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I Was a Brain in a Vat

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Abstract

Could you be a brain in a vat, with all your experiences of people, plants, pebbles, planets and more being generated solely by computer inputs? It might seem difficult to know that you aren't, since everything in the world would still appear just as it is. In his 1981 book, *Reason, Truth, and History*, Hilary Putnam argues that if you were in such a predicament, your statement 'I am a brain in a vat', would be false since, as an envatted brain, your word 'vat' would refer to the vats you encounter in your experienced reality, and in your experienced reality, you are not in one of those but are instead a full-bodied human being with head, torso, arms, and legs living in the wide open world. The following extended thought experiment is intended to illustrate that, contrary to Putnam's view, you, as an envatted brain, could truthfully believe that you are a brain in a vat.

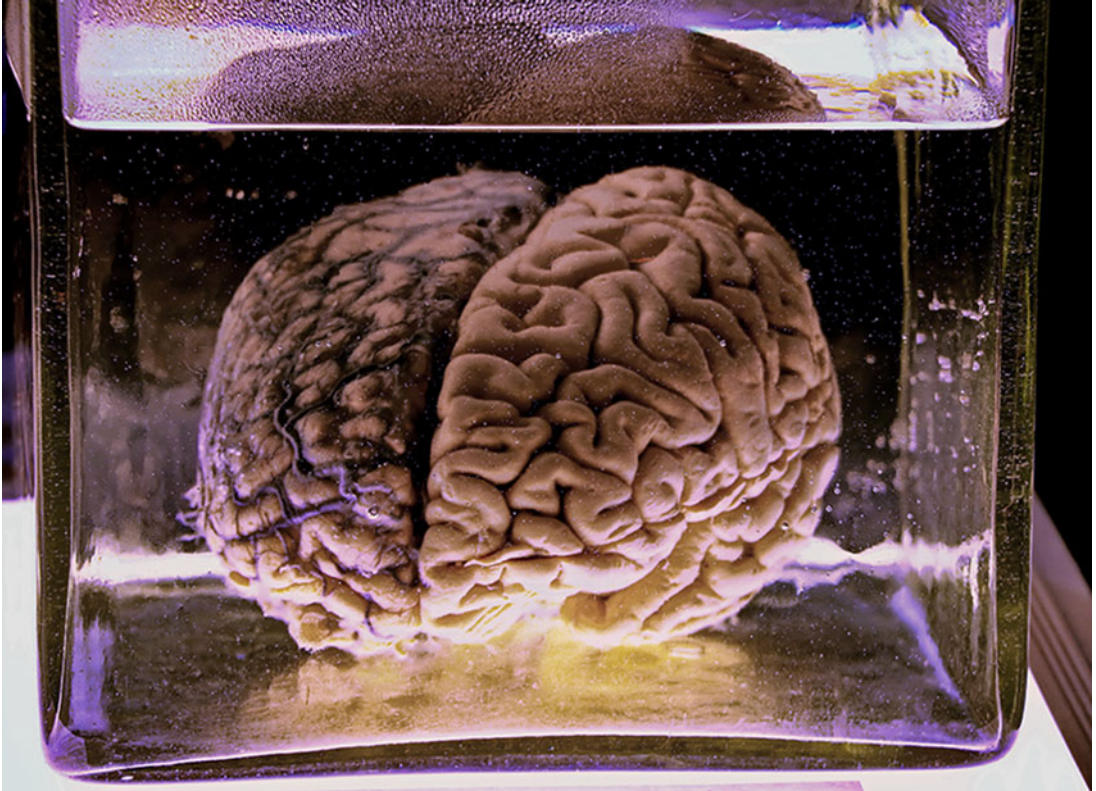
It may be difficult to believe – indeed, I have trouble believing it myself – but I grew up in a receptacle not much larger than a pickle jar; compared to my vat, your average New York City studio apartment is a mansion.

The abode was cosy, to be sure, but I wasn't particularly cramped. This is because, in my formative years, I was less than two inches tip-toe, so to speak. And, while my growth was rapid, my girth never exceeded that of a cauliflower. 'Pipsqueak' would have been an appropriate soubriquet if there had been anything cute about me. But the plain fact is that I also looked like a cauliflower. And was I fat! A full 60% of me was pure blubber. To be sure, my appearance and corpulence were perfectly normal for my predicament; besides, as the passive recipient of nutrient-rich artificial blood, it was hopeless to keep to a calorie-restricted diet.

While I looked like a cauliflower, I acted exactly like a potato, a couch potato to be

precise; recumbent in my vat, I never even attempted to doggy paddle. You might think that with so little exercise, I'd have bloated up even more than I had. Yet there you'd be wrong. Soaking in my vat, doing nothing other than thinking, I burned up about half as many calories as a normal-sized child who kicks and screams and crawls around the house mouthing everything in sight. The scientists who grew me from stem cells and tended the experiment – 'my parents', as their defence lawyer so craftily calls them – explained at the arraignment that they had devoted themselves to my envatted well-being, sometimes staying up all night to adjust my saline levels and monitor my dreams; but just think about it, never once did they need to change a nappy.

As for why I was fed *artificial* blood, those highly accomplished scientists were unable to find donors; apparently, no one thought I would survive. Even my parents, as it were, had their



doubts. But I flourished and on my nineteenth birthday received a body, transplanted from someone who had died in a freak construction site accident. It is a bittersweet predicament since although I'm enormously grateful that my body donor had signed a consent form before the mishap, it seems wrong to revel in someone's death. My psychiatrist advises me to avoid dwelling on such matters and instead to focus on how lucky I was. And, indeed, I was lucky. The accident left my donor's body and head relatively unscathed – all except for the crater made by the rogue steel hanger bolt that caused irrevocable brain damage and concomitant loss of life. Oh dear, I'm dwelling again. Ah, yes, as I was saying, I was very lucky. Surgeons patched it all up and now that their – sorry, I mean *my* – hair has grown out, no one seems to bat an eyelid.

Not only was my survival in the vat unprecedented, but never before had a brain been

transplanted into a body (or vice versa, as I prefer to think about it). Although the prognosis was unknown, the hospital advocated for it, as it would break new ground in transplantations, to say nothing of paving the way for a Nobel Prize for my so-called parents. And while some may have had their doubts beforehand, when it became clear that I would pull through, the procedure was hailed as an unprecedented medical marvel. The whole world, in an outpouring of texts, posts, letters, public announcements, and performances, showered the scientists and surgeons with hearty congratulations – the whole world except, of course, for me. I wasn't consulted. And, while it might be best for me to keep hush-hush about this at the trial, I am not entirely sure what I would have said if I had been. In retrospect, I can see that giving me a body was the right thing to do, that a life of illusions is no life at all, that existence out of the vat, even with its aches

and pains, disappointments and heartbreaks, is infinitely better than my painless envatted existence. Thus, I stand by the view that had I known what I was in, I would have wanted out. But, between you and me, if the operation and risks had been explained to me, I might have suffered from cold feet, metaphorically, of course.

‘I was merely unplugged from the electrodes providing my conscious experiences, and in the nothingness that ensued, I fell into what I assume was a dreamless sleep. When I awoke, I had a body!’

The operation took a full 24 hours. No anaesthetic was used – brains themselves have no pain receptors. I was merely unplugged from the electrodes providing my conscious experiences, and in the nothingness that ensued, I fell into what I assume was a dreamless sleep. When I awoke, I had a body! Not that having a body was surprising to me; I had always thought I had a body (though not such a buff one – construction worker, remember), but now I had a real body, a spatially extended symphony of skin, flesh and bones, and, golly, did it hurt. For one thing, my skull was on fire – the surgeons had to drill an even larger hole than the one made by that hanger bolt, and skulls as opposed to brains feel pain. For another, it turns out that beefing up is no picnic; no pain, no gain as they say. Perhaps the defendants’ legal team will argue that being spared suffering in my earliest days offset the vacuity of being envatted. But, although I didn’t

like this new feeling, I wish I had known what it was. Pain, I now believe, is part of life, an essential element of existence. Besides, let them try living in saline for nineteen years and then see what they think.

Of course, I didn’t know at first that I had a real body. When I regained consciousness, the construction worker’s – I mean, *my* – body was tucked under the covers, and I was informed I had been in an accident and would need to recover, tightly swaddled, before returning to my daily activities. (This was a lie. The body that is mine now was in an accident. Yet it wasn’t my body when it was in an accident. I was never in an accident.) After a solid week of psychiatric evaluation, both my physique and the truth were uncovered. I was a first, a scientific miracle, a symbol of the success of neuroscience. ‘You’ve made your parents very proud’, the doctors chimed in confident and reassuring tones. But why should they have been proud of me? I had done nothing.

It is discomfiting to think back to the time immediately following the surgery. Upon waking, I didn’t know that I had been a brain in a vat. I thought that I had been and still was a university student – a precocious one who had been sent to university early and was already working on a master’s in philosophy and cognitive science. I had been sent to a mind gym called ‘Ivy League University’ – you would have thought that such ‘brilliant’ scientists could have thought of a more creative name for my place of education than that, but there you go. And that they made me – yes, *made* me – study philosophy was rather ironic since the area of philosophy that fascinated me most was scepticism; in particular, I was obsessed by the possibility that we might all be brains in vats! It’s a difficult possibility to refute. I mean, if you were a brain in a vat being fed the same sorts of sensory inputs that your brain would be fed if you were embodied rather than envatted, there would be no way of knowing it: if your brain was stimulated in such a way to make you experience going to a brick and mortar university, you would think you were a student attending such a university, just as I did. But it is now clear to me that, apart from my sceptical worries – throwing to the wind the

Moorean implication from ‘here is a hand’, to ‘the external world exists’, when in fact I had no hands – it was all a lie.

And this is how I happened to end up in the New York County Supreme Court, suing the scientists who kept me envatted, performing experiment after experiment without my consent, when there had been earlier opportunities for me to acquire a body. (For example, a librarian, the year before, had been stabbed at the base of the skull with an ultra-sharp HB pencil – not construction-worker buff, but I would have taken it.) The prosecution has been driving home the fact that in any experimental study participants must be informed of the potential risks involved and must explicitly consent before commencing their participation. I did neither of these. I couldn’t have: the potential risks were unknown and, as I began life in the vat, there was no *before* for me.

‘I mean, if you were a brain in a vat being fed the same sorts of sensory inputs that your brain would be fed if you were embodied rather than envatted, there would be no way of knowing it . . .’

The defence rests its case on – what else? – a philosophy argument: Hilary Putnam’s argument that it is impossible for a brain in a vat to truthfully believe, ‘I am a brain in a vat.’ Putnam thought that such a sentence could only refer to a brain in a vat in the brain’s dream world. It can only refer to this, according to Putnam, because when you say or think of ‘vat’, or any other such words that refer to a thing, this word

can only refer to what caused your understanding of it (or at least it caused the person you learned the word ‘vat’ from to understand what the word refers to). And, following Putnam’s reasoning, since I didn’t come to understand ‘vat’ from seeing or being taught that the glass jar I was living in was a vat, the defence claims that when I said ‘vat’, I meant the canning vats my vat-parents (I guess I could call them) would use when they made strawberry jelly and other such vat-vats (I guess I could call them) – vats, that is, that existed in my dream world. ‘It’s false that you were a brain in a vat’ the lead defence attorney boomed; ‘you were a student living in a verdant suburb attending an elite university.’ Since I was never able to truthfully say, ‘I am a brain in a vat’, they argue that my claim that I had been a brain in a vat is false. And therefore (there is always a ‘therefore’ with these barristers) the scientists could not have been imprisoning me in a vat. Moreover, and this is really beyond the pale, or the vat, if you prefer, as no one was experimenting on me in my dream world, it is also false to say that ‘I, as a brain in a vat, was experimented on without my consent.’ Accordingly, the defendants, those illustrious Nobel Prize winners, cannot be charged with maintaining my envatment and experimenting on me against my will.

The jury will soon determine where the preponderance of evidence lies. And, although one might be hard-pressed to say how a philosophical argument could count as evidence at all, those so-called parents of mine have put on a good show, with their lawyers plying the bench with photos of what I *thought* I looked like as a toddler – even playing a video of my ‘parents’ one and only’ pretending to be a cat lapping milk from a saucer. Their strategy, if you could call it that, is to solicit admiration for those selfless individuals who catered to their child’s every whim. But I never did any of those things in the photos – I didn’t even have a tongue.

Am I worried about the outcome of the trial? I believe I have truth on my side and that it will be as clear to the jury as it is to me right now that Putnam was wrong. When I was fed sensory inputs of studying sceptical arguments and of

becoming convinced that I was a brain in a vat, I actually was a brain in a vat. I was a brain in a vat back then even though I had spent my entire life envatted.

Sinister scientists, I am sorry to say, I think the game is up, and your Nobel Prize money will be mine.

Postscript

What happened at the trial? It turns out that philosophical arguments can be persuasive. I knew this from my vat-philosophy education yet far be it for someone who had grown up as a brain in a vat to tell lawyers how to win a case. My team had originally thought that the hard cold fact that I had indeed been a brain in a vat would suffice to persuade the jury. Yet at every turn, my team was flummoxed by the defence's claim that the statement 'I am a brain in a vat' was false when I said it in the vat. I believed that it was not false and I thought we made a good case for it, but mid-trial I realized that if we were to win, we had better try another approach.

My team had originally objected to the admissibility of Putnam's argument as evidence: 'A philosophy argument', as my team's junior council pointed out, 'is not only not based on

direct perceptual information but it's not even a smoking gun.' However, watching the jurors' faces light up when the defence talked about such things as whether an ant crawling in the sand could be said to have traced a picture of Winston Churchill – their team was filled with philosophy PhDs – we decided to fight fire with fire. (And since philosophical arguments are not evidence, the impropriety of bringing up mid-trial new evidence that could have been known pre-trial was not at issue.) 'Even though we disagree, we'll grant', my lead attorney argued, 'that anytime the victim' – that's me, by the way – 'said "I am a brain in a vat", inside the vat, it was false.' The defence smiled contentedly, but then their countenances dropped. 'Nonetheless', my attorney continued, 'as Thomas Nagel argued in his 1986 book *The View from Nowhere*, even if a brain in a vat cannot truthfully claim, 'I'm a brain in a vat', they still are a brain in a vat!' – I had learned about this view of Nagel's in my vat, and I'm sure my scientist parents regretted ever letting me do so. We won, and the case established a precedent: participants in all thought experiments, including the one you are currently reading, must, as with any other experiment, provide explicit, informed consent.

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