

Phil. 270: Tuesday, 11/18/21: Putnam-Inspired Anti-Skepticism Readings 12,13
(first two pages repeat what was on the previous (11/16) hand-out)

The Basic Skeptical Argument Based on “Skeptical Hypotheses”

The Argument from Ignorance (AI)

1. I don't know that $\sim H$
 2. If I don't know that $\sim H$, then I don't know that O
- So, C. I don't know that O

[where 'H' is a skeptical hypothesis and 'O' is something we would ordinarily take ourselves to know]

-(Substantively) “Moorean” responses attack premise 1. Putnam-*inspired* responses to BIV-skepticism do so by providing a proof that $\sim H$ (and thus they make this knowledge “hard” to come by).

Putnam himself and Skepticism

-Putnam giving “an argument...that shows we are not brains in a vat” (12: p. 32.7) [note that he doesn't write “proof”]

-but he only even mentions skepticism at 31.2, and in such a way as to indicate a lack of interest: he seems more interested in “raising issues about the mind/world relationship”

-but then there's later (1994) material (about his argument being directed against “internal skepticism”) cited and discussed in 13.

-See 13: pp. 70.2-73.4 for Putnam's own attitude here. Whatever Putnam's intentions, I think it's clear that his “argument” became important because many saw in it the possibility of proving that one is not a BIV, and thereby refuting the skeptic, so we will be discussing its potential as an anti-skeptical weapon.

Refuting the Skeptic. The Putnam-inspired response falls into a long tradition in which anti-skeptics attempt to refute the skeptic, to prove that the skeptic wrong (see 13: pp. 66.9-67.6). This is done by means of arguments for anti-skeptical results [often, for the likes of O; but also often, and in Putnam's case, for $\sim H$], that, in order to be “proofs”, start from premises that do not “beg the question” against the skeptic. Since it's the “external world skeptic” who is typically in question, the premises available for such a “proof” are limited to two classes: a) simple obvious facts about one's own states of consciousness (what's transpiring in one's own mind); and b) clearly (*apriori*) intuitable claims about facts that are metaphysically necessary. Think Descartes here. {13's fn. 14: Thus, after presenting a Putnam-style argument, Colin McGinn writes (one presumes with a good deal of irony): “In effect, I can achieve the anti-sceptical result Descartes needed God to vouchsafe by exploiting considerations about what determines content. Ah, the wonders of analytical philosophy” (McGinn 1989: 113).} But, as the writer quoted just let on, Putnam's proof is fueled not by God, but by “considerations about what determines content,” and specifically by ...

Semantic Externalism: the contents of at least some of one's thoughts are not completely determined by 'internal' facts about what is going on inside one's head, but are at least partially determined by such 'external' facts as the nature of the items one has been in contact with. Illustrated by: Putnam's Twin-Earth (water/twater) example (12, p. 40.2).

Causal Constraint: You cannot think with certain concepts unless you have been causally connected in the proper way with items that fall under that concept. (See 13: p. 70.9)

-Since this is supported by thought experiments, rather than by observation of the world, they can seem the kind of *apriori* claims available for use in proofs against the external world skeptic. (Facts of type b), as listed above.) Issue: but do we perhaps rely on knowledge gained through experience in how we respond to these thought experiments?

Semantic Externalism Applied to the BIV Hypothesis

-Perhaps BIVs aren't falsely thinking such things as that they're seeing trees or that they're not BIVs, but are thinking such true things as that they're "seeing" trees-in-the-image and that they are not BIVs-in-the-image? We can call forms of SE that imply this "high-grade" SE

-Or perhaps they're not having truth-evaluable thoughts at all? (12, p. 37.6-.7)

Dilemma Argument (as rendered at 13: p. 74.3; this seems in a sense the argument Putnam has most in mind, and seems what he's getting at around 12, p. 33.6):

If I am a BIV, then by 'I am not a BIV,' I mean that I am not a BIV-in-the-image (or some closely related true thing), which is in that case true. On the other hand, if I am not a BIV, then by 'I am not a BIV,' I mean that I am not a BIV, which is in that case true. Thus, whether I am a BIV or whether I am not, my use of 'I am not a BIV' is true. Either way, it's true; so, it's true: I'm not a BIV.

Compatibilist Argument (suggested at 12: p. 32.4; explained here at 13: p. 74.5):

[The Compatibilist Argument] combines a negative externalist claim about what a BIV does not (or cannot) mean or think—that by 'tree', 'hand', 'vat', etc., the BIV does not refer to trees, hands, vats, etc.—with a positive claim to the effect that we do have the thoughts in question—the thoughts that the BIVs cannot have. These together imply that we are not BIVs.

***How Strong a Form of Semantic Externalism Do These Arguments Need?: An Initial Problem, at least for the Dilemma Argument**

-Dilemma argument seems to require "high-grade" SE, on which BIVs are thinking something true when they think the words "I'm not a BIV." That's not clearly true. And in fact, Putnam himself seems to have doubts about it (12: p. 37.6,.7). The Compatibilist Argument has a big advantage here in that it requires only a very modest form of S.E.: it can be fueled just by the causal constraint. Well, so long as we use Putnam's BIV scenario. But....

***Killer Problem: Other BIV Scenarios:** both arguments have a big problem with other BIV scenarios, like recent envatment versions of the BIV hypothesis (13: pp. 76.8-77.6; P's very skeptic-friendly scenario is at 12: p. 31.4). On these versions of the BIV hypothesis, it seems, and is consistent even with the causal constraint, that BIVs mean tree by "tree," hand by "hand," and vat by "vat," and so a key premise of each argument fails. (Exercise: identify the premise that fails for each argument.)

Refuting the Skeptic, Begging the Question, and the Compatibilist Argument: Given SE, do we "beg the question" against the skeptic, and thereby fail to prove them wrong, by our claim that we're having certain thoughts that we couldn't have if we were BIVs? Does SE expand certainty, or doubt? Given SE, does the presumed certainty we have about our own mental states seep out into the external world (since we couldn't have those thoughts without the external world being certain ways), or does the presumed uncertainty of our grasp of the external world seep into our grasp of the contents of our own thoughts?! -This seems a general problem. At least there's room to suspect that however our anti-skeptical argument went, the skeptic would then balk. Look, when you're challenged to "prove" there's an external world, or that some skeptical hypothesis is false, and all you're allowed to use are facts about what you're thinking, together with metaphysically necessary principles you can see to be true in some apriori way, it seems your "proof" is going to have to be of something like this form: I'm having this thought; I couldn't be having this thought unless [anti-skeptical conclusion]; hence, [anti-skeptical conclusion]. But I suspect that however we were able to make the case for "I couldn't be thinking this unless..." the skeptic's response would be, "Well, then, maybe you should worry about whether you're really thinking that." (To which I'm inclined to respond: "Wait, I should be worried that I'm really thinking what? If I'm somehow thinking it within the worry, am I not just plain thinking it, too?") – a worry that the worry is incoherent

Problem of Heroism: 13: pp. 78.7-84.1

A "heroic" response to AI is one that tries to make the argument's first premise not apply. But then does it leave non-philosophers (and, really, philosophers, too) behind?

I think what we need is an explanation that allows us to see how that premise was never true of us

What's the Alternative?

At 13: pp. 66.7-69.6, starting with Moore, and including Nozick, I give a little sampling of recent-ish philosophers who battle skepticism without trying to refute it (claiming this is really in the tradition of G.E. Moore, though Moore famously offered what he called a "Proof of the External World.") But what method of battling can we be talking about here? One that *does* engage in question-begging?

Answer to come...

Up Next: Kelly and KDR on Moorean Methodology (readings 14 and 15)