

# EXTERNAL-WORLD SCEPTICISM- WHAT IS IT?

When Philosophy is discussed in day-to-day life, the most common question asked of philosophers is:

**“Are we living in a simulation?”**

This question resonates on a deep level with people from all walks of life, even as a joke! **How can we be sure that what we think is real, actually is?**

Terms like: **“Simulation Theory”**, **“The Matrix”**, **“The Evil Demon”**, or the idea that we might be living in a dream-world, are all examples of **External World Scepticism**, which is the philosophical stance that claims we have no good evidence for our belief in a **shared**

**world external to our own thoughts**. This includes objects, other people, everything around us, and **even our own bodies!**

In many ways, this topic is almost a caricature of philosophy itself, **questioning even the most fundamental truths about our reality**. My research focuses on this discussion of reality, and starting from **Descartes'** famous **Cogito** argument (I think, therefore I am), seeks to **defend belief in the world** as not only the **sensible** stance for us to adopt in the face of scepticism, but the **ethically right** position to maintain.

# AN ETHICAL DEFENSE OF COMMON SENSE

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## THE COMMON SENSE RESPONSE

When faced with the suggestion:

“The world you believe exists, might not be real- it might be an **illusion** created by an **Evil Demon**, or this might be a **Computer Simulation**”

The **‘Common Sense’** response might be to ignore, or even laugh at this! After all, what good are theoretical reasons for doubting what seems obvious from the evidence of our senses?

Unfortunately, we cannot **prove** the world we think exists, is actually real. Because of this, some argue we are guilty of **incongruence**- we believe and act as if we have proven our world is real, but we haven't!

These objectors claim our actions should reflect this uncertainty, and that we ought to apply doubt to our experiences of the world, to align our behaviour with the theoretical uncertainty of the world's reality; and that **‘Common Sense’ isn't enough**.

## AN ETHICAL DEFENSE?

The most **realistic** way we could satisfy the sceptic is to **decrease the value** we attribute to our experiences of the world. The **sceptic** would say: “You can still hug your mum, but by reflecting on the fact she **might not be real**, you can **attribute less value** to hugging her, and thus **lessen your level of certainty** in her existence”

In the sceptic's view, by doing this you would have resolved **incongruence**- after all, now your beliefs are starting to reflect the fact you can't **prove** your mum isn't just part of a computer simulation- good news?

**But:** This feels **wrong**. I seek to defend the intuition that by taking scepticism seriously, we are doing something **ethically compromising**. I provide a justification for our ordinary belief that the world we experience, is real.

My thesis engages in close analysis of **Contextualist**, **Pragmatist**, and **Cartesian** contemporary philosophical perspectives and historical frameworks of **epistemological** and **ethical** thought, to shed light on how **incongruence** between our **practical certainty** in the realness of the world, is challenged by **theoretical doubt**, and to show that giving in to the latter, isn't **ethically viable**. I develop a **framework** that shows even the most realistic attempt we might engage in to reflect theoretical doubt in the external world, wouldn't be possible. Even more importantly though, my final position shows that **even if we could** succeed in this, **we shouldn't**. This position is called **Ethical Common-Sense Realism**.

## WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

The scope of this project is wide reaching, and has implications for how we interact with the **beliefs of others**, and **our own**. External world scepticism represents the questioning of those things we think represent **truth**, and casts doubt on to everything we take to be certain in our day-to-day lives.

The justification for belief in the external world presented in my thesis represents a justification for **belief itself**, and makes a case for the **ethical defence of knowledge systems** that lie outside of theoretical reasoning frameworks that seek to undermine or contradict them.

**Ethical Common-Sense Realism** represents a return to **accepting intuition** and knowledge systems deeply tied to **personal ethics** and **lived-experience**, as **valid**, and **justified** ways of experiencing the world.