

Brains in a vat and memory

Dr. Tim Kraft

Institut für Philosophie, Universität Regensburg

tim.kraft@ur.de

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Abstract

There is no such thing as *the* brain in a vat (*BIV*) scenario. Instead, a shared template is varied and embellished in myriad ways: Where are the *BIV* and the supercomputer located? What else exists in the universe? How long has the *BIV* been envatted? Why was the *BIV* created? If the envatting did not happen by chance, how and why was it covered up? And these are just the basic questions. The additional question I address in this paper is which epistemic sources are manipulated in the scenario. In the classical scenario only sense experiences are fed by the supercomputer, but there is, as I will argue in this paper, no convincing reason for this restriction: There are interesting, scientifically credible and sufficiently detailed versions of the *BIV* scenario in which perception *and* memory are manipulated. If correct, this result is relevant for two reasons. For one, it leads to reassessing the scope and nature of Cartesian scepticism. For another, it reveals the limits of some anti-sceptical strategies. For example, even if it is conceded that Putnam's argument shows that we are not classical *BIV*s, the argument seems to be powerless against a scenario whose victim was envatted recently, but whose memory has been radically altered.

In the first part of the paper I explain how a memory-altering *BIV* scenario could look like. Since there is, for all we know, no 'memory box' to which a supercomputer could feed fake memories, memory manipulation cannot be understood as analogous to feeding sense experiences. If memory is distributed over the whole brain, it cannot be manipulated by simply hooking a cable up with a specific part of the brain. The sceptic can overcome this difficulty by distinguishing two parts of the *BIV* scenario, a training session (single or repeated ones) in addition to the standard sensory stimulation. For some hints at how the training phase could look like in principle cf. Ramirez et al. (2013), Liu et al. (2014). After surveying some of the details, I

conclude that memory science does not rule out memory-manipulation from sceptical scenarios.

However, the strategy from last section is likely to be met with resistance: Lifelong envatment is already a far-fetched thought experiment, but a scenario about envatted brains that are subjected to memory-altering ‘training’ sessions overstrains the imagination – too much is too much. But recall that the aim of this paper is to argue for the permissiveness of memory alteration in sceptical scenarios, not to tell a thrilling story for its own sake. The interesting philosophical question is whether the restriction of sceptical scenarios to sense perception is legitimate. To answer this question I look at some common (and not so common) constraints on sceptical scenarios in the second part of the paper:

1. The personal identity constraint: Memory is closely connected to personal identity and, therefore, manipulating memories threatens personal identity: Envatment creates a new person. In reply I challenge the underlying claim that sceptical scenarios must be about a single, continuously existing person.
2. The reference constraint: Transfers to a new environment (cf. twin earth) and pervasive error (cf. “Madagascar”) lead to reference shifts and, therefore, the victim of a memory-altering scenario is not radically deceived. In reply I argue that even if the ‘slow’ switch is accelerated, the scenario can be told in a way that an (almost) instantaneous switch is ruled out.
3. The autonomous reasoner constraint: This constraint on sceptical scenarios is meant to rule out a variety of uninteresting scenarios such as “there are random shortcuts occurring in my brain all the time”. Of course, I cannot rule out being in such a scenario. Yet this does not mean that the sceptical argument is successful. If I suspect to be in such a scenario, I must suspect that my reasoning about the scenario is affected as well – taking such scenarios seriously is self-undermining. In reply I argue that although memory-alteration takes away everything but my occurrent thoughts, it leaves enough – reasoning skill, conceptual knowledge, working memory – for me to engage autonomously and without self-undermination in sceptical arguments.

References

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