6. Descartes 1641, Skepticism

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Skepticism: We don't know anything about the external world.

> External world = world beyond our own (present) conscious experience.

We obviously have lots of *beliefs* about the external world. The question is whether they amount to **knowledge**—can we *rule out* the possibility that we're mistaken?

We're used to the routine process of checking whether *individual* beliefs are knowledge.

> I don't think I need gas. But then I get worried about my trip tomorrow, so I check the gas gauge.

Descartes expands this: wants to *systematically* investigate whether large classes of beliefs amount to knowledge.

To show that we don't know some claim p, we need to come up with a **skeptical scenario** for p—a scenario that we cannot rule out *even in the best-case scenario*, but which is incompatible with p.

Focus on the *best* best-case scenario—one such that if we can know anything at all, we can know that.

Let p = *I have a racket*.

But what if I'm a brain in a vat?[1] Despite all my evidence, it seems I can't rule out that possibility. (I'd have all the same experiences if was.)

> [1] Or dreaming, or deceived by an evil demon.

Let a **BIV** be a (racketless) brain in a vat, stimulated to have experiences like the ones I have.

P1 I can know that: *if I have a racket, then I'm not a BIV.*
P2 Therefore, if *I can know I have a racket*, then *I can know I'm not a BIV*.
P3 But I *can't* know that I'm not a BIV.
C Therefore, I can't know I have a racket.

> Definition of BIV
>
> From P1, via "Closure" of knowledge. If you know that p implies q, then if you know p, you can come to know q.

The argument is valid.
So to reject the conclusion, we have to reject one of the premises.

> Compare:
> If it's raining, then the streets are wet. The streets are *not* wet. Therefore, it's *not* raining.

P1 seems true just by (my awareness of) the definition.

P2 follows from P1 given that you can extend your knowledge via inference, i.e. come to know the logical consequences of what you know.

P3 seems to follow from the fact that my experiences would be exactly the same if I were a racketless BIV.

Q: How should we respond to the argument?