Present and explain External World Skepticism. Present, explain and evaluate the Argument from Sensory Error.

External world skepticism is the view that you can’t know anything about the external world (or even if there is such a thing) – you can only know about the internal world of your own mind.

The external world is supposed to be whatever exists outside and independently of your own mind. So, for example, if the world is the way we usually think it is, the external world contains things like dogs and cats. If, on the other hand, the Matrix movie were the way the world the actual is, then the external world wouldn’t include any dogs and cats, since the evil robots have killed them all. The external world consists of the contents of your own mind, like your thoughts, desires and sensations. So, for example, the dog is a part of the external world, but your beliefs about the dog or your visual sensation upon seeing the dog are part of the internal world. So, the external world skeptic says that you could know that you think there are dogs, but you can’t know whether there really are such things.

The argument from sensory error is the first skeptical argument that Descartes talks about. It goes like this:

1) My senses have deceived me in the past.
2) If my senses have deceived me in the past, then they could be deceiving me now.
3) If my senses could be deceiving me now, then I can’t know anything about the external world.
4) [So] I can’t know anything about the external world.

This argument is valid. Descartes defends (1) by giving an example. He points out that when you look at something far away, it may look like it has a different shape than it actually does. In that case, your senses might deceive you in the sense that they could lead you to form a false belief. Our senses might be reliable, but they’re far from perfect. Descartes defends (2) by pointing out that, when your senses deceived you in the past, it seemed like they were telling the truth. It might seem like your senses are telling the truth now, but there’s no way to tell for sure. There’s no independent test for when your senses are working and when they are not. Finally, Descartes would defend (3) by appealing to what we called “the knowledge thesis.” In order to know that something is the case, you first need to rule out all the alternatives (like in the game of Clue). Now, I might think this paper I’m writing on is white. It looks white. But there are two explanations for why it looks that way. First, it might actually BE white and my senses are correctly reporting that. Second, it might be blue or green or something and my senses are just malfunctioning. I can’t rule out the second possibility so, according to the knowledge thesis, I can’t know the paper is white. The same thing goes for all my beliefs about the external world, since all those beliefs are based on sensory experiences.

Descartes thinks that some people might reject the second premise. It’s true that my senses have deceived me in the past, but that was always in “non-optimal” conditions, like when I was trying to see something far away or something really small. But this piece of paper on my desk is near enough and big enough that I can be sure by senses are working in this case. I don’t think this objection is very convincing. Descartes might know that the paper is close by, but how can he know for sure that the viewing conditions are optimal? He can’t rule out temporary color blindness, for example, so he can’t really be sure the paper is white.

A better objection is the one we called the “self-undermining” objection. If Descartes really does believe that we can’t know anything about the external world, then he shouldn’t think that his senses have deceived him in the past, since that’s just to say that the world was one way, and his senses told him it was somehow different. But we could never know what the world was really like, so we could never know that our senses have deceived us in the past.