

## Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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### Handout 18: Knowing You're Not A BIV, Part 1: Putnam's Proof

Consider the following argument (related Feldman's *Transmissibility Argument* for skepticism, pp. 118-119):

1. You don't know that you're not a bodiless brain in a vat (BIV).
2. If you don't know that you're not a BIV, you don't know that you have hands.
3. So, you don't know that you have hands.

Premise (2) seems irrefutable: if you're a BIV, then you don't have hands. So if, for all you know, you're a BIV, then for all you know you don't have hands.

How about premise (1)? Even if we agree that knowing doesn't require being certain, premise (1) can seem pretty compelling. How *could* you know that you're not a BIV?

Putnam's paper purports to *prove* that you're not a BIV on the basis of an idea known as *semantic externalism*.

#### Semantic externalism

The semantic externalist says that what a certain word means depends, in part, upon what it's used to refer to. Elsewhere, Putnam illustrates this idea with a thought experiment:

*Twin Earth.* Twin Earth is much like Earth, except that the stuff in the rivers, lakes, and oceans there is not made of H<sub>2</sub>O as it is on Earth, but of some other element; call that other chemical XYZ. So that stuff is not water. We can call it twater. The folks on Twin Earth speak a language that is structurally identical to English. But when they use the word 'water' they are referring to twater, not water. When they look out at the ocean and say, 'There is so much water here!', what they say is, in their language, *true*, even though there is no water in the ocean they are looking at.

The semantic externalist says that the meaning of 'water' is different on Twin Earth than it is on Earth. Thus residents of Twin Earth speak a different language than we do. Let's call it Twinglish (though, of course, Twin Earthers will call the language they speak 'English'):

	<i>'water' refers to:</i>	<i>'There is water' is true just in case:</i>
<i>English:</i>	water (the stuff composed of H <sub>2</sub> O)	there is water around.
<i>Twinglish:</i>	twater (the stuff composed of XYZ)	there is twater around.

#### BIV-English

My BIV-twin doesn't refer to trees when he says (or thinks) 'tree'. He refers to a "tree-in-the-image", or perhaps the complicated electronic stimulations that lead him to have a visual experience of a tree.

So, given semantic externalism, my BIV-twin speaks (and thinks) in a different language than I do. In his language, 'tree' means something different than it does in English.

Putnam's Proof(s)

Here is one proof.

- P1.1 When I say or think 'I am not a brain in a vat,' I mean that I am not a brain in a vat.
- P1.2 When a brain in a vat says or thinks 'I am not a brain in a vat,' he means something else; e.g., that he is not a brain-in-the-image in a vat-in-the-image.
- P1.3 So, I am not a brain in a vat.

Semantic externalism implies that P1.2 is true. But even if we accept semantic externalism, and hence that this proof is sound, there is a serious defect. If you're in a position where you don't know whether you're a brain in a vat, you won't be inclined to accept P1.1. ("Hey, for all I know, when I say 'I am not a BIV', what I mean is that I'm not a brain-in-the-image in a vat-in-the-image!") P1 thus shares a defect with what we might call Moore's Proof:

- M1.1 I have hands.
- M1.2 Brains-in-vats don't have hands.
- M1.3 So, I am not a brain in a vat.

Moore's Proof is sound, but if you're in doubt about whether you're a BIV, you'll be in doubt about whether or not M1.1 is true. Hence the proof won't be any good in helping you come to know that you're not a BIV.

So here is a second proof given by Putnam that does not share this defect:

- P2.1 Either I am a BIV or I am not.
- P2.2 If I am a BIV, then when I say or think 'I am not a BIV,' what I mean is that I am not a brain-in-the-image in a vat-in-the-image.
- P2.3 So if I am a BIV, when I say or think 'I am not a BIV,' what I say or think is true.
- P2.4 If I am not a BIV, then when I say or think 'I am not a BIV,' what I mean is that I am not a brain in a vat.
- P2.5 So if I am not a BIV, when I say or think 'I am not a BIV,' what I say or think is true.
- P2.6 So when I say or think 'I am not a BIV,' what I say or think is true. (P2.1, P2.3, P2.5)

One challenge to P2 is that you might think there is a difference between proving that what you say when you say 'I am not a BIV' is true, and proving that you are not a BIV.