21. Brain in a Vat*

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Background

When learning language, children rely on examples that caregivers can point to. As we learn words with more abstract meaning, like ‘wisdom’, it becomes harder to point to the examples, but examples still play an important role. Many philosophers have thought that all of the meanings of our words must ultimately be tied in some way to examples detectable by our senses. However, God (according to many theists) is supposed to be something entirely different from anything we perceive by our senses. Even though you might call God ‘Father’, God doesn’t look like your dad. (In fact, God doesn’t look like anything!) And even God’s wisdom is, perhaps, totally unlike the wisdom of a wise human. How, then, can human language describe God?

The Case

Ari has experiences just like ours and says words that sound just like ours. For instance, when he has an experience just like our experience of seeing a tree, he says ‘there’s a tree’. But there is something Ari doesn’t know: he doesn’t have a body and has never seen a tree. He is a brain grown from a cell culture in a vat of liquid. His nerves are attached to a computer that simulates a world like ours. He has never had a body and has been in this

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simulation his entire life. When he learned the word ‘tree’, it was people in simulated bodies (like his) pointing to simulated trees.

Philosophical Questions

1. When Ari says ‘there’s a tree’, does he mean that there’s a simulated tree or that there’s a real tree?
2. Can Ari talk or think about the world outside the simulation?
3. Are human attempts to talk or think about God like Ari’s attempt to talk or think about the world outside the simulation?

Responses

Stories about brains in vats (affectionately known as ‘BIVs’) have been used in many areas of philosophy. BIVs were originally introduced as a skeptical scenario (Harrison 1966–67):[1] I can’t know that I’m not a BIV, but if I’m a BIV then the tree I seem to see isn’t really there, so I can’t know that the tree is really there. However, the BIV discussion really got going when Hilary Putnam (1981) argued that I *can* know that I’m not a BIV. According to Putnam, the hypothesis that I’m a BIV is self-refuting—that is, if I’m wondering whether I’m a BIV, then I’m not a BIV.

Suppose Ari read a simulated copy of Putnam’s book and thought to himself “I am not a BIV.” According to Putnam, this thought would be true, since Ari is not a *simulated* BIV, and his word ‘BIV’ refers to simulated BIVs, not real ones such as himself. More generally, Ari’s words and thoughts refer only to things inside the simulation. As a result, Ari can’t really wonder whether he’s a BIV—he can only wonder whether he’s a simulated BIV. I, on the other hand, can wonder whether I’m a BIV, and that proves I’m not one.

Although Putnam does not draw connections between BIVs and God, he later wrote favorably about *negative theology* (Putnam 1997), and Putnam’s

1. I thank David Chalmers for this reference, which appears to be the first BIV in the philosophical literature.

BIV argument has important connections with this tradition.[2]

According to negative theology, human language cannot say what God *is* but only what God is not. Proponents of negative theology endorse the doctrine of *radical divine transcendence*, which says that God is wholly unlike any created thing. If this is correct, then our attempts to describe God are like Ari's attempts to describe the world outside the simulation (Lebens 2022, 556)

Versions of negative theology have been developed by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosopher-theologians. Similar ideas can also be found in other traditions. For instance, *Tao Te Ching* begins by stating that the Tao cannot be named, and many Indian philosophers have denied that *brahman* has any attributes (see entry **??**).

Within the Abrahamic traditions, perhaps the most radical proponent of negative theology was the rabbi and philosopher Moses Maimonides (1138–1204). According to Maimonides, no positive statements about God are true. However, the Bible appears to make positive statement about God—describing God as, for instance, omnipotent and merciful. What should we make of these descriptions?

If statements like 'God is omnipotent' and 'God is merciful' are true, but no positive statements about God are true, then there are two possibilities: either they are not really positive statements, or they are not really about God. For omnipotence, Maimonides uses the first strategy: when we say that God is omnipotent, we really mean that God is not powerless (Maimonides, *Guide,* ch. 1.58). For mercy, he uses the second strategy: when we say that God is merciful, we mean that God's *actions* are like the actions produced by human mercy, although God is in no way like a merciful human (ch. 1.54). The statement is not about God, but about God's actions—that is, God's effects in the world.

The Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) also says that "we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Question 3), but he thought Maimonides' view was too extreme. Aquinas insists that statements like 'God is good' succeed in giving some sort of positive description of God (Question 13). But what are we saying when we say 'God is good'? On the one hand, God's goodness is wholly unlike

2. Putnam says he came up with his BIV argument while contemplating connections between the Löwenhein-Skolem Theorem (a result in mathematical logic) and some ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein (Putnam 1981, 7). You might not think this has much to do with God, but there's a lot of Wittgenstein in Putnam's paper on negative theology.

the goodness of any created thing. So 'good' can't have the same meaning in 'God is good' and 'ice cream is good'. On the other hand, if the meanings are unrelated, why use the same word? Aquinas says that God is called 'good' by *analogy* and that analogy is halfway between univocity (sameness of meaning) and equivocity (totally unrelated meanings). We somehow manage to *stretch* language to describe God, even though we don't know what God is.

Some philosophers have responded to the BIV story in ways similar to negative theology. Suppose Ari sees some simulated brains in a simulated vat. He might first note that he knows he's not a BIV because, after all, he's standing in the real world, outside the vat, looking at them! But then, he might reflect, what if there's some other perspective from which he would seem like a BIV? Thus, although he knows he's not a BIV in the ordinary sense of the word (in his language), he might wonder if he's *analogous* to a BIV. Or, if that's too much, he may at least be able to use negation: perhaps the world is not at all as it seems to him to be (Nagel 1986, 67–74; Folina 2016).

While negative theology has been enormously influential in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it has also had critics in all three traditions. Most of the criticisms fall into two camps: those that question whether negative theology makes sense on its own terms, and those that question whether it is compatible with the relevant religious traditions.

Making sense of talk about God requires both making the individual words meaningful and making sense of trains of reasoning involving them. The Christian philosopher John Duns Scotus (1265/66–1308) influentially argued that negative theology couldn't do either of these things (Scotus, *On Being and Cognition*, §§6–68). In the first place, if we can't say anything at all about what God is, how can the word 'God' have a different meaning than the word 'nothing'? In the second place, if none of the words we use to describe God have their ordinary meanings, how can we reason from claims about the world (for instance, that it is orderly—see entry **??**) to claims about God?

The second class of objections, about compatibility with religious traditions, can target both the method and the content of negative theology. Concerning method, the issue is that negative theology begins with a rational, philosophical approach to God and then reinterprets religious texts and traditions to fit it. Concerning content, it is debatable whether this reinterpretation really succeeds. For instance, could Maimonides' God—who has no attributes, and is therefore not really powerful or merciful—really be the

being who appeared to Abraham and Moses? In the middle ages, objections of this sort were offered by al-Ghazali (*Incoherence*) and Crescas (*Light of the Lord*).

In analytic philosophy of religion today, philosophers who endorse radical divine transcendence (Ross 1998; Stump 2016; Hewitt 2020) are often known as 'classical theists' because their view is rooted in the classical, medieval tradition described above. Against this, other philosophers have argued that at least some of the core attributes of God must be univocal (Alston 1989; Swinburne 2016, chs. 4 and 5). These philosophers are often called 'theistic personalists' because they typically hold that God is a person in the same sense as you and me (Swinburne 2016, 104–108).[3] And, of course, there are also those who think the fact that theists can't even figure out what they mean by 'God is good' shows that all this God stuff is bunk (Nielsen 1982).

To return to BIVs, the classical theist must think that Ari can somehow (even if only by way of negation) manage to think about the reality outside the simulation. The theistic personalist, on the other hand, will deny that the BIV story provides a helpful way of thinking about God. According to the theistic personalist, God is part of our reality, not some deeper reality beyond or behind it.

Suggested Reading

General Overviews

Burrell, David B. 1986. *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas.* University of Notre Dame Press.

Davies, Brian. 2021. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion.* 4th ed. Oxford University Press.

Hickey, Lance P. n.d. "The Brain in a Vat Argument." In *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* Accessed July 19, 2024. https://iep.utm.edu/brain-in-a-vat-argument/.

3. If (as Christians generally claim) God is three Persons, could it also be true that God is *a* person? See entry **??**.

Seminal Presentation

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More on BIVs

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Harrison, Jonathan. 1966–67. “A Philosopher’s Nightmare or the Ghost Not Laid.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 67:179–188.

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