

# CAN WE KNOW ANYTHING FOR CERTAIN? Or COGITO ERGO SUM. What does it mean?

Roger K Howe, 2008-05-31

Skepticism's underlying claim is that we really cannot know anything for certain. Lord Berkeley notoriously asked: "If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear, does it make a noise?"

Descartes responded to the skeptics by stating that the mere fact that he can think is proof that he exists – so there is ONE thing you really can know for sure. What "I am" means is another issue completely, as we shall see, but the basic contention is that in order for him to experience himself as thinking, there must be some existent being with the intelligence to be having thoughts – whatever the nature of that being might be.

Socrates (and Pythagoras) would have refuted the skeptics with  $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$  – the relationship between the lengths of the sides of a rectilinear triangles and the hypotenuse. We learned this relationship as the "Pythagorean theorem" in high school. It is eternally and essentially true of all right triangles. In fact, it defines the perfected essence of a right triangle. And that, in a way, makes it a tautology – a statement that is true because it is true by definition. Such statements have little value in proving that you actually know anything. For instance, if one defines a harpy as "the set of harpies is congruent with the set of rocs with human bodies," then the statement that a roc with a human body is a harpy is true but says nothing about the nature of reality.

But, beyond the assertion of our own existence, and mathematical abstractions, what else is there we can know for certain?

The reasoning of Descartes is interesting. His concern was that he might be under a delusion or a hallucination brought on by an evil spirit. Everything he thought he could see, hear, touch, taste or smell could be a result of that delusion or hallucination. This is much like a dream. However, the one absolute requirement of a delusion, a hallucination or a dream is that there be an entity to have that delusion, hallucination or dream. Thus does Descartes prove his own existence – he is capable of thinking and, in thinking, he is able to understand that, even if everything else in his experience is false or misleading, at least he can understand that he exists because he must exist in order for the dream to have a vessel in which to exist.

Each of us can choose the same argument to ascertain our own existence – yet none of us can ascertain with the same certainty the existence of anyone else. I may choose to believe that all the rest of you are just a figment of my imagination. You may think that you think, that is your privilege. But I cannot know that you think, and, in the absence of knowing that you think, I cannot know that you exist.

I may be deluded about everything outside of my self-awareness and my ability to think logically. I may be a being of some very different physical nature (or of no physical nature at all!) in the midst of a dream – and what a complex and wonderful dream, if dream it is! I may be under the influence of some malignant magical entity, being fed delusions and hallucinations. If either of these is true, then nothing I think I experience

may be real. There may not be an Earth; I may not have a physical body; all of the people I meet may be phantasms or inventions of my (or another's) imagination.

There are two movies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that illustrate the conundrum wrapped in this logic. In *Total Recall*, the central character is bored with his life and goes to have a "vacation dream" implanted. We are given to understand that something goes wrong in the process, but it is never really clear whether the rest of the movie is about the dream or the activated recollection of real events. Similarly, in *Matrix*, the main character "awakens" to find himself locked into an existence in which his body is part of a large machine while his mind is being fed an artificial life that it thinks is real. He is able to disconnect and go into the neural matrix behind the artificial images. In one scene, one of the police fires a gun at him and because he understands that the "him" that is being fired upon is only a phantasm and not his real self, the bullet passes through him without doing damage – the implication is that if he had believed himself to be capable of being harmed by the bullet, he might have died. Both movies cast real doubts about what one can really know about the world one perceives, but neither leaves any doubt about a single central premise: the central character really exists.

Of one thing I may be certain. I exist. If I exist, I must exist in some context. Perhaps it is not the context of the world I think I live in, but nonetheless, there must be a context of some kind. Within that context, what I am experiencing has meaning. If I am deluded about the nature of my experience and my world, I may be deluded about the meaning of that experience – and I will have no way to correct myself while I am immersed in the delusion.

At base, then, I can start with one of two basic assumptions about what I experience. Either assumption must be based on the knowledge that whichever is true, my experiences in this world are real to me, whether they have any external reality or not. With that proviso, the two alternatives are that there is a real world that I live in and that my experiences are reflective of that world or that the world I think I experience exists only in my mind.

There is no possible referent external to my mind that can tell me which is the case. All of my perceptions of the world are in my mind, whether the world exists outside of my mind or not, the only place where I can understand it is in my mind. Therefore, there is no quality in my perceptions of the world that will help me to know whether it is real or not.

Is there some quality of my thought process that can help me to ascertain the reality of the world I perceive? So long as there is no break in my delusions, there can be no palpable signal that the world is not real. If the world is real, there will be no break in my consciousness of it, which could as easily be a signal of the constancy of my delusion.

Conclusion: The world I can perceive around me may or may not be real and I will have no way of ascertaining the truth of the matter. So I must consider both possibilities.

### The Universe as a Delusion

If the world is a delusion, then there are issues to be resolved:

- To what end am I having this delusion?
  - Is there a purpose? If so, what is the nature of that purpose?
  - If there is no purpose, what might that mean?

- What is the cause of the delusion?
  - Is it a simple dream?
  - Is it drug-induced – and if so, why did I take/was I given the drug?
  - Is it a delusion implanted by another being?

Of course, I do not think I will be able to figure out the correct answer to these questions, but the consideration of the alternatives may provide me some guidance as to how to conduct myself. The answers to these questions break down into three overall categories:

- The delusions are meant to be harmful to me;
- The delusions are of neutral import – neither helpful nor harmful to me (whether they are internally or externally generated seems not to matter);
- The delusions are meant to be helpful to me or to test me (which I would regard generally as being a subset of being helpful, since, presumably, if I “pass the test” there is some advantage to be gained).

If the delusions are neither helpful nor harmful, then it matters not how I react to them. In this case, reacting in the same way I would react if the external world were real cannot hurt me. Since I cannot be certain whether the external world is real or a delusion, it is prudent in this case to react to the world as if it were real.

If the delusions are meant to be helpful, then my reactions to them as if the world is real is the correct pathway to realizing the benefit that is intended. Any delusion implanted with the intent to produce a possible benefit will be there for me to react to as though it were real. I will either learn from it or prove something in relation to my reactions that will demonstrate or fail to demonstrate my fitness. Therefore, if the delusion is intended to be helpful, I should react to the world as if it were real.

If the delusions are intended to harm me, I must consider how that harm might come to pass. If the world I perceive is a delusion, how could it harm me unless I choose to harm myself? Or is it possible that the danger lies in this world? Could it be that becoming too committed – too “attached” – to this world will somehow harm me? Perhaps if I become too attached, I may seal my own fate, so to speak, by becoming the mortal I think myself to be. Or, perhaps, the danger is that I will be seduced by the pleasures of this world into conduct not consistent with my “waking” (when I am not suffering from the delusion) values.

This possibility is the most disturbing, since it is the only one indicating that the treatment of my delusion as something other than reality may be important. What is the substrate on which I may rest my “reserve” against such a reality? This is an issue to which I shall return from time to time.

However, if this world of illusion is the product of some inimical force, it still seems to me that there is little choice but to look at all of the alternatives, choose the one that seems best based on all available possibilities – never ignoring the possibility but never being obsessed with it either.

### The Universe as Reality

The alternative, of course, is that the world I perceive is real. In this case, the only rational choice is to deal with the world as if it is real.

### In Conclusion

Of the four possibilities (the world is real; the world is a neutral illusion; the world is a helpful illusion; the world is a harmful illusion), only the last suggests the possibility of reacting to the world in some other way – and even then it is not clearly the correct path. Thus, it seems to me overwhelmingly to be the best choice to treat the world I perceive as being real. In this sense, then, it really doesn't matter whether the world is real or a delusion – I should explore it as if it were real, seeking for the questions, answers, wisdom and folly it has to offer.