

## BRAINS IN VATS

### 4.1 Putnam's BIV argument

**The BIV scenario.** All sentient creatures, including me, are eternally envatted brains. That is, for the entire duration of their lives, they are brains in vats, were always brains in vats, and will always be brains in vats. However, they are being subjected to electronic neural stimulations, so that everything appears to be normal.

See Putnam 1981, ch. 1, and note the extremity of the scenario.

- **Gambit.** My word 'brain' refers to brains.
- **Bridge.** That would be impossible, if I were a BIV.
- **Conclusion.** I am not a BIV.

### 4.2 The language of BIVs

FIRST PASS ARGUMENT. Suppose Brian is a BIV whose brain is just like mine. So he has never actually interacted with any brain. So it would be miraculous if his word 'brain' referred to brains.

OBJECTION. *We can't make direct interaction a requirement on successful reference.*

But Brian has not had any *indirect* interaction with brains either. For example: Brian has never spoken with an anatomist, for no one in Brian's world has ever wielded a knife.

OBJECTION. *Hasn't Brian at least looked at a picture of a brain?*

No: Brian has never looked at anything, let alone a picture.

OBJECTION. *Doesn't Brian have mental pictures of brains?*

Call them 'mental pictures' if you like, but don't call them pictures *of* brains.

The parable of Churchill and the ant (Putnam 1981, p. 1): qualitative similarity is not sufficient to make something a picture *of* something.

ESSENTIAL POINT. Words do not have a '*magical connection*' to objects. (Putnam 1981, p. 3) Rather, they are tools we use to deal with the world around us.

Brian has a thoroughly messed up relationship with the world.

It's no surprise that his semantic relationship with the world is messed up too.

### 4.3 Internal scepticism

*How can we be sure that there isn't a magical connection?*

That we don't believe in magic is beside the point (we equally don't believe we are BIVs)

Is the magical theory intelligible? Analogy with divine command theory in ethics.

Internal scepticism: arises from *within* our own web of beliefs. (Putnam 1994, pp. 284–5)

BIV scepticism is presented as internal scepticism.

Countenancing a magical theory of reference makes the scepticism no longer internal.

## 4.4 My language

The **Gambit** is to be justified by appealing to disquotation in my mother-tongue.

Typical failures of reference (e.g. 'black bile') not relevant here.

But is this just a Moorean response again? Recall Moore:

- **Dogma.** I have hands.
- **Hand-Bridge.** It would be impossible for me to have hands, if I were a BIV.
- **Conclusion.** I am not a BIV.

This simply inverts the sceptic's initial challenge:

- **Anti-Conclusion.** I am a BIV.
- **Hand-Bridge.** It would be impossible for me to have hands, if I were a BIV.
- **Anti-Dogma.** I have no hands.

Might the BIV sceptic just offer:

- **Anti-Conclusion.** I am a BIV.
- **Bridge.** It would be impossible for my word 'brain' to refer to brains, if I were a BIV.
- **Anti-Gambit.** My word 'brain' does not refer to brains.

But *if* I am a BIV, then the **Anti-Gambit** does not even assert *that* I am a BIV.

Indeed, then BIV scenario does not confront us with the worry *that* we are BIVs.

## 4.5 Ineffable worries

Popular line of response (see e.g. Wright 1992, p. 93):

*Brian is a physically possible being. Moreover, given the ban on magical theories of reference, Brian cannot refer to brains, trees, books or holes. So Brian cannot refer to my world at all. But this raises a worry: there might be a physically possible thinker, who stands to us and to our world, as we stand to Brian and his world. We may be in an ineffable sceptical nightmare: in a sceptical situation which we are utterly unable to articulate. But our inability to articulate it doesn't mean that it isn't happening.*

This is very close to Stroud 1994. It still sucks: nonsense is nonsense.

But what sort of nonsense is it to say: 'for all its utter incomprehensibility, some ineffable sceptical scenario may yet obtain'?

Perhaps the desire to see the world from God's perspective; from nowhere?

Perhaps an expression of awe and mystery in the face of the Absolute?

Now philosophical arguments must lapse.

We have 'only connected', but we have not done so modestly.