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HILARY PUTNAM ON LANGUAGE AND REFERENCE: THE CASE OF DISEMBODIED BRAINS

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You are asked to imagine that everything that you say, everything you do, and everything that youbelieve is not real but rather you are just a BIV[1]. If you continue to believe in this hypothetical situation then you have successfully reached the heart of the skepticism that you are a BIV. American Philosopher Hilary Putnam (1926- 2016) raised this skeptical situation about the natureof reality akin to Rene Descartes. Regarding Putnam's Cartesian skepticism Tim Button writes, "We are being threatened with the thought that appearances might be radically, nightmarishly deceptive, so that (almost) all of our beliefs are false. Indeed, the BIV scenario is not much more than a sci-fi reworking of the nightmare skeptical scenario discussed in Descartes's First Meditation.[2]

The BIV thought-experiment is an argument that Putnam illustrates to critic metaphysical Realism. Metaphysical Realists believe that the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects and we know the mind-independent world through correspondence relations. The Metaphysical Realist's notion of a mind-independent world is very much similar to Immaneul Kant's (1724-1804) understanding of the 'noumenal world', a collective of thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) or the noumenal objects. The 'noumenal world' is unknown and unknowable for us as it is beyond our sense experience. Putnam argues that if metaphysical Realist believes in a mind-independent world, then they are simply pursuing the fantasy of the noumenal world, because ".. we can form no real conception of these noumenal things; even the notion of a noumenal world isa kind of limit of thought (Grenz-Begriff) rather than a clear concept."[3] Putnam also argues that if the world exists mind-independently then truth becomes radically non-epistemic in nature because reality is being perceived from No Eye's point of view which he sometimes called God Eye's point of view. Therefore reality is unknown and unknowable to us, and it could be possible that we are BIV. But Putnam argues that we are not BIV, thus the Metaphysical Realist notion of truth as non-epistemic is eliminated as well as the notion of a mind-independent world is refuted. He writes, "When this sort of possibility is mentioned in a lecture on the Theory of Knowledge, the purpose, of course, is to raise the classical problem of scepticism with respect to the external world in a modern way. {How do you know you aren't in this

[1] I shall refer to the Brains in a Vat as BIV for the rest of the paper

[2] Button, Tim. *The Brain in a VAT*, by Sanford C. Goldberg, Cambridge

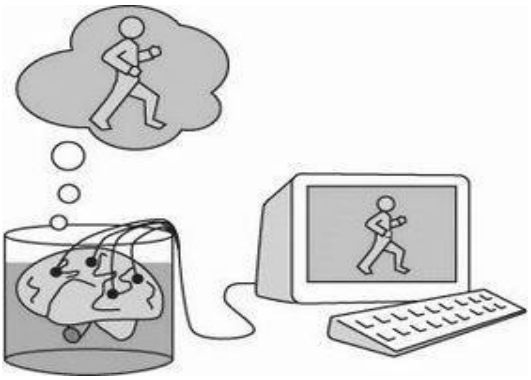
[3] Putnam, Reason Truth and History, p. 61

predicament?) But this predicament is also a useful device for raising issues about the mind/world relationship."[4]

However, before Putnam, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was the first philosopher who raised this skeptical question that there is an evil demon who is causing you to vividly hallucinate all your sense experience. He writes, it could be that "...some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myselfas having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things…"[5] Descartes's thought experiment is a method of systematic doubt through which he seeked to understand the extent of subjects that could be doubted upon. In contrast, Putnam's BIV thought experiment deals with the pre-conditions of reference and how representations correspond to the external objects. He reworks Descartes's evil demon to give us ascientific situation, supplanting the evil demon with an evil scientist working on a super-scientificcomputer to simulate sense experiences. Let us take a closer look at Putnam's BIV hypothesis in the next section.

Brain in a vat

Putnam's main question is, "Could we, if we were brains in a vat in this way, say or think that wewere?"[6] and the burden of his entire argument is to show that if we were a BIV, we cannot say or think that we are one. The diagram below contemplates a brain-in-a-vat situation.



A brain in a vat that believes it is walking.[7]

[4] Ibid. P.6

[5] Descartes René, et al. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*. University Press, 1911

[6] Putnum, Reason Truth and History, p.

[7] Alexander Wivel, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_in_a_vat#/media/File:Braininvat.jpg.\

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Putnam illustrates 'BIV' at length in his seminal work *Reason Truth and History* (1981) for the first time. BIV is an argument presented in the form of a thought experiment by Putnam. The BIV thought experiment is built on the hypothetical situation: Putnam supposes that an evil scientist has removed a person's brain from his skull and suspended it in a vat filled with fluid nutrients, where the brain can stay active and alive. The evil scientist has connected the nerve endings of the brain to a powerful super-scientific computer that sends neurological signals to the brain. Putnam writes, "The nerve endings have been connected to a super-scientific computer which causes the person whose brain it is to have the illusion that everything is perfectly normal. There seem to be people, objects, the sky, etc; but really all the person (you) is experiencing is the resultof electronic impulses travelling from the computer to the nerve endings."[8]

As such, the brain receives impulses from the super-scientific computer and can make sense of theexternal world, as the human brain does in the real world. When the brain in a vat volitionally tries to raise its hand or walk, the super-scientific computer is smart enough to send the same impulse to the brain. Thus the 'BIV' feels that it is raising its hands or is walking. The person who is actually a brain in a vat does not understand that he is being deceived by the super scientific computer or someone. The computer programmes can also be manipulated by the evil scientist soas to cause any kind of hallucination he desires for the victim to experience. He can remove or delete the memory of that same hallucination such that the victim will never remember what he orshe has experienced. Quite ironically, we can also imagine the victim is reading and writing on Putnam's thought experiment and the existence of an evil scientist who removes people's brains from the victims bodies and puts them in a jar of nutrients that keep the brains alive. We can continue supposing a bunch of programmes that the scientists perform on the brain.

Putnam further supposes that instead of having just one brain in a vat we could imagine that all human beings are simply 'brains' suspended in a vat. Now let us suppose that the super scientific computer is programmed by the scientist to give us all (sentient beings) a collective hallucination, instead of giving each individual vat brain different hallucinations. What will happen when I thinkthat I am communicating with my peers? When I say, 'How are you' to my peer, the efferent nerveendings send impulses from my brain to the computer. The super scientific computer then causesme to 'hear' my own voice uttering those words as well as feel that my tongue is moving, and I am thinking those words. On the other hand, when my peer thinks that he is listening to my words,the computer allows

[8] Putnam, Reason, truth and history, p. 6.

my peer to hear my words, see me speaking, and nod his head. But, neither of us have any physical organs. Putnam writes, "From a certain point of view, it doesn't even matter that 'the whole world' is a collective hallucination; for you do, after all, really hear my words whenI speak to you, even if the mechanism isn't what we suppose it to be."[9]

If this entire situation is considered to be actually true, one might ask, as Putnam does, that if we are brains in a vat, could we imagine or say or think that we are not brains in a vat? Putnam says that although brains in a vat do not violate any physical law and perfectly consistent with everything we have experienced yet it cannot be true because, according to Putnam, in a certain way, it is a self-refuting supposition.

Self-Refuting Supposition

Putnam writes "A 'self-refuting supposition' is one "whose truth implies its own falsity. For example, consider the thesis that all general statements are false. This is a general statement. So, if it is true, then it must be false. Hence, it is false. Sometimes a thesis is called 'self-refuting' if it isthe supposition that the thesis is entertained Brains in a vat or enunciated that implies its falsity."[10] For example, if I say that 'I do not exist' is true, then the truth of this statement will imply its ownfalsity, because to say 'I do not exist', one needs to exist. Hence one can be certain that one exists,if one thinks about non-existence. In other words, if the brain in a vat says that "I am not brain in a vat' is true, then the truth of this statement implies its own falsity proving that we are not brainsin a vat.

Let us further evaluate the problem of the self-refuting supposition in Brains in a Vat argument. When the 'brain in the vat' says "There lies a tree in front of me". Some theories even suggest that trees or the experience of looking at a tree actually refers to the image which is an electronically generated impulse. Such theories are precisely looking at the causal connection between vat- English and the presence of the tree image, or at least the presence of electronically generated impulses through certain configurations of the machine's program. Such causal chains cannot be ruled out, for the brain has rightly 'processed' the image by the electronically generated impulses.The reality as perceived by the vat in this manner is causally connected to the impulse. Within thescope of such causal theories, we can assume three truth conditions, which is fulfilled by the 'brainsin a vat' condition:

[9] Ibid, p. 7.

[10] Ibid. P.7-8

a. 'There lies a tree in front of me' in vat-English simply means that a ‘tree’ in the image be‘in front of’ the ‘me’ in question,
b. Or that the kind of electronic impulse that normally produces this experience is comingfrom the automatic machinery,

Or, perhaps, the machinery that is supposed to produce the 'tree in front of me' experienceis operating.[11]

Therefore, what follows is, words like 'vat', 'nutrient fluid' or all other words in vat-English refers to the vat, liquid and all other words simply as images. Following this, Putnam writes, “It followsthat if their 'possible world' is really the actual one, and we are really the brains in a vat, then whatwe now mean by 'we are brains in a vat' is that we are brains in a vat in the image or something ofthat kind (if we mean anything at all)”[12] Hence, one can also contend that 'we are brains in a vat'as long as we are brains in a vat in the image. But Putnam's hypothesis wanted to show that if weare brains in a vat then we are not simply brains in a vat in the image. Hence, if in any way we are brains in a vat, then the sentence 'We are brains in a vat' says something false or self-refuting.In short, if we are brains in a vat, then 'We are brains in a vat' is false. So, it is (necessarily) false.”[13]

In *The Realism with the Human Face* (1992) he writes, “This reflection suggests that when the Brains-in-a-Vat think ‘we are brains in a vat’ the truth-condition for their utterance must be that they are brains-in-a-vat in the image, or something of that kind. So, this sentence would seem to befalse, not true, when they think It (even though they are brains in a vat from our point of view). Itwould seem that they are not deceived-they are not thinking anything radically false. Of course there are truths that they cannot even express; but that is, no doubt, true of every finite being. Thevery hypothesis of "radical deception" seems to depend on the idea of a predetermined, almost magical, connection between words or thought-signs and external objects that Transcendental Realism depends on.”[14]

The problem of reference

Deeply tied to the concept of self-refuting statements in his BIV argument, is the concepts of reference, language and reality. Putnam seeks to posit through his argument that, “although the people in that possible world can think and 'say' any words we can think and say, they cannot (I claim) refer

[11] Ibid.p.14

[12] Ibid. p. 15

[13] Ibid. p. 15

[14] Putnam, Realism with a Human Face, p. 111-112

to what we can refer to. In particular, they cannot think or say that they are brains in a vat {even by thinking 'we are brains in a vat'."[15] It is so because reference is not magically fixed.According to the magical theory of reference, one can assume that some occult rays connect wordsand thought-signs to their referents. For example, when I say the word 'apple', the word corresponds to a real external apple with the help of the occult rays. But we know that occult raysdo not exist in the world. Putnam argues that the magical theories of reference are wrong for mentalrepresentations as well as for physical ones. To fully understand the concept of reference, let us briefly elucidate on 'Turing Text's for Reference', a reworking of Alan Turing's 'Imitation game'.The Turing Test is an intelligence as well as an imitation game. The idea of the Turing Test was first introduced by British mathematician Alan Mathison Turing (1912- 1954) in his article *Can Machines Think?* (1950). The aim of this game was to discover whether a computer is conscious or not.

In this game, there are three players suppose that player A is the man and player B is the computer and player C is the interlocutor, who is tasked to find out the non-human computer through their conversations or by using a keyboard, each of them separately performing. The interlocutor will be talking to both A and B from different places. Whether the interlocutor is talking to a computeror a man will have to be differentiated through the conversations. The computer is smart enough because it tries to show itself as a man. Suppose that if you ask him: 'Do you like Apples?' 'Yes',I like apples, they are very sweet and good for health. If he/she can't differentiate between the computer and the person then the computer will have successfully passed the game. But Putnam slightly modified this game which he designated as the Turing Test for Reference. According to the Turing Test for Reference, imagine a similar situation where there is an interlocutor and two participants (A and B) where one is a computer and the other is a human being. But the task is notto determine whether the partner is really a person or a machine, but rather to determine if the partner is referring to those words, for example 'apple', as we do or the interlocutor does in the real world.

Putnam states that even if the machine passes the game by beautifully framing its responses to thehuman interlocutor, it would be impossible for the machine to refer to an actual tree. Thus, he says "It is true that the machine can discourse beautifully about, say, the scenery in New England. Butit could not recognize an apple tree or an apple, a mountain or a cow, a field or a steeple, if it werein front of one."[16] They can simply produce objects in the image through their automatic system and no reference can be attributed to this machine. It is precisely because they are not connected to the real

[15] Putnum. Reason, truth and History, p. 8

[16] Ibid. p.11

world at all. The machine is able to refer to apples and trees because the programmer has causally interacted with these objects and not the machine. In this situation the programmers were conscious when they referred to apples or trees, had the intention to refer to them and designthe machine accordingly. The existence of apples or trees is a requirement for the programmer toincorporate them in the program. But this sort of causal connection does not suggest that the machines can have the ability to refer. Putnam writes, "There is some causal connection betweenthe machine and the real-world apples, etc., via the perceptual experience and knowledge of the creator—designers. But such a weak connection can hardly suffice for reference."[17] This illusion of referenceis possible only through the "convention of representation"[18] or some agreed patterns of representation that "*we*"[19] (italics in original), or we as humans have and which the computer doesnot have. The patterns are a product of the human ability "to perceive, handle, deal with apples and fields. Our talk of apples and fields is intimately connected with our nonverbal transactions with apples and fields."[20] The convention of representation is associated with the 'language entry rules' and 'language exit rules'. 'Language entry rules' takes us from experience to utterances, such as 'I see an apple in front of me'. 'Language exit rules' which takes us from decisions we utterto action and transaction, for example 'I will buy an apple'. Whereas the machine can engage onlyin the syntactic play. Again, we see that Putnam turns towards the human or more specifically theperspective that is internal to the speaker. It is through our understanding that we are able to recognize the 'Imitation game' as an illusion of reference. Thus, we can argue that the 'conventionof representation' that is intrinsic to the human process of referring that we are able to comprehendthe machine's referring to apples and trees. The machine in itself cannot refer, but it only imitatesthe human conventions.

This insensitivity of the machine cancels out any possibility of reference. But if we are all 'brainsin a vat' as per the possibility that Metaphysical realists believe in, then, can we still argue that reference is an illusion? We have already seen in the previous chapter that if this hypothetical world is indeed a possible world in which we are all brains in a vat, then we may argue that *we arebrains in a vat in the image of that kind*. But now the question remains, why is it simply an imageof that kind? Can we also say that the BIV simply functions as a machine? No doubt, the machineis not as intelligent as BIV. BIV is a rational brain which functions like the human brain in the actual world. Secondly, the nerve-endings are tied to the machine, the machine sends inputs to thebrain through these nerve

[17] Ibid. p.11

[18] Ibid. p.11

[19] Ibid. p.11

[20] Ibid. p.11

endings. Can the 'verbalization' of the word 'tree' by the BIV refer to actual trees? Putnam argues it cannot, even if the BIV were made by an intellectual creator- designer or if we all sentient beings were brains in a vat the verbalization would still not refer to actual trees. Putnam says that having an intelligent and conscious brain is not a sufficient condition to refer to because "there is nothing by virtue of which their thought 'tree' represents actual trees."[21]The absence is typically the absence of a causal connection. He writes, "The whole system of sense-data, motor signals to the efferent endings, and verbally or conceptually mediated thought connected by 'language entry rules' to the sense-data (or whatever) as inputs and by 'language exitrules' to the motor signals as outputs, has no more connection to trees than the ant's curve has to Winston Churchill.'[22]

Conclusion

According to MR, if reality is independent of human minds, then we are all brains in a vat. If we are all brains in a vat, then from whose perspective can we say that we are brains in a vat? Is it thatthere are no observers, and we are 'brains in a vat' from a No-eye point of view? Of course, it cannot be from the point of view of a sentient being, because all beings are brains in a vat. Neithercan an individual observer who is not a brain in a vat spying on the 'brains in a vat' world say that,otherwise 'all' sentient beings cannot be brains in a vat. It follows from here that there must be anomniscient observer from whose perspective this reality is being told. Putnam writes, " So, the supposition that there could be a world in which all sentient beings are Brains in a Vat presupposesfrom the outset a God's Eye view of truth, or, more accurately, a No Eye view of truth — truth asindependent of observers altogether"[23] So, from a No-eye point of view or God's eye point of view, truth becomes independent of human minds and reality is radically non-epistemic, which Putnam denies by rejecting the 'Brain in a vat' hypothesis. Therefore, truth must be epistemic and reality depends on our representations and conceptual schemes. Putnam writes, there is no God's Eye point of view but various points of view of "actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve."[24] Hence, from Putnam's perspective, 'Brain in a vat' is simply a story which is understandable through the construction of language. In no waythis story posits itself as a framework for the possible world or a parallel reality. At the same time, it also refutes the possibility of global skepticism that all of us might actually be "brains in a vat".

[21] Ibid. p.13

[22] Ibid. P.13

[23] Ibid. P. 50

[24] Ibid. P. 50

We have seen so far that Hilary Putnam by revisiting the question of Global Skepticism through the 'Brains in a Vat' thought experiment has asked some poignant questions. It is a relevant topic discussed in his book, *Reason Truth and History* (1981). Through the thought experiment, he has successfully cancelled all possibilities of humans as being brains in a vat and thereby refuted global skepticism. His findings help us also to do away with the magical theory of reference that insists on the intrinsicness of the words, thoughts, pictures, mental images to represent what it intends torefer to. It also repudiates the notion of intentionality as the only necessary condition for reference.We can agree with Putnam that the statement 'I am a brain in a vat' is necessarily a self-refuting supposition. The brain can never depict its own situation of being a brain suspended in a nutrient fluid connected with a super-scientific computer. It can only refer to the 'Brain in the Vat' imagebut not to an actual brain suspended in a vat. One can easily discern that the consequent findings become the premises of his seminal work on the 'theory of reference' where reference is a social phenomenon.