

Brain in a vat, skepticism and utilitarianism

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In this paper, I shall attempt to first explore and summarize the contemporary understanding of skepticism through the brain-in-a-vat scenario; second, present a critique of the hedonistic principles of utilitarianism using the same; third, present questions for further review.

The brain-in-a-vat (BIV) scenario is a thought experiment that illustrates radical skepticism. It is framed as a modern contemporary to Descartes' Evil Demon by Gilbert Harman as follows: suppose that advanced machinery allows our brains to exist outside our bodies and stimulate our sensory experiences through electrical impulses; how do we know we're not in that machinery at this very moment? The thought experiment asks us about the fundamental nature of knowledge and our experience thereof: how do we know anything we experience through our sensory systems is real instead of a simulation presented to our minds? (Harman, 1973, 5)

Before we proceed further with the analysis of the thought experiment, we must question our assumptions concerning the nature of reality. The scenario is reliant on the existence of a fixed reality: one independent of the observer. This mind-independent reality specifies one accurate description of material objects and is, thus, free from epistemic notions of truth. (Hickey, n.d.) However, we must contend with the possibility that this may not be the case. We may argue for subjectivism: the belief that instead of a shared reality, the reality of any object is contingent on an individual's perception thereof. Further, we may also argue the way of the physicists and allow for a continuous range of the 'truthfulness' of a statement, forming a reality of possibilities rather than absolute facts. (Heisenberg, 2000, 128)

Descartes' resolution of radical skepticism, famously quoted as '*cogito ergo sum*' (I think, therefore, I am), seemingly provides a foundation for knowledge, arguing that doubting our existence implies the existence of a thinking entity. However, Kierkegaard disputed the conclusion, claiming the presumption of an 'I' makes the existence of a thinking entity a trivial conclusion to draw. Gassendi concluded that the only thing one can be sure of is the occurrence of the cognitive activity of thinking. (Fisher, 2005)

A summary of modern thinking on the brain-in-a-vat thought experiment is incomplete without mentioning Hilary Putnam and the 'causal constraint' on reference. (Putnam, 1981, 13) In essence, Putnam argues that intention is a necessity for reference; for example, if a monkey typing randomly on a keyboard recreates this paper, it would not refer to this paper because the monkey has no idea or context of said paper and thus, cannot *intend* to recreate it. Applying this to the brain-in-a-vat scenario, Putnam argues that from the brain's perspective, it is impossible to make factual statements referencing anything from the 'real' world. For example, the brain in a vat may claim, "this is a book," but it would not actually reference a book and instead would be referencing the brain's sense impressions of the book.

Thus far, we have established first that our assumption of the mind-independent nature of reality is, in fact, an assumption, one we will continue to make in this argument; second, the certainty of the existence of the cognitive process of thinking; third, the inability of the BIV to refer to real-world objects owing to the lack of a causal connection.

Utilitarianism is a philosophical theory that conjoins consequentialism and hedonism: it argues that all actions must work towards maximizing the total amount of happiness experienced by the members of society. We may describe the exact nature of this happiness or pleasure as either quantitative or qualitative. Bentham defended the quantitative view, defining happiness by its intensity and duration. At the same time, Mills argued that not all pleasures are the same and that we must consider the quality thereof. Further, utilitarianism is other-regarding in nature: it considers the interests of all human beings equally. Thus, this entails that you, the person taking action, are no more important than any other affected by your decision.

Using the skeptical arguments discussed above, I will endeavor to critique two of the basic tenets of utilitarianism: its focus on happiness (hedonistic attributes) and its other-regarding nature.

Happiness refers to contentment or positive emotions that we experience. The scientific understanding of the term refers to the electrical and chemical stimulation of specific brain parts. We can quickly achieve this stimulation synthetically in the BIV scenario, so does utilitarianism

then argue for the BIV scenario to be extended to all society to make them ‘happy’? Further, since we can’t be sure of any knowledge, we can’t be justified in believing anything, then nobody can ever really be happy. (Unger, 1975) Lastly, we cannot measure any action against the happiness it produces in others as we cannot reliably refer to this external pleasure due to the causal constraint imposed.

Furthermore, assuming that one can indeed be happy, the BIV scenario points out an issue for the other-regarding nature of utilitarianism. If we cannot be sure of the existence of other people, of other members of society: why should one be moral or ethical? Why should we consider the happiness of other parties at all? One may give a reasonable answer to the above questions in terms of probability: on the off-chance that other people do exist, we should act in the best interests of society. While this seems like a fair enough argument to consider the happiness of others in our actions, it fails to convince us to assess their satisfaction at par with ours. After all, we can speak to our existence as a thinking machine (one may call this the ‘mind’) with far greater certainty than we can speak to the presence of other people. Thus, this aspect, too, falters in the face of radical skepticism.

An alternative metaphysical approach may be to consider reality as inextricably linked to the observer, implying the reality of the BIV is as real as the one experienced by the mad scientist. In this scenario, the argument for skepticism may have to be modified accordingly to question the nature of knowledge obtained therein.

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