

Demons and Dreams

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The Problem of Doubt

Abstract questions about the nature of certainty, although clearly of interest to epistemologists, often seem detached from the ordinary reasoning required to successfully navigate the world. After all, in determining how many oranges to buy in order to make sangría, even a philosopher is unlikely to worry that he might be a brain in a vat wholly deluded about his capacity to purchase fruit. Nonetheless, in the course of making everyday judgments and choices, people do rely upon both implicit and explicit beliefs about the requirements of certainty. For some people, certainty is nothing more than the warm and fuzzy feeling of strong belief, meaning that their cognitive processes are dominated by their emotions. For others, any claims to certainty must be rejected as hubris, for only an infallible and omniscient God is free from doubt. And for still others, statistics rule the day, such that studies showing widespread correlation conclusively demonstrate causation. Given that certainty is contrasted with various forms of doubt, the line drawn between real and illusory doubts is of particular significance to any understanding of certainty. Because this line determines which doubts must be considered and which may be ignored, it is central to the reliability of a person's cognitive methodology.

In keeping with tradition established by Descartes, modern philosophers generally opt for strict and difficult standards for certainty according to which all possible sources of error relevant to a claim must be proven inoperative. In other words, the line between real and illusory doubts is drawn by the law of non-contradiction, such that all and only incoherent doubts are excluded at the outset of any investigation. Although some philosophers (e.g. contextualists, Dretske, Stine) have questioned this standard, the strange doubts raised by various skeptical arguments are alluring—and not easily dismissed. If my experiences as a brain in a vat would be identical to my experiences as a brain in a skull, how could I ever know which I really am? And if I have claimed certainty and yet unknowingly erred in the past, how can I be certain that I am not so erring again now? As Peter Klein notes, such skeptical arguments are compelling precisely because they seem “to proceed from universally accepted epistemic principles” and thus “remain plausible after careful scrutiny.”¹ Moreover, if we abandon the bright line set by non-contradiction, then distinguishing real from illusory doubts becomes extremely messy, not to mention difficult to justify. For example, if we claim that we need positive evidence to doubt, we must be able to detail what constitutes positive evidence. Would past similarities, statistical aggregates, or known probabilities constitute positive evidence? If so, then we may not have advanced much against skepticism, for then the fact that the drugs used to dull the pain after the amputation of a limb are known to cause hallucinations of the missing limb would seem to undermine the certainty of my claim that I have two hands and two feet. Skeptical arguments against our ordinary claims seem quite robust, able to inject themselves whatever the limits we place upon doubts.

Despite such difficulties, two apparent sources of doubt ought not be regarded as genuine: conceivable scenarios and the delusions of dreams. As we shall see, these apparent doubts do not pose a genuine challenge to otherwise well-grounded claims of certainty, nor do

¹ Peter Klein, *Certainty: A Refutation of Scepticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 4.

they constitute defeaters of claims to knowledge. Although this paper shall focus upon the philosophical arguments, respect for such false doubts is not without substantial practical consequences for ordinary reasoning. The acceptance of conceivable doubts opens the door for faith, as claims unsupported by any positive evidence are seen as legitimate alternatives to common sense and science so long as they cannot be conclusively refuted. Thus Christians often regard the atheist's inability to prove the non-existence of God as providing the necessary wiggle room for rational faith, even though the various attempts to prove God's existence all fail. Regarding dreams as sources of doubt may encourage people to regard them as visions from God, i.e. as alternative sources of knowledge. Although such appeals are obviously questionable in light of ordinary standards of justification, nevertheless an overly broad conception of doubt does offer an all-too-convenient rationalization for such epistemological irresponsibility.

Cartesian Methodological Skepticism

The modern standards for doubt trace back to the methodological skepticism of the very first modern philosopher: René Descartes. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes attempts to firmly ground his ordinary and scientific knowledge by “demolish[ing] everything completely and start[ing] again right from the foundations.”² In order to “hold back [his] assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable,” Descartes develops a series of ever more powerful skeptical arguments which eventually call all of his beliefs into doubt.³ He begins by doubting his perceptions of objects which are “very small or in the distance” on the grounds that his senses have “deceived” him in the past about such matters.⁴ He then wonders whether he might be dreaming given that he often thinks himself awake when he is really dreaming. He thereby considers the possibility that he might “not even have such hands or such a body at all,” although he admits that dreams must be “fashioned in the likeness of things that are real” such that some “general kinds of things”—whether “eyes, head, hands and the body” or “other even simpler and more universal things” like color, extension, shape, quantity, place, and time—must indeed exist.⁵

Descartes' skepticism encompasses all of his beliefs when he considers the possibility that his idea of an omnipotent and benevolent God is nothing more than fiction, such that his cognitive imperfections would lead him into deception and error even when doubt seems impossible, such as about the simples mentioned earlier, the sum of two plus three, and the number of sides in a square.⁶ Because such totalistic doubt is difficult to seriously maintain, Descartes attempts to retain it by positing a “malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning [who] has employed all his energies in order to deceive [him]” such that “the sky, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which [the demon] has devised to ensnare my judgment.”⁷ Of course, Descartes has no positive evidence that such an evil demon exists, let alone that it might be deceiving him—but such concerns are beside the point. The skeptical hypothesis serves a methodological function: it motivates doubt about the ideas which he normally takes to be indubitable by fully explaining all of his thoughts and perceptions in a way that would render them all false.

² René Descartes, *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 76 (18).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 77-8 (19-20).

⁶ Ibid., 78 (21).

⁷ Ibid., 79 (22).

Once ensnared in this skeptical trap of his own making, Descartes attempts to extract himself via the one belief that remains “certain and unshakable,” namely that he exists as a thinking substance.⁸ This single certainty is then leveraged into the “clarity and distinctness” criterion for certainty, according to which “we will never mistake the false for the true provided we give our assent only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive.”⁹ Unfortunately, Descartes’ attempt to ground this standard seems hopelessly circular. To eliminate the possibility that the deceptions of the evil demon would also appear clear and distinct, he must prove the existence of God—but that proof presumes that clear and distinct ideas are trustworthy.¹⁰ Thus Richard Schacht asks:

If it is held not only that the testimony of our senses, but also our knowledge of mathematics and the like (which rests upon our clear and distinct ideas) is not to be trusted, and if the reason for the latter is that we cannot be certain that some evil genius or infirmity of our nature is not leading us to regard as clear and distinct what is not true, prior to our finding a proof that God exists and is good, then how are we ever to come up with such a proof, which itself would be immune from the possibility of doubt and deception?¹¹

In the *Fourth Replies*, Descartes denies such circularity on the grounds of “a distinction between what we in fact perceive clearly and what we remember having perceived clearly on a previous occasion.”¹² He claims that “we are sure that God exists because we attend to the arguments which prove this; but subsequently, it is enough for us to remember that we perceived something clearly in order for us to be certain that it is true.”¹³ The most obvious objection to this argument is that if presently clear and distinct ideas were never brought into doubt, then Descartes’ repeated claims of total uncertainty before the *cogito* ring hollow.¹⁴ More fundamentally, how can Descartes justifiably claim that even presently clear and distinct ideas are indubitable when faced with the possibility of an omnipotent evil deceiver? Such an evil demon ought to be able to tinker with the clarity and distinctness of ideas just as well as it tinkers with their content.¹⁵ Descartes admits as much in the *Third Meditation* when considering whether he sees the truths of mathematics “clearly enough to affirm their truth”:

Indeed the only reason for my... judgment that they were open to doubt was that it occurred to me perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived in matters which seemed most evident. And whenever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, *I cannot but admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I got wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind’s eye.*¹⁶ [Emphasis added.]

Descartes then notes in order to eliminate these admittedly slight doubts, he “must examine whether there is a God, and if there is, whether he can be a deceiver [because] if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else.”¹⁷ So to avoid the charge of circularity, Descartes does not seem to take his own skeptical doubts as seriously as he ought.

Notably, the difficulties Descartes encounters in formulating these arguments do not stem from the particular method he uses to bootstrap certain knowledge out of his own skeptical doubts. In the face of an omnipotent evil demon seemingly capable of deceiving a person into believing that two apples plus three oranges equals four tables rather than five fruits, no process

⁸ Ibid., 80 (24-5).

⁹ Ibid., 87 (35); Descartes, *Descartes*, 174 (21, #43).

¹⁰ Descartes, *Descartes*, 94 (46).

¹¹ Richard Schacht, *Classical Modern Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1984), 12.

¹² Descartes, *Descartes*, 143 (246).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 78-80 (21-5).

¹⁵ Schacht, *Classical Modern Philosophers*, 11.

¹⁶ Descartes, *Descartes*, 87-8 (36).

¹⁷ Ibid., 88 (36).

of reasoning, however simple, could be safe from corruption. If we cannot distinguish genuine experience of reality from such demonic deceptions, then both certainty and knowledge seem impossible. Thus the strength of Cartesian methodological skepticism seems to lead to a more substantive form of skepticism, one well-expressed by Bertrand Russell's comment that "all our knowledge of truths is infected with *some* degree of doubt, and a theory which ignored this fact would be plainly wrong."¹⁸

Accommodating Skepticism

In analytic philosophy, one common response to this challenge of skepticism is partial concession. Necessary truths and beliefs about subjective mental states may be known with certainty, while contingent truths are at best highly probable appeals to the best explanation. Our empirical investigations allow us to asymptotically approach certainty, so that as evidence is gathered and alternatives are eliminated, we first leap and then creep ever closer to the epistemological ideal of certainty. Yet we can never reach it, for doubts of various kinds always linger. So as I search for a friend in a crowd of people, I can quickly rule out the six foot tall bearded man, the purple-haired punker, the six year old girl, and so on. As I walk towards a plausible candidate, my degree of certainty dramatically increases with every step, for as I move closer I see her facial features more clearly, hear the sound of her voice, and notice her wave as she sees me. Yet even spending hours together will not totally exclude the possibility that she is an imposter or a hallucination. Certainty thus primarily serves as a regulative ideal at which our cognitive processes aim.

This asymptotic conception of certainty does seem intuitively plausible in light of how confirmations and doubts work in ordinary reasoning. First, all knowledge seems open to further confirmation—and even minor confirmations seem to bolster certainty, if only slightly. For example, the fact that I have two hands seems fully and completely certain to me on the basis of sight and kinesthesia alone. Yet moving them around at will and touching them together seems to provide additional evidence that they are really my two hands. So how could I have been fully and completely certain before if now I am even more certain? Perhaps such full and complete certainty is not possible. Second, no matter how many reasonable doubts are excluded, the skeptic always seems able to raise one more far-fetched scenario to explain my experience. So if I claim certainty in my two hands, the skeptic might demand that I exclude the possibility that I'm hallucinating due to the strong painkillers given after the recent emergency amputation of my arms. Generally speaking, for any proposition P, there are infinitely many far-fetched ways that not-P could nevertheless be the case, only some of which a person is ever likely to consider, let alone justifiably exclude. So again, perhaps the standards for certainty are beyond human reach. In the end, the simple fact of human fallibility seems to show that "there are no empirical beliefs, with the possible and extremely problematic exception of beliefs about one's own mental states, for which we have justification adequate to exclude all possibility of error."¹⁹

For most analytic philosophers, such skepticism about certainty is not seen as a threat to our claims of knowledge. Fallibilism is the norm: certainty is widely rejected as a condition of knowledge in favor of the less demanding and more ambiguous condition of justification.²⁰ So I may well know that I have two hands—but not with certainty. But is skepticism about certainty

¹⁸ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 135.

¹⁹ Laurence Bonjour, "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge," in *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism*, ed. Hilary Kornblith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

thereby rendered inconsequential? If Descartes were a fallibilist, he might think so. He claims that his skeptical arguments render former beliefs “highly probable” such that “it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny.”²¹ But such cannot be correct. If any of the skeptical arguments which purport to explain all of our experiences are sound, then we no longer have *any* rational reason to maintain our common sense beliefs over the skeptical alternatives. If I really cannot tell whether I am dreaming or awake, then the claim that I am awake is simply arbitrary, not probable. The issue here is not that knowledge requires certainty, but instead that many of the skeptical arguments advanced against certainty are just as effective against knowledge and justification. As a result, questions about whether skeptical argument X undermines knowledge or defeats justification are often the same as those concerning the scope of legitimate doubt.

So in light of such considerations, we can now ask: What reasons do we have—if any—to reject the doubts raised by skeptical arguments as illegitimate?

Conceivable Doubts

The conceivability arguments for skepticism (such as the brain-in-a-vat and evil demon hypotheses) create doubt by offering self-consistent, all-encompassing alternative explanations for our ordinary experience. If true, they would render all of our common sense beliefs about the world false. So if I were a brain in a vat, I wouldn't be in graduate school, I wouldn't have ten toes, and I wouldn't be nearsighted. (Admittedly, some of my beliefs might merely be unjustified rather than false, as the scientists controlling my experience could replicate various features of the real world. So traffic on the 405 might still be a nightmare and a moon might still orbit earth—although such beliefs would be unjustified.) All of my judgments would be based upon the phony experiences generated for me by a supercomputer, rather than the actual facts of my situation. I would complain about the effects of the dry Colorado winter upon my skin, never realizing that I'm really a hunk of gray matter suspended in a vat of purple jelly on a shelf in a lab in the south of France. The truth would always be cleverly hidden from me by the veil of apparently ordinary experience. Poor me! Or perhaps: Poor you! Who knows!

In general, conceivability arguments assert that, for some internally consistent skeptical hypothesis X:

1. My only evidence relevant to X and not-X is my sensory experience.
2. My sensory experience is fully consistent with either X or not-X.
3. I cannot rationally exclude the possibility of X. (From 1 and 2)
4. To be certain that not-X, I must rationally exclude the possibility that X.
5. I cannot be certain that not-X. (From 3 and 4)

As we saw with Descartes' evil demon hypothesis, such skeptical scenarios are not supported by any positive evidence; they are purely arbitrary speculation limited only by logical possibility, i.e. non-contradiction. Yet the argument is not merely that our common sense beliefs are uncertain because evil demons and brains in vats are logically possible. Ordinary conceivables, after all, are routinely deemed false on the grounds that they conflict with known facts about physical laws, past events, the properties of entities, and more. By positing an alternative explanation for the whole of our sensory experience, the skeptical arguments render appeals to such facts useless, for we no longer know what the facts are. The real world might still be subject to gravity, but proportional to the distance cubed rather than the distance squared; we seem to have no way to tell which would actually be the case.

²¹ Descartes, *Descartes*, 79 (22).

The arguments from conceivability clearly capitalize on the fact that we can never step outside our own means of awareness to independently determine whether our perceptual experiences accurately represent the world or not. As a result, we seem doomed to perpetual doubt, but perhaps we can find some rational basis upon which to deny that conceivable doubts are genuine doubts. At first glance, the conceivability arguments do not seem to smuggle in any illicit premises or presume any substantive philosophical theses. Yet a closer examination reveals a tacit and problematic presumption of a representationalist theory of perception—and thus explains why conceivable doubts seem so intractable and why they must be rejected from the outset as illegitimate.

In *The Evidence of the Senses*, a defense of direct realism, David Kelley argues that the doubts seemingly generated by Descartes' evil demon hypothesis are illusory because they depend upon an implicit and false view of the nature of consciousness.²² The evil demon argument calls into question the very existence of the physical world, and in doing so, it presupposes that mind is essentially "distinct from and independent of any physical substance whatsoever."²³ After all, if consciousness could exist without a physical world, it would be able to (mentally) chug away all by itself, without any external input whatsoever. In other words, the evil demon hypothesis presumes the concept of mind explicitly revealed by the *cogito*, namely that "consciousness can become the object of awareness, and be identified as consciousness, prior to any awareness of the existence of other things."²⁴

Kelley offers an extensive analysis of the errors of this understanding of consciousness, but the central point for our purposes is the way in which accepting the evil demon hypothesis excludes the possibility of a direct realist understanding of relationship between consciousness and the world. Within a direct realist framework, "awareness is essentially [i.e. ultimately] directed toward external objects" and introspective awareness of consciousness requires prior knowledge of the external world—meaning that the evil demon hypothesis is simply incoherent.²⁵ As a result, accepting the evil demon hypothesis as a coherent and intelligible source of doubt necessitates an implicit, in-advance rejection of direct realism as a potential solution to the skeptical doubt. Yet without a direct realist theory of perception, skepticism seems inevitable. Establishing a correspondence between consciousness and the external world is impossible on a representationalist theory of perception, as there are no empirical grounds for the inference that the external world causes our ideas.²⁶ And, of course, idealism entirely gives up the idea of such correspondence with an external world altogether.

Kelley's analysis shows us why the evil demon hypothesis seems so intractable as a skeptical doubt: the mere act of seriously considering it implicitly commits a person to an understanding of the relationship between mind and external world deeply vulnerable to skepticism. But with a direct realist theory of perception firmly in hand, the evil demon hypothesis cannot even get off the ground.

The brain-in-a-vat argument is often understood as a more modern and scientific version of the evil demon hypothesis, in that both propose an alternative explanation for all of our experiences based upon mere conceivability. However, unlike the evil demon hypothesis, the

²² David Kelley, *The Evidence of the Senses: A Realist Theory of Perception* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 10-6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

brain-in-a-vat argument does not deny the existence of the external world. Instead, as in the argument from dreaming, the external world would simply be radically different than we suppose it to be. However, as Michael Huemer argues in *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, the brain-in-a-vat scenario does still err in presuming a representationalist theory of perception—and thereby subtly excluding the possibility of foundational direct realism. As in Premise 1 above, the argument classifies our “sensory experiences” as a form of “evidence” for claims about the world.²⁷ Sensory experiences are indeed a form of evidence in representationalist theories of perception, as mental images are the direct objects of perception and facts about the external world are inferred from those images.²⁸ However, for the direct realist, the features of the external world themselves, i.e. the facts, constitute the evidence for common sense beliefs, while sensory experiences are just the means of awareness of those features.²⁹ So the direct realist does have plenty of evidence against the skeptical hypothesis that he is a brain in a vat. He has two hands, two feet, and a nose, whereas brains in vats do not, ergo, he is not a brain in a vat. Huemer writes,

the [brain-in-a-vat] scenario is supposed to explain all our evidence, but it does so only on an indirect realist’s interpretation of what the evidence is: the [brain-in-a-vat] scenario can account for my having a *perceptual experience* of two hands. But it cannot account for my having two hands.³⁰

As in the evil demon hypothesis, the brain-in-a-vat argument creates the illusion of genuine doubt by implicitly presuming a representationalist theory of perception. As a result, the direct realist may reject the doubts as illegitimate from the outset.

Huemer also suggests a second, more general line of defense against conceivable skeptical doubts through his Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism. He argues that our perceptual beliefs are foundationally justified (and thus differentiated from arbitrary beliefs) on the basis of this Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism: “If it seems to S as if P then S thereby has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that P.”³¹ Since the principle does not offer conclusive justification, could conceivable skeptical scenarios serve as defeaters of our ordinary perceptual beliefs?³² In short, no. A genuine defeater must have “some reason for accepting it,” i.e. we must have “significant evidence” in favor of the skeptical hypothesis.³³ If the mere logical possibility of the skeptical hypotheses undermined the *prima facie* justification of our perceptual beliefs, then the concept of *prima facie* justification would serve no purpose, since no contingent truth could be *prima facie* justified and no necessary truth would require it.³⁴

Huemer’s observations about the limits of logical possibility feed directly into G.E. Moore’s argument against that the idea that no contingent truths may be known with certainty. Moore argues that this common confuses two senses in which a claim “might be false.”³⁵ By definition, a contingent claim might be false in the philosophical sense that it could have been otherwise because its negation is not self-contradictory.³⁶ Thus philosophers say that “the cat is

²⁷ Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 181-2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 182, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

³² *Ibid.*, 183.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ G.E. Moore, “Certainty,” in *Certainty*, ed. Jonathan Westphal (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1995).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 61-2.

outside” might be false since the cat is not defined as a creature which is never outside.³⁷ But that very limited sense of “might be false” does not imply “might be false” in the ordinary sense indicating uncertainty, such when I wonder whether “the cat is outside” might be false because my husband could have let him outside as he so often does when he is home, as he is now.³⁸ Moore’s essential argument for this distinction is simple: “the conjunctive proposition ‘I know that [X], and yet the proposition that [X] is contingent’ is certainly not itself self-contradictory, even if it is false.”³⁹ Slightly extending this analysis, we find that any philosophical principle asserting that contingency implies doubt must itself be contingent and thus doubtful by its own standard, since the claim “contingent truths may be known with certainty” is not self-contradictory.

In sum, the skeptical doubts arising from contingency are not genuine doubts. They depend upon a representationalist theory of perception, undermine the purpose of *prima facie* justification, and confuse the various meanings of “might be false.” As such, they cannot by themselves weaken claims to certainty.

Reliability Doubts

Given the illegitimacy of doubts based upon conceivable speculations, we might wonder whether Descartes’ dreaming argument fares any better as a source of doubt. If some degree of realism is necessary for genuine doubt, then the dreaming argument may be regarded as simply a more compelling version of the brain-in-a-vat argument, in that it calls into question all of our common sense beliefs about the world through a very real feature of human life: dreams. Yet as we shall see, this very realism also undercuts its credibility as a source of doubt because real life facts can be marshaled against it.

Descartes’ basic motivation for the argument from dreaming is the commonplace observation that he often thinks himself wide awake by the fire while he is actually fast asleep in bed. So in considering whether he is now awake or asleep, Descartes applies various techniques in an attempt to conclusively determine which is the case before realizing that whatever method he might try in real life could also be dreamed. He then formulates the general principle that “there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep”—meaning that his ordinary judgments about objects and events must be regarded as doubtful.⁴⁰

One immediate worry about this argument stems from the simple observation that billions of people go through their waking hours without ever mistakenly thinking themselves asleep. In other words, when we are awake, we do seem able to reliably determine that we are awake rather than merely dreaming. Given this asymmetry, we should ask: Does the fact that a person is an unreliable judge of his state of consciousness while asleep indicate that he is also an unreliable judge of his state of consciousness while awake? Indeed not. In judgments about our conscious states, the source of our unreliability is not the particular judgment being made, but rather the conditions under which the judgment is sometimes made. All of our dreaming judgments are unreliable, but that does not cast doubt upon the reliability of our waking judgments simply because they sometimes concern the same issues.

³⁷ This seems to me to be a wholly absurd sense of “might be false”—but it is standard analytic usage.

³⁸ Moore, “Certainty,” 61-3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁰ Descartes, *Descartes*, 77-8 (19-20).

More generally, the plausibility of the argument from dreaming depends upon the very capacity that it denies, namely that of distinguishing dreaming from wakefulness. If the world of dreams could not be reliably distinguished from the real world, then the skeptical argument would never arise, as we would be largely ignorant of errors made while dreaming. The fact that we do make such distinctions on a daily basis suggests that Descartes' general principle that "there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep" is false.⁴¹ In fact, there are substantial and obvious differences between dreams and perceptions, but we are so cognitively befuddled while dreaming that we cannot properly attend to them. Once we wake up, we have the capacity not only to know that we are awake, but also to notice those these myriad differences. In these ways, the plausibility of the argument from dreaming is implicitly depends upon a set of epistemological capacities which are then denied by the argument. As a result, it fails to generate any legitimate doubts—except perhaps in the wholly uninteresting case of when we are dreaming.

Epistemological Standards

In his essay "The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge," Fred Dretske proposes that we "think of knowledge as an evidential state in which *all relevant alternatives* (to what is known) *are eliminated*."⁴² Such a model could easily be applied to certainty as well, such that the doubts to be eliminated in the process of cultivating certainty would be only the relevant doubts.

Dretske sees an avoidance of skeptical debates as a benefit of this line of thought; he writes:

Somehow, in the end, we seem reduced to shrugging our shoulders and saying that there are certain possibilities that are just too remote to worry about. Our evidence isn't good enough to eliminate these wilder hypotheses because, of course, these wild hypotheses are carefully manufactured so as to *neutralize* our evidence. But dismissing such hypotheses as too remote to worry about, as too fanciful to have any impact on our ordinary use of the verb "to know" is merely another way of saying that for the purposes of assessing someone's knowledge that this is a table, certain alternative possibilities are simply not relevant.⁴³

Yet the problem with skepticism is not merely that the doubts are cleverly manufactured, but rather that the doubts seem reasonable within the traditional assumptions of modern philosophy. The danger of setting aside skeptical debates as "irrelevant" is that we might be overlooking important but subtle errors in epistemology, errors that will lead us astray in other areas of thought. And as we have seen, skeptical arguments are not impregnable. Thus it seems that a careful survey of these arguments may well help us determine the proper location of the line between legitimate and illegitimate doubt.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Fred Dretske, "The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge," in *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Michael Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2002), 542.

⁴³ Ibid., 543.