Fourth Edition

Philosophy Through Film

Amy Karofsky and Mary M. Litch

"Outstanding! I am a major fan of this book and have used it with great success in my philosophy and film classes. The 4th edition continues to give philosophical substance to course content that might otherwise wander too far in the direction of mere film review. The writing style is down to earth, and the philosophical topics are traditional ones that work perfectly in introduction to philosophy courses. The authors smartly confine the book to just 16 films that can realistically be viewed during a single semester, and their choice of films is spot on, including both current and classic ones."

James Fieser, University of Tennessee at Martin

Praise for previous editions:
"A valuable book for introducing students to the wonder of philosophical exploration and the power of philosophical reasoning to force us to reevaluate our reflexive responses to fundamental questions, such as the nature of truth or the self."

Jennifer Hansen, St. Lawrence University

"With clarity that doesn't compromise rigor, Mary Litch and Amy Karofsky introduce readers new to philosophy to some of its most enduring concerns and seminal questions, including skepticism, personal identity, artificial intelligence, and political philosophy"

Mark Uffelman, Millersville University

"Highly recommended for the introductory philosophy classroom, as well as for anyone who likes movies that make you think."

Nathan Andersen, Collegium of Letters, Saint Petersburg, FL

PHILOSOPHY THROUGH FILM

In *Philosophy Through Film*, Amy Karofsky and Mary M. Litch use recently released, well-received films to explore answers to classic questions in philosophy in an approachable yet philosophically rigorous manner. Each chapter incorporates two or three films to examine one longstanding philosophical question or problem and assess some of the best solutions that have been offered to it. The authors fully integrate the films into their discussion of the issues, using them to help students to become familiar with key topics in all major areas of Western philosophy and master the techniques of philosophical argumentation. Revised and expanded, changes to the Fourth Edition include:

- A brand new chapter on the mind-body problem (chapter four), which includes discussions of substance dualism, physicalism, eliminativism, functionalism, and other relevant theories.
- The replacement of older movies with nine new focus films: *Ad Astra, Arrival, Beautiful Boy, Divergent, Ex Machina, Her, Live Die Repeat: Edge of Tomorrow, A Serious Man*, and *Silence.*
- The addition of two new primary readings: excerpts from Patricia Smith Churchland's, "Can Neurobiology Teach Us Anything about Consciousness?" and Frank Jackson's "What Mary Didn't Know"
- Story Lines of Films by Elapsed Time for each focus film are included in an accompanying eResource.

The films examined in depth are: *Ad Astra, Arrival, Beautiful Boy, Crimes and Misdemeanors, Divergent, Equilibrium, Ex Machina, Gone Baby Gone, Her, Inception, Live Die Repeat: Edge of Tomorrow, The Matrix, Memento, Minority Report, Moon, A Serious Man*, and *Silence*

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PREFACE

Philosophy Through Film is geared for use as the primary textbook in a first course in philosophy and covers the same topics as a standard introductory text. However, the novel avenues for philosophic exploration opened up by the use of film make *Philosophy Through Film* appropriate for an upper-level course in some contexts. The movie enthusiast interested in a deeper understanding and appreciation of films could also find the book engaging and informative.

Some feature films can be interpreted as attempts to provide answers to classic questions within philosophy. This is an underlying assumption of *Philosophy Through Film*. Each chapter examines one such question in an approachable yet philosophically rigorous manner, using one or two focus films as a source for the standard positions and arguments associated with that question. The discussion of the films in question is fully integrated into the discussion of the philosophical issue within the authored portion of the book: the films are not mere "add-ons" to an otherwise straightforward introductory philosophy text. One consequence is that the bulk of each chapter is most fruitfully read after viewing the relevant films. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction (to the topic and to the films) to be read first; however, the remainder of each chapter assumes that the reader has already seen the one or two films associated with that chapter and has them freshly in mind. Associated with each chapter are one, two, or three readings from primary sources that are collected together at the end of the book. For those instructors who wish to assign readings from the most historically significant texts mentioned in each chapter, those readings are available. For those instructors who prefer to use *Philosophy Through Film* as an authored text, that is also an option: while occasional reference is made to a relevant reading, any passages from these texts discussed in detail in a chapter will be quoted in that chapter.

The focus films associated with each chapter run the gamut of styles and genres. The main requirement for inclusion was philosophical relevance: Does the movie "cover the topic" in a way that will be familiar to philosophers? A second requirement for inclusion is that the film is engaging for the typical American undergraduate. This means that many of the focus films are

high-budget, high-production value films that initially saw wide theatrical release. However, with the advent of streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video, some very good films go straight to video and cannot be seen in theaters. While we continue to use the blockbuster test that we applied when choosing titles for the earlier editions, we will also consider films that have excellent ratings and have had wide-viewership online.

For the fourth edition, a new chapter, "The Mind-Body Problem," has been added. It appears as the fourth chapter and uses *The Matrix* as well as the recent film, *Live, Die, Repeat: Edge of Tomorrow* (2014). Patricia Churchland's piece, "Can Neurobiology Teach us Anything about Consciousness?" and Frank Jackson's article, "What Mary Didn't Know," have been added to Readings from Primary Sources for that new chapter. In addition, two existing chapters have been revised to cover the relevant problem being considered more generally. The chapter that was originally titled "The Problem of Evil" is now "Philosophy of Religion." And what was "Existentialism" is now "The Meaning of Life." For those and other chapters, some older films were swapped out in favor of the following recent releases: *Arrival* (2016), *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2015), *Beautiful Boy* (2018), *Divergent* (2014), *A Serious Man* (2009), *Silence* (2016), and *Ad Astra* (2019). Finally, in an attempt to avoid "page creep" and to keep the cost of the book down for students, we have eliminated some of the lists of books and articles at the end of each chapter, although we have kept the lists of relevant films. To further save space, we have moved the 'Story Lines of Films by Elapsed Time' online. These are useful in helping locate particular scenes for classroom or home viewing, and they can be accessed via a link on the book's product page found here: www.routledge. com/9780367408503.

We would like to thank two Hofstra University faculty members—Amy Baehr and John Farley—for reading drafts of chapters and offering comments on some of the films. Thanks, also, to many Hofstra students who were in *Philosophic Themes in Film* courses in the Spring of 2019 and the students in *Introduction to Philosophy* in the Fall of 2019. We would also like to thank the members of the Chapman University Philosophy Club. As always, responsibility for any leftover errors remains our own.

Notes on using this book

Films: The structure within all of the chapters follows the same pattern. The first two or three sections serve as a general introduction to the topic and are intended to be read *before* that chapter's focus film or films are screened. Sections thereafter will make repeated reference to the film(s), so they are best read only *afterward*.

Readings: Corresponding to each chapter are readings from primary sources. These readings have been selected based on their significance within the

history of philosophy and their offering of complete arguments on central issues within the space of just a few pages. The readings are printed at the back of the book.

eResource: To assist with finding specific moments in the films, storylines by elapsed time are available for each film on the Routledge website: www.routledge.com/9780367408503.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

0.1 What Is Philosophy?

While it is hard to give a one-sentence definition of the term *philosophy*, it is relatively easy to describe the field by reviewing some of the classic questions philosophers study. Here are some examples. What is truth? Is it objective or subjective? What are the limits of human knowledge (for example, can I *know* that an external world exists?) Does it even make sense to talk about the way that the world is apart from our conceptualization of it? What is the nature of reality? What makes me *me*? What does it mean to have a mind? Is there a difference between the mind and the brain? What distinguishes morally right from morally wrong action? Under what circumstances can I be held morally responsible for my actions? Do I have an obligation to obey the laws of the state? Does God exist? If so, why is there so much evil in the world? Does life have meaning? At first glance, nothing seems to tie these diverse questions together, leaving the impression that they are all considered "philosophical" questions only because of some historical accident in the development of the Western intellectual tradition. On closer examination, however, the questions are seen to share at least one attribute in common—they are all basic questions. By basic, we mean that each of these questions must be among the first questions asked when building a framework for thinking about and acting in the world.

The usual method employed by philosophers in examining one of these questions is to describe and then argue for a particular answer to it. An **argument** is nothing but a set of reasons that are given to back up or justify some statement. For example, the skeptic argues for the view that we cannot know that an external world exists by giving us reasons to believe that we cannot have such knowledge.

Can a Film Carry Philosophical Content?

The usual form in which philosophical discussions are carried out is the written or spoken word. But is the written or spoken word the *only* medium in which philosophical positions and arguments can be expressed? An

assumption of this book is that a film, with the assistance of some supplementary written material to guide the viewer in the right direction, can be used to present philosophical positions and arguments in a way that is both rigorous and entertaining.

Over the past couple of decades, academic philosophy has seen significant growth in interest in the question: Can a film carry philosophical content? In a way, though, this question is not new. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato, in his Allegory of the Cave, described a rudimentary movie house 2,300 years before the invention of moving pictures. According to Plato, nothing of philosophical interest could go on in that rudimentary movie house. To see why Plato held this view, and, more importantly, to see if his reasoning is relevant to us, it is useful to consider the role that the Allegory played in the larger work, *The Republic*, of which it is a small portion. The Allegory of the Cave is included in Readings from Primary Sources.

In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato asks us to imagine prisoners chained from birth in an underground cave. They are each chained in a way that severely restricts movement. As a result, they can see only one of the cave walls. The cave is poorly illuminated by a single torch a considerable distance behind the chained row of prisoners. Occasionally, a guard will walk between the torch and row of prisoners, and his shadow or the shadow of some object he is carrying will be cast on the wall in front of the prisoners. As the prisoners cannot turn their heads to see the torch or the guard (or their fellow prisoners), they naturally mistake the shadows they are seeing for "reality." If the guard speaks while walking past, the prisoners are likely to assume that it is the shadow that is speaking. There are several points of similarity between the prisoners in Plato's cave and people in a movie house. One point of similarity is that both sets of people have their attention focused on what is being projected on the wall in front of them. Also, both sets of people can become so drawn in to what is happening in the fictional shadow world that they mistake it for reality. (It is part of the folklore of early cinema that movie-goers occasionally mistook movies for reality; thus, the screening of a short film showing a locomotive speeding towards the camera would cause everyone to run out of the theater in panic. Even today, one regularly sees viewers so drawn in to the fictional world presented in a film that they cry when a sympathetic character suffers or become embarrassed when a character does something silly.) There are some important differences between the prisoners in the Allegory of the Cave and modern movie-goers. The most obvious of these is that modern movie-goers know about the outside world and its relationship to the movie that they are watching; whereas, Plato's prisoners know only the shadow world.

After describing the cave interior and the situation of the prisoners, the Allegory of the Cave continues as follows. Plato asks us to imagine that one of the prisoners is freed and struggles out of the cave. His initial response would be confusion: What is this I am seeing now? He might desire to return to the

safety and familiarity of the cave environment. If he perseveres in the outside world, he will come to understand that everything that he experienced in the cave was unreal, and he will begin to pity the prisoners who are still chained there. If one examines the Allegory of the Cave in the context of the surrounding text in *The Republic*, one sees that the story is much more than a premonition of cinema. For Plato, the prisoners chained in the cave are the masses of humankind who walk around in the visible world, mistaking it for reality. These masses fail to understand that the world they experience through the senses is a poor reflection of true reality—a reality that is accessible only through philosophical inquiry. To the extent that we have our attention drawn away from the world of the intellect and toward the world of the senses, to that extent we move away from philosophy. So, for Plato, the cave symbolizes a mistake about what is real and about where knowledge of true reality is to be found.

Does this mean that Plato would have a similarly dim view of the ability of cinema to offer us philosophical insight? It seems not. First, in rejecting the cave as a possible venue for philosophical inquiry, Plato was thinking of the cave as a place of sense-based experience only—not a place in which abstract ideas could be communicated. His rejection of the cave as a possible locale for philosophical inquiry was a rejection of an empirically based method for doing philosophy, not a rejection of "shadows" as a possible medium for reproducing philosophical arguments. Second, Plato wrote most of his works (including *The Republic*) in dialogue form. Many scholars believe that this choice of the dialogue form was based on his view that discussion—dialectical give and take—was the best, and perhaps the only means for gaining philosophical insight. *The Republic* is a work of philosophy because it reproduces a discussion on an appropriate set of topics. Is there any difference between a written copy of *The Republic* and a dramatic reading of it that bears on its status as a work of philosophy? Is there any difference between a dramatic reading of *The Republic* and a screening of a filmed dramatic reading of it that bears on its status as a work of philosophy? We believe that the answer to both of these questions is no.

Some contemporary philosophers would disallow a filmed dramatic reading of *The Republic* as positive evidence that a film can carry philosophical content. They would object that the question: Can a film carry philosophical content? presupposes that we consider only the specifically cinematic attributes of film (that is, a film's visual and the narrative elements) in answering the question.[1] Thus, philosophy that takes place in dialogue or is embedded in structural elements of a film is off-limits. Given our present interest in using film in the instruction in philosophy, we have no qualms about taking philosophical content wherever we can find it.

Thus, film offers the philosopher the full expressive power of language, plus the visual and narrative elements that makes film such a good vehicle for introducing students to philosophy. Film, like other forms of fiction, can even make the transition to philosophical thinking easier. We mentioned above that

one of the classic questions within philosophy is: Can I know that an external (mind-independent) world exists? At first glance, this might strike you as an absolutely preposterous question. "Of course, I can!" you answer. Indeed, the original question might strike you as so preposterous that it does not deserve serious thought. A movie can be an effective tool for introducing a philosophical topic, because it allows the viewer to drop many preconceived notions. We are all used to suspending our commonsense views about how the world works in the context of fiction. This suspension can be used to the philosopher's advantage. Consider the film *Inception*. It first draws the viewer into the fictional world created by the film, pointing out that the protagonist cannot know that *his* experiences represent an external world or that *his* memories correspond to experiences that he had in the past. It is only once the viewer has accepted this that the film's subtext becomes clear: *the viewer* is in exactly the same position as the character. This realization can produce an "Aha!" experience—a sense of sudden understanding—that skepticism (the thesis that we cannot know that an external world exists) is not so preposterous after all!

Other films can have the same force. Indeed, our main criterion for using films in this book is that they do just that—that they present and defend an answer to one of philosophy's classic questions. Whether the writer or director responsible for a film had the intention of doing philosophy is beside the point. Each film that we will be discussing deals with one or more of the questions posed in the first paragraph of this chapter. *Arrival* could be interpreted as presenting arguments for relativism—the view that the truth of all statements can be judged only relative to a conceptual scheme and other background assumptions. As already noted, *Inception* offers us a defense of skepticism, as does *The Matrix*. *Moon* and *Memento* consider what makes a person who they are: Is it my body, my mind, or my immaterial soul that identifies me at birth as the same person I am now? *The Matrix* and *Live, Die, Repeat: Edge of Tomorrow* help to explore the question whether the mind is a distinct entity from the brain. *Her* and *Ex Machina* pose questions at the intersection of philosophy and artificial intelligence: What does it mean to have a mind? What does it mean to be a person (in the sense of someone who has moral rights)? *Minority Report* and *Beautiful Boy* consider the question of whether human beings are free: Do I have free will, or are all of my actions determined by the laws of nature governing the universe? *Gone Baby Gone* and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* examine the nature of morality: When faced with a decision, how do I know which choice is *right*? And which ethical theory is the correct one to use to figure that out? *Divergent* and *Equilibrium* address problems within political philosophy: Do I have an obligation to obey laws? What is a *just* state? *A Serious Man* and *Silence* concern philosophical issues with respect to religion: Is there proof that God exists? And, if God does exist, why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? *A Serious Man* and *Ad Astra* are useful sources to consider the questions, Does human life has meaning? If so, is it subjective or objective? And can life have meaning if there is no God?

Tips on How to Watch a Film Philosophically

Films can offer philosophical content in several different ways. As we have noted, a film can simply reproduce a position or an argument in its entirety via dialogue, thereby offering up philosophy in its usual linguistic form. While this does occasionally occur, it is quite rare. Much more common is the case in which a film offers us a fictional world with the key elements of a thought experiment and sufficient context within the film to interpret those elements *as* a thought experiment.

When presenting a thought experiment within the more traditional vehicle for philosophy—the essay—a philosopher describes a hypothetical situation and asks the reader how they interpret what is going on: for example, would they assent to statement X's being an accurate description of the situation? To take a particular example, suppose a philosopher were investigating what criteria determine whether a person at one time is the same person as a person at another time. The philosopher might describe the case of someone who has a form of amnesia that causes them to forget everything that happened prior to a few minutes ago.[2] The philosopher might then pose the following question: Is the person who goes to bed at the end of the day the same person as the person who wakes up that next morning? The reader would then be left to determine what their intuitions tell them about such a case. The role that this particular thought experiment plays would depend on the context in which the philosopher is using the thought experiment; the philosopher perhaps assumes that the reader will say that the person who wakes is a different person from the person who went to bed. This response would then be used by the philosopher as evidence against a theory that tied personal identity to physical continuity of the body. The pattern exemplified in this thought experiment is typical: a philosopher (i) presents theory T; (ii) presents a hypothetical situation, S; (iii) notes that T makes some prediction, P, related to S; (iv) asks the reader whether they agree with P; and (v) explicitly notes that a discrepancy between P and the reader's intuitive response implies that T is false. How would this pattern of thought experiment be realized in film? Step (ii) is easy, as it is the job of a fiction film to present a series of hypothetical situations. Steps (i), (iii), and (v) are a bit trickier, but not impossible: they might be stated or at least alluded to in dialogue. Step (iv) is something that the viewer does on their own. The film can encourage the viewer to take this step in various ways; the most common method is to depict a conversation among several characters in which one character insists that P is true and the other insists that P is false. Once steps (i) through (v) have been recognized by the viewer, the argument is complete. Films differ in how explicit the various steps are: in some cases, one or more of the steps are a bit of a stretch. In that case, some prior knowledge of the relevant philosophic topic can help to fill in the gaps. That is one of the functions performed by this book.

It should be noted that the legitimacy of thought experiments within philosophical argumentation has been a controversial topic within academic philosophy. Given that a significant number of the film-based arguments that we will consider in the following chapters involve the use of thought experiments, this debate affects the legitimacy of using film to explore philosophical topics. Unfortunately, examining this debate further would take us too far afield. Therefore, throughout this book, we will assume that the use of thought experiments in argumentation is legitimate.

Obviously, for Hollywood blockbusters, the purpose of the film is to entertain audiences and, ultimately, to make money; the purpose is not to engage in philosophy. However, many screenwriters and directors have at least some background in philosophy. This is why, even in some very mainstream commercial films, one sees in the construction of the story, the dialogue, and the visual elements that the screenwriter and director are running into philosophical topics and discovering independently how to reason through them. Writing such thought experiments that appear in films involves **creative thinking**. The creative thinker develops novel ways to think about old problems; comes up with innovative solutions to those problems; and devises original methods to help others to understand the relevant issues. Learning how to think creatively is a useful tool not only for the philosopher and the screenwriter, but for the physician attempting to diagnose an unusual case; the scientist working to find a cure for Alzheimer's; and the inventor searching for a new technological advance.

There is one other role that film can play in the context of philosophy. In addition to helping a viewer to think creatively, a movie can also help the viewer to *think critically* by presenting them with views to which they have not (yet) been exposed. Think back, again, to Plato's Allegory of the Cave. The prisoners believe that the shadows on the wall are *real* people and *real* objects and not merely shadows of them. They believe this because this is all they have ever known and because everyone else in the cave believes the same. When the prisoner who has been freed leaves the cave, the brightness of the sun is painful to his eyes (remember, he has been in a dark cave all of his life). But slowly he becomes acclimated to the light and is able to look around at the world outside of the cave. He sees real trees and real animals and, as a result, comes to realize that much of what he took to be true about the world when he was in the cave is in fact false.

A **critical thinker** will be open to examining their own beliefs and the reasons that they have for holding them. They will try to recognize when a belief is the product of their upbringing or the culture in which they live and to be aware of any biases that they might have as a result. For example, if I was raised by my parents and community to believe that *guns are bad*, I could tend to reject any reasons in support of gun ownership, even if they are strong. To think critically, I must try to avoid being too emotionally or psychologically attached to my anti-gun position that I will not allow anything to count

against it. Instead, I will work to be open-minded about views that differ from my own and to take opposing views seriously, without immediately rejecting them. I will also accept the possibility that my own beliefs could turn out to be false. Like the prisoner coming into the bright sun for the first time, it can be disconcerting to come face to face with a new and different perspective. It can also be quite troubling to discover that a long-held belief might not be true, especially when it is a core belief upon which many life-decisions are based. But a critical thinker will recognize that it is better to hold a belief for good reasons, than to hold it only because it is the view that they have always held or because their family and friends believe it to be true.

Most likely, you already hold some views with respect to many of the issues that will be explored in the movies and covered in the following chapters. You might find that some views match up with your own and that some do not. There could be some explanations that you have never encountered before and some accounts that differ from the one that you take to be correct. As you explore various solutions to the problems, try to evaluate them as a critical thinker. As much as possible, attempt to maintain some distance from your own views, consider different notions in a fair-minded way, and assess whether there are good reasons supporting a position before accepting or rejecting it.

Layout of the Book

Even though philosophy through film is an unorthodox approach to teaching philosophy, the topics have been chosen to cover roughly the same material as a standard introductory textbook. Each chapter corresponds to one of the classic questions within philosophy. The structure within all of the chapters follows the same pattern. The first two or three sections serve as a general introduction to the topic and are intended to be read *before* that chapter's focus film or films are screened. Sections thereafter will make repeated reference to the film(s), so they are best read only *afterward*. A discussion of a specific scene includes a *minute mark* (MM), indicating the elapsed time in the film from when the scene starts. Corresponding to each chapter is one or more readings from primary sources. These readings have been selected based on their significance within the history of philosophy and their offering of complete arguments on central issues within the space of just a few pages. The readings themselves are printed in the Appendix at the back of the book.

Notes

1. See, for example, Thomas Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
2. What we have described is the story line for the film *Memento*, one of the focus films for Chapter 3 on personal identity.

1

TRUTH

Arrival (2016)

LOUISE: We don't know if they understand the difference between a *weapon* and a *tool*. Our language, like our culture, is messy, and sometimes one can be both.
IAN: And it's quite possible that they're asking us to offer them something, not the other way around.
WEBER: So, how do we clarify their intentions beyond those two words?

Arrival

LOUISE: The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The theory that … the language you speak determines how you think and, yeah, it affects how you see everything.

Arrival

A philosopher searches for the *truth* about the world. But what is the nature of *truth*? What does it mean for a statement to be *true*? In this chapter, we will consider various responses to these questions. In the first section, we will discuss some issues with respect to truth. Then we will provide a brief introduction to the film *Arrival*, drawing your attention to certain elements to watch for watch during your viewing. The next few sections will lay out various theories of truth, using scenes from the movie to help to explain and assess those theories.

1.1 Issues with Respect to Truth

The Greek philosopher, **Aristotle** (384 BCE−322 BCE), one of the earliest and most influential philosophers in the history of Western thought, explains truth and falsity like this: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true."[1] Notice that Aristotle defines truth and falsity in terms of what we *say*. We communicate by using combinations of words that form *statements*. Some statements are questions like "Are you feeling ill?" and some statements are warnings like "Be careful!" Notice that such statements are not asserting that something is true or false. Statements that do propose that a certain idea

is true or false are **propositions**. The following are examples of propositions: "brown is a color," "some dogs are brown," and "all birds are brown." The same proposition can be expressed by different statements. Thus, the English statement "brown is a color," the Spanish statement "el marrón es un color," and the Icelandic statement "brúnn er litur" all express the same proposition.

According to Aristotle, each proposition that we use to express the facts about the world is either true, or it is false. Notice that because Aristotle takes truth to be a property of a proposition, truth is not appropriately applied to objects or events. So, for him, it is not appropriate to say that *heptapods* (the creatures in *Arrival*) are *true* aliens, but it is appropriate to consider whether the proposition "heptapods are aliens" is true. Different philosophers provide different theories concerning how we ought to assess the truth-value of propositions. We will examine some of those *theories of truth* in this chapter.

We might wonder whether any propositions are **objectively** true—that is, true independent of the perceptions, biases, feelings, and opinions of thinking beings. An objective truth would be a proposition that is true at all times, in all places, and for all rational beings. Many believe that mathematical truths, like "1 + 2 = 3," are objective, as it seems that no matter who you are or where or when you live, it is true that 1 + 2 = 3. However, one might maintain that because math is a human invention, mathematical propositions cannot be objectively true. Perhaps we could have decided to use *6* (instead of *2*) to name this many objects: * *. And in that case "1 + 2 = 3" would be false and "1 + 6 = 3" would be true, instead. But as we saw above, there could be different ways to express the same proposition. So, it is important to keep in mind that in the discussion of truth we are not so much interested in the symbols or the words used to express a proposition; instead we are interested in the proposition that those symbols and words are expressing. When assessing the truth of the proposition "1 + 2 = 3," we focus not on the symbols (*1*, +, = and so on) but on the proposition that is being expressed by those symbols. In this case, the proposition indicates that when we put this many: * together with this many: * * we get this many: * * *. Indeed, we could use the word "Fred" to indicate this many objects: * *. But that would not change the fact that there are still just this many objects: * *. And because it is difficult to see how this many: * added to this many: * * could be anything other than this many: * * *, we can understand why so many philosophers believe that mathematical propositions are objectively true.

But even if there are some objectively true propositions, one might maintain that there are also *subjective truths*. A claim is **subjectively true** when it depends on what a person feels or perceives. Because two people can have different experiences of the same thing, and because beliefs and opinions can differ from person to person, it would seem that the same proposition could be true for one person but false for another. For example, Mary and Amy walk outside. Mary thinks that it is cold, and Amy thinks that it is hot. But then the proposition "it is cold outside" looks to be true *for Mary*, but false *for*

Amy, in which case it would seem that the proposition must be subjectively—and not objectively—true. However, Aristotle would explain that the statement "it is cold outside" when uttered by Mary is *not* expressing the same proposition as it is when uttered by Amy. When Mary says, "It's cold outside," her statement expresses the proposition "it feels to me (Mary) that it is cold." When Amy disagrees with Mary, Amy is not saying that Mary's claim is false; instead, Amy is saying that a different proposition is true: "it feels to me (Amy) that it is hot." Because Mary's statement expresses *what Mary is feeling* and Amy's statement is about *what Amy is perceiving*, the example is not of a single proposition that is true for one person and false for another; there are actually two different propositions being asserted, both of which can be true. Aristotle explains that, in general, whenever someone says, "It's true for me that …," what they are really saying is, "I believe that it is true."

But how do we know whether a proposition is true or false? Before we examine the various theories of truth, let us first take a look at the film.

1.2 An Overview of the Movie

Arrival (2016). Directed by Denis Villeneuve
Starring Amy Adams, Jeremy Renner, Forest Whitaker

Based on Ted Chiang's short story entitled *Story of Your Life*, the film *Arrival* follows the experiences of Louise Banks, a linguist, and Ian Donnelly, a scientist, both of whom have been enlisted by U.S. Army officer, Colonel Weber, to figure out why a group of aliens—called *heptapods*—have arrived in 12 different places on Earth. The heptapods do not speak any human language, so in order determine what the purpose of the alien visit is, Louise must first figure out how to communicate with them. In accordance with the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesi*s, as Louise becomes fluent in the alien language, she begins to *see* and *think* about the world in the way that the heptapods do. In particular, whereas humans experience time *linearly* and *sequentially*—one moment following another—heptapods experience time *simultaneously*—all moments all at once. Thus, as Louise becomes immersed in the heptapod language, she develops the ability to experience future events.

The film highlights the role that language plays when assessing truth. Sometimes a word in one language does not translate well to another, and sometimes a word might have two different interpretations. But if we are uncertain whether a certain heptapod term means "gift" or whether it means "weapon," then a statement indicating that we ought to *use it* will mean one action if taken to mean "gift," and a very different action when interpreted to mean "weapon." How can we assess whether a statement is true or false if we are not certain what the words in the statement mean? And if there are different interpretations of the same term, how do we know which

interpretation is *correct*? Or could it be the case that there is no one correct interpretation? As we will see in the next few sections, there are different answers to such questions depending on the theory of truth that is being considered.

1.3 The Correspondence Theory of Truth

In Section 1.1, we saw that Aristotle maintains that a proposition is such that it is either true, or it is false (what is known as the *law of excluded middle*). But what makes a true proposition true? According to Aristotle, a proposition is true when it corresponds to what is in fact the case, and a proposition is false when it does not correspond with what is in fact the case. For example, the proposition "a dog is an animal" is true because a dog that *is in fact* an animal. The proposition "a dog is not an animal" is false because it does not align with the facts. So, Aristotle seems to posit a straight-forward theory of truth: a proposition is true if it matches up with reality or what is in fact the case.

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) offers a theory of truth that is similar to Aristotle's. Russell provides an explanation of his theory of truth in his book, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912). Selections from the chapter, "Truth and Falsehood," are provided in Readings from Primary Sources (Reading 1a, 256). Russell focuses on *beliefs*, rather than propositions. For him, a belief, like a proposition, proposes that an idea is either true or false. And on his account, "[A] belief is true when there is a corresponding fact, and is false when there is no corresponding fact."[2] In other words, a true belief matches up with what is in fact the case, and a false belief does not. So, according to both Aristotle and Russell, truth must include: (1) a proposition or belief and (2) reality or facts. When (1) *corresponds* with (2), we have a true proposition or belief. This is the **correspondence theory of truth**.

Russell explains that facts about the world are independent of thought, and thus there is a mind-independent reality—a world made up of objects that exists independently of what anyone or any group of people happens to think. **Cognitive objectivism** is the position that combines the thesis that the world is mind-independent and the correspondence theory of truth. So, the cognitive objectivist holds that what makes a proposition or a belief true is its relationship to a fact about the world. And because the world is mind-independent, minds do not decide what is true and what is false. For the cognitive objectivist, then, there are only objective truths and no subjective truths. This means that if two people hold opposing views, they cannot both be asserting the truth. As Russell writes, "We know that on very many subjects different people hold different and incompatible opinions: hence some beliefs must be erroneous." However, Russell explains, it is not always easy to know which beliefs are true and which are false: "Since erroneous beliefs are often

held just as strongly as true beliefs, it becomes a difficult question how they are to be distinguished from true beliefs."[3]

Consider one of the crucial moments in the film: Louise asks the two heptapods—whom they have named *Abbott* and *Costello*—why they came to earth. The heptapods reply is "offer weapon" (MM 1:06:53). The Chinese General, Shang, interprets the phrase *offer weapon* as *a threat to humanity*; he believes that the heptapods want to turn humans against themselves in order to eliminate the human race. As a result of Shang's interpretation, China declares war against the aliens and delivers an ultimatum to them: leave in 24 hours or face destruction. But Louise believes that the heptapods want to *save humanity*. She thinks that the aliens are offering a *gift*, not a *weapon*; the gift that is offered is the heptapod language and, with it, the ability to see the future. So, there are two *opposing* beliefs: Shang believes that the heptapods want to destroy humanity, and Louise believes that they do not. However, it soon becomes clear that Louise has a better understanding of the heptapod language, and it also becomes evident that her belief about the heptapods' purpose on earth matches up with reality. By the end of the film, when Louise is able to read the heptapod writing, she learns that the heptapods need to help humanity so that three thousand years from now humans can help to save the heptapods. Thus, according to the correspondence theory, Louise's belief—"the heptapods want to save humanity"—is true because it corresponds with the facts, and Shang's belief—"the heptapods want to destroy humanity"—is false because it does not.

The above example presents another problem for the correspondence theory of truth. Although we do our best to use words to express what is going on in the world, there is an imperfect relationship between language and reality. Just try to get a group of words to perfectly convey a beautiful sunset; can anything that you say or write even come close to expressing it? In general, it seems that no group of words could ever come close to matching up exactly with actual objects. (In the next section, we will see that William James raises a similar objection against the correspondence theory). The correspondence theorist might respond by explaining that a true proposition only needs to *correspond* with the facts and does not need to be an exact depiction of them. Moreover, as we explained in Section 1.1 of this chapter, it is not the words that matter, but the concepts and ideas that the words express. However, even our concepts and ideas are incapable of matching up with the features of something like a sunset. In the end, we are left to wonder: Just how much correspondence is needed for a belief to be true?

Some might also worry that there are many instances when we just do not know which of two opposing beliefs is true and which is false. In fact, the skeptic (whom we will discuss in detail in the next chapter) argues that it is impossible to ever know whether *any* belief corresponds to reality. The skeptic will maintain that a person can only have direct access to their own *sense data*. You might have the *sensation* that a ball is red because that is how it looks to

you. But, the skeptic argues, how do you know that the ball is *really* red? How can you ever be sure that the way that the ball *appears* to you inside your head is the way that the ball *really* is in the external world? You would have to "get outside your own head" to compare your *perception* of the red ball with the ball as it is in reality in order to determine whether what you are seeing matches up with a ball that is really red. But *you can't get outside of your own head*! You can never have *direct* access to the external world of mind-independent objects; you only have direct access to your own internal world of sensations and perceptions. Because you can never compare your sense data with some fact out there in the world, it seems that you can never *know* whether how things *appear* to you corresponds to how things *really* are. And, if you can never know whether your beliefs match up with a mind-independent fact, then you will never be able to use the correspondence theory of truth to show that any of your beliefs is true. The skeptic concludes that the correspondence theory fails as a theory of truth because it cannot work to give a definite answer about whether any proposition is true.

Aristotle considers another problem with his theory of truth that is directly relevant to the film. Aristotle wonders whether propositions about *future* facts are true *now*. (**Fatalism** is the position that true propositions about the future are true now). The problem is that because future facts are not facts *yet*, there are no actual facts to which a proposition about the future could correspond. Consider, for example, Louise's belief that *Hannah will die of an incurable disease*. In the time period that is portrayed in the film (the present-day events that begin with Louise in the college classroom and end with Louise and Ian hugging as the heptapod vessel disappears), there is no actual fact of Hannah's dying; indeed, Hannah does not even exist, yet. But if there is no fact that corresponds to Louise's belief that Hannah will die of an incurable disease, does that mean that Louise's belief is *false*? Perhaps a correspondence theorist would explain that because Louise *can* see and experience the (future) fact of Hannah's death, there *is* a fact that corresponds to her belief, in which case her belief is true. But then a new problem arises: if the future must happen in accordance with the series of events that the heptapods and Louise foresee, it seems that there is only one way that the future can unfold. That future includes Louise's choosing to marry Ian and choosing to have a child with him. And if those are the only possible choices that Louise could make, it would seem that she does not have *free will*. (We will take up the issue of free will in Chapter 6.) Aristotle also worries that if propositions about the future are true now, then there would be only one possible path that the future can take. He attempts to solve the problem by claiming that propositions about the future are neither true nor false now; instead, they become true (or false) when the future actually unfolds. However, recall that Aristotle defends the law of excluded middle, according to which *every* proposition is either such that it is true, or it is false. How can Aristotle defend that law and, at the same time, maintain that propositions about the future are neither true nor false

until the future events occur? Furthermore, it seems strange to say that the proposition "Hannah will die of an incurable disease" is neither true nor false, even though Louise has the ability to experience and foresee her daughter's death from an incurable disease.

1.4 The Pragmatist Theory of Truth

William James (1842–1910), an American philosopher and psychologist, raises a different objection against the correspondence theory of truth. Excerpts from James's book, *Pragmatism*, are provided in the Readings from Primary Sources (Reading 1b, 259). In the first passage, James explains that the correspondence theorist (whom James calls the "intellectualist") is right to characterize a true idea as one that is in "agreement" with reality. (Notice that James uses the term "idea" to mean essentially the same as Russell's use of "belief." For the sake of our discussion, we can take the two terms to be essentially synonymous.) However, James argues that the definition of *agreement* that the correspondence theorist uses is in some sense too strict because many of our ideas are not exact copies of reality. James asks the reader to think of a clock and the way that it works. If you are like James, your idea of the *time keeping function* of the clock fails to accurately capture the *real* workings of the clock (unless, of course, you are a clockmaker). And, when you consider the *elasticity* of the clock's springs, most likely your idea of elasticity does not *exactly* match up with what elasticity *really* is. James concludes that the correspondence theory cannot work because so many of our ideas fail to be exact copies of reality: "Where our ideas cannot copy definitely their object, what does agreement with that object mean?"[4]

Rather than taking *agreement* to mean "corresponding to reality," James maintains that an idea *agrees* with reality when its being true is "helpful in life's practical struggles." A true idea has "cash-value in experiential terms," in other words, it is *useful* in helping the person to function in the world:

> If I am lost in the woods and starved, and find what looks like a cow-path, it is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it, for if I do so and follow it, I save myself. The true thought is useful here because the house which is its object is useful.[5]

Thus, according to the **pragmatist theory of truth**, an idea is *true* when it is practical. Unlike the correspondence theory, the pragmatist theory does not require "complete verification" that the idea matches up exactly with reality, we only need to show that the belief *works*: "Just as we here assume Japan to exist without ever having been there, because it WORKS to do so."[6] In this way, the pragmatist can avoid the skeptic's objection that is raised against the

correspondence theory. Whereas the correspondence theorist must prove that a belief matches up with reality, the pragmatist only needs to show that the consequences of holding the idea will have practical value:

> Any idea that helps us DEAL, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn't entangle our progress in frustrations, that FITS, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality's whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will hold true of that reality.[7]

So, both Russell and James believe that there is a mind-independent world and both hold that a true belief or idea must agree with that world. However, the two philosophers differ with respect to what it means for an idea to "agree" with reality: Russell claims that a belief agrees with reality when it *corresponds* with it, and James maintains that agreement occurs when an idea is *useful* when dealing with reality.

Russell raises an objection against James's pragmatist theory of truth. Russell explains that since it *works* to believe that Santa Claus exists, then, on James's account, the idea that Santa Claus exists must be *true*—even though we know that it is false that Santa Claus exists.[8] Because this objection can work for many such beliefs, it seems to follow that pragmatism encourages the belief in false propositions. This objection might seem a bit childish. However, in another work, James makes the case that religious belief is justifiable because a person is better off believing that God exists.[9] Because James makes the case that a person's belief that God exists is true when it is pragmatic for them to do so, he would need to show why that same line of reasoning would not work in the case of the belief in Santa Claus.

Perhaps a more pressing problem for the pragmatist account concerns the characterization of a true idea. According to James, an idea is true if it is useful and helps to lead to a better life. But what does it mean to say that an idea is *useful*? And does a true idea need to be useful to everyone or just the person who is considering the idea? Also, the skeptic might argue that because we cannot see the future, we can never know whether a particular idea will have good consequences and lead to a better life. Think back to the cow-path example. Say that I follow James's advice and take the path because I believe that there is a house at the end of it. But as it turns out, I am mistaken. There is no house at the end of the path; there is just a big old grizzly bear that eats anything that comes his way. One might argue that the pragmatist theory is problematic because it could encourage us to adopt beliefs that result in very bad consequences that we cannot foresee. Or consider an example from the film: before Ian knows that Hannah will die at a young age, he has the idea that it would be good for him to marry Louise and have a child. When Louise (in the future) tells Ian that Hannah will die, he can neither look at Hannah the same way again nor remain in a relationship with Louise. Thus, before

knowing that Hannah will die, Ian believes that *marrying Louise and fathering her child* will lead to a better life. After he comes to learn about Hannah's fate, he no longer thinks that that belief is *useful* or *beneficial* for his life or Hannah's, for that matter, but at that point it is *too late*; Hannah has already been born.

Finally, one might argue that the pragmatist must concede that the same idea could be true for one person but false for another. If an idea works for one person but not for another, it would seem that the idea could be both true (for the person for whom it works) and false (for the person for whom it does not work). Louise has the idea that it was beneficial to have Hannah and Ian (after Louise tells him that Hannah will die) believes that it was not beneficial. Both Louise and Ian can provide support showing the benefit of their two opposing ideas, and there seems to be no clear method to determine which of those two ideas *is* useful and so no way to determine which idea is true. However, if *both* ideas are beneficial, it would seem that the pragmatist is committed to the claim that *two opposing ideas can both be true*. In other words, the pragmatist could be committed to some form of *relativism* with respect to the truth—a position that the pragmatist rejects. We will be able to better consider this objection, once we have examined various forms of relativism.

1.5 Cognitive Relativism

In Section 1.3, we saw that the skeptic raises an objection against the correspondence theory of truth: because we can't get outside our own heads to see whether a belief matches up with the external world, we can never use the correspondence theory to determine whether any given belief is true. The skeptic's objection concerns the fact that we do not have direct access to the external world; we only have direct access to our own internal world of perceptions and beliefs.

The cognitive relativist takes seriously the skeptic's concern that there is no way to verify whether the information that a person has about the mind-independent world is true. The cognitive relativist does not necessarily deny that there is a mind-independent world; they might merely think that *we can never have direct access to it*. Either way, the cognitive relativist maintains that we ought to define truth only in terms of what we can have access to, namely, our beliefs. Thus, rather than characterizing truth as a relation between beliefs and facts in the mind-independent world, the **cognitive relativist** maintains that truth is *relative*—relative to a person's beliefs and, in particular, relative to a person's *conceptual scheme*. A **conceptual scheme** is the set of concepts and rules that a person uses to shape and organize their thoughts and to process sensory information to form their system of beliefs. When a person receives sense data, the cognitive machinery of the mind works on the sensory stream to produce a coherent account of the world. So, as I look around right now, I am receiving visual sense data—I see colors and shapes in various positions. My mind interprets that sensory information in terms of interrelated objects.

The colors and shapes that I see are immediately interpreted as *a white and yellow coffee cup on a desk next to a stack of books*. Without *concepts* like "white," "yellow," "coffee cup," "on," "desk," "next to," "stack," and "books," my sensory stream would not reveal a coherent world. Rather, it would be pure confusion; there would be no regularity from one moment to the next and no objects persisting through time. For that matter, there would be no objects at all; there would just be uninterpreted patches of color of various shades. If I lacked the concept "coffee cup," I might interpret the set of white and yellow patches that I experience as part of the desk, or I might interpret the patches of color as distinct objects that do not go together to form a larger object. My *conceptual scheme* is the set of concepts that I use to interpret the sense data into diverse objects related in various ways, and it is what allows me to divide up the world in a way that makes sense to me and helps me to interact with it. When I drink from the coffee cup, I manipulate it in a particular way, with the result that there is less liquid in the cup than when I started the action. All this is as it should be—as common sense and my conceptual scheme tells me that the world is.

One of the less radical forms of cognitive relativism is the **coherence theory of truth**, according to which a belief is true when it *coheres* with the person's conceptual scheme. For the *coherentist*, I know that a certain belief is true by holding it up against all of my other beliefs. If that belief is consistent with my other beliefs, then it is true; if it contradicts my other beliefs, then it is false. For example, consider, again, Louise's belief that it is false that the heptapods want to destroy the human race. Louise thinks that the belief that the heptapods want to destroy us is false because it does not cohere with her other beliefs about the aliens, including her beliefs that: the heptapod language is a gift and not a weapon; the heptapods are trying to connect with her (as when Abbott puts a tentacle up to the barrier where Louise's hand rests); and the heptapods and humans "are part of a larger whole." The belief that *the heptapods are a threat to humanity* just does not accord with these and other beliefs that Louise has and so, on the coherence theory, the belief that the heptapods want to destroy humanity is false for Louise.

It could be the case that different individuals have different conceptual schemes. Cultural anthropologists return from the field with reports of individuals who seem to use quite different conceptual schemes to interpret their experiences. What initially appear to be irrational beliefs are shown to "make sense" in the context of the culture-specific conceptual schemes. And, it may be the case that individuals within a culture have varying conceptual schemes. In fact, it might even be possible for an individual to have a different conceptual scheme than the one they previously had. Louise's conceptual scheme at the beginning of the film and her conceptual scheme at the end are very different. At the beginning of the film, Louise, like most humans, interprets her experience of time *linearly*, as a series of events that occur in a sequence of present moments passing from one to the next.

Now think about Louise's "memory" at the beginning of the film, before she has learned the heptapod language; she "remembers" holding her baby's hand. But when Louise compares the "memory" of holding her baby's hand with her beliefs that *she is not married* and that *she does not have a child*, it is clear that her belief that *she has held her baby's hand* does not cohere with her other beliefs, and so, at that time, it must be false that Louise has held her baby's hand. Yet by the end of the film, when Louise has mastered the heptapod language, the way that she sees and thinks about the world is affected, and her conceptual scheme has changed. At one point, Louise explains to Ian that the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* suggests that a language determines the way that one categorizes their experiences. In Louise's case, learning the heptapod language affects her experience of time. Rather than interpreting time linearly, she interprets it *simultaneously*; she experiences past, present and future *all at once* and is no longer "so bound by time, by its order." Towards the end of the film, Louise's altered conceptual scheme allows her to make sense of her experience of holding her baby's hand in such a way that she is able to hold the belief that *she has held her baby's hand* consistently with her other beliefs. Thus, a coherentist might appeal to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and maintain that after learning the heptapod language, Louise's conceptual scheme changes and she begins to interpret and experience time simultaneously. As a result, for Louise, her belief that she has not yet had a baby coheres with her belief that she has held her baby's hand.

It is important to see that the coherentist and cognitive relativists, in general, can maintain that some conceptual schemes ought to be rejected as irrational. The coherentist will maintain that a conceptual scheme is irrational if it allows the person to hold two incoherent beliefs. However, Russell raises an objection against the coherentist's claim that *a conceptual scheme is irrational if it contains two contradictory beliefs*. In a passage from "Truth and Falsehood," Russell argues that even though the coherentist wants to maintain that we cannot get at objective truths, the coherentist must actually make use of at least one objective truth in the defense of the coherence theory. For when the coherentist maintains that a conceptual scheme is irrational if it allows a person to hold two contradictory beliefs, the coherentist must hold that it is *true* that *two incoherent beliefs cannot both be true*. But then there is (at least) one objective truth—*that two incoherent beliefs cannot both be true*. The claim that *two contradictory statements cannot both be true* is called the **principle of non-contradiction** (what Russell calls the principle of *contradiction*). Russell concludes that although the coherentist claims that objective truth is beyond our grasp, the coherence theory of truth ends up resting upon the objective truth of the principle of noncontradiction.

Whereas coherentism rejects a conceptual scheme that is irrational, according to **relativism of rationality**, there is no way to determine that any given conceptual scheme is better or worse than any other. Some

rationality relativists might argue that since there is no objective truth, there is no available criterion to use to judge between any two schemes. Other rationality relativists might argue that because rationality, itself, is internal to a conceptual scheme, there is no such thing as a conceptually neutral version of rationality that could be used to compare the two different conceptual schemes with one another. Instead, according to the relativity of rationality, "what warrants belief depends on canons of reasoning … that should properly be seen as social norms, relative to culture and period."[10] **Protagoras** (ca. 480 BCE–421 BCE), a slightly older contemporary of Socrates, appears to have defended a version of relativism of rationality. Although the bulk of Protagoras's writings is no longer in existence, a few fragments have managed to survive (mostly in the context of criticisms of relativism by subsequent generations of Greek philosophers). The most famous among these is: "A [hu]man is the measure of all things: of what is, that it is; of what is not, that it is not."[11] Here we see that what is *true* is entirely up to us to decide. According to Protagoras, humans are the ultimate arbiter of what is true and what is false and perhaps, even, of what is rational and what is irrational.

1.6 Nietzschean Perspectivism and Postmodernism

In its most extreme form, relativism of rationality rejects the objective truth of any proposition and even questions whether the laws of logic (like the law of noncontradiction) have any sort of objective status. According to **relativism of logic**, laws of logic are merely social norms; they do not reflect laws governing the mind-independent world. The most radical relativists do not even require that I be minimally consistent in my beliefs, assuming that my conceptual scheme does not recognize the law of noncontradiction. In the words of Walt Whitman, "Do I contradict myself?/ very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"[12] In this section, we look at the two most radical members of the cognitive relativism family: Nietzschean perspectivism and postmodernist relativism.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) lived in the 19th century, and thus he predates the birth of postmodernism. However, he is the first major philosopher to espouse relativism of rationality, which is the point of departure for postmodernism. Indeed, he was also prescient of postmodernism in emphasizing the role that language plays both in fixing our conceptual schemes and in creating the very idea of objective truth.

Nietzsche had a rather strange writing style, preferring to express his ideas with highly elliptical prose and copious self-contradictions. Some have argued that this writing style was exactly what was called for, given the message: Nietzsche wanted to force his readers into seeing that many of the things that they currently believed were not objectively true, without thereby putting something equally untrue in their place.[13] The use of multiple perspectives, in both film and literature, serves a similar purpose. We, as viewers, are shown

several incompatible descriptions of the world and asked not to pick which one is the objectively correct one (or even which is closest to objective truth), but to conclude that they are all true relative to the perspective of their respective narrators. As Nietzsche tells us:

> There are no facts, only interpretations.
>   As though there would be a world left over once we subtracted the perspectival![14]

Contrary to the implication of the second quotation above, he was no idealist: there was a world left over after the subtraction of the perspectival. As Arthur Danto notes in writing about Nietzsche, "[T]here was a world which remained over, tossing blackly like the sea, chaotic relative to our distinctions and perhaps to all distinctions, but there nevertheless. ... A blind, empty, structureless thereness."[15] So, Nietzsche's conceptual relativism was the result of what he saw as a qualitative mismatch between our distinctions (that is, the concepts that we use in structuring the world of experience) and the mind-independent world.

Because of his repeated emphasis on the ineluctably perspectival nature of all observation and knowledge, Nietzsche's version of cognitive relativism has come to be called **perspectivism**. But Nietzsche did not stop there, with merely a negative description of what the world was not. His perspectivism had a positive aspect as well. To the extent that you can say what it is, the world is "made up of points of origin for perspectives, ... occupied by active powers, wills, each seeking to organize the world from its perspective, each locked in combat with the rest."[16]

Does this mean that every conceptual scheme is as good as every other one? Nietzsche would answer: no. The wills are in combat. The victor shall be the will whose perspective incorporates the conceptual scheme that most facilitates life. For Nietzsche, "Truth is that sort of error without which a particular class of living creatures could not live."[17] So, Nietzsche does not use some objective standard of rationality in judging the adequacy of a conceptual scheme, but rather a pragmatic standard: a conceptual scheme is adequate if it allows one to thrive.

Postmodernism's history as a distinct school of thought begins in the mid-20th century within the philosophy and literary criticism in France and Germany, as a reaction to the devastation of the Second World War. For the postmodernists, Hiroshima and the Holocaust showed without a doubt that humanity is not progressing toward some objective goal, as the modernists' inherent faith in the universality of rationality had led many to believe.

Postmodernism's starting point is the claim that there are no objective standards either for determining the truth or falsity of individual judgments or for judging the adequacy of conceptual schemes. Members of the mainstream

Western tradition mistakenly believe in objective standards because our language has created the myth of a mind-independent world against which judgments can be compared. According to Gene Blocker, one of the goals of postmodernism is to expose this myth of the mind-independent world

> by "deconstructing" language, that is, by showing first the gap between word and object, language and reality, and then by showing that the so-called reality is simply created by the language itself. Deconstruction shows how language has constructed what we call "reality"; it then deconstructs these linguistic constructions. What this basically accomplishes, where successful, is to expose as myths linguistic descriptions which masquerade as reality—the myth of [the correspondence theory of truth], the myth of universal cross-cultural objectivity and rationality, the myth of neutral, value-free scientific investigation, and so on. … The things we refer to are not real, objective parts of reality; they are just ways of speaking which have caught on, become popular and then "internalized" so that we wrongly assume they accurately describe and reveal an independent reality.[18]

Even the distinction between what is or is not a value judgment is overthrown. According to postmodernism, all judgments are colored by human values and emotions. Even if the notion of a "disinterested observer" made sense, there is no neutral, value-free vocabulary in which to express judgments. As noted in the quote above, even science, presumed by many to be the epitome of rationality and the search for objective truth, is value-laden. As such, Alison Jaggar notes, "the conclusions of western science thus are presumed … [to be] uncontaminated by the supposedly 'subjective' values and emotions that might bias individual investigators. … [However,] it has been argued that it does not, indeed cannot, eliminate generally accepted social values."[19]

Towards the beginning of *Arrival*, Colonel Weber lets Louise know that he is considering a different linguist to take on the job of translating the heptapod language. Louise tells Weber that she knows the other linguist and that Weber ought to ask him the Sanskrit word for "war" and its translation. Later, Weber comes back to request that Louise help with the mission. She asks him how the other linguist responded to the translation question. Weber says that the linguist replied that it means "an argument." He then asks Louise how she would translate the term; she says it means "a desire for more cows" (MM 14:52). It is interesting that there is no discussion about *which one* of the two interpretations is *correct*; it seems that Louise assumes that *both* are acceptable translations, and perhaps there is no correct interpretation of the term. However, there is the understanding between Louise and Weber that translating the term as *an argument* will have very different implications with respect to

values than it will when interpreted as *a desire for more cows*. In fact, that difference is the reason why Weber selects Louise over the other linguist for the job.

There is one other element of the film that is relevant to postmodernism: Ian, the scientist, initially maintains that unlike Louise, who thinks that language is the foundation of civilization, he thinks that *science* is the foundation. However, as we have seen, the heptapods have a different experience of *time*, and that difference in experience could well affect their scientific understanding of the way that the world works. Humans experience a continuous flow and sequence of events; a cause leads to an effect, which in turn causes another effect, and so on and so on. Our laws of nature and science reflect that perspective. The heptapods, who see all things all at once, would probably not interpret their experiences in terms of *cause* and *effect*, and thus their laws of nature and science would be very different from ours—so different that it might not be possible to interpret a human scientific law in terms that would make sense to the heptapods. Is one of these perspectives *better than* or *more accurate than* the other? I cannot grasp what it would be like to have a simultaneous experience of time in part because I cannot understand how an effect happens if it is not preceded by a cause: How could I have arrived on campus, if I did not *first* get in my car and drive there? However, there are many theists who maintain that God sees everything all at once, so the concept of a simultaneous experience of time is not entirely *alien* to us. If there are two possible interpretations of time, then it could well be the case that there are (at least) two possible interpretations of the way that the world works. And according to the postmodernist, both interpretations are right.

The upshot of **postmodernist relativism** is the legitimization of *all* points of view. There is no such thing as objective truth. There is no such thing as universal rationality. The canons of logic are merely one set of social norms among others with no special claim to universal acceptance. Many postmodernists even reject the possibility of employing pragmatic criteria for adjudicating between conceptual schemes.[20] Taken to its extreme, in postmodernism

> [t]here are no external standards nor even internal standards of personal or cultural consistency and coherence to restrict us. We are therefore free to go with what seems at the moment compelling to us and we are guided in our articulations only by the desire to persuade, to gain a receptive following.[21]

To many objectivists, and even modernist (truth) relativists, this sounds like intellectual anarchy. It should therefore come as no surprise that the postmodernist challenge to modernism's assumption of the universality of reason has been greeted with great apprehension within mainstream Anglo-American philosophy.

It could be useful at this point to offer a condensed description of all the theories of truth that we have discussed (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Theories of Truth

Correspondence theory of truth: a proposition or belief is true when it *corresponds* to reality
    Cognitive Objectivism: (1) the world is mind-independent; and (2) the correspondence theory of truth
Pragmatist theory of truth: an idea is true when it is *practical*
Cognitive relativism: truth is relative to a conceptual scheme
    Coherence theory of truth: a person's belief is true if it coheres with their conceptual scheme
    Relativism of rationality: a person's belief is true if it coheres with their conceptual scheme, but there is no way to adjudicate between competing conceptual schemes
    Relativism of logic: laws of logic are merely social norms and do not reflect laws governing the mind-independent world; no such laws are objective
    Perspectivism: there are no objective truths because all we can have are perspectives of the world; yet, a conceptual scheme that allows one to thrive is better than one that doesn't
    Postmodernist relativism: the mind-independent world is a myth, and there are no objective standards for determining the truth of any belief or for judging the adequacy of any conceptual scheme, so there are no objective truths

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1.7 An Assessment of Relativism

Let us examine some of the main empirical arguments for cognitive relativism. The first argument begins with the pervasive differences of opinion one observes among people, coupled with the claim that there is no objective standard to use in adjudicating between the differing views—no objective standard to use in deciding which view is true and which view is false. Does difference of opinion by itself constitute evidence in favor of cognitive relativism? We think not. This can be seen by considering a related argument—one that shows the structural unsoundness of inferring cognitive relativism based solely on a difference of opinion.

This related argument goes as follows:[22] different individuals have different views on whether the earth is flat or not. In general, there is a high degree of intracultural agreement on this question. Thus, among adults within a given culture, the probability that an individual holds the flat-earth hypothesis is closely correlated with whether their cultural peers hold this hypothesis. (Because conceptual schemes play a large role in cognitive relativism, and because conceptual schemes are largely culture-specific, this intracultural agreement is potentially relevant to the argument—it strengthens the relativist's case.) However, intercultural diversity and intracultural uniformity on the question of the earth's shape do not entail that there is no objective fact of the matter about whether the earth is flat or not. A consistent cognitive objectivist can say that some cultures (namely, those cultures in which the flat-earth hypothesis is widespread) are just mistaken on this point. The burden of proof is on the relativist to show how difference of opinion implies relativism;

so, the objectivist's response is not begging the question. In general, mere difference of opinion does not constitute evidence in favor of relativism. In order to argue for cognitive relativism, we must be offered more; we must be offered reasons to believe that there is no way of adjudicating between the differing views.

A second argument used to support relativism appeals to *tolerance*. It goes something like this: in a pluralistic society like the United States, tolerance is an absolute necessity. Some argue that one way to foster tolerance is to convince everyone that cognitive relativism is correct. If there is no such thing as absolute truth, but only truth relative to a conceptual scheme, then two individuals can both be right on some issue, even if those two individuals disagree with one another. I am less likely to act intolerantly toward someone with whom I disagree if I think that that person's views could be true (relative to their own conceptual scheme, of course). While the above line of reasoning looks good on the surface, we believe it has one serious flaw: the form of tolerance that emerges from relativism is not very attractive. It should not be confused with the form of tolerance that emerges from traditional liberalism.

However, suppose that I am someone who categorizes members of certain races as fully rational and members of other races as less than fully rational. Suppose further that I am someone who holds that I have serious moral obligations only to creatures that are fully rational. Thus, I believe that I do not have serious moral obligations to members of some racial groups. As a result, when I make decisions, I might not take their well-being into account to the extent that I take into account the well-being of those whom I judge to be fully rational humans. A consistent cognitive relativist would have to admit that a racist conceptual scheme is not objectively better or worse than any other. Thus, a consistent cognitive relativist cannot reject my conceptual scheme on the grounds that it is mistaken. Similarly, a consistent cognitive relativist cannot object that those actions of mine based on my racist categorization of humans are done in error, so long as my actions are consistent with my racist conceptual scheme. Even more importantly, moral condemnation of my racist actions is beyond the reach of the cognitive relativist.

This is the version of tolerance that arises out of cognitive relativism: so long as someone is acting in a way that "makes sense" given their (or their culture's) conceptual scheme, that person is not acting in an incorrect or immoral manner. But this is not a version of tolerance that is very appealing, for it requires that we must tolerate individuals and societies, no matter what they do. Genocide, human slavery, the subjugation of women—all of these things have been practiced by some societies. (Alas, some societies continue to practice them even now.) The consistent cognitive relativist must tolerate these sorts of practices, along with the less objectionable ones. Contrast the version of tolerance emerging out of relativism with that emerging out of traditional liberalism, according to which individuals could act as they like as long as they do not infringe on the rights of others. It is this latter version of tolerance that

is required to prevent a society from succumbing to either tyranny by the dominant group or Balkanization as the society is torn apart into its separate subcultures. If a stable pluralism is a benefit for society (as we believe it is), then it is not relativism but objectivism that is most likely to achieve it.

So, the argument for cognitive relativism based on its relationship with tolerance is actually an argument *against* cognitive relativism. Are there other such arguments? One problem that the cognitive relativist faces is explaining just what intellectual investigation (within the sciences and the humanities alike) is striving for, if not knowledge of the objective truth. It seems as though we already have knowledge in the relativist sense, so what's the point of continuing the search?

Another difficulty for cognitive relativism is explaining why science and technology have been so successful. This difficulty is especially acute for postmodernism, which classifies science as "just one among many equally good approaches to improving our understanding of the world." The postmodernist responds by noting that science and technology are successful relative to their own criterion for success (namely, controlling the environment); but not necessarily successful relative to some other criterion (for example, living in harmony with the environment). One person's idea of success is another person's idea of failure. We will leave it for you, the reader, to decide whether this response is adequate.

Yet another difficulty arises for the relativist who wants to maintain that there are no objective truths. In Section 1.1, we explained that many people believe that mathematical truths must be objectively true. However, the postmodern relativist would maintain that even mathematical truths lack objective status. Ian is surprised when he discovers that the aliens cannot seem to follow (human) algebra, and the film seems to suggest that the heptapods have a different system of mathematics. The postmodernist would say that algebra is *merely* a human construct and the conclusions that result from it are not objectively true. Such a relativist would argue that, in general, no truths of any mathematical system are objective. But, as we explained in Section 1.1, it seems that no matter who is doing the counting—whether human or alien—it must be the case that this many: * and this many: * * amounts to this many: * * *. And if that is the case, wouldn't at least that law of mathematics be objectively true?

Even if the postmodernist digs in and maintains that even the above example from mathematics could differ according to perspective and that *there are no objective truths*, it seems that such a relativist would ultimately be committed to at least one objective truth, namely, that *there are no objective truths*. Relatedly, and by far most oft-cited criticism of cognitive relativism is that it is self-refuting.[23] If the truth of all judgments is relative, then the truth of the judgment "cognitive relativism is correct" is itself relative: it is true according to some conceptual schemes and false according to others. If one goes the extra step to relativism of rationality, those conceptual schemes in which

conceptual relativism is true have no better claim to our allegiance than those conceptual schemes in which it is false. Thus, for the relativist about rationality, anyone with a conceptual scheme that makes cognitive relativism false can truly say that cognitive relativism is false.

For these and other reasons, most philosophers maintain that there is at least some objective truth. It is important to see that truth is not merely the philosopher's concern; truth affects us all every day. And, yet, too often it can be difficult to know whether certain information that we are receiving is in fact true. If 12 alien vessels appeared on earth, or if there were a worldwide pandemic, we would need to know what was happening. The way that we typically get such information is from the news, and we tend to assume that what is asserted in a news broadcast is true. So, it can be downright dangerous when a newscaster or someone in a position of authority asserts false claims as though they were true. In several scenes in *Arrival*, we see newscasts on different channels from around the world. Although many of the reports appear to coincide with what is actually happening, the talking head, Richard Riley, argues that the U.S. government is failing in its handling of the situation and that we should give the aliens "a show of force." Similarly, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was difficult to determine how dangerous the situation was and what ought to be done to avoid the spread of the virus, in part because there was a lot of misinformation—and sometimes even outright lies—asserted by public officials, including the public officials in the White House. If the relativist is right, there would be no way to maintain that a newscaster or any public official is lying or in some way making stuff up.

Where does this leave us? What is the best theory of truth? Given all of the arguments against relativism, we can begin to understand why so many philosophers have come to reject it, while at the same time conceding that it may be difficult to know whether any given proposition or idea is true. We will examine this problem in more detail in the next chapter.

Readings from Primary Sources

1a: Excerpts from: Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 1912, p. 256
1b: Excerpts from: William James, *Pragmatism: A New Way for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, 1907, p. 259

Discussion Questions

1. Look, again, at James's example involving the *cow-path*. How would the correspondence theorist assess the truth-value of the belief "there is a house at the end of the path?" How would the coherentist assess it? And the perspectivist?

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TRUTH

2. What are similarities between Nietzsche's perspectivism and James's pragmatism? What are some differences? How might James argue that pragmatism is not a form of relativism?
3. Did you start out the chapter as a cognitive relativist? Or now, after having finished the chapter, are you a cognitive relativist? If your view changed, why did it change?
4. Russell objects to cognitive relativism because it entails that *no belief can be false*. First explain Russell's objection against cognitive relativism. Then try to come up with a statement that *must be false*.
5. Does the universality of rationality necessarily mean that humanity must progress towards a common goal? Can you provide an example of two different cultures that each has a different idea about what the ultimate goal really is? Now take a look at those goals again and explain the underlying basis for each. Is the basis the same? Does this affect the way that you initially responded to the first question of this discussion question?
6. What are the "memories" that Louise has at the beginning of the film? Can you provide an explanation of them that is *consistent* with the rest of the film?
7. Is the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* true? If one never learns a language can they still think?
8. Can one language ever be *accurately* and *adequately* translated into another?
9. Towards the end of the movie, Louise asks Ian the question, "If you could see your whole life from start to finish, would you change things?" How would you respond to that question?

Annotated List of Film Titles Relevant to Truth

Citizen Kane (1941). Directed by Orson Welles. Starring Orson Welles, Joseph Cotten, Ray Collins, Dorothy Comingore.
  Citizen Kane is the reconstruction of one man's life, as told from the points of view of several people who knew him. Whose portrayal is most accurate? Does that question even make sense?
Rashomon (1950). Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Starring Toshiro Mifune, Masayuki Mori, Machiko Kyo, Takashi Shimura, Minoru Chiaki.
  Rashomon, like *Hilary and Jackie*, is a multiple-perspective film: it tells the same story several times over from the point of view of different characters.
He Said, She Said (1991). Directed by Ken Kwapis, Marisa Silver. Starring Kevin Bacon, Elizabeth Perkins, Sharon Stone.
  This lightweight comedy attempts to answer the question: Do men and women live in different worlds? It offers the male and the female perspective on a love affair that develops between two polar-opposite newspaper editorial writers.
Courage Under Fire (1996). Directed by Edward Zwick. Starring Denzel Washington, Meg Ryan, Matt Damon.
  A classic example of the multiple-perspective film.

Hilary and Jackie (1998). Directed by Anand Tucker. Starring Emily Watson, Rachel Griffiths, James Frain, David Morrissey.

Based on the book by brother and sister Hilary and Piers du Pré, *Hilary and Jackie* is a multiple-perspective film, telling the story of the lives of the two du Pré sisters from the changing perspectives of the two sisters.

Go (1999). Directed by Doug Liman. Starring Sarah Polley, Desmond Askew, Katie Holmes.

Drug deals, sex, violence, pyramid schemes, a road trip to Las Vegas, supermarket check-out cashiers: these elements are thrown into the hopper, shaken, and strewn out to form the backbone of a multiple-perspective film. *Go* has the fast-paced, almost frenetic feel typical of young directors weaned on music videos. It is a fun, darkly comic ride.

Melinda and Melinda (2004). Directed by Woody Allen. Starring Radha Mitchell, Chloë Sevigny, Johnny Lee Miller, Amanda Peet, Will Ferrell.

Several old friends meet at a restaurant for dinner and end up in a heated debate over whether life is essentially comic or tragic. They decide to settle matters by considering and then retelling the "same" story first as a tragedy, then as a comedy.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IV, part 7.
2. Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), (The Project Gutenberg, 2009), Chapter XII, "Truth and Falsehood".
3. Ibid.
4. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, (1907), (The Project Gutenberg, 2004), Lecture VI, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth".
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1946), "William James," Chapter 29, 845–846.
9. William James, *Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), Chapter 1, "The Will to Believe".
10. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 10.
11. This is the opening sentence from Protagoras's book *On Truth*. It is the only surviving fragment from that work.
12. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia, PA: David McKay, 1891–92), 51.
13. See, for example, Arthur Danto's *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 97.
14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Aus dem Nachlass der Achtzigerjahre*, vol. 3 of *Nietzsches Werke in Drei Bände*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1958), 903 and 705, respectively. These passages are as translated by Danto in *Nietzsche as Philosopher*.
15. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 96.
16. Ibid., 80.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Aus dem Nachlass*, 814.

18. Gene Blocker, "The Challenge of Post-Modernism" in *Introduction to Modern Philosophy*, 7th ed. Alburey Castell, Donald Borchert, and Arthur Zucker (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 554–555.
19. Alison Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology" in *Introduction to Modern Philosophy*, Castell, Borchert, and Zucker (eds.), 535.
20. Nietzsche, a postmodernist in all but name, held that a pragmatic criterion for judging adequacy was universally valid.
21. Blocker, "The Challenge of Post-Modernism," 558–559.
22. The following is a reworking of the argument against relativism in James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999).
23. The criticism originates with Plato, in his discussion of Protagoras's views in the *Theaetetus*.

2

SKEPTICISM

The Matrix (1999) and *Inception* (2010)

> **MORPHEUS:** You have the look of a man who accepts what he sees, because he is expecting to wake up. Ironically, this is not far from the truth.
>
> *The Matrix*

> **COBB:** If this is my dream why can't I control this?
> **MAL:** Because you don't know you're dreaming!
>
> *Inception*

We are all used to thinking that our senses reveal a world that exists independently of our minds. But is this belief justified? What can I know about this external world? Can I be sure that what my senses report to me is accurate? Maybe my senses are giving me radically misleading information about what is going on in the world outside of my mind. Can I even know that an external world exists? Philosophers have been examining these questions for centuries. As we saw in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, some philosophers hold a position called **skepticism**, according to which genuine knowledge in such matters is unattainable. The science-fiction virtual-reality genre is ideal for introducing this topic. The movies *The Matrix* and *Inception* are both excellent sources for the standard arguments supporting skepticism and for hints at how modern philosophers have reacted to these arguments. Our advice is to read up to and including Section 2.3, then to watch the movies before resuming reading the rest of the chapter. The first two sections introduce the topic of skepticism in very general terms; having it under your belt *before* viewing *The Matrix* and *Inception* will help you to extract more of the philosophical content out of the movies. The material beginning in Section 2.4 makes constant reference to the movies, so it would be most profitably read after viewing the movies.

2.1 What is Skepticism?

In everyday discourse, to call someone *skeptical* is to say that that person is prone to disbelieve what others say. It is commonplace to show distrust or disbelief in what a politician is promising by stating, "I'm skeptical." The term

skepticism as it is used within philosophy has a slightly different, albeit related meaning. Someone who is skeptical about X in the *philosophical* sense is someone who claims that it is impossible to know whether X is true or false. To see this more clearly, consider the following propositions:

P1: George Washington was the twenty-first president of the United States.
P2: 2,356,717 is a prime number.
P3: I am not dreaming right now.

Suppose you were asked, for each of *P1, P2, P3,* whether you *know* with absolute certainty that that proposition is true. What would your response be? Here is how your answers might go:

P1ʹ: I know that *P1* is definitely false.
P2ʹ: I don't know about *P2,* maybe it's true, maybe it's false. If I were a math whiz or someone with some time to kill, I could probably figure out, though, whether *P2* is true or false.
P3ʹ: I'm not quite sure what to make of *P3*. I tend to believe that I'm not dreaming right now, but I can remember times in the past when I thought I wasn't dreaming, only to wake up a few minutes later when my alarm went off. The more I think about *P3,* the weirder *P3* seems. At least if asked whether *P2* was true or false, I could think of a way to figure it out. But *P3* is qualitatively different. I can't think of a calculation I can carry out or a test I can perform that would give me conclusive evidence either way. I guess the correct thing to say in this case is that I can't know with absolute certainty whether *P3* is true or false.

The response given in *P3ʹ* above captures exactly what philosophers mean by skepticism: skepticism is the view that we cannot know with certainty whether any proposition is true. Note the difference between skepticism in its everyday usage and its philosophical usage. According to the former, skeptics are deniers. According to the latter, skeptics are doubters.

It is possible for someone to be skeptical about some domains but not about others. Thus, a *moral* skeptic claims that it is not possible to know whether moral propositions are true or false; however, this moral skeptic could think that knowledge is attainable in other areas. Such circumscribed versions of skepticism will not be discussed further. The version of skepticism that this chapter deals with is all-encompassing. Sometimes the term *epistemological skepticism* is used to distinguish this all-encompassing version of skepticism from versions that involve more limited claims. (*Epistemology* is the name of the sub-area of philosophy that studies what knowledge is and how knowledge claims are justified.)

Skepticism has a long history, which predates the advent of virtual reality movies by some 2,300 years. The first skeptics lived in ancient Greece in the third and fourth centuries BCE in the generation after Aristotle. While none

of the writings from these very early skeptics survived, we are familiar with their views based on the writings of later skeptics who had had access to those original documents. Among the latter group, Sextus Empiricus (175–225 CE) has been the most influential in defining ancient skepticism. According to the ancient skeptics, all one's claims to knowledge are to be rejected, except for the knowledge of one's current perceptual state. Thus, I can know that I am having a visual impression of redness right now (a current perceptual state), but I cannot know that that impression of redness is caused by, or represents, or has anything whatsoever to do with goings-on outside of my own mind. Notice that these ancient skeptics are not claiming that my current impression of redness is not caused by something outside of my mind (remember, skeptics are *doubters*, not deniers). They are merely claiming that I have insufficient evidence to know whether my current impression of redness is thus caused by an *external* object (that is, an object that is mind-independent, that exists external to the mind). The ancient skeptic, just like his modern counterpart, would say that active *dis*belief in the existence of an external world is just as unfounded as active belief in such a world. Strange as it might sound, the ancient skeptics held that the natural psychological response to adopting skepticism would be a blissful detachment from the world. Whether the ancient skeptics were blissfully detached is anyone's guess; the modern response to skepticism has been repugnance. (Watch for the responses offered by characters in *The Matrix* and *Inception* when the skeptical hypothesis enters the picture—do they become blissfully detached?) Philosophers are like other people in finding something profoundly unsettling about skepticism. Indeed, much of the epistemology done in the modern era can be interpreted as an attempt to refute skepticism. So deep is the disdain for skepticism among some philosophers (e.g., George Berkeley, whom we shall meet in Section 2.6) that they will reject any assumption, solely on the grounds that it will lead to skepticism.

The strain of skepticism that began in ancient Greece died out during the Early Middle Ages and had no or only very few adherents in Europe for over a thousand years. It was not until the religious and scientific revolutions of the 15th and 16th centuries that interest in skepticism re-emerged. This re-emergence was further spurred by the republication of the writings of Sextus Empiricus in the middle of the 16th century. The time was ripe for philosophers to grapple once again with doubt. By far the most influential writer on the topic of skepticism during this time was the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650). In retrospect, historians of philosophy have marked his emergence as the beginning of philosophy in the modern period.[1] Descartes laid out skepticism in the form that it has retained to this day. Because of his influence, we have allocated all of Section 2.2 to a discussion of his views. Skepticism remained on philosophy's front burner for the rest of the 17th and most of the 18th centuries. Another highly influential philosopher of this period, David Hume (1711–76), refined the arguments for skepticism still further, showing just what would be

required to justify a claim to know that an external world exists, and showing how this requirement could not be satisfied—not even in theory. We shall discuss some of these arguments in Sections 2.4 and 2.5.

2.2 Descartes's Formulation

The most influential work ever written on skepticism is the first essay in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, originally published by **René Descartes** in 1641. In this essay, Descartes lays the framework for modern skepticism and sets the standard according to which any presumed refutation of skepticism must pass muster. In the remaining five essays that make up the *Meditations*, Descartes sets forth what he believes to be a refutation of skepticism. While philosophers greatly admire the thoroughness and ingenuity of the arguments that Descartes offers in favor of skepticism, most philosophers believe Descartes's solution to the problem of skepticism presented in the second through sixth essays does not work. Thus, Descartes's *Meditations* have become the classic source for skepticism, rather than the refutation of skepticism that Descartes had intended the work to be.

The complete first essay from Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* is reproduced in Readings from Primary Sources (Reading 2a, 262). In this essay, Descartes sets about trying to find a belief whose truth he cannot possibly doubt. He notes that his senses have deceived him in the past; so, any belief based on the report of his senses can be doubted. (Recall the distinction emphasized above between doubting the truth of a proposition and believing it to be false.) Furthermore, he recalls having experiences while dreaming that were indistinguishable at the time from experiences while awake. Thus, while close and careful examination of an object in good light is normally sufficient to dispel concerns that his senses are deceiving him, close and careful examination in good light is wholly insufficient for distinguishing *real* reality from the *virtual* reality created within a dream. He decides that he is looking for indubitability in the wrong place. If he has any indubitable beliefs, they are more likely to be found within the domain of pure mathematics (for example, arithmetic statements such as "$2 + 3 = 5$"). On further consideration, however, he decides that, even here, doubt is possible. Descartes believes that an all-powerful God exists—a God who created him and would not allow him to be massively deceived. He admits, though, that his belief in the existence of God can be doubted. Perhaps the truth is that, instead of God, an all-powerful and evil demon exists; this demon has created Descartes so that he constantly falls into error, even when he performs simple calculations such as adding 2 and 3. He cannot know for sure that this is not the case. If such an evil demon exists, then even beliefs based solely on his powers of reason are called into doubt. Descartes decides to adopt the hypothesis that just such an evil demon exists, not

because this hypothesis is well founded (quite the contrary, Descartes would say), but because such a hypothesis will steel Descartes in his resolve not to allow in any belief as indubitable if that belief has the slightest shred of grounds for doubt. It is on this note of abject skepticism that his first meditation ends.

As mentioned above, Descartes believed he had refuted skepticism in the later essays. While most of the remainder of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* lie outside the scope of this chapter, there is one item from the beginning of the second meditation that bears remarking upon. In his search for a belief whose truth he could not possibly doubt, Descartes settles upon the proposition "I exist." He bases the indubitability of this proposition on the reasoning that even if the evil demon exists and is constantly causing him to fall into error, Descartes could not possibly be mistaken in believing he exists as a thing that thinks—as a thing that doubts. This is because he would at least have to exist as a thing that was being deceived. Thus, Descartes formulates the argument "I think; therefore, I exist" (in its original Latin, *cogito, ergo sum*) as showing beyond a shadow of a doubt that he exists.

2.3 An Overview of the Movies

THE MATRIX (1999). DIRECTED BY ANDY AND LARRY WACHOWSKI
STARRING KEANU REEVES, LAURENCE FISHBURNE, CARRIE-ANNE MOSS

The Matrix is the first film released in what eventually became a movie trilogy exploring a futuristic world in which computers have enslaved humankind. The humans are farmed as an energy source, and their nervous systems are hooked into computers that create a perfect virtual world for each of them. While fancy computers are not, strictly speaking, necessary for a discussion of skepticism (after all, Descartes managed to do just fine back in the 17th century making reference only to the virtual world created in normal, human dreams), bringing technology into the picture makes skepticism an easier sell. Neo, the main character in The Matrix, is asked the question "How would you know the difference between [a] dream world and a real one?" He (and we, the viewers) realize that there is no way to tell the difference.

INCEPTION (2010). WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY CHRISTOPHER NOLAN
STARRING LEONARDO DICAPRIO, JOSEPH GORDON-LEVITT, ELLEN PAGE.

Inception allows us to explore the question whether we can ever be certain that we are not dreaming. The main character, Dominic Cobb, is a thief-for-hire. He and his team of specialists have figured out how to enter a person's dream and extract valuable secrets from that person's subconscious. This time, however, rather than stealing an idea, Cobb and his team must figure out how to plant an idea in the victim's mind, a process called *inception*. They devise a

plan according to which they will go three levels deep—a dream within a dream within a dream.

For the viewers, the film can be quite confusing to watch (especially the first time through). We have to keep track of different dream levels and different dreamers. The confusion starts with the opening scene (a scene that is repeated later in the movie) and continues to the end of the movie when we are left wondering whether Cobb successfully returns to reality.

If you are following our advice given at the beginning of the chapter, now is the time to watch *The Matrix* and *Inception*.

2.4 Cobb and Neo as Embodiments of Descartes's Problem

So, you have just finished watching *Inception*. What happened in the movie? Did you wonder whether Cobb is stuck in limbo at the end or whether he was really awake and seeing his real kids? Is this all a dream? It is difficult to know. In the first scene, Cobb wakes up on a beach with waves washing over him. He is then taken to a room to meet a very old Saito. Saito tells Cobb that he reminds him of someone, "a man I met in a half-remembered dream." The scene shifts to what feels like a flashback of another conversation between Cobb, Arthur, and a younger Saito in a room very much like the one we just saw. Then, Cobb "wakes up" after having been dunked in a bathtub (MM 11:35). And at MM 14:36, Cobb wakes up on the train. So, in the first 15 minutes of the movie, the viewer sees Cobb in limbo, then waking up in a dream, and then waking up in (what might be) reality. Because we have already seen a couple of scenes in which Cobb wakes up, only to wake up again, how do we know—and how does *Cobb* know—that he is not in yet another dream? Is there any way to prove that Cobb is not dreaming?

Descartes explains that "there exist no certain marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished from sleep."[2] The problem is that any test that one might use to prove that he is not dreaming can be replicated in a dream, because any such test will involve a sensory experience. For example, say that I ask someone to pinch me right now to prove that I am not dreaming. Quite clearly, the experience of feeling the pinch will not work to prove to me that I am not dreaming, as I could merely be dreaming that I have been pinched. As we will see, even the pain that I might feel might not be genuine because it could be possible to have the sensation of pain in the absence of any actual physical injury. As Descartes recognizes, it is impossible to know that a perception is genuine *in a given moment*—one could wake up afterwards and retroactively discount a perception one experiences while asleep as unreal, but while it is happening, there is nothing to distinguish it from a waking perception.

Inception adds a couple of other features that work to further enhance the skeptic's argument. The first is *lucid dreaming*. In a typical dream, the dreamer

is passive. The dream happens and the dreamer has no control over his own actions. In a lucid dream, the dreamer is consciously aware that he is dreaming and can actively direct his own movements. In *Inception*, the lucid dreams that some of the characters have are so like reality that it is difficult for the victim to know that the events are occurring in a dream. For example, at MM 1:25:43, Cobb (as Mr. Charles) prompts Robert Fischer to realize that he is dreaming. Cobb does this by pointing out the strangeness of things going on around Fischer and by helping Fischer to recognize that he has no memory of how he came to be sitting at the hotel bar. However, Fischer's awareness that he is in a dream actually makes him more vulnerable to Cobb's ruse. Although Fischer knows that he is dreaming at that moment, his sense of certainty that he is in a dream prevents him from suspecting that he is in a dream *within a dream*.

The film also introduces the concept of *shared-dreaming*, where more than one person can plug into and share another person's dream. In the scene discussed above, Fischer, Cobb, Ariadne, and Saito are actually sharing Arthur's dream, within Yusuf's dream. Because everyone except Fischer knows that they are sharing Yusuf's dream and because they are lucid dreaming, the team is able to manipulate the dream in certain ways to make it even more difficult for Fischer to discover that he is in a dream within a dream.

But how do the members of the team know that *they* are not dreaming? Each one uses a *totem*—a trinket with an entirely unique feature that only that person knows about. Arthur explains that "when you look at your totem you know beyond a doubt that you're not in someone else's dream" (MM 34:50). Cobb uses a top as his totem. When he spins the top and it topples over, he "knows" that he is not dreaming. But can the toppling top really work to provide Cobb with absolute certainty—*beyond a doubt*—that he is not in a dream? It seems not. It is possible that Cobb could merely dream that he is having the experience of watching the top fall over in just the right way, in which case he would mistakenly believe that he is not dreaming. Because the use of the totem requires sensory experience to prove that he is not dreaming, the totem will fail to provide absolute proof.

Once we understand that neither the viewer nor Cobb can be certain that Cobb is awake in any given scene, the movie permits a variety of interpretations. Here are five of them[3]:

1   The straightforward interpretation: In reality, Cobb is hired by Saito to implant the idea in Fischer's head. The inception works. Cobb wakes up on the plane with the rest of the team and Fischer. And Cobb returns to his real kids.
2   The limbo ending: Cobb is hired by Saito to implant the idea in Fischer's head. The inception works. But Cobb is stuck in limbo and does not make it back to his real kids.

3   The partial dream: Most of the movie is Cobb's dream that begins while
     he is on a plane, flying home. He wakes up on the plane and returns to
     his real kids.
4   The shared-dream: Part or all of the movie is someone else's dream, and
     Cobb is plugged into it.
5   The full dream: The entire movie, from beginning to end, is Cobb's
     dream.

(1) is the straightforward account of the events in the film, and, as it is also the
one with the happy ending, it could be the most attractive. However, there
are a few problems with this interpretation. At the end of the movie, when
Cobb turns to go to his children, he leaves the top spinning—neither Cobb
nor the viewer sees the top fall. So, whether Cobb is still dreaming is unde-
termined. Furthermore, the position of the kids in the yard and the clothes
that they are wearing seem to be *too* similar to Cobb's memory of them. Even
though we know that dream-time is much slower than real-time, on this
interpretation, some real-time must have passed since Cobb last saw his kids,
so it seems that they would have changed in various ways. Wouldn't they be
wearing different clothes? Wouldn't they be playing somewhere else, or at
least be in different positions?

On interpretation (2), Cobb never makes it back to the real world. Instead,
he is in limbo after drowning in the van. Although interpretation (2) is able to
make sense of the spinning top at the end and although it accounts for the
similarity in Cobb's memories of the kids, there are still some problems with
this interpretation. In particular, why would Cobb choose to stay in limbo
when he could shoot or "kill" himself in some way in order to return to reality
to be with his kids?

The partial dream interpretation in (3) suggests that when the movie begins,
Cobb is on a plane dreaming. He wakes up on the plane and goes home to see
his kids. But this interpretation has some problems, as well. Specifically, on this
interpretation, his top is merely a part of his dream and not a genuine totem.
So, why at the end of the film does he take it out and spin it before he goes to
greet his kids? Also, as with (1), there seems to be too much similarity between
his real kids and how he dreamed of them to make sense of this explanation.

According to (4), Cobb is in someone else's dream. This interpretation
makes the most sense of the spinning top at the end—that it continues to spin
indicates that Cobb is in someone else's dream. However, the camera cuts
away, and neither Cobb nor the viewer can ever know whether the top
eventually falls at some point.

And (5) is that old movie trick of making the entire film one long, compli-
cated dream. Unlike the other interpretations, there can be no holes in this
interpretation of the film, because any inconsistencies that might be found in
the narrative can be explained away as just part of the strangeness of the
dream.

There could well be more interpretations that could be offered for what *really* happens in *Inception*. (We will leave it to you to come up with others). Of course, because *Inception* is a work of fiction, there is nothing that *really* happened. Yet, because we are left with uncertainty about which events are real and which are not, the various interpretations work well as an argument for skepticism.[4]

The Matrix offers us the same sorts of jumps in interpretation as the action progresses as was offered in *Inception*. We discover at MM 11:57 that everything that has happened up to that point (for example, the strange messages that Neo is receiving on his computer) was a dream. Similarly, when Neo awakes *again* at MM 21:30, we discover that the events between MM 11:57 and MM 21:30 were a dream, and that, therefore, the first 12 minutes was a dream within a dream. After this second awakening, major events happen very quickly. Neo meets Morpheus. Morpheus begins to explain what "the matrix" is. Neo chooses to learn more, even though the truth could be very upsetting. This sequence culminates with the "real" Neo waking up in his vat, being released and flushed out into the "real" world, and being greeted by the "real" Morpheus. From this point on in the movie, the interpretation that Neo has entered the "real" world is never questioned. Thus, except for the times when he re-enters the matrix to fight the (virtual) bad guys, all of his perceptions are genuine.

But what does it mean to say that Neo's post-release perceptions are *genuine*, whereas his pre-release perceptions are not? Similarly, what does it mean to say that the perceptions experienced in the context of lucid dreams and dreams within dreams are *not genuine*? What both of these movies do so well is highlight the starting point of skepticism: both movies make it clear that *when we perceive, we are not immediately aware of external objects*. Our perceptions exist only in our minds—they are not themselves external objects. It is only by distinguishing between perceptions and external objects that sense can be made of (1) the virtual reality created by the matrix; (2) the virtual reality in *Inception's* architecturally designed lucid dreams; and (3) the virtual reality found in normal, human dreams. But once it is granted that perceptions are not themselves external objects, what then? Descartes recognized this as an important question. In the third essay of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he develops a theory that we shall call the **theory of representative perceptions**. According to this theory, a perception is genuine if it is caused by and accurately represents the external object(s) that give rise to it. Thus, the visual perception of a book that I am having right now is genuine if there really is a book that exists "out there" in the mind-independent world of material objects, and that book is causally responsible for producing the perception that I am experiencing right now. Furthermore, my perception must accurately depict that book: it must offer accurate information about the book's size and shape, as well as its location relative to other objects that I am also perceiving at present. If these conditions are all satisfied by a perception, then that perception is said to be *genuine*.

Notice that there is a similarity between the theory of representative perceptions and the correspondence theory of truth (that we discussed in Section 1.3). For both theories, there must be a direct relationship between the "internal world" of a person's mind and the "external world" of reality in order for a perception to be genuine or a belief to be true. But Descartes's theory of representative perceptions has an additional feature: according to him, there must be a *causal* relationship between the perception and the object of which it is a perception. So, there must be a real object out there in the world that causes the perception of it. However, as we will see, the theory of representative perceptions could fall prey to problems that are similar to those raised against the correspondence theory of truth.

It is clear that many of the perceptions that Cobb and Neo have are not genuine according to the conditions laid out above. All matrix-generated perceptions (whether in Neo or any other character hooked into the system) fail the accuracy-of-representation requirement. Thus, even though the perceptions are caused by an external source (the physical computer that is running the matrix program), they are not caused by the external objects that they purport to represent. The same goes for Cobb's perceptions in his shared lucid dreams. For example, there are no material objects that cause *and resemble* the visual and auditory sensations that Cobb has when he (seems to) interact with Mal or any of the other projections of his subconscious; even though the cause may be his material brain that houses his subconscious, his brain definitely does not resemble Mal.

Descartes is not alone among philosophers in believing that the theory of representative perceptions (or something very much like it) is the only way to make sense of the possibility of illusion; although he was alone among the great philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries in arguing that this theory did not inexorably lead to skepticism. **Descartes's problem** is explaining how a perceiver could get evidence that a current perception is caused by and accurately represents an external object. Consider how Neo responds to this challenge. His response on being plugged into not the matrix but a computer construct (MM 39:15) is to reach out and touch a sofa and ask in amazement, "This isn't real?" Neo responds to the challenge of Descartes's problem by seeking tactile confirmation that, indeed, he is not experiencing a visual illusion. In his first meditation, Descartes himself describes a similar search for tactile confirmation as his initial response to the challenge. "I put my hand out consciously and deliberately; I feel the paper and see it."[5] But further consideration convinces Descartes and Neo that tactile sensations are just more perceptions—they do not provide unmediated information about the characteristics of, or even the existence of, external objects. While tactile sensations are qualitatively insufficient to meet the challenge of Descartes's problem, there is a reason why this is Neo's and Descartes's initial response. It is commonplace that our visual sensations deceive us. Even in a waking state, we have all experienced optical illusions; so, the average person is willing to

occasionally distrust the visual system. Similarly, auditory illusions are relatively common, as is the corresponding willingness to distrust our hearing. The sense of touch is much less susceptible to waking illusion; it seems the natural choice in testing the genuineness of our visual and auditory reports. However, *Inception* challenges the trustworthiness of tactile sensations. In one dream sequence, Mal shoots Arthur, and Arthur screams in pain, even though he has not *really* been shot (MM 6:53). Mal (or, rather, Cobb's projection of her) explains that "pain is in the mind," suggesting that Arthur is not really feeling pain, he just thinks that he is. And later, in another dream sequence, when Mal and Cobb are arguing about whether their current experiences are genuine, Mal stabs Cobb. "Does this feel real?" Mal demands of Cobb, making the point that the tactile sensation of being in pain is nothing but a sensation and that Cobb's experience of being in pain is not genuine. Because there is no real knife and there is no real injury, there cannot be any real pain. In reality, Cobb is asleep on an airplane, and Mal does not exist. Thus, both *The Matrix* and *Inception* help to demonstrate that tactile sensations cannot provide the evidence necessary to distinguish between genuine and nongenuine perceptions.

As we saw in the discussion of the correspondence theory of truth, skepticism has its source in the fact that all we directly experience are our own sensations, not the external things themselves. None of us has ever, in our entire lives, had contact with an external object where that contact was not mediated by the senses. We cannot, therefore, justify our belief in external objects with reference to our *direct* contact with them.

Are *we* any different in this regard than Cobb and Neo? We haven't plugged ourselves into a dream-sharing device. Furthermore, we are living in the early 21st century, not the year 2199, as did Neo. But hold on a minute. This line of reasoning will get us nowhere. What generates skepticism is the recognition that all we are ever directly aware of are our own perceptions, not mind-independent objects in some material world. We assume such a world exists and is causally responsible for the perceptions we have, but we have no way of peeking around our perceptions to view these mind-independent objects to check the assumption. There is, however, one important difference between us on the one hand, and Cobb and Neo on the other: they have been given a reason to actively suspect the genuineness of many of their perceptions, while we have not.

Cobb has reason to worry that he may not be having genuine experiences at any given moment due to the events that occurred after he and Mal returned from limbo. While in limbo, Cobb had planted the idea that "this isn't real" in Mal's subconscious to help her want to wake up and return to their kids. They "killed" themselves in their dream by lying down in front of a train, but when they woke up in reality, the idea that this is not real remained in Mal's mind. Her belief that they were still in limbo was so strong that she committed suicide in an attempt to "wake up." As a result of these events, and

because Mal continues to plague his subconscious, Cobb cannot be entirely certain that any current experience is genuine.

Other characters in *Inception* also have reason to suspect that their perceptions are not genuine. Consider, again, the scene in which Cobb, as Mr. Charles, tries to convince Fischer that he is dreaming. Fischer has to decide whether or not to trust this Mr. Charles. If Fischer listens to Mr. Charles's advice and believes that his current perceptions are nongenuine, he might be able to prevent the kidnappers from extracting the combination for the safe and from killing his god-father, Browning. What evidence is there, from Fischer's point of view, that he is dreaming? First, the experiences that Fischer is having and has had up to that point in time are strange and atypical. A woman has left him a phone number with only six digits, the room is shaking, and the people in the bar are all looking at him. Second, Fischer is familiar with the process of extraction, and he remembers that at some point in the past, he was trained to protect his subconscious from thieves. Third, Fischer also remembers that he and Browning have been kidnapped, and it could very well be the case that the kidnappers are going to enter into his dream and steal his secrets. Finally, as Cobb points out, Fischer has no memory of having entered the hotel bar and cannot remember how he came to be sitting there. Now, what evidence does Fischer have that his current perceptions are caused by and accurately represent external objects? Most people are naturally inclined to trust that their perceptions are genuine. But for Fischer, that natural inclination does not provide strong support for thinking that he is currently having genuine perceptions. Fischer has more evidence supporting the theory that his current perceptions are nongenuine, so trusting Mr. Charles could help to protect his secrets and save Browning.

Can a similar analysis be given for *The Matrix*? Let us consider the two theories contending for explanation of Neo's perceptions between MM 21:30 and MM 32:00. (This is roughly the period of time between Neo waking up for the second time and the "real" Neo waking up in his vat.) According to one theory, Neo's perceptions are the result of a computer stimulating his nervous system in a way indistinguishable from the way in which his nervous system would be stimulated, were he actually interacting with material objects. Thus, according to this theory, all of his perceptions during this time period are nongenuine. What evidence is there in favor of this? First, he has the equivalent of a "waking up" experience at MM 32:24 which, at the very least, calls into question the genuineness of the preceding perceptions. Second, many of his experiences during this time period were highly atypical. And third, Neo has experiences throughout the rest of the film that flesh out the hows and whys of the matrix. According to another theory, Neo's perceptions during this time period are genuine. There is not much to say in favor of this theory, with the possible exception that Neo's experiences, while admittedly atypical during this time period (judged relative to those of the average human), are no more atypical than the things that he experienced both before

and after this portion of the movie. There is a third theory that has some plausibility: maybe Neo is still dreaming; maybe everything that happens throughout the entire movie is a dream. After all, we are already allowing for the possibility of a dream-within-a-dream. (Recall, that is what is going on during the first 12 minutes of the film.) This alternative has one major point to recommend it: Neo has sequences of highly atypical experiences sprinkled throughout the movie—they are not just confined to the first 32 minutes.

This third interpretation of *The Matrix* and the fifth interpretation of *Inception* again raise the question originally posed by Descartes in his first meditation: Are there any reliable signs distinguishing sleeping from waking? By the end of his *Meditations*, Descartes believes he has found just such a reliable sign, noting that "memory can never connect [a person's] dreams with each other and with the course of life, in the way it is in the habit of doing with events that occur when we are awake."[6] Thus, for Descartes, there is nothing in the perception itself that would allow someone to say that this is certainly a genuine perception. Rather, this judgment of genuineness can only be made in the context of the individual's *other* perceptions—past, present, and future. Other philosophers in the modern era claim that Descartes got it wrong—they hold that there *is* an intrinsic (noncontextual) difference between genuine and nongenuine perceptions. One of these dissenting philosophers is George Berkeley, who held that genuine perceptions are more intrinsically vivid than their nongenuine counterparts.[7] Berkeley held that there are three criteria that distinguish genuine perceptions from nongenuine ones: (1) the vividness of the perception; (2) its degree of independence from our will; and (3) its connectedness to previous and future perceptions.

Does the evidence of nongenuineness in some of the characters' perceptions in *Inception* and *The Matrix* tend to support Descartes or Berkeley? A few pages ago, we isolated several attributes that led us, as viewers, as well as Fischer and Neo, to interpret some of their perceptions as genuine and others as nongenuine. For *Inception*, these attributes were: (1) the atypicalness of many of Fischer's perceptions; (2) his memory of having been trained to protect himself against extraction; (3) his memory of having been kidnapped; and (4) his lack of memory about how he arrived at the bar. Are these attributes of isolated perceptions or attributes of perceptions relative to other perceptions that Fischer has? (2) and (3) involve the memory of past perceptions, while (4) involves the awareness that there is a lack of any such memory. Thus, (2), (3), and (4) must all be considered in relation to past perceptions and not in isolation. Likewise (1), the atypicalness of Fischer's current perceptions, is judged relative to other perceptions that Fischer has experienced in the past. So, all four of these attributes tend to support Descartes's contention that the only way to tell whether a perception is genuine is to consider that perception in the context of the individual's other perceptions.

The attributes isolated in *The Matrix* likewise support Descartes over Berkeley. Recall the three attributes mentioned as clues that certain of Neo's

perceptions were nongenuine: (1) Neo's "waking up" experience at MM 32:00, which, at the very least, calls into question the genuineness of the preceding perceptions; (2) the atypicalness of some of Neo's perceptions; and (3) Neo's experiences throughout the latter part of the movie that flesh out the hows and whys of the matrix. According to the first and third attributes, earlier perceptions are judged nongenuine because of something that happens later. The second attribute is one that we have already met in the discussion of *Inception*. Here, as there, atypicalness is a contextual attribute.

The upshot from the preceding few paragraphs reinforces the claim that Berkeley got it wrong: there might be nothing about a nongenuine perception that marks it off as nongenuine—its nongenuineness might only be ascertained by considering the perceptions that went before and after it in an individual's stream of consciousness. This explains why it is difficult for humans to distinguish perceptions in dreams as nongenuine *while those perceptions are being experienced*. After the fact, when the abrupt discontinuity in perception occurs at waking up, the individual has no problem identifying the previous perceptions as nongenuine (unless, of course, that individual merely dreams that he has woken up).

Skepticism is not concerned so much with individual perceptions as it is with our entire mental lives. How can I know that I am not massively deluded about the existence of an external world? The preceding discussion provides us with a new way of describing skepticism: How can I know that I will not have perceptions in the future (for example, the typical abrupt discontinuity in perception that corresponds to waking up) that will invalidate my current perceptions and all my perceptions that have come before? The response that the skeptic would give to both ways of posing the question is the same: I cannot know.

Before we leave this section, there is an important disanalogy between *Inception* and *The Matrix* that bears mentioning: *The Matrix* neither considers the possibility that there are *no* material objects whatsoever, nor that Neo exists in some physical form or other; whereas this is consistent with the interpretation of *Inception* that explains the entire narrative as a dream.

The consistent skeptic would say that you cannot be justified in claiming to know that any physical body exists anywhere. It is possible that *you* are nothing but a bunch of perceptions; it is possible that there is no physical body that corresponds to you. Recall that this is the quandary in which Descartes found himself at the end of his first meditation. He can doubt the existence of all material objects; he can even doubt the existence of his own body; but he cannot doubt his existence as a thing that thinks.

2.5 Hume's Radical Skepticism

Was Descartes overstepping the evidence when he pronounced his famous, "I think; therefore, I exist"? Some philosophers who came after Descartes

thought even this limited claim to knowledge was unjustified. In this section, we shall consider the views of **David Hume** who argued that not only can the existence of an external world be doubted, but even the existence of a centralized and continuous self can be doubted. Hume's skepticism goes even deeper, for he argued that memory could not be trusted to provide us with certain information about our previous perceptions.

What is the *I* in Descartes's "I think; therefore, I exist"? Descartes assumed that he could perceive an unchanging self that was the entity doing the perceiving, thinking, and so on. But did Descartes really have such a perception? Do you ever have a perception of yourself as a continuous, unchanging self? We are not speaking here of a perception such as that of seeing yourself in a mirror over an extended period of time; we are not dealing here with issues of your bodily existence. Rather, we are asking whether you can discern some unchanging thing (your *self*) in the flux of thoughts and perceptions that occur. At this point, this is probably striking you as an even stranger question than "Have you ever genuinely perceived an external object?" But if you consider it, you may well find agreement with Hume, who provides the following argument in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (excerpts of which are in Readings from Primary Sources—Reading 3b, 283, and are a reading for the next chapter):

> [W]hen I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, … [however], I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception…. The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor *identity* … whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind.[8]

According to Hume, we have no evidence that an unchanging self exists, since all we are ever aware of are fleeting thoughts and perceptions. To the extent that a self exists at all, it is nothing but a bundle of thoughts and perceptions. Hume would say that, in pronouncing "*I* think; therefore, *I* exist," Descartes never considered the possibility that there is no *I*; really, all Descartes could know with certainty was that *thoughts* and *perceptions* exist. It was an unjustified leap on Descartes's part from "thoughts exist" to "I exist."

But things get even weirder than that. Consider memories. What are the conditions for a memory's being *genuine*? In some ways, the conditions are less stringent than the conditions for genuineness of a perception: there is no requirement that an external object exists. Thus, I can have a *genuine* memory