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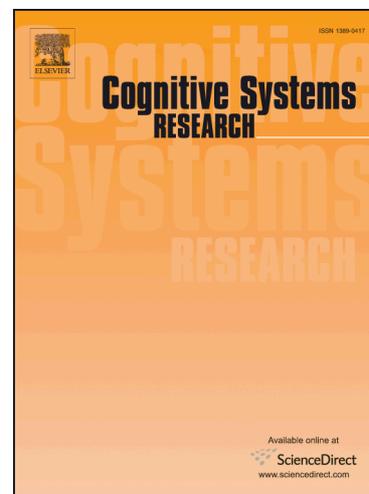
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Skepticism Revisited:
Chalmers on *The Matrix* and brains-in-vats

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Abstract—Thought experiments involving *The Matrix*, brains-in-vats, or Cartesian demons have traditionally thought to describe skeptical possibilities. David Chalmers has denied this, claiming that the simulations involved are real enough to at least sometimes defeat the skeptic. Through an examination of the meaning of kind terms in natural language I argue that, though the Chalmers view may be otherwise attractive, it is not an antidote to skepticism.

Keywords—Putnam; Chalmers; brain-in-a-vat; Matrix; simulation; skepticism; kind terms

I. STANDARD SKEPTICISM, AND STANDARD RESPONSES TO IT

In “*The Matrix* as Metaphysics,” [1] David Chalmers argues that we in the philosophical tradition have gravely misunderstood hypotheses such as Descartes’ demon, the brain-in-a-vat (BIV), and the Matrix. These are not essentially skeptical hypotheses, Chalmers tells us. Rather, they are interesting metaphysical hypotheses.

Chalmers’ basic argument is an extension of some points that Hilary Putnam made in “The Meaning of ‘Meaning,’” and “Brains in a Vat.” [2], [3] Putnam uses a theoretical background of the causal theory of reference, which Chalmers claims to avoid relying on; Chalmers tells us he wants to derive the causal theory rather than assume it. But since the order of dependence will not matter for my purposes here, I will employ the causal theory for explication of the arguments.

First let’s rehearse the tradition that Putnam and Chalmers rebut. Suppose that I am not a BIV. Then I am not now in Tucson. And a good thing, too, since I believe I am not in Tucson right now, and like Russell’s pedant I prefer my beliefs to be true. Suppose further that there is a BIV in Tucson right now, being manipulated by clever scientists to have experiences that seem to justify it in believing it is not in Tucson right now. It believes it is not in Tucson right now, and this belief seems to be false, since the BIV *is*, we just supposed, in Tucson right now. Bad news for the BIV.

Moreover, the tradition continues, bad news for me as well, since although it’s true that I am not in Tucson right now, nothing in my present experience conclusively rules out the possibility that I am a BIV in Tucson having an experience of not being in Tucson right now, in which case my belief would be false. Given some plausible assumptions, it follows that I don’t know much. At least, and this will be our focus, my empirical beliefs about the external world, no matter how justified, fall short of propositional knowledge.

Let’s examine this skeptical argument in more detail. Consider:

A. I know I have hands.

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