means to remind us that there are at least four alternatives more moderate than the extremes Rorty presents us with in his false dichotomy.

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[5] Ibid., 130.

[6] Ibid., 130.

[7] Ibid., 133.

She denies that Rorty argues effectively against any of these other four descriptions of truth, even though his attack on foundationalism relies on our not considering these alternatives.

For Haack, once we realise that Rorty's view is not the only path open to the epistemologist, we need only consider the post-epistemological future Rorty sketches to see that epistemology remains a desirable part of our intellectual practice. After the demise of epistemology, Rorty sees us as participating in what amounts to the "mutual incomprehension" of discoursing communities, and to thorough-going cynicism in relation to truth.[8] Haack denounces Rorty's view as a contextualism which combines with conventionalism, leading to "tribalism".[9] What prospect could be less appetising when, aside from Rorty's position, we can still choose among coherentist, foundherentist, and foundationalist alternatives?

For Haack, contextualists hold us to be justified in a belief whenever we believe the belief in conformity with the norms of the "epistemic community" of which we are a part.[10] Conventionalists claim that no epistemic community is closer to the truth than another: they reject as nonsensical the

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[8] Ibid., 139.

[9] Ibid, 137. "Tribalism" is Haack's term, Rorty himself calls his approach "anti-anti-ethnocentrism", c.f., "On ethnocentrism" in: Rorty, Richard. Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1991. 203-210.

[10] Ibid., 134.

very idea of our ranking epistemic communities in terms of the truth-indicativeness of their epistemic practice. Accordingly, there is a close tie between Rorty's contextualism and his conventionalism. Contextualism is a rational choice when epistemic communities both vary in terms of their epistemic norms and have no set of norms among them which have a closer relation to the truth than any other epistemic community's norms.[11]

It is from such conventionalism that Rorty's relativism as well as his cynicism would flow. Rorty's relativism is the natural corollary to a conventionalism which takes, as of equal merit, the claims that all and any epistemic communities make to truth. Rorty's cynicism follows from the fact that, as Haack puts it, "One cannot coherently engage fully - non-cynically - in a practice of justifying beliefs that one regards as wholly conventional. For to believe that p is to accept p as true".[12] Since Haack believes that there are plausible alternatives to Rorty's concept of truth, she argues that these other standpoints allow us to see Rorty as completely detaching our choice of a belief from the truth of the belief.

Haack acknowledges that, of late, Rorty has clarified his position. With his "tribalism" Rorty suggests we hew to the standards of our particular epistemic community, as justificatory, without in turn attempting to justify these

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[11] Ibid., 135.
[12] Ibid., 136.

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standards. While which epistemic community we find ourselves
a part of is a contingent matter, nevertheless we are
justified when we believe in conformity with our community's
norms. Any further questions of relatedness to truth are
beside the point.[13] Here, Haack suggests, Rorty is too quick
off the mark: tribalism is only rational when we can justify
the epistemic, truth-indicative superiority of our tribe's
practice. Since Rorty's conventionalism forbids him from
presenting us with such a justification in favour of his
tribalism, Haack asks whether he has become not only cynical
but also incoherent in his views.[14]

Rorty centres his reply[15] to Haack on her concerns about how
the norms of an epistemic community relate to truth. He
begins by citing the way Haack criticises epistemological
reliabilism in her book <u>Evidence and Inquiry</u>[16] . Reliabilists
would have justification depend upon the presence of the
right objective conditions, conditions whose holding is
perhaps unknown or even unknowable by the person whose
knowledge these conditions underwrite. In her book, Haack
insists that the norms by which we justify our beliefs should
precisely be those norms which we presume lead to the truth:
norms we can know are satisfied. Rorty answers that if we so

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[13] Ibid., 138.

[14] Ibid., 137.

[15] "Response to Haack" in <u>Rorty and Pragmatism</u>. ed Herman J.
Saatkamp Jr. Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University
Press. 1995. 148-153. Hereinafter, "Response".

[16] Haack, Susan. <u>Evidence and Inquiry: Towards
Reconstruction in Epistemology</u>. Cambridge, MA:
Blackwell. 1993.

pen justification within our circle of ideas, we cannot find norms for truth beyond our norms for justification.[17]

Rorty then enumerates three uses he recognises of the term "true".[18] First comes the cautionary use, such as in the phrase "fully concordant with our justificatory norms, but perhaps not true." This use puts us on notice that further evidence or sharpened criteria may well be in the offing: factors which could alter our judgment of a statement's acceptability. Second comes our use of true as an endorsement of a statement. When we say that what the Pope has said is true, we mean, at least in part that we agree with what the Pope said. Third comes the disquotational account of truth, by which the statement " 'violets are blue' is true" corresponds to our asserting "violets are blue."

Rorty argues that none of these uses of "true" licence the epistemologist to stand in judgment over an epistemic community's standards.[19] While analytic epistemologists often claim to apprehend another aspect to the concept of truth, Rorty himself admits ignorance in relation to any additional kind of truth, a truth which would justify Haack's reproaches. In fact, he warns us that when we imagine such an "extra" property belongs to the term "truth" we open the door to the skeptic. The skeptic can then ask us how we know that our epistemic practice leads us to truth.

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[17] "Response", 149.
[18] Ibid., 150.
[19] Ibid., 151.

While Rorty aims to lead us past skeptical questions, one of his types of truth in particular, disquotational truth, offers the skeptic a useful tool. As Quine shows,[20] disquotational truth allows us to gather up whole collections of statements, propositions, or beliefs. For example, by filling in disquotational truth's quotation appropriately, we can affirm everything that someone has said. In this way, we say of this set of statements that each is true, we affirm each statement of the set, without needing to list, know, or understand the statements. Armed with such a generalising device, the skeptic can probe deeper, more quickly, in particular demanding a justification from us for our thinking the gathered collection of beliefs is even coherent. When a justification is not forth-coming, the skeptic then can ask why a set, whose coherence is in question, can, by our own standards, count as at all meaningful. Thus begins again the perennial round. As the ancient skeptics observed, the thrust of any assertion can be turned against itself simply by asking the assertion's basis. The basis is either a dogmatic assertion without further warrant, or an infinite regression, or a circular argument. Disquotational truth moves this process from the retail to the wholesale level. Thus, disquotational truth in no way exempts Rorty from wrestling with the skeptic.

Rorty then discusses Haack's view of "justificatory

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[20] C.f., <u>Philosophy of Logic</u>. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall. 1970. 11.

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practices" as expressed in her <u>Evidence and Inquiry</u>.[21] There, Haack distinguishes between "background beliefs" and "standards of evidence." Rorty sees her as neglecting what should be the centre of interest, when she argues that epistemology is the examination of our standards of evidence, not examination of the beliefs which govern what we count as relevant in our assessment of other beliefs. For Rorty, we cannot help but weigh our beliefs with our standards of evidence: talk of truth as our motivating goal is out of place. What interests him are the background beliefs which govern what we take to be relevant in our assessments.

Rorty concludes by conceding that he prefers epistemic communities with which he shares more background beliefs to those communities with which he shares fewer background beliefs[22] (what Haack labels as Rorty's tribalism.) He also concedes that he accords equal validity to the standards of evidence of each and every epistemic community; but says his concession means he agrees with Haack when she says in her book that all epistemic communities have ultimately the same standards of evidence.

The exchange between Rorty and Haack turns on the characterisation of truth. Haack's critique relies on the availability of coherent, plausible alternatives to the Rortian version of truth. Rorty's rejection of analytic epistemology relies on his denial that our concepts of truth

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[21] Supra, footnote 16.
[22] "Response", 153.

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permit us to make sense of what it would be to take up an objective standpoint; he denies there is a reality independent of the particular conceptual choices of our epistemic community.

Both Rorty and Haack are remiss. Haack is remiss in merely listing accounts of truth which might rescue epistemology, without defending any account in particular, and without explaining how any of the non-Rortian accounts allow us to escape the threat skepticism poses to foundationalism, coherentism, and foundherentism. As for Rorty, the types of applications to which he restricts the predicate "true" do not shield him from the skeptic's questions. Even if we give up our "realistic intuitions" of "accurate representation,"[23] in favour of the standards of a particular epistemic community, the questions arise of: 1.) whether we are at any given moment faithful to those standards (even by the standard of those standards), 2.) whether the standards are consistent, and 3.) whether what we take to be an epistemic community is in fact a community, and not simply a delusive solipsism. All these questions may have answers but Rorty's waving away of an "extra" element to truth hardly counts as an answer.

In sum, we see that both Haack's thrust and Rorty's counterthrust fall short. Before accepting a Rorty's solution, which is tantamount to swallowing either skepticism or circularity, we should first ask whether there might not

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[23] Ibid., 150.

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be a viable alternative, one available without even leaving neo-pragmatism. Chapter two probes Putnam's effort to satisfy our epistemological scruples while escaping the strictures of those, like Haack, who remain rooted in philosophy's traditions. The rest of the present chapter explores the thrusts and counterthrusts of the contemporary skeptical dialectic.

2.0 Stroud's Skeptical Dilemma

Barry Stroud is among the leading contemporary students of skepticism. Stroud addresses his paper "Understanding Human Knowledge in General"[24] to the many contemporary philosophers who presume that the theory of knowledge is well advanced, and who thus ignore skeptical problems. The paper argues that the traditional epistemologist in fact seems destined to remain ever dissatisfied.[25] The traditional epistemologist asks how we have any knowledge within entire domains (such as the domain of our knowledge of the external world), and she seeks to give an answer supported by reasons. We would expect that any relevant reasons must come from the domain she is explaining. Yet, her question's generality bars her from appealing to knowledge within the domain, to justify her account of the nature and genesis of the knowledge she has of the targeted domain; the very terms of her project seem to bar her from the reasons she seeks. Thus starts a regress: to

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[24] Stroud, Barry. "Understanding Human Knowledge in General" in Knowledge and Skepticism. ed Marjorie Clay and Keith Lehrer. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press. 1989. 31-50. Hereinafter "Understanding".

[25] Ibid., 31.

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know, we would need to know that we know; to know that we know, we would need to know that we know that we know; ... .[26] Externalism avoids internalism's regress by replacing the first-person's standpoint of internalism with a third-person's standpoint. But this third-person's standpoint blocks us from a reasoned, general, understanding of our knowledge.[27]   Externalism seems to avoid regress by conceeding to the skeptic the futility of traditional epistemology's goals.

Traditional epistemologists often propose relations of epistemic priority between domains of knowledge. Knowledge of some domains (as well as the modes of perception or inference proper to the domains) would be more basic than others, and would support our knowledge of the other domains. But to reasonably accept the claimed relations of epistemic priority, we would first need knowledge of the domain with purportedly less priority.[28] We reasonably infer from evidence in a domain, to knowledge in domains beyond that evidence, only by presuming to use knowledge from the targeted domain to ground our inferences (at minimum, we need knowledge of which sorts of inferences will succeed). Kantians claim an a priori basis for the epistemic principles they propose. However, they are hard-pressed to justify their confidence in these a priori principles, and to explain how

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[26] Ibid., 38.
[27] Ibid., 48.
[28] Ibid., 34.

the principles might relate to our experience.[29]

Externalists argue that the internalist's assumption that, to have knowledge, we must know what we know, dooms internalism to failure. Thus, externalism claims that an account of how we know suffices as an epistemology. We see examples of this externalist impulse in philosophers such as Russell and Chisholm, who propose rational reconstructions of the principles we would be relying on, if in fact we have the knowledge we take ourselves to have. But these reconstructions remain hypothetical: they do not show that we do have the knowledge we believe ourselves to have.[30]

The interplay, between two classic objections to the epistemology of Descartes' Meditations[31] , highlights a generalised shortcoming of externalism. For Stroud, contemporary scientific externalists are no better placed to understand their own knowledge than are Cartesian theological externalists, and both types of externalist are in unsatisfactory positions as epistemologists.[32] Descartes claims that God created our perceptual and cognitive faculties. Since God, in her infinite goodness, is not a deceiver, the clear and distinct perceptions of these faculties reveal to us the truth about the world. Thus, to know about the world, we need only believe in God and attend

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[29] Ibid., 38.

[30] Ibid., 37.

[31] Descartes, Réné. Meditations. trans Laurence J. Lafleur. New York: The Liberal Arts Press. 1951.

[32] "Understanding", supra footnote 24. 45.

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to the quality of our perceptions.

The externalist objects when Descartes assumes that we must know we know, in order to know. From the externalist's point of view, that God creates our faculties as reliable would suffice for our faculties to yield knowledge, regardless of our particular religious beliefs or disbelief.[33] A second objector accuses Descartes' argument of circularity. Descartes knows of God's existence and goodness because Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives (the premises and steps of his proofs of) God's existence and goodness. But Descartes draws his assurance, that clear and distinct perceptions yield knowledge, from his confidence that God exists and is good.[34] Here lies the incompatibility between the first and second objections. As the externalist affirms, we may know without our knowing how we know or even that we know. Thus, externalism must deny that circularity impairs the authority of Descartes' theory. The theory's authority would depend on the truth in fact of God's existence and goodness. As an externalist, the Cartesian even has an advantage over a generic reliabilist, in that the Cartesian gives a specific account of how our beliefs are reliably produced.[35]

Stroud asks what might drive a philosopher to reject externalised Cartesianism (other than a disbelief of

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[33] Ibid., 41.

[34] Ibid., 42.

[35] Ibid., 43.

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Descartes' premises which would be due to the philosopher's preexisting atheism or agnosticism).[36] Externalised Cartesianism describes a situation where we would know most of what we now think we know, but one where we would have no reason to believe that the epistemic situation described by the Cartesian obtained. In this regard, either the contemporary scientific externalist or the Cartesian theological externalist succeeds in explaining her knowledge, so long as her explanation of her knowledge acquisition process is true. If her explanation is false, she neither explains her knowledge, nor does she have any good reason to believe that her explanation is true, not even what externalism would term a good reason.[37] (Presumably, a good reason, to an externalist, would be a reasonable belief which accords with the the way the world is.) This problem of accessible reasons fuels Stroud's dissatisfaction with externalism. Traditional epistemology asks for the reasons supporting an account of knowledge, the reasons which prove the skeptic wrong. Traditional epistemologists seek to understand how we know, and "having an explanation of something [,] in the sense of understanding it [,] is a matter of having good reason to accept something that would be an explanation if it were true".[38] Whether the externalist gives a true or false explanation, she "cannot see or understand [herself] as knowing or having good reason to

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[36] Ibid., 44.
[37] Ibid., 46.
[38] Ibid., 44.

believe what her theory says".[39] A natural reading of the preceding quote replaces "see or understand" with "know" and reads Stroud as denying the externalist can know herself as knowing, or know herself as having good reason to believe, what her theory describes.

The externalist may counter that her theory's justification of first order knowledge sets the pattern which will licence higher-order levels of knowledge (knowing that one knows, knowing that one knows that one knows, ...).[40] But, Stroud replies, externalism will still lack an element which is crucial to full epistemological understanding. In effect, the externalist says: "I don't know whether I understand human knowledge or not. If what I believe about it is true and my beliefs about it are produced in what my theory says is the right way, I do know how human knowledge comes to be, so in that sense I do understand. But if my beliefs are not true, or not arrived at in that way, I do not. I wonder which it is. I wonder whether I understand human knowledge or not."[41] The skeptic takes a favoured position when she questions our assertions of knowledge, since the logic of argument puts the onus on the person who makes a claim, to justify their claim. The skeptic wins ties, and Stroud's dilemma between traditional epistemology and externalism seems to leave us, at best, in a tie with the skeptic.

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[39] Ibid., 46.
[40] Ibid., 47.
[41] Ibid., 47.

2.1 Williams's Contextualist Rejoinder

In "Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism",[42] Michael Williams challenges the apparent inevitability of external world skepticism and the consequent pessimism spread by Stroud, Peter Strawson and Thomas Nagel. For Stroud, the only live option to counter the skeptic would be for us to show that the skeptic is only apparently intelligible. Nagel closes even this avenue; he takes the intelligibility and straightforwardness of skepticism as rendering implausible the recondite theories of language or metaphysics set-up against the skeptic.[43] Strawson's naturalism yields the plane of theory to the skeptic; he grants that arational factors sustain our continuing belief in an external world. For Stroud, the skeptic bases her arguments on nothing more than platitudes that we naturally grant, such as the objectivity of the world. Stroud sees a stark choice between holding to our platitudes (thereby expressly conceding to the skeptic) or giving up some of our conception of objectivity (thereby implicitly conceeding to the skeptic). Williams answers that so long as we have contextualism as an alternative to the epistemological realism which supports skepticism, we need not attribute any more authority to the traditional epistemological project than to any of our other types of

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[42] Williams, Michael. "Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism". Mind vol XCVII no 387 (July 1988). 415-439. Hereinafter, "Basis".
[43] Ibid., 416.

inquiries.[44] The existence of the contextualist option counters the traditional project's claim to ground the other types of inquiry.[45]

For Williams, the platitudes which generate skepticism conceal dispensable foundationalist assumptions. We would answer the skeptic by bringing to light skepticism's constant reliance on foundationalism and epistemological realism. In fact, revealing the skeptical results that the foundationalism and epistemological realism permit should discredit both positions.[46] (The skeptic may reply that Williams reverses the true relation of reliance, that we try to avoid skepticism through foundationalism. Once we are forced to foundationalism, the skeptic's defeat of the foundationalist would leave us with no way out.)

Williams argues that "foundationalism emerges out of a skeptical assessment of our knowledge of the world only in the way the rabbit emerges out of the conjurer's hat."[47] According to foundationalism, a basic rank of beliefs we arrive at directly (i.e., experience), supports the other

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[44] Ibid., 438.

[45] Contextualism avoids difficulties that plague other approaches, but at the cost of raising its own difficulties. As a form of externalism, contextualism argues that we can know, so long as the conditions for our knowledge are fulfilled. Thus, we would not generally need to know that we know, in order to qualify as knowing a fact. Externalists thereby concede to the skeptic that we may well not know any of the things which we take ourselves to know.

[46] "Basis", supra, footnote 42. 418.

[47] Ibid., 422.

ranks of our beliefs, thanks to various lengths of inference.[48] A belief's content determines the belief's epistemic rank, the belief's "natural epistemic kind".[49] The idea of natural epistemic kinds springs from the foundationalist's "epistemological realism", her view that the beliefs which make-up our knowledge stand in a structure which is fully objective, and thus which is independent of our particular projects, goals or interests.[50] The foundationalist's commitment to epistemological realism, and to natural epistemic kinds, readily leads to skepticism. (For instance, we seem incapable of giving a general justification for our inferences, from our experience, to facts about the external world).[51] Yet, that skepticism follows readily from foundationalism, hardly shows that foundationalism is a necessary presupposition of skepticism. Skepticism might flow from our knowledge claims about physical objects being naturally more vulnerable as compared to our knowledge claims about our experience.[52]

The skeptic claims to use two steps to analyse a kind of knowledge. First, she shows that we need a foundation beyond that knowledge kind, on which we can justify any knowledge we have within that kind. Second, she shows that the foundation we need is inaccessible. In response to this skeptical tactic we either reply to the skeptic's undermining of

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[48] Ibid., 419.
[49] Ibid., 419.
[50] Ibid., 420.
[51] Ibid., 421.
[52] Ibid., 421.

foundationalism, or reply to the skeptic's prior argument that foundationalism offers the sole prospect to justify that kind of knowledge which the skeptic questions.[53] If we overlook skepticism's foundationalist presuppositions, we restrict ourselves either to conceeding to the skeptic, or to the implausible course of questioning the intelligibility of skepticism. Showing that skepticism presupposes foundationalism, allows us to dismiss both foundationalist and skeptic, in favour of one of the alternatives to foundationalism (Williams himself supports contextualism).

Williams looks in turn at three elements of the traditional epistemologist's project which drive her to skepticism: detachment, totality, and objectivity. The traditional epistemologist seeks "a _detached_ examination of the _totality_ of our knowledge of an _objective_ world".[54] So long as we could point to examples of external world knowledge, we could hardly be vexed by the general problem of whether we had knowledge of the external world. But the totality condition blocks the traditional epistemologist from appealing to any knowledge of the external world to justify any other knowledge of the external world. The totality condition arises in two steps. First, the traditional epistemologist, as an epistemological realist, assumes that her term "our knowledge of the external world" designates a theoretically significant kind, a kind which exists naturally and which

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[53] Ibid., 422.
[54] Ibid., 423.

awaits our assessment.[55] Second, the traditional epistemologist, in accord with foundationalism, assumes that her generalised scrutiny, of the tie of our knowledge of the external world to experience, assesses the justification of our individual external world beliefs. The traditional epistemologist values her project because she believes that "our knowledge of the external world" is a theoretically significant kind.[56] Yet a specific context characterises a knowledge claim, a context which typically sets the standard for what evidence will justify the claim. If the context governs what will count as evidence, governs what will count as relevant to a justification, then we should expect that our knowledge claims will be deprived of justification by the traditional epistemologist's divorce of justification from context. The skeptic's conclusions would be an artifact of peculiar demands. The epistemological realist hopes to use the bare content of each of our knowledge claims to place the claim in a natural order, in an unchanging hierarchy of justificational relations. Epistemological realism would be guilty of forgetting that propositions gain their epistemological status in a context, a background woven by the standards and goals of a particular type of investigation.[57]

The next element of the traditional view is the traditional

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[55] Ibid., 423.
[56] Ibid., 424.
[57] Ibid., 426.

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epistemologist's yearning for detachment.[58] Detachment may simply mean the imposition of the totality condition on knowledge claims, or the idea of detachment may arise from the contrast between investigations limited by pragmatic constraints (time, energy, expense) and investigations which are freed of pragmatic constraint, guided purely by the demands of theory. The second view, of detachment as a release from pragmatic constraints, allows the skeptic to counter the relevant alternatives account of knowledge.[59] The skeptic claims that much of what we term knowledge may in fact just count as knowledge for all practical purposes. The skeptic's assay would expose our erstwhile knowledge of the external world as beliefs which are well grounded enough for everyday purposes, but which are not well grounded enough to count as knowledge, when we suspend the pragmatic restrictions on our epistemological assessments.

The skeptic explains, as a mere concession to practicality, our usual restriction, on demands for justification, to counter-possibilities which are relevant to the type of inquiry which generated the knowledge claim.[60] The skeptic presents her doubts as natural, and not as the artifact of special theoretical presuppositions, thanks to the notion of a permanent order of justification, an order which underlies our everyday justifications despite our pragmatic

[58] Ibid., 426.

[59] E.g., Austin, J.L. "Other Minds" in his <u>Philosophical Papers</u>. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1961. 44-84.

[60] "Basis", supra, footnote 42. 427.

compromises.[61]   But we need not grant the skeptic the
epistemological realism with which she defends her severe
demands on justification. We needlessly yield quarter to the
skeptic, when we grant that the skeptic is simply applying
our usual criteria for knowledge at full strength, unhampered
by pragmatic limits. We presuppose epistemological realism
when we suppose that we can possibly apply our usual criteria
for knowledge at what the skeptic sees as "full strength",
that is, without the framework of practice. As a
contextualist, Williams opposes epistemological realism by
reminding us that "specific forms of enquiry have a
characteristic direction, a structure determined by what
counts as a relevant possibility of error."[62]   A form of
inquiry would decide what we could appropriately question, as
the form shapes our challenges to the knowledge claims that
it generates. The traditional epistemological project would
be a form of inquiry among others, rather than the most
basic. The findings of the traditional epistemologist would
not endanger the findings of the forms of inquiry shaped by
different standards.

The third element of the traditional view is the traditional
epistemologist's desire for objectivity in our knowledge (yet
another child of epistemological realism).[63]   Williams insists
that we can never derive a purely epistemological claim from
logical or metaphysical propositions, citing Hume's more

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[61] Ibid., 428.

[62] Ibid., 428.

[63] Ibid., 429.

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general argument, which blocks us from deriving evaluative claims from propositions about the state of the world.[64] For Williams, realism centres on the idea of truth as radically non-epistemic, on the distinction between beliefs about the external world and the way the world is in fact. Realists are often fallibilists, holding that whatever the weight of evidence for a belief about the external world, the belief may still be false.[65] Williams suggests that while realism accords with fallibilism, we cannot derive fallibilism from realism. (Presumably, Williams sees that realism only requires the world's independence from determination by our beliefs; an independence which leaves room, at least in theory, for a uniform relation of determination running in the other direction, from the world to our beliefs).[66] Neither can we derive skepticism from fallibilism, the fallibilist admits that any given belief of hers about the the external world might be mistaken, but she need not, by that admission, commit to the skeptic's claim that we have no reason to accept any of our beliefs about the external world.[67]

The skeptic presupposes epistemological realism and foundationalism, when she argues by presenting a instance of knowledge about the external world as the best case or as a case which represents all our other claims.[68] Notably, the

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[64] Ibid., 432.
[65] Ibid., 431.
[56] Ibid., 431.
[67] Ibid., 432.
[68] Ibid., 433.

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skeptic believes in a relation of representation which would allow a wholesale assessment on the basis of one case because she believes that "knowledge of the external world" forms a cohesive class. The skeptic typically begins by denying that there are clear logical links between propositions about the course of experience and propositions about physical objects. The skeptic then argues, from the logical distinction between knowledge of appearances and knowledge of reality, to the conclusion that we are confined to knowledge of appearances. Yet, to show a logical gap, between appearance and reality, falls short of showing that experience has a relation of epistemic priority.[69] Without more, the truth of the skeptic's claim would entail a symmetrical relation between the two realms, not an asymmetry: knowledge of each realm would be independent of knowledge of the other. To find an asymmetry, we would need a further assumption along the lines of Stroud's "all possible evidence is ultimately sensory."[70] Williams points out that talk of <u>ultimate</u> evidence relies on making sense of ultimacy through foundationalism and epistemological realism, while the skeptic claims that foundationalism arises in response to the skeptic's attack.

Williams next examines the skeptical argument which drives Stroud's book <u>The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism</u>.[71] One premise of the argument denies that we can ever know we are wakeful (i.e., not dreaming). If one of us knew she was

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[69] Ibid., 433.

[70] Ibid., 433.

[71] Stroud, Barry. <u>The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism</u>. Oxford: Oxford.1984.

wakeful, she would know thanks to a test for wakefulness, a test which she applies to herself with success. Yet we cannot know we apply a test for wakefulness to ourselves with success. To know that we are applying a test for wakefulness to ourselves with success, we first need to know independently that we are awake (we would need to know that we were not merely dreaming that we applied the test, or dreaming the test's result).[72]

The other premise of the skeptical argument claims that if we have some knowledge about the external world, then at some moment we know we are awake. By the first premise, we never know that we are awake. The skeptic concludes that we never have knowledge of the external world.[73]

For Williams, the second premise relies on equivocation.[74] The skeptic muddles two different types of relation which might hold between knowledge of the external world and knowledge of our wakefulness. A reciprocal relation between knowledge of wakefulness and knowledge of the external world leaves no opening to the skeptic. Because we know something about the external world, we can conclude that we are wakeful; just as we can conclude we know something about the external world when we know we are awake. The plausibility of this first relation allows the skeptic to smuggle into the second premise a priority, of our knowledge of our

[72] "Basis", supra footnote 42. 436.
[73] Ibid., 436.
[74] Ibid., 437.

wakefulness over our our knowledge of the external world. Yet this interpretation yields the skeptic's conclusion, only due to its assumption of foundationalism and epistemological realism.

3.0 Wilburn's Renewed Foundationalist Skeptic

Ron Wilburn's "Epistemological Realism As the Skeptic's Heart of Darkness",[75] counters Williams' diagnosis of skepticism about the external world. Williams traces the traditional epistemologist's path as starting with epistemological realism, which leads to the traditional epistemologist's demand for a justification of the totality of her knowledge of the external world (Wilburn calls this demand "totalism"[76]). For Williams, totalism would then lead to foundationalism, and foundationalism would end in skepticism. As we saw, Williams denies that we can draw epistemological conclusions on the basis of logical or metaphysical premises. Williams argues that "epistemological realism is the crucial presupposition of skeptical questions, indeed that metaphysical realism has no particular connection with any skeptical problems or answers to them."[77]

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[75] Wilburn, Ron. "Epistemological Realism as the Skeptic's Heart of Darkness". Journal of Philosophical Research vol XXIII (1998). 165-217. Hereinafter, "Darkness".

[76] Ibid., 178.

[77] Williams, Michael. Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 1996. 266.

Wilburn traces the traditional epistemologist's path as starting with metaphysical realism. Metaphysical realism would lead to belief foundationalism, a type of epistemological realism which resists Williams' arguments against the other types of epistemological realism. Belief foundationalism leads to totalism, and totalism leads to skepticism.[78] Wilburn distinguishes three types of epistemological realism: experience foundationalism, belief-about-experience foundationalism, and belief foundationalism.[79] The experience foundationalist attributes an epistemic priority, over the person's claims about the external world, to a person's claims about their experience.

Belief foundationalism attributes epistemic priority, over first-order beliefs about the external world, to those beliefs' corresponding second-order beliefs.[80] Although Wilburn does not say so explicitly, he obviously means, by second-order beliefs, positive second-order beliefs. "I believe that I believe that the gnat is in the bat" comes with the belief "the gnat is in the bat", while "I believe that I do not believe that the gnat is in the bat" need not come with any first-order belief in particular (e.g., "I believe that I do not believe that the gnat is in the bat" may indicate a suspension of belief, or a judgment that the belief described in the denial is impossible).

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[78] "Darkness", supra, footnote 74. 212.
[79] Ibid., 196.
[80] Ibid., 209.

Williams argued against belief-about-experience foundationalism in his <u>Groundless Beliefs</u>.[81] The phenomenalist arrives at this foundationalism by six steps:[82]

1. We have knowledge;

2. If we have knowledge, it must be based on intrinsically credible beliefs;

3. If we have intrinsically credible beliefs they must be something we can take in all at once (and not something which needs assembling or arguing for);[83]

4. Only a belief about experience is something we might take in all at once;

5. If beliefs of a certain type are the foundation of our knowledge, then the beliefs of the certain type will have epistemic priority over beliefs which are knowledge, but which are not of the certain type (given the existence of beliefs which are knowledge but which are not of the certain type);

6. (From "1", "2", "3", "4", and "5") Beliefs about experience are the foundation of our knowledge, and have

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[81] Oxford: Blackwell. 1977. Hereinafter "Groundless".

[82] Ibid., 75.

[83] Contra: Burge, Tyler. "Content Preservation". <u>The Philosophical Review</u> vol 102 no 4 (October 1993). 457-488.

epistemic priority over our other beliefs.

Williams finds that "2." is only plausible if we grant that we can have intrinsically credible beliefs. He then traces the plausibility of the idea of intrinsically credible beliefs to experience foundationalism (the position which provides the only plausible candidate for intrinsically credible beliefs).[84]

Williams thus stands to undermine both belief-about-experience foundationalism and epistemological realism when he makes experience foundationalism the principal target of attack. Standardly, the experience foundationalist argues on the basis of a gap between a person's claims about their experience and their claims about the external world. Williams argues that this gap means symmetrical independence of the two types of claims, not an asymmetry or dependence.

Wilburn counters William's arguments by introducing belief foundationalism. While metaphysical realism means that a belief about the world could be in error (e.g., the rabbit we take to be in front of us is really just a will o' the wisp, hallucination, or dream), a belief about our having a certain belief about the external world is never mistaken.[85] A belief about our having a certain belief about the external world, "BB", as a matter of logic, will be accompanied by the belief about the external world, "B", by virtue of the redundancy in

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[84] Ibid., 76.

[85] "Darkness", supra, footnote 74. 203.

content between the first-order belief and second-order belief. We may well also have, unawares, another first order belief, "A", which contradicts B, or we can be mistaken as to the role B plays in our personal motivational psychology; but neither of these possibilities impair the epistemic privilege of BB (the second-order belief).[86]

Metaphysical realism gives us the mind-independent realm to which our first-order beliefs are purportedly reactions. Our beliefs about what beliefs we have about the external world, are a surveyable kind. Thus, from the aerie of our second-order beliefs about what beliefs we have, we can ask the general question of why the first-order beliefs we believe we have about our experience should count as justified beliefs about the state of the external world. For Wilburn, the absence of an answer to this totalising question, an answer which would satisfy an internalist, leads to the skeptic's suspension of belief.[87] Wilburn attacks the adequacy of externalist answers, and defends internalism, by arguing that the externalist's thought-experiments trade implicitly on our internalist intuitions.[88] Externalist explanations, cum justifications, of our knowledge of the external world, use the third person's point of view. The externalist's observer has access to the knowledge relation by virtue of observing both of the relation's poles: the external world objects of which knowledge is acquired, and the person acquiring the

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[86] Ibid., 200.
[87] Ibid., 212.
[88] Ibid., 208.

knowledge. However, the observer owes this broad access to her own, first person, perspective. Thus, the externalist observer's own justification of her observations, of her knowledge, must be internal.[89] Internalism is fundamental.

Internalism lets Wilburn rehabilitate the skeptical scenarios which licence radical doubt about the external world:

> Rather than being distinct from the demand for justification, the skeptic's insistance [sic] upon certainty is better viewed as merely the form which this demand for justification takes when posed from what we have called the skeptic's peculiar Totalist stance: the stance from which all empirical claims are questioned at once, without recourse to some of these claims as credibility conferring grounds for others.[90]

Wilburn's renovated skepticism is open to attack on two fronts. The following chapter examines the relation of our experiential belief's content to the nature of the surrounding world. First, however, we should attend to how the totalising moves of Wilburn's skeptic draw cross-contextual significance from their supposed operation over a cohesive kind formed by the second-order beliefs (the beliefs as to what experiential beliefs we have). The second-order beliefs themselves draw their structure from the cohesive first-order formed by the experiential beliefs. The first-order's cohesion, as well as the image of a simple, two level

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[89] Ibid., 208.
[90] Ibid., 177.

structure, falls into doubt when we see how our special authority as individuals, in relation to our knowledge claims about our experience, lends a false appearance of conceptual truth to the assumption that experience is direct and free from inference. Our special authority, in relation to our experience, ceases to ground assumptions of the simplicity of experience when we see that the special authority is contingent, and not a conceptual or metaphysical necessity.

A famous paper[91] of G.E. Moore's exhibits the pervasive tendency among philosophers to take the authority we have over our experience for a conceptual truth. These philosophers mistake the practical authority conferred by our language community, a contingent incorrigibility, for an infallibility accessible even to the solipsist. Norman Malcolm writes, in relation the paper,

> Wittgenstein related to me an anecdote about Moore that, he thought, exhibited what was most admirable in Moore's character: Moore had been working hard on his lecture entitled "Proof of an External World" which he was to deliver before the British Academy in London. He was very dissatisfied with the concluding part of it, but he had not been able to revise in any way that satisfied him. On the day of the lecture, as he got ready to leave his house in Cambridge to catch the London train, Mrs. Moore said to him, "don't worry; I'm sure they'll like it ." To which Moore replied:"If they _do_ they'll be wrong!"[92]

[91] Moore, G.E. "Proof of an External World" in his Philosophical Papers. London: George Allen & Unwin.1959.127-150. Hereafter, "Proof".

[92] Malcolm, Norman. Ludwig Wittgenstein: a memoir 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1984. 56.

The concluding pages of Moore's paper defend a proof of an external world in which Moore holds up one of his hands and then the other. Moore concludes, from the evidence of the hands, that external things exist.[93] Most critics of Moore's paper focus on this proof and its conclusion. For example, Stroud dismisses the pages preceding the proof as Moore's "clearing off the table and rolling up his sleeves".[94] But, in character with Moore's other papers, "Proof of an External World"'s key is not the conclusion explored at the end, but rather the careful distinctions drawn in the earlier part of the paper, the distinctions on which Moore builds his conclusion.

In answer to a challenge in Kant's <u>Critique of Pure Reason</u>, Moore looks specifically at whether we can prove, and how we might prove "the existence of things outside of us."[95] He finds that philosophers commonly use the terms "things external to our minds", "things external to us", and "external things", interchangeably, and as if the terms were self-evidently clear. Of the three terms, Moore finds "things external to our minds" the clearest, since it stops our conflation, of the sought after distinction, with the distinction "external to the body".[96] Kant draws a distinction in what we might mean by the term "things outside of us". Sometimes we mean by "things outside of us", things

[93] "Proof", supra, footnote 90. 146.
[94] Stroud, Barry. <u>The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism</u>. Oxford: Oxford. 1984. 83.
[95] "Proof", supra, footnote 90. 127.
[96] Ibid., 128.

independent from our perceiving of them, sometimes we mean just the image we experience. Kant terms, the independent objects, "things to be met with in space".[97]

Moore explains "things to be met with in space" as designating "whatever can be met with in space", including material objects, and physical objects such as shadows.[98] To clarify the limits of the term "things to be met with in space", Moore contrasts "things to be met with in space" to "things presented in space".[99] Things presented in space, but which are not to be met with in space, include afterimages, pains, and the images we see when we see double. Moore sees "to be met with in space" as open to description in terms of dispositions. We suppose of any of the things to be met with in space: "1.) that it might have existed at that very time, without being perceived; 2.) that it might have existed at another time without being perceived at that time; 3.) that during the whole period of its existence, it need not have been perceived at any time at all."[100] But, for Moore, we draw the key criterion for external world objects from the difference between the concept of things to be met with in space, and the concept of mere things presented in space. The afterimages and other things presented in space are each logically restricted to the mind of one person, "none of them could conceivably have been seen by anyone else".[101]

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[97] Ibid., 130.
[98] Ibid., 130.
[99] Ibid., 131.
[100] Ibid., 135.
[101] Ibid., 132.

Here Moore overlooks a difficulty. The problem for the epistemologist is that not only can no one else see the afterimage; neither can the individual to which the afterimage occurs see the afterimage in the way the epistemologist needs. When the individual perceives an afterimage; she perceives the afterimage at a point in time, and, by the fact of perceiving it, has set it in terms of concepts.

Other individuals in the language community lack the range of challenges, to the afterimage perceiver's description and conceptualisation of the afterimage, that they would have in challenging a typically public object, such as a chair. Yet the individual to whom the afterimage occurs can revise her conceptualisation of the perception (one moment she might attribute squarishness and brownness to the afterimage "X", at another moment she might attribute rather roundishness and dark yellowness to "X"). Ordinary circumstances do not give reason to prefer one moment's characterisation of the afterimage to another moment's (e.g., so long as the moments are close enough in time so as not to raise concerns about fading memories).

Thought experiments suggests themselves, once we see the limits on an individual's incorrigibility in relation to things to be presented in space. We realise that the authority our language community confers on an individual, in relation to her experience, is a practical authority and not

a pure product of concepts.[102] The facts of physiology may prevent us from sharing afterimages, and so from having public divergences in conceptualisation as to any given afterimage. Yet, under the dispensation of the thought experiment, we can imagine how the nerves and nerve impulses from one eye could be split, and conducted simultaneously to two different brains. In such a case, the physiological basis of an afterimage would yield conceptualisations by two different people, one person of which, by voicing comparisons and contrasts with afterimages on which the two individuals agreed on in the past, might convince the other person to change her conceptualisation of the present afterimage, and thus to agree that the convincer's conceptualisation is the correct one. In such a case, the two people would have seen the same afterimage.[103] Two people share the epistemic authority over the afterimage. Even our perception of afterimages are, in theory, liable to the same challenges as we direct toward perceptions of more typically public objects. Thus, we owe our special authority over beliefs about our experience to practical limitations, not conceptual necessities.

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[102] Cf., Pinkard, Terry. Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994. 366.

[103] Same on the basis of the identity of indiscernibles. The reader may object that the discernibility between the two individual perceivers makes a difference. If this discernibility makes a difference, it should also make a difference in the case of the typically public objects, ruling out the standard challenges. If these challenges were ruled out, the afterimage, again, would not benefit by virtue of metaphysics or logic from a special epistemological status.

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The skeptic begs the question when she relies on the product of practical limitations to argue for permanent structures among beliefs, and special status for a rank of second-order beliefs constituted by the structure. Whether an inquiry counts a practical limit as relevant depends on the particular aims of the inquiry, the context. Indeed, the skeptic's illegitimate assumption about ranks of beliefs, which we looked at earlier, bears close analogies to the assumption that we can characterise our experience's content independently of our present relation to the world. The next chapter looks at how Hilary Putnam counters the skeptic on this further front, with his argument that, if we change the surrounding world, we change the beliefs of the thinkers within that world.

CHAPTER TWO

Putnam's Answer

1.0 Verificationism's Insight

A key insight inherited from verificationism influences Hilary Putnam's response to skepticism. In "Pragmatism"[1] , a paper he delivered in 1995 to the Aristotelian Society, Hilary Putnam situates himself in relation to two traditional schools of verificationism. He begins by distinguishing between the classical pragmatist's verificationism, and the verificationism of the logical positivists. Putnam naturally chooses Peirce, the acknowledged founder of pragmatism, as representative of the pragmatists. As representative of logical positivism, Putnam chooses a version close to Rudolf Carnap's Aufbau,[2] a choice which sharpens the distinctions he then makes between the respective verificationisms of pragmatism and logical positivism. In the end, Putnam finds both varieties of verificationism wanting, but he identifies within verificationism an insight which is also central to pragmatism, and which also has resonance beyond both schools: "The insistence not just on the interdependence of our grasp of truth-claims and our grasp of verification, but also on the interdependence of our conceptual abilities and our practical abilities."[3]

Putnam begins by distinguishing between the respective

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[1] Putnam, Hilary."Pragmatism" Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society n.s. supp. vol XCV (1995). 291-306 Hereinafter "Pragmatism".

[2] Carnap, Rudolph. Der Logische Aufbau der Welt. Hamburg: Meiner. 1961. (written in 1928)

[3] "Pragmatism", supra, footnote 1. 305-306.

verificationisms of the logical positivist and of the pragmatist. The pragmatists take their lead from the pragmatist maxim which, in Peirce's words, asks us to "Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearing, we conceive [an] object to have;" the maxim then declares that "our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object."[4] Peirce ties these effects to sensible qualities, but he denies we have direct access to the contents of our minds (e.g., through introspection). Peirce therefore refuses to base his system on such incorrigible "givens" as sense-data: verification need not be conclusive. Pragmatism locates verification in the world of public objects, and thus at the level of the community of inquirers. In this way, the Peircean pragmatist argues that our metaphysical conceptions can have practical bearing, and that accordingly, when our metaphysics are naturalised, metaphysics is a legitimate and meaningful endeavour.[5]

By contrast, Putnam's logical positivists hold that our concepts have meaning when there is a method by which we could show decisively whether the concept holds of the world: verification is conclusive.[6] Logical positivism aims to secure foundations for our scientific conception of the world. Thus, logical positivism seeks foundations which can never be cast into doubt, by locating verification at the level of the individual's sense-data. Finally, the logical

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[4] Ibid., 291.

[5] Ibid., 293.

[6] Ibid., 292.

positivist relies on verificationism to discard metaphysics as an obsolete, empty project.[7]

Here I make three comments. First, we must note that while Putnam is right that early logical positivism largely relied on sense-datum theory, it is only fair to note that some logical positivists (including as central a member of the Vienna Circle and of the Ernst Mach Society as Otto Neurath), were physicalists from the beginning.[8] Other central figures, such as Carnap and Hempel[9] abandoned sense-data theory in the mid-thirties. However, as late as 1940, A.J.Ayer could still write in his The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge[10] of finding "the general principles on which, from our resources of sense-data, we 'construct' the world of material things". Second, we must note that only some of the logical positivists insist, in their early writings, that verification need be conclusive. Neurath always denies it.[11] Third, we must note that, strictly speaking, the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle believed that we could deal with the problems of metaphysics through clarification, in a way not all that estranged from Peirce: "Clarification of the traditional problems of philosophy leads us partly to unmask them as pseudo-problems, and partly to transform them into

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[7] Ibid, 292.

[8] Schilpp, Paul Arthur. The Philosophy of Rudolph Carnap. La Salle. Ill.: Open Court. 1963. 23. Hereinafter "Rudolph Carnap".

[9] Ibid, 23.

[10] Ayer, A.J. The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge. London: Macmillan. 1940. 92.

[11] "Rudolph Carnap", supra, footnote 8. 23.

empirical problems and thereby subject them to the judgment of empirical science."[12]

Pragmatism's verificationism is more plausible than that of the logical positivists, due to pragmatism's eschewal of sense-datum theory and of incorrigibility, but Putnam presents a counter-example to verificationism with which he means to show us why we must forgo even the pragmatist's version.[13] Putnam explains that contemporary astrophysics teaches that we cannot receive information from parts of the universe which are so distant that not even light emanating from these locations will ever reach us (these parts of the universe lie "outside our light cone").[14] Accordingly, if a certain geometrical configuration of stars existed in such a distant region, we could never know of its existence. So the following two statements have the same practical consequences for us, but not the same meaning:

"I. There do not happen to be any stars arranged as the vertices of a regular 100-gon (in a region of space otherwise free of stars).

II. No one will ever encounter any causal signals from a group of stars arranged in the vertices of a regular 100-gon in a region of space otherwise free of stars)."[15]

This difference calls into question the verificationist's

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[12] "Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung: der Weiner Kreis" (The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle). 8.

[13] "Pragmatism", supra, footnote 1. 294.

[14] Ibid., 294.

[15] Ibid., 294.

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theory of meaning, even that version of the theory which relies on Peirce's concept of indefinitely extended inquiry. (The notion of indefinitely extended inquiry depends upon the assumption both that time is indefinitely extended and that information is indefinitely retrievable, assumptions disproven by twentieth century developments in physics).[16]

Yet, verificationists are not without resources with which to address Putnam's counter-example. Logical positivists might disagree that Putnam's example is decisive, invoking their concept of "verification in principle".[17] We can speak of a counterfactual case "CF," in which there are competent observers in each region of space at all the relevant times; these observers not detecting any stars formed into 100-gons because no such formation exists anywhere in the universe. This type of counterfactual analysis was, of course, anticipated far earlier. Notably, George Berkeley, in his Principles, Part I, §3, says: "The table I write on I say exists, that is I see it and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed- meaning thereby that if I was in my study I would perceive it."[18]

The case CF answers to Putnam's statement "I" (that "there do not happen to be any stars arranged as the vertices of a

[16] Ibid., 295.
[17] Reichenbach, Hans. Experience and Prediction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1961. 257-259.
[18] Berkeley, George. The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne vol II. ed A.A. Luce & T.E. Jessop. London: Nelson. 1949.

regular 100-gon.") If CF were false, so would our assertion of statement "I" be false. Conversely, if CF were true, so would our assertion of statement "I" be true. Our assertion of statement "II," however, makes a claim about what actually will be the case, not what would obtain in the counterfactual case of observers spread throughout the universe. If CF was false, II would still hold true, so long as all the 100-gon star formations remain beyond the light cone of the observers that happen to exist.

While Putnam no longer holds to any form of verificationism, he nevertheless undertakes to delineate its motivating insight. Putnam believes that there is a conceptual connection between our understanding a concept related to experience, and our understanding what it would mean for the concept to be applied in a way warranted by sensation.[19] Putnam rejects the reduction of our statements about the world we perceive to statements merely about perception (e.g., to statements about sense-data).[20] He also argues that we can form statements about the world which are beyond any practical means we might conceive of to warrant their assertion. But Putnam points out that we construct our statements, about such phenomena as inaccessible formations of stars, with the aid of concepts whose sensible warrant is clear (e.g., we know what counts as seeing a star).[21]

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[19] "Pragmatism", supra, footnote 1. 296.

[20] Ibid., 296.

[21] Ibid., 296.

Putnam uses a similar strategy to answer the objection that we do not usually have a direct warrant from our experience when we rightly apply words with conceptual definitions, words like "bachelor."[22] Putnam replies that we know what it is like to see someone be married, we associate certain actions and formalities with this concept. Thus, we understand what it is for a man to be a bachelor in terms of the absence of the events constituting marriage. It is the concept of marriage that is basic in this pair of concepts; so the term "bachelor" does have a round-about link with experience.

Despite his suggestion of a connection to experience even in the case of analytically defined concepts, Putnam decides to exclude, from his retracing of the verificationist insight behind our understanding of everyday concepts, both the terms we define conceptually (such as "bachelor") and the terms whose accurate application requires expertise (Putnam's example of the latter are the terms "elm" and "beech", which apply to species of trees laymen are often unable to distinguish).[23] For Putnam, the insight behind verificationism lies in the fact that when we understand everyday concepts such as "chair" or "cat," we understand what counts as experiencing an instance to which we would properly apply the concepts.[24]

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[22] Ibid., 297.

[23] Ibid., 298.

[24] Ibid., 298.

Philosophers who invoke Quine[25] to reject any distinction between conceptual and empirical truth also deny that we can meaningfully speak of conceptual connections. On this basis, they will deny Putnam the conceptual connection he sees as the insight of verificationism. According to Putnam, Quine's argument against the "dogma" of conceptual truth relies on the presumption that the proponents of conceptual truth claim knowledge of such features as synonymy to be "unrevisable knowledge."[26] Against this approach, Putnam argues that our judgments of synonymy involve interpretation and that interpretation is by its very nature revisable.[27] Thus, conceptual connection, at least in the pragmatic sense of the term, designates a fact about our present use and interpretation of language.[28]

To drive home this point, Putnam uses a thought-experiment.[29] Putnam describes Dyson's notion of intelligent entities whose bodies consist wholly of gases. We grant the beings knowledge of the laws of physics, as well as abstract knowledge of space and of time, but we then ask if we can make sense of what it would be for the beings to understand one of our everyday empirical concepts, such as "chair."[30] In the final analysis, Putnam denies we can make sense of the

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[25] E.g., Quine, W.V.O. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism". in his From a Logical Point of View. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard. 1961.

[26] "Pragmatism", supra, footnote 1. 300.

[27] Ibid., 300.

[28] Ibid., 301.

[29] Ibid., 303.

[30] Ibid., 303.

beings' grasping a concept of "chair" that is at all close to ours.[31]

Although Putnam does not say so explicitly in "Pragmatism", presumably the gaseous entities would have nothing like our sense experience. This failure would doom Putnam's thought-experiment from the start. With no sense experience of the physical world, these entities would be in no better a position to have even highly abstract concepts pertaining to the physical world than an envatted brain of Putnam's Reason, Truth & History.[32] As we shall see in the next section, Reason, Truth & History shows why "there is no basis at all for regarding the brain in a vat as referring to external things."[33] If an entity cannot refer to external things, we must ask whether the entity could refer to the relations between external things, relations which ultimately constitute the laws of physics. (For example, it is not a matter of pure logic that nothing in our universe will exceed in velocity that of light in a vacuum).

We may well be able to provide definitions of "chair," in the abstract terms of physics, definitions divorced from our modes of sensory verification; but our empirically-based concept of chair is primary: it is our understanding of what it is to verify that something is a chair which underwrites our definitions of "chair" in the terms of physics. This last

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[31] Ibid., 304.

[32] Putnam, Hilary. Reason, Truth and History. Cambridge: Cambridge. 1981. Hereinafter "Reason".

[33] Ibid., 14.

realisation leads Putnam to a key insight he draws from classic pragmatism; namely, the part practice plays in the sense of our beliefs. The primacy of practice flows naturally from the fact that "our grasp of empirical concepts depends on our perceptual verification abilities;"[34] our acting to perceive features of the public world of public objects. Our beliefs about this public world, are not "self-identifying mental state[s] ... What identifies [them] as the belief[s][they] are is, <u>at least in part</u>, [their] connection with action - including of course further intellectual action".[35] Starting from this pragmatist insight, Putnam will counter external world skepticism based on the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis.

2.0 A Counter to the Skeptic

Hilary Putnam's counter to skepticism rest heavily on the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis with which he opens <u>Reason, Truth and History</u>[36] (the structure of Putnam's argument leads him to vary the usually singular brain-in-a-vat to the plural brains). From the mid-1970s through the 80s, Putnam uses his "model-theoretic" argument to assail Metaphysical Realism.[37] Putnam's Metaphysical Realist contends that 1.) there is one determinate way the world is, independently of our conceptual

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[34] "Pragmatism", supra, footnote 1. 305.

[35] Ibid., 305.

[36] "Reason", supra, footnote 31.

[37] Davies, David. "A Traveller's Guide to Putnam's 'Narrow Path' ". <u>Dialogue</u> vol XXXV no 1 (Winter 1996).117-146.

choices; 2.) there is one correct and full description of the given set of objects which constitute the way the world is; and, 3.) truth, in a natural language, means a correspondence mediated by determinate and unique relations of reference between our words and the objects of the world.[38] For the Metaphysical Realist, even a theory which is perfectly justified according to ideal standards might be false. The Metaphysical Realist views truth as "radically non-epistemic", as suits a world detached from our representations, a world which to which our true representations merely correspond.[39]

When Putnam deployed his model-theoretic argument (using considerations of conceptual relativity, and of the preconditions upon reference, to challenge Metaphysical Realism), he found hearers who insisted "there must be something wrong somewhere" with Putnam's argument, since the argument would show that "we could not be brains in a vat".[40] Naturally, Putnam then chose to prepare the ground for his model-theoretic argument by beginning Reason, Truth and History with an independent refutation of a version of brain-in-a-vat skepticism.

I begin by setting out Putnam's version of the brain-in-a-vat

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[38] "Reason", supra, footnote 31. 49-50.

[39] Putnam, Hilary. "Realism and Reason". in his Meaning and the Moral Sciences. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1978. 123-140.

[40] Putnam, Hilary. "Reply to David Anderson". Philosophical Topics vol 20 no 1 (Spring 1992). 361-369.

hypothesis, and I respond to a critic who denies that Putnam's brains count as speakers and thinkers. I find this criticism wanting and I show that, even if the critic were right, Putnam would still be entitled to dismiss the skeptic. Second, I review Putnam's demonstration that the skeptical hypothesis is incoherent. Third, I review the case against "magical" theories of reference, a case which proves crucial for Putnam's attack on brains-in-a-vat skepticism. In particular, Putnam gives us a thought-experiment by which he means to free us from the notion that images (whether mental or external) necessarily refer to an object or property. In this connection, I review a segment of Wittgenstein's dialectic, the source of a practical, dispositional account of concepts and understanding, the account which Putnam sets against the magical theory. Fourth, I review and find wanting a classic critical response to Putnam's brains-in-a-vat argument. Finally, I review Paul Coppock's attempted parody of Putnam's argument, and I point out why the parody fails.

2.10 The Brains-in-a-Vat Hypothesis

Putnam's skeptical scenario suggests that all creatures capable of experience are in fact brains-in-a-vat, cared for by automatic machinery which just happens to exist.[41] The situation of the vats, machinery, and brains has always been, and always will be (We can presume that the brains are synthesised in the vat and are, in turn, dissolved in the

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[41] "Reason", supra, footnote 31. 6.

vat, at the end of their life-span). The vat-tending computer
gives the brains' nervous systems just the stimulation which
the brains-in-a-vat would receive if they were embodied
brains, acting in a world populated by the objects which
populate our world. The computer also coordinates the
respective stimulations of the various brains, so that the
consciousnesses in the vats communicate with each other, and
generally interact with each other, in a way which matches
the interactions the brains would be capable of, were they
embodied.[42] Putnam argues that we could not say, think, or
conceive of the situation of being a brain-in-a-vat, were we
in the position of the brains-in-a-vat.

2.11 A Turing Test for Reference

Putnam attacks the coherence of the brains-in-vat hypothesis
with, as a key ally, his ideas about the preconditions on our
referring. In a famous paper, Alan Turing proposes a test for
consciousness in computers; if enough human examiners, over
enough time, cannot distinguish a computer discoursing with
them from human interlocutors, the computer should count as
conscious. Human and computer conduct their verbal exchanges
over teletype, so as to shield from the examiner's view all
features of the computer, save its linguistic competency.[43]
Following Turing, Putnam imagines a dialogic test for

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[42] Ibid., 7.

[43] Turing, Alan M. "Computing Machines and Intelligence".
    Mind vol LIX (October 1950). 433-460.

competence in reference; a test which would use the same criteria and the same shielding as Turing's test. Putnam's test asks if a partner in a linguistic exchange shares our language, our abilities to refer. Thus, this test for reference judges that an interlocutor shares our abilities to refer when we consistently cannot distinguish between the interlocutor and people known to share our language.

Putnam points out that his dialogic test for reference can, at best, indicate a great probability of shared reference practices. The test is not definitive.[44] The examined referrer, say, a computer, could match exactly the syntax of our language, yet this performance need have no connection with the bases in action, non-verbal practice, and sensation in which our language and our reference are rooted. A computer's programme might arise spontaneously, or in another way cut-off from the realm of sensation and action in the world.[45] Logic allows that the computer might happen to have a programme which permitted it to engage in syntactical permutations of words, permutations which perfectly simulate the conversational ability of an English speaker, yet the computer would never actually refer. In an extreme instance, a world might well have as its only occupants two English-simulating computers connected together. The two computers would merrily exchange the electric impulses we would interpret as English conversation, yet none of the computers's exchanges could count as having either reference

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[44] "Reason", supra, footnote 31. 10.
[45] Ibid., 11.

or sense.[46]

2.2 Do the Brains Count as Thinkers?

Putnam compares the case of the test for reference to the case of the brains-in-a-vat. The vat-tending computer simulates the brains-in-a-vat's sensed world, thus the brains' reference practice is cut-off from any direct causal link to the objects of the external world, including trees, brains, and vats, and the brains are cut-off from the properties with which the brains might construct a description of external world objects (even of brains, or vats). Still, four reasons lead Putnam to suggest that we would attribute consciousness and intelligence to the brains-in-the-vat: first, the brains have the structures required to take in sense experience from a body, and from the body's nervous system (if, counter to the facts of Putnam's thought-experiment, the brains were embodied rather than envatted); second, the brains-in-a-vat are brains, that is, they have the same chemical make-up and physical structure as our own, conscious, intelligent, brains; third, the brains-in-a-vat work in the same way ours do; fourth, the brains-in-a-vat, in particular, give the same role in their internal processes to the inputs they receive in place of sensation, as our brains give to actual sense "input".[47]

Paul Coppock challenges Putnam's claim that the brains-in-a-

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[46] Ibid., 12.
[47] Ibid., 12.

vat count as thinkers or speakers.[48] Coppock's challenge
relies on a false dilemma, but the challenge would not
threaten Putnam's main, anti-skeptical, goal, even if
Coppock's argument proved sound. Coppock uses the idea of a
"notional world", which Putnam introduces in the chapter
which follows the brains-in-a-vat argument.[49]

Putnam takes the idea of notional worlds from Daniel
Dennett.[50] The expression "bracketed beliefs" refers to the
beliefs held by a thinker, while apart from any consideration
of the beliefs' entailments beyond the thinker's mind.[51] We
describe a thinker's notional world by describing, under this
constraint of bracketing, all the thinker's beliefs. When a
person in the real world, embodied and free of vats, thinks
the thought "that is a tomato", the person has a part of
their notional world identical to part of a brain-in-a-vat's
notional world, when the brain in the vat thinks the thought
"that is a tomato" (in response to vat-stimulation). If the
embodied person and the brain-in-a-vat each respectively
formed an identical set of bracketed beliefs, the two would
have completely identical notional worlds.

Coppock means to show that our "cerebral counterparts" in the
vat do not refer and so cannot think. As an example, he asks

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[48] Coppock, Paul. "Putnam's Transcendental Argument".
   Pacific Philosophical Quarterly. 68 (1987). 14-28.
   Hereinafter, "Coppock".

[49] "Reason", supra, footnote 31. 28.

[50] Ibid., 28.

[51] Ibid., 28.

what the brain-in-vat could be referring to when it asserts of itself "I weigh 174 lbs.".[52] Coppock sees only two answers: either the brain is referring to itself as a brain-in-vat, a brain experiencing a notional world with this property; or the brain is referring to the notional weight of a notional individual.[53]

If the brain is referring to itself as a brain-in-vat, the brain attributes to itself the property of experiencing a notional world "whose notional subject weighs 174 lbs.".[54] Coppock rejects this proposal, since the proposal would, for instance, have the brain think "Jones weighs 174 lbs." and, by that thought, attribute to vat-Jones the property of experiencing a notional world whose notional subject weighs 174 lbs.. On this proposal, the brain would even attribute a notional world to a desk, by thinking "this desk weighs 174 lbs.". Yet, Coppock finds it implausible that the brain-in-the-vat would predicate different properties of itself than of a desk, with the term "weighs 174 lbs.".[55]

Coppock's other proposal holds that, with the thought "I weigh 174 lbs.", the brain-the-vat is referring to the notional weight of a notional individual.[56] Coppock sees no good reason for us to identify our cerebral counterpart in the vat with the notional individual who "weighs 174 lbs.".

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[52] "Coppock", supra, note 46. 24.
[53] Ibid. 25.
[54] Ibid., 25
[55] Ibid., 26.
[56] Ibid., 23.

After all, if the skin and bone of Coppock's skull magically became transparent, Coppock could look in a mirror and see his own brain. The vat-tending computer might well simulate the same type of display, for a brain-in-the-vat with the equivalent notional world to that of Coppock. But in the case of such a display by the vat-computer, we would "say that the notional Paul Coppock is (notionally) gazing at his own brain."[57] The brain-in-the-vat would not be referring to itself, when it adverts to this notional display of a brain; the brain-in-a-vat would, at best, be referring to the notional brain of a notional individual. The brain fails to refer to itself or to its characteristics, on both of Coppock's alternatives. Generalising from this example, Coppock accordingly denies that a Putnam brain-in-a-vat ever refers. Finally, Coppock argues that, since the brain-in-the-vat never refers, it never thinks either.[58]

2.21 How the Brains-In-A-Vat Refer and Count as Thinkers

The key to Putnam's anti-skeptical argument does lie in the bar on what a brain-in-the-vat can refer to, but Putnam in no way restricts his envatted brains to their notional world. When a brain-in-a-vat responds to the appropriate stimulation by referring to "the vat in front of me", Putnam sees three possible objects for the brain's reference: first, what a phenomenologist would call a "vat-in-the-image"; second, the

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[57] Ibid., 24.
[58] Ibid., 25.

electrical stimulation of the brain which leads to this particular "vat" perception by the brain; or, third, the elements in the brain-tending computer's programme which lead to this particular "vat" perception by the brain.[59]

Rare among critics of Putnam, Coppock does note that Putnam's skeptical scenario ranges over a community of brains-in-a-vat. However, Coppock overlooks this feature's significance, he says "the collective character of [the brains-in-a-vat's] predicament does not, I think, play any role in Putnam's argument, I mention it here only because Putnam does."[60] Putnam makes clear that his brains are not solipsists, each trapped in its notional world. For Putnam, the selves of the brains are interacting so that, as a fellow brain-in-the-vat, "you do really hear my words when I speak to you, even if the mechanism isn't what we suppose it to be".[61] Here lies an answer to Coppock's challenge.

The possibility of reference may well follow from the fact that the brains are in their predicament as a community. When a brain-in-a-vat thinks of itself, it forms an idea of itself in large part in terms of its past, present, and anticipated relations with the other consciousnesses which share its vat-world. In the world simulated by the vat-tending computer, the self of a brain-in-a-vat would find that only one body reacts directly to the self's desires. This vat-simulated

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[59] "Reason", supra, note 31. 14.
[60] "Coppock", supra, footnote 46. 15.
[61] "Reason", supra, footnote 31. 7.

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body is the thing which "weighs 174 lbs.". We understand
questions of weight in terms of the reaction of instruments
which serve to gauge the gravitational attraction between the
Earth and objects on the Earth's surface. Thus, weights are
intersubjectively verifiable quantities. When a brain-in-a-
vat asserts, of itself, "I weigh 174 lbs.." the brain's
consciousness, in effect, remarks on a feature of the world
it shares with other consciousnesses. "Weighing 174 lbs.."
in the brain's "I weigh 174 lbs.." means the same when the
brain applies the predicate to the other "bodies", associated
with the other consciousness, of the vat-computer simulated
world. Finally, "weighing 174 lbs.." has the same,
intersubjective, meaning when the brain's consciousness
applies it to a desk within the vat-simulated world. In the
vat-simulated world, when an object weighs 174 lbs. an
accurate vat-simulated scale will read 174 lbs. in response
to the object.

Even if Coppock were right that the brains-in-vat are neither
thinkers nor speakers, Putnam could have his anti-skeptical
conclusion by modus tollens. When the skeptic presents us
with the brains-in-a-vat scenario to mull over, the skeptic
by that act of address grants that we are thinkers. Coppock
holds that if we are brains-in-a-vat, then we are not
thinkers. So, granted that we are thinkers, we cannot be
Putnam's brains-in-a-vat.

2.3 The Language of the Vat

Questions of language arise as soon as we accept that the brains-in-a-vat count as speakers. Putnam terms the brain-in-vat's language "vat-English".[62] If the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis were true, this is the language you would, in fact, now be reading in: we would speak to each other and think to ourselves in vat-English (or vat-French, vat-Hungarian, etc.). As speakers of vat-English, our reference would be confined to the vat-world's causal circle. English, plain, unhyphenated, English, is the language which is spoken in our world, the language we are in fact speaking if it turns out that the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis is false. The skeptic tells us that we are speaking vat-English, that we are brains-in-a-vat. But her claim that "we are speaking vat-English" can never be true in vat-English.[63] With "we are speaking vat-English", the skeptic can refer to the vat, and thus to vat-English, only if the skeptic speaks a language which allows for reference to the external world (i.e., English). Yet, if we are speaking English, it is false that we are speaking vat-English. If the skeptic is a brain-in-a-vat, her statement that "we are speaking vat-English" actually asserts that we are speaking the language of simulated brains in simulated vats, another false statement. Thus, the statement "I am speaking vat-English" is false, whichever language I am speaking; false in vat-English, and false in English: the statement is necessarily false.

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[62] "Reason", supra, footnote 31. 14.
[63] Ibid., 15.

Taking a different tack, let us follow Putnam in supposing that "vat", in vat-English, actually refers to vat-in-the-image. Thus, when the brain-in-a-vat would wonder, in the vat-English to which it is confined, whether it might be a "brain-in-a-vat", the brain would in fact wonder if it was a brain-in-the-image in a vat-in-the-image. Again, the brain-in-a-vat is not a brain-in-the-image in a vat-in-the-image; accordingly, the brain's supposition is false.[64] Putnam concludes, from the falsity of the brain's supposition, that " 'We are brains-in-a-vat' says something false (if it says anything). In short, if we are brains-in-a-vat, then 'We are brains-in-a-vat' says something false. So it is (necessarily) false."[65]

The causal gap barring reference remains, regardless of how closely a brain-in-a-vat can match us in neurological processes, mental imagery, and words of inner discourse. When I see the green tree before me, I correctly assert "A green tree is before me", and refer to a palpable, material tree. Should the vat-tending computer appropriately stimulate the brain-in-a-vat, this brain (with mental processes formally identical to mine), will likely string together the same word forms: "A green tree is before me", yet the brain will not be referring to a tree nor even to greenness. As Putnam says, "the brains in the vat are not thinking about real trees when they think 'there is a tree in front of me' because there is nothing by virtue of which their thought 'tree' represents

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[64] Ibid., 15.
[65] Ibid., 15.

actual trees."[66] Even at the non-verbal level of nerve
stimulation and of the brain's neural responses, the brain-
in-the-vat cannot have a reference-licensing relation either
with the external world, or with external world properties,
since a brain-in-a-vat is forever within the closed causal
circle constituted by the computer and the other envatted
brains.

3.0 Magical Reference and the Putnam-Wittgenstein Alternative

Putnam ascribes to two factors our temptation to accept the
brain-in-a-vat scenario as coherent: first, we are tempted to
blindly take physics as a guide to what is possible; second,
we are tempted to presume, at least implicitly, magical
relations of reference, that is relations by which one thing
(word, mental image, mental feeling) will, in all
circumstances, refer to a certain other thing.[67] Putnam does
not explain at any length his claim that he has shown to be
impossible what physics would deceive us into thinking is
possible. Surely, if the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis is
ultimately inconceivable or incoherent, the hypothesis is no
more conceivable in the terms of physics. Be that as it may,
Putnam's brains-in-a-vat argument does crucially rely both on
his denial of magical reference, and on the denial that we
can refer to the objects and properties of the external world
without the appropriate contact (contact with the external-

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[66] Ibid., 13.
[67] Ibid., 15.

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world objects, the external-world properties, or at the very least with appropriate intermediaries).[68]

3.1 Putnam's Denial that Images Necessarily Refer

Putnam shows us that an image does not refer, in itself, to what the image may represent for us in the appropriate circumstances.[69] He imagines a tree-less planet populated by human-like creatures. The humanoids have never had any contact with, nor any communication about, vascular plants: moss is the only vegetation on their planet. A spaceship visits the tree-less planet and leaves behind a multicoloured sheet bearing what would look, to earth-dwellers, as a rendering of a tree. The spaceship moves on without any communication with the humanoids. The space-travellers could not have explained the image as a representation of a tree, even if they would have wished to, they are as innocent of trees as the tree-less planet's humanoids. The image the space-travellers leave behind is simply the result of random paint-splashes, splashes which match what we would take to be a tree-picture. Putnam supposes the humanoids would be perplexed by the coloured sheet:

> For us the picture is a representation of a tree. For
> these humans the picture only represents a strange
> object, nature and function unknown. Suppose one of them
> has a mental image which is exactly like one of my

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[68] Ibid., 16.
[69] Ibid., 3.

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mental images of a tree as a result of having seen the picture. His mental image is not a representation of a tree. It is only a representation of the strange object (whatever it is) that the mysterious picture represents.[70]

Contrary to the claim of "magical" theories of reference, the property of referring does not lie in an image itself, independently of the image's history and relations. For an image to warrant the claim "that is a tree", or "this is a vat", the appropriate causal links need to obtain between the image and the object or properties referred to; and, as Wittgenstein reminds us, speakers and hearers need to have the appropriate set of practical dispositions.[71]

With his example of the tree-picture on an alien planet, Putnam counters the belief that an image, in itself, must refer to the properties, or objects, that it now depicts for us. Yet, we might still insist that our minds rely upon necessary relations of reference; these relations would involve a more abstract object than images, namely, concepts. In reply to this possibility, Putnam draws on Wittgenstein.[72] Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations,[73] roughly between §140-185, suggests a practical, dispositional account of

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[70] Ibid., 3-4.

[71] Ibid., 6.

[72] "Reason", supra, footnote 31. 17-20.

[73] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Philosophical Investigations. Oxford: Blackwell. 1953. Hereinafter "Philosophical Investigations".

understanding, an account free of any notion of concepts as pure mental states or mental events.

For Wittgenstein, the role of philosophical description is to make evident the grammar of our practice. Dispositions, manifested in practical contexts, constitute what it is for us to grasp and use concepts, and thus what it is for us to refer by means of concepts. Even if we could make sense of a notion of concepts, apart from their practical contexts, such a divorce from practice would hardly grant to such concepts a magical power of reference. Just as the arrival of the mock tree-image hardly grants, to the people of the treeless planet, the power to refer to trees.

4.0 A Classic Response to Putnam's Brains-in-the-Vat Argument

A near classic pattern of analysis and critique, in regard to the brains-in-a-vat argument, unites many of Putnam's critics. Jane McIntyre[74] is one of the clearest, and, publishing in March 1984, one of the earliest critics of Putnam's brains-in-a-vat argument. McIntyre grants to Putnam that, if the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis is true, then the claim "I am a brain in a vat" is false. Thus a first premise:

1.) If we are brains in a vat, then the sentence "we are brains in a vat" says something false.[75]

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[74] McIntyre, Jane. "Putnam's Brains". Analysis 44 (1984). 59-61.

[75] Ibid., 60.

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As read by McIntyre, Putnam draws from this first premise the certainty that we are not brains in a vat. Thus arises the premise which McIntyre attributes to Putnam as an implicit, but problematic assumption:

> 2.) If the sentence "we are brains in a vat" says something false then we are not brains in a vat.[76]

Premises 1.) and 2.) yield the third premise:

> 3.) Therefore, if we are brains in a vat, then we are not brains in a vat.[77]

This last premise leads to the conclusion:

> 4.) Therefore, we are not brains in a vat.[78]

McIntyre's challenge targets Putnam's second premise. She asks Putnam in what language (English or vat-English) the claim "we are brains in a vat", of premise 2.), is false. If Putnam shows that the statement "we are brains in a vat" is false in English, he risks begging the question against the skeptic. After all, the definition of English is such that English is the language we are speaking, if we are not brains-in-a-vat. But if Putnam merely shows that the statement "we are brains in a vat" is false in vat-English,

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[76] Ibid., 60.

[77] Ibid., 60.

[78] Ibid., 61.

he establishes a fact irrelevant to his goal.[79]

McIntyre goes astray when she takes questions of the falsity of certain statements as the nub of Putnam's argument. The brains-in-a-vat argument in fact depends centrally on questions of accessibility for reference. Putnam begins the chapter which follows the brains-in-a-vat argument by asking "why it is surprising that the Brain in a Vat hypothesis turns out to be incoherent?".[80] Putnam answers that we were tempted by magical theories of reference. The truth of these theories would allow the brains to conceive of their envatment. Accordingly, the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis lapses into incoherence precisely as we give up magical reference in favour of the more plausible alternative of causal preconditions on reference. Once we let go of magical reference, we see that "we are brains-in-a-vat" ultimately means the same in English as in vat-English. "We are brains-in-a-vat" is ultimately the contradictory proposition "we can refer to certain properties, and it is false that we can refer to those properties." In this light, Putnam's key premise becomes the truism that, if we cannot refer to something (object, property, relation), we cannot refer to that thing (object, property, relation). Contrary to McIntyre's analysis, it is not the falsity of what the brain-in-the-vat says which clinches Putnam's argument, but rather what the brains-in-a vat cannot say.

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[79] Ibid., 61.

[80] "Reason", supra, footnote 31. 22.

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5.0 A Failed Parody of Putnam's Argument

Coppock offers a parody of the brains-in-a-vat argument, a parody meant to show us where Putnam goes wrong. Coppock's thought-experiment begins with our discovering that we develop cancer when we take as true the sentence "this is an odd-numbered year". To prevent these cancers, we reform our language practice so that we never take the dreaded sentence as true again.[81] We continue to speak ordinary English in even-numbered years; however in odd-numbered years we speak a new language, odd-English. Odd-English is a language identical to ordinary English, save for two features: first, in odd-English the term "odd"[82] means what the term "even"[83] means in ordinary English, second, in odd-English the term "even" means what the term "odd" means in ordinary English. Thus, in odd-numbered years, "1492 was an even-numbered year" and "every even number is divisible by 2" would both be false statements, since they would be expressed in odd-English.[84] In all years, we would hold true the sentence "this is an even-numbered year", and in all years we would hold false the sentence "this is an odd-numbered year".

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[81] "Coppock", supra, footnote 46. 21.

[82] "odd" applied to one or more of the natural numbers (1,2,3 ...) with respect to whether there is a remainder when the given number is divided by two.

[83] "even" applied to one or more of the natural numbers (1,2,3 ...) with respect to whether there is a remainder when the given number is divided by two.

[84] Ibid., 21.

Once in this situation of alternating languages, Coppock might forget whether the present year was odd or even. In such a case, he could follow the model of Putnam's brains-in-a-vat argument. Coppock writes

> "Naturally", I will say to myself, "I know that whether I am speaking English or Odd English -and I must be speaking one or the other- "This is an odd-numbered year" is false in the language I am speaking. So, "This is an odd-numbered year" is false in the language I am speaking. So, "This is not an odd-numbered year" is true in the language I am speaking. Therefore, this is not an odd-numbered year.[85]

Coppock points out that, while he draws his conclusion correctly, he remains ignorant of just what the conclusion means. To grasp the meaning of my conclusion, he would first need to know whether he counted as speaking odd-English or ordinary English. Accordingly, he also remains ignorant of his situation, of whether he is in an odd-numbered or an even-numbered year.

Coppock's odd-year/ even-year scenario is disanalogous to the situation of Putnam's brain, just where analogy would matter most. In his example, Coppock is ignorant about the specific numerical properties of the year he finds himself in, but he understands the nature of his position. Coppock understands what English and odd-English are, the difference between the two languages, and their alternation from year to year. Above all, Coppock understands the concepts which govern our use of

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[85] Ibid., 21.

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"odd" and "even" well enough that he need only be told the number of the year he is in, to continue in the year's language game. Putnam' brains are in a predicament, given Putnam's views on reference, in which we expect them to conceive of their situation, while they are, by our very hypothesis, in a situation which bars them from conceiving of their situation. The brains just do not have an access, equivalent to Coppock's, to the concepts they would need to describe their predicament.

Coppock's scenario also makes sense because he restricts the situation's force to himself. We increase the analogy between Coppock's situation and that of the brains-in-a-vat if we specify, Putnam-style, that no sentient being in Coppock's world knows whether the current language, the language the world's language users are in fact using, is odd-English or whether it is ordinary English. However, with this expansion, the distinction between odd-English and ordinary English breaks down. A distinction makes sense in a situation if we can imagine, at least in principle, what it would be to apply the distinction in the situation. But the universalised Coppock-situation includes all sentient beings; we are deprived of any position from which an observer might judge that the world contains odd-English users or ordinary English users. Where a distinction is, even in principle, impossible to make, we can hardly maintain that there remains, in this situation, a fact of the matter concerning the aspect targeted by the distinction.

6.0 Conclusion

In _Reason, Truth and History_, Putnam says that the
Metaphysical Realist hankers after more than a God's-eye view
of the world, she seeks a "No-eye view", a view beyond any
possibility of experience.[86] As we have seen, the brains-in-
a-vat hypothesis relies on the prime dogmas of Metaphysical
Realism, including magical reference. Putnam and Wittgenstein
lead us to a far more plausible account of reference, of
understanding, and of concepts. By virtue of this new
account, Putnam dismisses magical reference, and shows the
consequent incoherence of brains-in-a-vat skepticism. Critics
parody Putnam's argument, question whether Putnam's brains
count as speakers, and refute premises they attribute to him.
The critics fall short because they fail to take account of
the broader dimensions of Putnam's attack, an attack not just
on the skeptical hypothesis, but also on skepticism's roots.

In the final analysis, global skepticism about propositional
knowledge depends upon the possibility of an island of
discourse free from any tie to practice. The skeptic relies
on this haven when she responds to all of our canons for
justification, to all prospects of canons for justification,
by saying "that may be true for all practical purposes, but
not in REALITY." In founding Pragmatism, Peirce insisted that
all our theories, even theological or metaphysical, will gain
their sense from a tie with experience and practice. However
distant and attenuated the tie with experience may be, this

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[86] "Reason", supra, footnote 31. 50.

tie means that our theories are all ultimately responsible to our experience and practice. When the skeptic presents us with the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis, she threatens to show us how we might be adrift, cut us off from experience of our reality. In true Pragmatist fashion, Putnam answers the skeptic by tracing her scenario's implausible basis in experience. In the end, we see that we can no more refer to what we cannot refer to, than we can jump out of our brains.

CONCLUSION

The thesis's first chapter showed how persistently and acutely the skeptic presses her challenge to our claim of external world knowledge. The skeptical threat continues to hang over our epistemological proposals: her body is forceless, but her shadow is full of might. To progress, the modern epistemologist must either refute or defuse the skeptic. The second chapter showed Putnam's success in refuting a skeptical hypothesis. Pursued to a broader conclusion, Putnam's anti-skeptical argument of Reason, Truth and History[1] reassures modern epistemology and suggests that the skeptic fails because she tries to ask a question in relation to the external world that is radically problematic, and, thus, only apparently a question.

Yet, since Putnam so carefully targeted his subject of refutation, he leaves to the skeptic the other arrows in her quiver. The modern skeptic's classic arrowsmith is Descartes. The first of Descartes's Meditations[2] lays out the modern skeptic's attack, with unprecedented vividness. While the ancient skeptic sought to attack all claims to knowledge,[3] the modern skeptic typically grants us immediate knowledge of our thoughts and perceptions. The skeptic uses this presumed internal touchstone to demand the same certainty from our

[1] Putnam, Hilary. Reason, Truth and History. Cambridge: Cambridge. 1981.

[2] Descartes, Réné. Meditations. trans Laurence J. Lafleur. New York: The Liberal Arts Press. 1951.

[3] E.g., Sextus Empiricus. "Outlines of Pyrrhonism" in Sextus Empiricus. trans R.G.Bury. London: Heinemann. 1933.

claims to know about the external world.[4] When our beliefs about the external world fail the skeptic's test, she strips them of their claim to be knowledge and demotes them to the rank, at best, of mere belief. Thus, Descartes entitles his first Meditation: "Concerning the Things that can be Doubted". The first Meditation incites the other Meditations' search for absolute justification, by leading the reader through a dialectic of ever more threatening skeptical hypotheses. One step in this dialectic holds an analogue to Putnam's refutation of the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis. The place of this analogue within the dialectic sets Putnam's refutation on a wider epistemological canvas.

Descartes begins the first Meditation by noting that, in the past, he has occasionally misperceived features of his environment, but only later realised his misperception. Thus, his senses are not completely reliable.[5] Descartes counters that his senses may mislead him in special circumstances (such as at the limits of their capacities) but that they could hardly mislead him now, as he sits in his own room by the fire, writing. Still, such an insane extent of illusion visits him each night, whether he dreams he is sitting by the fire writing, or dreams that he has a completely different nature (e.g., the lunatic conviction that he is a gourd).[6] A dream need not bear any marks which would reveal to the dreamer that it is a dream. Descartes realises that he might

[4] As we saw at the end of the first chapter.
[5] "Meditations", supra, footnote 2. 15.
[6] Ibid., 16.

well be dreaming at the present moment. The skeptical dream

hypothesis provokes Descartes to counter that

>Nevertheless, we must at least admit that these things
>which appear to us in sleep are like painted scenes and
>portraits which can only be formed in imitation of
>something real and true and so, at the very least, these
>types of things - namely, eyes, head, hands, and the
>whole body - are not imaginary entities, but real and
>existent. For in truth painters even when they use the
>greatest ingenuity in attempting to portray sirens and
>satyrs in bizarre and extraordinary ways, nevertheless
>cannot give them wholly new shapes and natures, but only
>invent some particular mixture composed of parts of
>various animals; or even perhaps their imagination is
>sufficiently extravagant that they invent something so
>new that nothing like it has ever been seen, and so
>their work represents something purely imaginary and
>absolutely false, certainly at the very least the colors
>of which they are composed must be real.[7]

Descartes uses the same basis to support the much more

general concepts which also join together to form our

thoughts and perceptions (e.g., extension, number, duration).

Such concepts in turn form the theoretical sciences, like

geometry and arithmetic (sciences which still seem, at this

point in Descartes' skeptical progress, to have "some element

of certainty").[8] The passage just quoted parallels Putnam's

insistence that to use concepts, to construct skeptical

hypotheses out of a set of concepts, we must first have those

concepts (perhaps getting the concepts through experience, in

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[7] Ibid., 17. Note: The translator Lafleur indicates
variations in wording among the editions of the
Meditations by means of brackets and parentheses. I have
left out this added punctuation in my quotations, in the
interest of ease of reading, and since my argument does
not turn on precise questions of wording.

[8] Ibid., 18.

which case we must be capable of the right sort of experience; or perhaps developing the needed concepts out of the concepts we already have).

Descartes next attacks the concept-based "elements of certainty". Descartes's God is omnipotent. Thus, God could make the world such that we would perceive earth, sky, and extension, we would have a false sense of certainty, and yet there would be "no earth, no sky, no extended bodies".[9] Yet someone may object that God's goodness jars with such a thoroughgoing programme of deception. Descartes answers the objector by substituting, for God, an evil spirit with the needed powers of deception.[10]

If neither God nor the evil spirit exists, Descartes's existence must flow from some source, if only chance, and "since to err and be mistaken is a kind of imperfection, to whatever degree less powerful [persons] consider the author to whom they attribute [Descartes'] origin, in that degree it will be more probable that [Descartes is] so imperfect that [Descartes is] always mistaken."[11] Between the prongs of powerful evil deceiver and powerless chance, Descartes reaches his pinnacle of doubt: "to this reasoning, certainly, I have nothing to reply." (Of course, the following five Meditations do reply.)[12]

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[9] Ibid., 18.
[10] Ibid., 18.
[11] Ibid., 19.
[12] Ibid., 19.

Descartes's purportedly powerless chance is in fact what
Putnam calls "Chance with a capital "C".[13] Putnam also dubs
this idea of chance "Aristotelian Chance (which was a cause-
a cause of whatever is unexplainable."[14] Descartes's Chance has
an extraordinary, if perverse degree of systematicity. Chance
would be Descartes's author and act so that he is always
mistaken. Thus, imperfection under the reign of chance is not
random probability, but rather the mirror image of
perfection. Chance maps the external world, then inverts the
map and forms Descartes's beliefs. Still, whether Descartes
is the prey of Chance, God or the evil spirit, there is a
world beyond Descartes, composed of at least God or the evil
spirit. God or the evil spirit systematically deceives
Descartes as to the nature of the world which lies beyond the
confines of Descartes's mind.

To provide a skeptical rejoinder, Descartes relies on access,
even by the deceived, to the concept of other intelligences,
whether intelligences divine or diabolical. In Putnam's
depiction of the skeptical hypothesis, computers (perhaps the
products of Chance) systematically deceive the envatted
brains. In Putnam's real world, systematic patterns of
causation support reference and show the unreachability of
the skeptical situation. Our thoughts and perceptions gain
their determinacy due to their form of engagement with the

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[13] Realism with a Human Face. Cambridge, MA: Harvard. 1990.
154.
[14] Ibid., 155.

world. As well, Putnam wishes to steer his argument away from the conclusions that a person could acquire or develop their language or concepts magically (once we admitted magic in the case of language and concepts, it would barely take a step to admit magic in reference). Putnam needs that there be interacting brains, that there be brains in the plural, to form the linguistic community which underwrites our language and concepts.

In Chapter One we saw how the global skeptic relies on a generalising device, as she singles-out for challenge an entire class of our beliefs. We would counter the skeptic by depriving her of the generalising device (such as the global skeptical scenarios concerning knowledge of the external world). Putnam's success, detailed in Chapter Two, shows that the inmates, of a particular skeptical scenario, are cut-off from the external world. Their insulation prevents them from referring to the external world. Thus, were we in the inmates' situation, we could not refer to the external world. Yet, the skeptic needs to refer to an external world in her description to us of the skeptical scenario. Note, however, the difference between the external world and an external world.

The inmates of the skeptical scenario have the ingredients to form a concept of an external world, a concept sufficient to support the skeptic's picture. One of Putnam's envatted brains, "B", interacts with other brains and has the concept of other minds. The other minds are external to "B" in the

sense that they are intelligences separate from that of "B". From the concept of an intelligence, and the concept of effects on her mind which come from causes external to her mind, "B" forms the concept mind's contrast-pair: matter, the non-mental which may have effects on the mental. The mental is the realm of reasons and the material is the realm of pure causes.[15] Thus, we find ourselves once again with the problem of a general divide and no obvious way to draw a reason from a cause: skepticism.

The tendency, in our attempt to explain our knowledge of the external world, to tell ourselves that we can draw a reason from a cause, is hardly reserved to lower rank philosophers. Often, the strength of the tendency in a thinker reflects her heightened degree of insight into the threat that the skeptic poses to our knowledge claims. Philosophers typically construe the insight as forcing them to choose between unpalatable alternatives, such as foundationalism or coherentism, but choose they do. For example, C.I.Lewis rejects Moore's claim that "This is my hand" (said in the right situation), should be immune from doubt.[16] Yet this titan of American Pragmatism in the first half of the Twentieth century, defends the presence of an incorrigible given (which would found the knowledge we draw from experience). Lewis recoils from skepticism, or theories which

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[15] Pure causes, pure in the sense that they may operate without any mental trigger or effect.

[16] Lewis, C.I. "The Given Element in Empirical Knowledge". The Philosophical Review vol LXI no 2 whole number 358. 168-175. 170.

lead to skeptical conclusions, as "an intellectual

disaster".[17] Lewis reminds us that

> experience is all that is given to us for the purposes
> of empirical knowing, and that such knowledge of
> objective facts as we achieve is simply that body of
> beliefs which represents our over-all interpretation of
> experience. If we could not be sure of our experience
> when we have it, we should be in a poor position to
> determine any objective fact, or confirm the supposition
> of one, or assign any probability to one.[18]

When Reichenbach sees the search for certainty as a clinging

to rationalism, Lewis retorts that reliance on the given is

the way to "retain a trace of empiricism"[19] Logic alone cannot

yield our knowledge of the world. For instance, only

experience can decide between the individually consistent,

incompatible geometries for our space, given by Euclid,

Riemann, or Lobachevsky.[20] Equally, we cannot draw knowledge

of the world from mere congeries of probabilities based on

less than a certainty. Probabilities rely on the real, the

certain, for support. Lewis finds this foundation in

certainty, by distinguishing between the given: "the

incorrigible presentational element"[21] and our interpretation

of the given: "the criticizable and dubious element".[22]

Lewis is thus led astray, pressed by the threats to our

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[17] Ibid. 175.

[18] Ibid. 174.

[19] Ibid. 173.

[20] Ibid. 169.

[21] Ibid. 170.

[22] Ibid. 170.

knowledge of the external world. Lewis presumes the given as the basis, the cause of our interpretations. Yet we know through interpretation, so we cannot have direct access to the uninterpreted basis of the interpretation. When Lewis seeks justifications for our beliefs, our interpretations, when he tries to show that they constitute knowledge, he reaches for the uninterpreted and tries to force, on this given, a role it cannot bear: that of reason for the belief. If Lewis shows that an element is accessible to us, that the element is fit for the role of a reason, he would show the element was interpreted, and thus unfit to play the role of given, of a cause.

G.E.Moore wrote at the dawn of the past century that

> the only *reasonable* alternative to the admission that matter exists [i.e., an external world] *as well as* spirit, is absolute skepticism - that, as likely as not *nothing* exists at all. All other suppositions - the Agnostic's, that something, at all events, does exist, as much as the Idealist's, that spirit does - are, if we have no reason for believing in matter, as baseless as the grossest superstitions.[23]

Given matter and spirit (or mind), the problem, of how to bridge the gap between the two, grows ever sharper. With these closing lines of his "Refutation of Idealism", Moore was opening another hundred years of struggle with the skeptic; a struggle unfinished today, yet clarified by a

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[23] "The Refutation of Idealism". in Moore, G.E. Philosophical Studies. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1922. 30. (first published in Mind n.s. vol XII. 1903.)

century of attempts.

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