

Tossing Junk into a Small Pool

If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.

—René Descartes

Seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) asked just what can be known beyond a shadow of a doubt. He imagined a powerful, evil genius that has dedicated his considerable power to deceiving him. As Descartes put it,

I shall then suppose . . . some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colors, figures, sound, and all other external things are naught but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity.⁴

Such an evil genius could easily mislead us to believe five is larger than four (or vice versa); that day-old halibut smells pleasing rather than horribly (or horribly rather than pleasingly); or that halibut do (or do not) exist at all. How could anyone have much chance of sorting out the actual from the illusory when every thought we have may well be part of the evil genius's deceit? The problem isn't merely with figuring out what is (or is not) an illusion but with figuring out what would count as good reason to accept (or reject) the "evil genius hypothesis" itself.

Skepticism is the notion that no adequate justification for holding this or that belief exists (and so concluding that knowledge is not possible). A "global skeptic" holds that no knowledge on any subject of any sort is possible.⁵ To take Descartes's example, since we can never escape the possibility that the evil genius's mischief stands between our beliefs and the world, we can never know what is actually the case. On the other hand, "local skeptics" hold that particular methods of justification fail to properly link our beliefs to truth. Most of us are skeptics regarding reading tarot cards, tea leaves, or the lines on the palms of the hand and would rightly dismiss Marco's claims regarding the fish-bearing capacity of McElligot's Pool. But he tells the farmer that

This MIGHT be a pool, like I've read of in books,
Connected to one of those underground brooks!
An underground river that starts here and flows
Right under the pasture! And then . . . well, *who knows*. (Pool)