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Sceptical hypotheses and subjective indistinguishability

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The notion of subjective indistinguishability has long played a central role in explanations of the force of Cartesian sceptical hypotheses. I argue that sceptical hypotheses do not need to be subjectively indistinguishable to be compelling and I provide an alternative diagnosis of their force that explains why this is the case. My diagnosis focuses on the relation between one's experiences and third-personal accounts of the circumstances in which these experiences occur. This relation is characterized by a distinctive gap that leaves room for questions about the nature of one's circumstances, providing sceptical hypotheses with a foothold. I argue that this gap lends sceptical hypotheses their force and renders the stipulation of subjective indistinguishability unnecessary.

Keywords: sceptical hypotheses; subjective indistinguishability; subject; first-person perspective; objective account.

> "As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep."
>
> —Descartes, *First Meditation*

It is widely accepted that sceptical hypotheses have intuitive force, at least in part, because they describe scenarios in which the subject has experiences that are subjectively indistinguishable from one's own experiences (see e.g. Nozick 1981; Stroud 1984; Lewis 1996; Luper 2011; Conant 2012; Coliva and Pritchard 2022). From the perspective of the subject in a sceptical scenario, nothing alerts them to the fact that they are in a bad epistemic situation; everything seems to them just as it would if they were in normal

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circumstances. The following worry then comes to seem pressing: If the subject in a sceptical hypothesis has experiences that are subjectively indistinguishable from one's own, how can one rule out the possibility that one is, oneself, in a bad epistemic situation? There are of course ways to resist this worry (see e.g. Williamson 2000; Leite 2019), but they accept the basic assumption that subjective indistinguishability is a key feature of sceptical hypotheses.

My concern is with this basic assumption, rather than with sceptical or anti-sceptical arguments. I will argue that subjective indistinguishability is not what makes sceptical hypotheses effective at introducing doubt into inquiry. I argue that subjectively *dis*tinguishable sceptical hypotheses can be just as effective, and I explain why this is. The core issue, on my view, is not that there is no discernible difference between two experiences one might be having, but rather that *any* experience, on its own, fails to provide a basis for an indubitable account of the circumstances in which that experience occurs. Sceptical hypotheses exploit this room for doubt.

James Beebe (2010) has argued that sceptical hypotheses *must* be subjectively indistinguishable from the actual world to present a significant sceptical challenge. For a possibility to be subjectively indistinguishable from the actual world, it needs to be a world in which the experiences and memories of the subject 'match' their experiences and memories in the actual world (Beebe 2010: 466). He stipulates that a possible world is 'experientially possible' if it is subjectively indistinguishable from the actual world (2010: 466).[1] This notion of experiential possibility serves to capture the sense in which sceptical hypotheses are open possibilities for the subject. Beebe thinks that sceptical hypotheses must fulfill the 'possibility requirement', a requirement that states that 'it must be possible for sceptical hypotheses to be true and for targets of sceptical attack to be false' (2010: 461). He argues that this requirement should be understood in terms of experiential possibility. For Beebe, then, sceptical hypotheses must be subjectively indistinguishable from the actual world.

I agree with Beebe that sceptical hypotheses must be open possibilities for the subject, and that we need to find a way of understanding this requirement. However, the notion of experiential possibility, understood in terms of subjective indistinguishability, obscures the issue. To begin to see why, it is helpful to consider how subjectively *dis*tinguishable possible worlds are sometimes needed to model a subject's ignorance about their circumstances.

Robert Stalnaker (2008) provides us with an example of this in his rejection of 'the principle of phenomenal indistinguishability'. For our purposes,

[1]Neither logical possibility nor metaphysical possibility is a requirement on experiential possibility, for Beebe.

'phenomenal indistinguishability' and 'subjective indistinguishability' can be used interchangeably. This principle states:

> If a possibility is an epistemic alternative for a knower at a time (that is, it is compatible with his or her knowledge) then it is *phenomenally indistinguishable* from the actual world to the knower at that time. (2008: 88)

Stalnaker challenges this principle by considering the following scenario: suppose Mary knows that, based on the outcome of a coin toss, she will be shown either a red star or a green star. She has never seen red or green before, but she knows all the physical facts involved in seeing red and seeing green, and she can describe the two possibilities she is faced with: one in which she is seeing red (world R) and one in which she is seeing green (world G). It turns out that she is shown the red star. However, in the presence of the red star, it seems that there is still room for ignorance on Mary's part; she knows that she is either seeing red or seeing green, but which is it? To explain Mary's ignorance, we have two choices, according to Stalnaker. We can either claim that R and G are epistemic alternatives for her in the moment she sees red and thereby deny the principle of phenomenal indistinguishability (remember, in world G, Mary sees a green star, and the experience of green is phenomenally distinguishable from the experience of red). Or, in an effort to preserve the principle of phenomenal indistinguishability, we can posit G*, a world that is physically just like G, but phenomenally like R. This option is unacceptable, according to Stalnaker, because it involves accepting what Lewis calls the 'hypothesis of phenomenal information' (Stalnaker 2008: chap. 4).[2]

Stalnaker's case illustrates how phenomenally *dis*tinguishable alternatives can plausibly be used to model a subject's ignorance about the nature of what is present. An experience of red is distinguishable from an experience of green, and yet, upon having an experience of red, there is room for ignorance about whether one is in world R or world G. One can wonder about one's circumstances even if there are no phenomenally indistinguishable alternatives on the table.

Now, consider the following, parallel case. Suppose Mary knows that when she goes to sleep, her memories of past perceptual experiences will be erased and there is a chance (based on a coin toss) that she will wake up as a brain-in-a-vat. When she wakes up, it is explained to her that she is either the human being she takes herself to be or a brain-in-a-vat being stimulated to have the experiences she is having. Suppose that these alternatives are subjectively distinguishable, and that Mary knows this. Perhaps vat experiences are not nearly as vivid. Since Mary's memories were erased, she cannot compare her current

[2] See Lewis's (1999) discussion of the difficulties associated with the hypothesis of phenomenal information.

experience with her past experiences. In this case, then, the fact that human experiences are distinguishable from vat experiences will not help Mary to determine which world is hers. There is room for ignorance here even though the relevant alternatives are distinguishable. We could imagine Mary saying to herself: 'I know that vat experiences and human experiences are different, but I do not know if I am in a vat world having vat experiences, or in a human world having human experiences!'

In fact, we can dispense with the coin-tossing scientists and simply say that one day Mary comes across a philosophical text that introduces her to the sceptical hypothesis that she is a brain-in-a-vat. The rest of the case unfolds in much the same way. The main difference is that, in this case, Mary will wonder whether she has *ever* had human experiences (i.e. if she has ever experienced truly vivid colours). Memory no longer plays a role in this case because Mary is no longer confident that she has ever been a human being.

One might object that, if Mary knew more about *how* the human world and the vat world were subjectively distinguishable, then she might be able to determine which world is actual. I do not wish to dispute this here. The key point for now is that we can make sense of a scenario in which the subject is unsure about their circumstances even though they know *that* the relevant alternatives are subjectively distinguishable from each other. This is enough to challenge the following two claims: (1) the subject's experiences in a sceptical hypothesis must 'match' their current experiences for the hypothesis to be effective and (2) the subject must *believe* that their experiences in a sceptical hypothesis match their current experiences for the hypothesis to be effective.

Let us take each of these points in turn. First, it is built into the case that the relevant alternatives are in fact subjectively distinguishable. It is also built into the case that Mary is a human being and not an envatted brain. So, if we accept that Mary could wonder about which world she is in after reading the book about scepticism, it follows that it is not necessary for the sceptical hypothesis to be subjectively indistinguishable from Mary's current (human) experience to be effective. Therefore, claim 1 is false. It is *not* the case that the subject's experiences in a sceptical hypothesis must 'match' their current experiences for the hypothesis to be effective.

Secondly, it is built into the case that Mary *knows* that the relevant alternatives are subjectively distinguishable; that is, she knows that she would be having very different experiences in each of the two worlds (the vat world and the human world). So, if we accept that Mary could nevertheless wonder about which world she is in, then we must accept that Mary *lacks the belief* that her experiences match the experiences she would be having in the sceptical hypothesis. If she held this belief, she would not be wondering about whether she is a brain-in-a-vat; she would believe that she is one! Therefore, claim 2 is false. It is *not* the case that the subject must believe that their experiences in a

sceptical hypothesis match their current experiences for the sceptical hypothesis to be effective at generating doubt.

What is needed, for a given sceptical hypothesis to be effective, is room to question whether the circumstances it describes *could* (metaphysically speaking) give rise to *this* experience (i.e. the subject's current experience), and it looks as though this condition can be met without relying on the notion of subjective indistinguishability. Of course, if it turns out that a given sceptical hypothesis *does* characterize the actual world, then, trivially, it describes circumstances that are subjectively indistinguishable from the actual world. The key point, however, is that the room to question *whether* a sceptical hypothesis characterizes the actual world does not depend upon a prior stipulation of subjective indistinguishability. A sceptical hypothesis can have force in the absence of claims about subjective indistinguishability.

Is there a way to explain this room for questioning that does not fall back on the notion of subjective indistinguishability? I believe there is. The key is to look more closely at the background assumptions we make when constructing sceptical hypotheses. Cartesian sceptical hypotheses assume that subjects play an important role in determining *which* things become present and *how* they become present; the subject is an important part of the circumstances in which experiences occur. It is then stipulated that the subject is mistaken about some aspect of their identity as an object, the relations they stand in, and their role in making it the case that certain things are present. For example, the subject in a sceptical hypothesis might believe that they are a human being who moves around and perceives the world in all the standard ways, but they are really a brain-in-a-vat being stimulated by a machine to have certain experiences. This feature of sceptical hypotheses, namely that the subject is mistaken about their identity and place in the world as an object, suggests a different way of diagnosing the force of these hypotheses. If there is room to question one's identity *qua* subject as an object in the world, then there is room to question the circumstances of one's experiences, and space to generate sceptical hypotheses. Here is how the argument would go:

> Assumption 1: The subject is an important part of the circumstances in which an experience occurs.
>
> Assumption 2: An account of the circumstances in which an experience occurs will include information about the subject (e.g. what kind of thing the subject is, the relations they stand in, etc.).

P1: If it is always possible to wonder about one's identity as a particular object/kind of object, then, for any account of one's circumstances, A, it is possible to wonder whether A describes the circumstances of one's experience.

P2: It is always possible to wonder about one's identity as a particular object/kind of object.

C1: For any account of one's circumstances, A, it is possible to wonder whether A describes the circumstances of one's experience.

P3: If, for any account of one's circumstances, A, it is possible to wonder whether A describes the circumstances of one's experience, then it is always possible to wonder whether sceptical hypotheses describe the circumstances of one's experience.

C2: It is always possible to wonder whether sceptical hypotheses describe the circumstances of one's experience.

This way of elucidating the room for doubt exploited by sceptical hypotheses does not make use of the notion of subjective indistinguishability. Instead, it rests heavily on P2, the claim that one can always doubt one's identity as an object. I will return to this point in a moment.

First, however, it is important to clarify what is meant by the phrase 'possible to wonder whether *p*'. By this, I mean that one can adopt an 'interrogative attitude' in relation to the question whether *p*, and thereby treat it as an open question (Friedman 2019). To treat something as an open question, in the sense that is relevant for this argument, involves the conceivability of *p* and the conceivability of ¬*p*. Here, conceivability is understood as *philosophical conceivability*: to conceive that *p* is to imagine a world that is taken to verify *p* (Yablo 1993: 29). On this view, conceivability 'involves the appearance of possibility' (Yablo 1993: 30).

Understood in these terms, my argument aims to show that, for any proposed account, A, of the circumstances of one's experience, one can wonder whether A characterizes one's circumstances insofar as one can imagine a world that one takes to verify the proposition *A describes the circumstances of my experience*. This involves imagining that this very experience (i.e. one's actual experience, thought of first-personally) is embedded in the set of circumstances described by A. Importantly, we can engage in these sorts of imaginative exercises even when the relevant alternatives are stipulated to be subjectively *dis*tinguishable from one another, as in the cases described above, and when A is silent on questions of subjective indistinguishability (e.g. when we consider that we might be brains in vats instead of human beings, and nothing is said about the relation between vat experiences and human experiences).

This argument is significant because it provides a way of accounting for the fact that sceptical hypotheses appear as candidates for the actual world without making use of Beebe's notion of experiential possibility. Recall that an experiential possibility is a world in which the subject's experiences and memories match the subject's experiences and memories in the actual world (Beebe 2010: 466). Thus, the sceptical hypothesis outlined above, in which vat experiences are subjectively *dis*tinguishable from human experiences, is not an experiential possibility (assuming we are human beings). Nevertheless, it might be said to be experientially possible in a different sense: we can *imagine* that it is true; we can imagine that we are brains in vats and that our experiences are the vat experiences described by the sceptical hypothesis. We need an explanation of why this is, one that does not rest on considerations of

subjective indistinguishability. I will turn now to a defence of P2 to explain why different accounts of one's circumstances have the appearance of possibility, and why sceptical hypotheses have the force that they do.

I have argued elsewhere that there is a special problem about taking oneself, *qua* subject, as an object (Doerksen 2022). I call this the 'subject-as-object problem' and I've argued that it interferes with attempts to arrive at an account of the object that is the subject of one's first-person perspective. My discussion of this problem begins with the assumption that subjects play a central role in determining which things become present and how they become present. This is the same assumption we noted above as being integral to the construction of Cartesian sceptical hypotheses. I then argue that this conception of subjecthood results in a unique problem for attempts to develop an objective account of oneself, insofar as one's first-personal grip on what it is for something to be present cannot provide the right kind of foothold for inquiry aimed at discovering *which* object (and what *kind* of object) is the subject of one's first-person perspective.

There is much to unpack here, but the key idea is that one's grip on what it is for something to be present is not sufficient to establish what I call 'the framework of objectivity', or a view of the world on which things can stand in relations of *being present to* subjects, and on which presence is something in the world (a relation) that can itself be investigated. Against the backdrop of this framework, we can make sense of (1) the possibility of inquiry, insofar as inquiry requires a subject who can influence what becomes present and when it becomes present and (2) the possibility of inquiry *aimed at* subjects of experience and presence, insofar as they must have a place, so to speak, in the world, in order to become *targets* of inquiry. The problem arises when we observe that presence is not originally given to us as 'one thing among others in the world' (Doerksen 2022: 15), or as something that is *there* to be investigated in the way that we investigate ordinary things in our environment. Certain assumptions, including assumptions about what a subject of experience is, must first be made in order to inquire into the nature of presence, and this means that our original, first-personal grip on presence cannot serve as a starting point for inquiry aimed at ourselves *qua* subjects of experience. The subject-as-object problem threatens any attempt to arrive at an objective account of oneself (*qua* subject of experience) in a non-circular way.

In essence, the subject-as-object problem it is a problem about how to find a starting point, within one's experience, for inquiry directed at the conditions of the possibility of one's experience, where the inability to do so results in a gap between one's first-person perspective and accounts of oneself. This gap is experienced as a limitation on one's ability to see how an object, with a certain set of properties, situated in a certain way, could have *this* very perspective on the world (i.e. the perspective one takes to be one's own). It thus leaves room to wonder about one's identity as a particular object/kind of object. Most

importantly for our purposes, this way of supporting P2 does not rest on claims about subjective indistinguishability. The subject-as-object problem is rooted in limitations on inquiry into the conditions of the possibility of experience, rather than relations of subjective indistinguishability between experiences.

If we accept this defence of P2, and the rest of the argument outlined above, then we are left with the view that sceptical hypotheses derive their force from a gap that exists between the subject's first-person perspective and objective accounts of the circumstances in which things are present to the subject. This is the same gap that I have described as interfering with attempts to arrive at objective accounts of oneself; it is a gap that leaves room for questions about one's identity as an object. The argument outlined above shows how this very gap (or this room for questioning one's identity as an object) *also* necessarily leaves room for questions about whether a given sceptical hypothesis accurately characterizes the circumstances in which one's experiences are occurring. This is because subjects are assumed to be an important part of the circumstances in which experiences occur.

This view of sceptical hypotheses has an important advantage: it can account for the force of sceptical hypotheses that are subjectively *dis*tinguishable. Subjectively distinguishable hypotheses have sceptical force because it is always possible to wonder whether they describe one's own circumstances (as per the argument given above).

Furthermore, this view has implications for how we understand and respond to scepticism about the external world. If it is right to say that sceptical hypotheses grip us because of a broader problem about giving objective accounts of ourselves, then a new space for reasoning about the sceptical challenge opens up. It is not imperative that we begin with discussions of subjectively indistinguishable 'good' and 'bad' cases; rather, we can start further back with a discussion of the extent to which 'room to wonder' about one's identity threatens *knowledge* of one's identity and the circumstances of one's experiences. This will involve examining how the relation between one's first-person perspective and objective accounts of one's circumstances shapes the sceptical challenge.[3]

This shift in focus makes it clear that external world scepticism and the 'problem of perception' are importantly distinct. Crane and French (2021) characterize the problem of perception as a problem for direct realist accounts of perception, accounts that aim to preserve our ordinary understanding of perceptual experience as something that involves the unmediated, direct presentation of objects in the external world. The problem of perception is motivated by arguments from illusion and hallucination that threaten our ordinary understanding of perceptual experience as something that enables this unmediated relation to the external world. Hallucinations are worrisome,

[3]See, for example, Nagel's (1986) discussion of scepticism.

in part, because they can be *subjectively indistinguishable* from veridical experiences. To account for this point about subjective indistinguishability, it might be thought that we need to treat hallucinations as being of the same kind as veridical perceptual experiences. This might then drive one to adopt an *indirect* realist view of perception, on which we are directly presented with 'sense data' or 'ideas' or 'sense impressions' in perception instead of external world objects.[4]

The problem of perception is often closely associated with scepticism about the external world. Macarthur (2003) notes that the 'traditional line' is that scepticism, like the problem of perception, is motivated by the argument from hallucination, which is used to motivate indirect realist views of perception that isolate us from the world.[5] Intuitively, the thought is that indirect realist views of perception are inherently sceptical because they interpose a 'veil of perception' between subjects and the external world, making knowledge of the external world a matter of dubious inference from appearance to reality. Perhaps, if we were able to avoid inherently sceptical views of perception by responding differently to arguments from illusion and hallucination (that turn on considerations about subjective indistinguishability), we would be able to avoid scepticism about the external world.

However, if my account of sceptical hypotheses is right, then the sceptical challenge, unlike the problem of perception, does *not* hinge on worries about subjectively indistinguishable hallucinations, and responses to the problem of perception do not answer the sceptical challenge. In other words, solutions to the problem of perception that manage to resist the worry about subjectively indistinguishable hallucinations in order to establish some form of direct realism do not thereby diminish the force of the sceptical challenge. This is because *any* account of perception is on the same footing as other bits of one's overall characterization of one's circumstances; accounts of perception are equally vulnerable to the worry that one might be mistaken about the nature of one's circumstances, which include one's perceptual relations to the world. The sceptical challenge exploits the fact that there is always room to wonder whether one's *own situation* is characterized by an (anti-sceptical) view of perception.

Before concluding, I want to briefly revisit the intuition that subjective indistinguishability is indispensable. Consider the following picture, on which

[4]There are different ways to avoid this conclusion. One could, for example, adopt a disjunctivist approach and deny that hallucinations and veridical perceptual experiences are of the same kind. Alternatively, one could accept that they are of the same kind but deny the 'relational assumption' in the background of sense-datum theories of perception (Soteriou 2016). If perceptual experience is not essentially relational, then we do not need to posit entities to which we are related in cases of hallucination and veridical perceptual experience.

[5]Descartes' own construal of the dreaming argument in Meditation VI (Cottingham et al. 1984: 53) seems to support this line.

subjective indistinguishability is deemed necessary for effective sceptical hypotheses: a set of possible worlds, each partially characterized by a representation of how things seem to the subject in that world, are compared with one's own experience. In this set, the possible worlds that are stipulated to be subjectively indistinguishable from one's own experience are thought to present a special challenge insofar as there is a *prima facie* difficulty involved in eliminating them on the basis of one's experience.

We can now make the following observation about this picture: when one imagines a set of possible worlds in which one is stipulated to be having experiences indistinguishable from *this* one (i.e. from one's current experience), it is possible to wonder about which of these possible worlds could in fact give rise to an experience like this one. In other words, although it is easy to *imagine* or *conceive* of worlds that are subjectively indistinguishable from this one, there is still room to wonder whether the possible worlds in question could *in fact* give rise to the experiences that one imagines to be taking place in those worlds. After all, there is a fact of the matter about which circumstances are responsible for one's current experience and there is a fact of the matter about which circumstances could give rise to experiences indistinguishable from this experience. If the argument I have outlined above is right, then space to question one's identity as an object makes it possible to wonder about which circumstances these might be.

Sceptics and non-sceptics are unlikely to worry about this sort of point. It is often granted that a brain-in-a-vat, for example, could have experiences that are indistinguishable from one's own experiences; we needn't get hung up on the details of how this would work! This seems right, but I believe that we miss something important by glossing over the fact that one *could* wonder about what sort of set-up it would take to produce experiences that are indistinguishable from one's own. In particular, we miss the opportunity to investigate the relation between having an experience and having an account of the circumstances in which that experience occurs. When we compare possible worlds, in which certain experiences are paired with certain circumstances, to see whether the experiences 'match' one another, we overlook the relation between the individual experiences and their circumstances. We fail to consider what it would take for a subject in one of those worlds to move from having an experience to having an account of the circumstances in which it occurs.

A picture on which a set of possible worlds are compared with one another fails to address the gap between having an experience and having an account of the circumstances in which that experience occurs. I have argued that this gap is responsible for the force of sceptical hypotheses, and so it follows that this picture obscures the reason sceptical hypotheses are difficult to eliminate. This picture also obscures the reason why it is so easy to construct subjectively indistinguishable hypotheses in the first place. One can easily conceive of subjectively indistinguishable sceptical hypotheses *because* there

is a question about which circumstances might give rise to an experience like *this* one. One can easily superimpose one's experience onto a variety of third-personal representations of various circumstances *because* of a gap that exists between one's experience and third-personal accounts of the circumstances in which that experience occurs. This gap is exploited in the construction of subjectively indistinguishable possibilities, which are then presented as the source of the difficulty. The real difficulty, however, lies in determining the circumstances responsible for one's current experience. To think that the difficulty lies in one's inability to eliminate subjectively indistinguishable worlds is to get things the wrong way around.

To summarize, the gap that makes it easy to construct subjectively indistinguishable sceptical hypotheses is the same gap that makes it difficult to eliminate them, and it is this gap, rather than the stipulated subjective indistinguishability of sceptical hypotheses, that lends them their force. Insofar as there is room to question first-person identity statements, there is room to wonder whether a given sceptical hypothesis describes the circumstances of one's current experience.

In conclusion, it is often thought that sceptical hypotheses present a special challenge because the experiences of the subject in a sceptical hypothesis are stipulated to 'match' one's current experience. I have argued that the emphasis on subjective indistinguishability obscures the reason why sceptical hypotheses are compelling. The deeper issue lies not in the comparison of experiences but in the relation between one's experience and objective accounts of the circumstances in which that experience occurs. There is a gap here that leaves room to wonder about one's circumstances in such a way that sceptical hypotheses gain a foothold, regardless of whether they are subjectively indistinguishable.[6]

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