

DREAMS IN A VAT*

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ABSTRACT

Putnam's semantic argument against the BIV hypothesis and Sosa's argument against dream skepticism based on the imagination model of dreaming share some important structural features. In both cases the skeptical option is supposed to be excluded because preconditions of its intelligibility are not fulfilled (affirmation and belief in the dream scenario, thought and reference in the BIV scenario). Putnam's reasoning is usually interpreted differently, as a classic case of deception, but this feature is not essential. I propose to interpret BIV's utterances as cases of reference failure best captured by truth-value gaps. Both anti-skeptical strategies are then vulnerable to the same type of objections (how do we know what state we are in or how do we know what kind of language do we speak).

Keywords: *Putnam, Sosa, brain in a vat, dream argument, disquotation, negation.*

“To see a vat in your dreams, foretells anguish and suffering from the hands of cruel persons, into which you have unwittingly fallen.”¹

¹ *Psychologist World*, <https://www.psychologistworld.com/dreams/dictionary/vat> (accessed March 30, 2017).

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1. Introduction

Putnam's famous thought experiment of brains in vats (BIVs, for short) is usually considered a contemporary version of Descartes's skeptical argument of the Evil Genius.² Recall: "... some evil spirit, supremely powerful and cunning, has devoted all his efforts to deceiving me. ... What truth then is left? Perhaps this alone, that nothing is certain." (Descartes 2008, 16). According to the hypothesis advanced by Putnam's skeptic, the universe, by accident, just happens to consist of automatic machinery tending a vat full of brains. In the BIV world everyone is raised as brains in vats, and their perceptual input is qualitatively just like ours. How do we know that we are not in this miserable predicament? The matrix of the skeptical argument is familiar: In the *bad* situation (dream, BIV world ...) it is possible to have the best experiential evidence that p , yet p is false (where p is a proposition about the external world). But, given the description of the scenario, the possibility of a bad situation cannot be excluded. So we do not know that p .

Putnam argues from some plausible assumptions about the nature of reference to the conclusion that it is not possible that all sentient creatures are brains in a vat. If we were brains in a vat in this way, we could not say or think that we were, the story "cannot possibly be true, because it is, in a certain way, self-refuting" (Putnam 1981, 7). Putnam's argument is based on an analysis of the truth conditions for the sentences uttered (or thought) by a BIV. These conditions depend on the assignments of references which one would make in evaluating the truth value of BIV's utterances. According to semantic externalism when S uses a referring term, she refers to whatever typically causes her uses of that term. So 'tree' refers to trees-in-the-image in vat-English, or something related (computer program features), and 'vat' refers to vats-in-the-image in vat-English, or something related (Putnam 1981, 15):

It follows that if [the brains'] 'possible world' is really the actual one, and we are really the brains in a vat, then what we now mean by 'we are brains in a vat' is that *we are brains in a vat in the image* or something of that kind (if we mean anything at all). But part of the hypothesis that we are brains in a vat is that we aren't brains in a vat in the image (i.e. what we are 'hallucinating' isn't that we are brains in a vat). So, if we are brains in a vat, then the sentence 'we

² According to contemporary perspective at least, which might not be entirely correct in its assimilation of demon scenario with Putnam's vat scenario (thanks to anonymous referee for this remark). Cf. Brueckner (2016b): "One skeptical hypothesis about the external world, namely that one is a brain in a vat with systematically delusory experience, is modelled on the Cartesian Evil Genius hypothesis ...", and Goldberg (2016, 2): "Putnam's reflections on the BIV scenario have a familiar historical precedent, of course, in Descartes's reflections on the Evil Demon scenario."

are brains in a vat' says something false (if it says anything). In short if we are brains in a vat then 'we are brains in a vat' is false. So it is (necessarily) false.

Putnam also remarks that his "procedure has a close relation to what Kant called a 'transcendental' investigation; for it is an investigation, of the preconditions of reference and hence of thought — preconditions built in to the nature of our minds themselves" (Putnam 1981, 16).

What is the role of global *deception*, which seems to be inherited from the Cartesian tradition? How to understand the possibility that the "envatted" words might not mean anything at all? And what, exactly, is the anti-skeptical potential of Putnam's *transcendental* procedure? I will explore these questions by comparing Putnam's anti-BIV strategy with Sosa's (and late Wittgenstein's) reply to dream skepticism, where the threat is that we are unable to distinguish waking life from the corresponding dream. Both anti-skeptical strategies are based on the allegedly conceptual "impossibility" of a bad scenario (dream or BIV) for *us*, but both are deficient as a final antidote to radical skepticism, for roughly the same reasons. Or so I will try to argue. I do not claim particular originality in my critical assessment. Still, although the parenthetical possibility of "not meaning anything at all" with one's utterances when in the BIV scenario has been noticed, it has not been sufficiently explored. Especially not in connection with Sosa's "transcendental" strategy against dream scepticism (so far as I know).³

2. Dream skepticism

Let me start with a little piece of fiction: *The Testimony of a Woodcutter Questioned by a High Police Commissioner*.⁴

The old man was found dead on a bench in a grove. His death was considered suspicious and the woodcutter strolling in the vicinity is questioned by the police commissioner.

The woodcutter

How did the old man die? This is a strange story. After a long walk in a grove the old man got tired and sat on the bench to rest himself. He fell asleep and dreamt that he was an armored medieval knight fighting with another knight to earn the hand of a beautiful princess. In the very moment when the two of them, on

³ Putnam (1981) is cited by 4974 according to *Google Scholar* (2017) and the number is growing almost on a daily basis.

⁴ Some will perhaps recognize – intentional – similarities with "In a Bamboo Grove", a short story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1915), filmed as *Rashomon*, by Akira Kurosawa (1950).

horses, clashed with their spears, it started to rain outside. I was walking nearby and being sure the man would not like to get wet, I poked him gently with the umbrella, just to warn him. But the poor old man, immersed in his dream, thought that he was stabbed by a spear, this *belief* provoked a stroke and he died.

The police commissioner

You liar! You just made everything up. Suppose the story is true – then nobody could truly tell this story – the poor man died. This story is untellable. You are a liar and the prime suspect!

The woodcutter

But why don't you check my testimony with the *Testimony of the Dead Man's Spirit Told through a Medium*?⁵ True, I might not have been in the exact position to retell the events, but it does not follow that the story is impossible.

The police commissioner (very smart, acquainted with Wittgenstein 1969 and Sosa 2007)

Absolutely no need to engage in dubious spiritual practices. Consider this (cf. Sosa 2007, 7-8):

Dreaming does not involve forming beliefs, but merely consists in imagining or simulating experiences. Dreaming resembles imagining in that, when one imagines, one does not thereby acquire beliefs, but only certain propositionally contentful states that are known as “make-beliefs”. ... We are guided by our imagination but have no beliefs about what we are experiencing: we don't take what we are experiencing to stand for something in reality. We do not affirm anything.

And also:

“My exposition relies heavily on distinguishing between two expressions: ‘in my dream’ and ‘while I dream.’ From the fact that in my dream something happens it does not follow that it happens while I dream. From the fact that in my dream I am chased by a lion it does not follow that while I dream I am chased” (Sosa 2007, 4).

So, you see, there is a profound distinction between what goes on “in the old man's dream” (allegedly hit by the spear) and what goes on “while he dreams” (supposedly poked by the umbrella). It is just a conceptual confusion to think that any kind of epistemic “transaction” between the two domains is possible. His so called “testimony” could not express any beliefs at all and his dream mental states could not cause any real action. His “report” would

⁵ Akutagawa, R. 2006. *Rashōmon and Seventeen Other Stories*. Penguin Classics, p. 14.

be just a piece of fiction, irrelevant as a description of what went on “in reality” and so of no value, if not outright nonsensical since no *genuine* statements would be made. You should rather confess!

The woodcutter (smart too!)

Your procedure has a close relation to what Kant called a “transcendental’ investigation” (Putnam 1981, 16) and not a real police investigation. But “transcendental deduction” is not any super-duper deduction, the term actually comes from German legal vocabulary – an argument intended to yield a justification on the court. And in this context – what is more convincing, my story or your ruminations about the conceptual preconditions of having *real* thoughts? Is this not enough for a reasonable doubt? Come to think of it, how do *you* know that you have real beliefs and not some kind of imaginations and quasi-beliefs right now?

We are now in the deep waters of skepticism and epistemology students will know how to continue the dialogue. The commissioner is using *modus ponens*: the story is conceptually inconsistent so excluded *apriori*, but the woodcutter returns with *modus tollens*: the story is epistemically possible, so there is no conceptual inconsistency. My philosophical sympathies are with the woodcutter – he is guilty, probably, but we are talking conceptual possibilities now. I doubt not only that conceptual investigations exclude metaphysical possibilities (this much is granted by Putnam – according to him the BIV scenario is *physically* possible), I doubt that they have the power to exclude epistemic possibilities and doubts raised by the skeptic. How could a mere reflection on our concepts (rather than on proper evidential considerations) give us some concrete information about the external world?

The skeptical threat of *dreams* is familiar from Descartes – when dreaming, a subject has misleading sensations, which typically lead to false beliefs. According to this, *hallucination* model of dreaming, when subjects dream, they undergo perceptual experiences of the same kind that they do while waking and form real beliefs about what is happening on their basis. But there is an alternative, *imagination* model of dreaming. When subjects dream, the experiences they suffer are different in kind from those involved in perception. They are exercises of the imagination, including sensory imagery and propositional imagination (Ichikawa 2016, 150). I do not want to take stands (although arguments in favor of the imagination model could be given: structural similarity between dreams and fictions; brain areas particularly implicated in dreaming seem to be the same as those involved in imagery, as opposed to those involved in perceptual experience, etc., cf. Ichikawa 2009), the issue is still controversial. I am mainly interested in epistemological consequences of accepting the imagination model as developed by Sosa (and earlier by Wittgenstein).

According to Sosa, to dream is to imagine something and not to hallucinate or falsely believe it. Even if we are unable to distinguish waking life from the corresponding dream, there can be no *deception* (false beliefs) in our dreams, because there are *no* beliefs at all. While dreaming, one does not form false beliefs, nor even consciously affirm anything, “in dreaming we do not really believe; we only make-believe” (Sosa 2007, 8). And according to Wittgenstein in dreaming we do not really assert, we only quasi-assert:

The argument “I may be dreaming” is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this remark is being dreamed as well – and indeed it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning. [OC 383; Wittgenstein 1969, 387]

I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says “I am dreaming,” even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream “it is raining”, while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain. [OC 676, Wittgenstein: 1969, 670]

The notion of “quasi” statements is sometimes used by the commentators (Hamilton 2014, 235):

Someone who, while dreaming, utters the words “I may be dreaming” has made no genuine statement. Only when false does the utterance of “I may be dreaming” constitute a genuine statement; dream scepticism, like scepticism about the meanings of one’s words, is self-defeating. Despite appearances, therefore, it is not a “genuine statement”; it is not false, but nonsensical. Its very expression raises doubts about whether the speaker understands what they are saying.

It is a vexed issue how to interpret Wittgenstein’s cryptic remarks so my main source for this anti-skeptical strategy will be Sosa, who is much more explicit. Affirmations of wakefulness are automatically justified – the claim that one is not just dreaming must, like the *cogito*, be right if affirmed (Sosa 2007, 16). If we are awake, we affirm truly. But if we happen to be asleep and dreaming, we only have a belief *in* our dreams (not *while* we dream) and do not affirm anything (Sosa 2007, 17). So we are “automatically rationally committed to supposing” we are not dreaming, whenever we reflect upon the possibility that we might be (Sosa 2007, 20).

How does this differ from: we are automatically rationally committed to supposing we are *not* brains in a vat whenever we reflect upon the possibility that we might be? Or, as Putnam says about the BIV hypothesis: “If we can consider whether it is true or false, then it is not true... Hence it is not true” (Putnam 1981, 8) and again “ ‘We are brains in a vat’ is necessarily false” (Putnam 1981, 15). Also, BIV mental states

are in certain respects dream-like states, being causally isolated from the environment they lack the very preconditions for being representational (according to semantic externalism). Putnam's semantic argument against the BIV hypothesis and Sosa's anti-skeptical argument against dream skepticism based on the imagination model of dreaming share some important structural ("transcendental") features. The rejection of the hallucination model seems to be the basis of Sosa's reply to dream skepticism in the same way as Putnam's externalism is the basis of his reply to BIV skepticism: no *false* beliefs because *no* real beliefs (thoughts) at all. And both seem to be vulnerable to the same type of objections raised, informally, by the woodcutter in the story.

The analog of "I am awake" in the dream scenario is the sentence "I am not a BIV" in Putnam's scenario. Consider the following condensed version of Putnam's reasoning (DeRose 2000, 124):

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.

But wait – this reasoning is based on the assumption that as a BIV I have thoughts with *genuine* truth conditions ("I am not a BIV" is true). In the standard BIV scenario the opposite thought "I am brain in a vat" is *false* – we are being *deceived* and fed falsities about our poor situation (as if we are walking in the sunshine or something, we do not have images of being envatted). But the corresponding claim that one is just dreaming is *not* false but pragmatically incoherent according to Sosa (2007,16). Does this not break the analogy? Is *deception* essential for Putnam's anti-skeptical line of reasoning?

3. Deception and disquotation

It is part of the traditional skeptical challenge that a world fitting the skeptic's description would appear to its inhabitants just as *our* world appears to us. There is an implicit assumption that if the BIV possibility were actual, *all* of our beliefs would be false. Even the belief expressed by the sentence "I am a BIV." Putnam's thought experiment is usually interpreted along the lines which emphasize the role of *deception* (Brueckner 1986, 151, among others):

The BIV's utterance [of "I am a BIV"] would be true iff he had sense impressions as of being a BIV. But by Putnam's hypothesis, a BIV never has such sense impressions. A BIV has only sense impressions as of being a normal, embodied human being moving through a richly varied world of physical objects. Thus a BIV's

utterance of 'I am a BIV' would never be true ...

But if I am not a BIV, then my utterance of 'I am a BIV' is obviously false. We thus get a standard, dilemma version of the *Disjunctive Argument* (DA for short), formulated by Brueckner (first in Brueckner 1986, 154, below is the version from Brueckner 2010, 137).

- (1) Either I am a BIV or I am a non-BIV.
- (2) If I am a BIV, then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are true iff I have sense-impressions as of being a BIV.
- (3) If I am a BIV, then I do not have sense-impressions as of being a BIV (instead, I have sense-impressions as of being a normal, embodied human).
- (4) If I am a BIV, then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false. [(2), (3)]
- (5) If I am a non-BIV, then my utterances of 'I am not a BIV' are true iff I am a BIV.
- (6) If I am a non-BIV, then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false. [(5)]
- (7) My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false. [(1),(4),(6)]
- (8) My utterances of 'I am not a BIV' are true. [(7)]

The vat-English truth conditions of 'I am a BIV' are not satisfied because of *deception* (I am not fed experiences representing me to be a disembodied BIV). And the normal, English truth conditions of 'I am a BIV' are not satisfied for obvious reasons. So I am not a BIV. Hmm, this looks very quick.

There are two components in this standard version: (i) semantic externalism – in order for our word 'vat' etc. to refer to a particular kind of thing, it is necessary for our uses of the term to be causally connected – in an appropriate way – with things of that kind; (ii) *deception* – what we are 'hallucinating' isn't that we are brains in a vat.

The semantic core of the argument is usually interpreted as analogous to the distinction between our "water" (H₂O) and Twin Earth "water" (XYZ). The Earthian's sentence "Water is clear" expresses a different thought than the corresponding Twin Earthian thought expressed by the same sentence. In the same way our sentence "We are brains in vat" expresses a different thought than the corresponding sentence uttered by the envatted brains. Their utterances have non-standard truth conditions – computer states that causally affect their brains so as to produce corresponding experiences or something like that.

But recall Putnam's initial analogy – an ant is crawling on a patch of sand and as it crawls, it traces a line in the sand which ends up looking like a caricature of Winston Churchill (Putnam 1981, 1).

Does the ant mispresent? Or represent Churchill*? The Putnamian intuition is that the caricature does not refer to or represent Churchill, because the presuppositions of successful reference are not fulfilled. The main problem with BIV mental states is not deception, but lack of proper connection. This suggests that the envatted utterances of "I am a BIV" are in certain respects like the famous (S) "The present king of France is bald." According to Strawson a speaker does not succeed in making a truth-evaluable claim by uttering (S). The logic and formal semantics of a language which contains singular terms without denotations is best captured by introducing truth value gaps – (S) is neither true nor false. And the same diagnosis would then apply to BIV's utterances.

The idea is hinted by Putnam – "the sentence 'we are brains-in-a-vat' says something false (if it says anything)." If it does not say anything then it is neither true nor false. Can we work out the anti-skeptical argument on the assumption that "We are not brains in a vat" is not false, rather, the preconditions for its having a truth value are not fulfilled? Various parts of the original argument will now be affected. Suppose I am a BIV, then the gist of the reasoning seems to be:

My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are not true.

So,

My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false.

So,

I am not a BIV.

The first inference is based on standard understanding of negation (if not true then false) and the final step on the principle of disquotatation:

(Disq) My utterances of 'I am not a BIV' are true iff I am not a BIV.

Both are now problematic. We can agree that "The present king of France is bald" is not true. But it does not follow that it is false – it is neither true nor false. Negation behaves differently, once truth value gaps are admitted as the third logical value. The negation of a truth value gap results in a truth value gap. Consider another area, where this idea usually finds its domicile. Since future is yet to be, some will say that it is not true (today) that I will be at home tomorrow at noon. But it is not false either, it is neither true nor false (according to Łukasiewicz, for instance). So we cannot conclude that I will not be at home tomorrow at noon.

Consequently we can no longer affirm (4) in the above DA version of the argument. And instead of (7) we now have:

(7') My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are not true.

Classically, (8) still follows from (7'), but not in the logic of truth value gaps. My utterances might not be true because preconditions for being true or false are not fulfilled. Even more – what we really want is the

conclusion that I am not a BIV, not the conclusion that my sentence ‘I am not a BIV’ is true. Brueckner (2010, 137) already noticed that we must add a disquotation principle (Disq) in order to get the desired anti-skeptical result. Perhaps (4) – a BIV’s sentences being false, which is based on (2) and (3) in DA above is then *no* longer needed at all. Once we have disquotation, deception is no longer a necessary ingredient of the anti-skeptical argument.

What happens if we drop deception from the BIV scenario? Suppose a supercomputer is running a program that affects my brain in such a way as to produce experiences representing me to be a disembodied BIV (premise 3 of DA is false). Consider the case of dreams – the analog would be a *lucid* dreamer, who “believes” her dream to be a dream. Well, according to Sosa lucid dreaming is a kind of daydreaming, one is still protected from the dream skeptic. If you lucidly dream that you face a fire you will only believe that you face a fire *in* the dream, not *while* you dream (Sosa 2007, 19-20, fn. 18). So, dreaming that you dream does not give you any beliefs about the *reality* of your situation. The same is true, I think, about the BIV scenario:

‘But surely a community of brains-in-a-vat could work through just these thoughts, and so convince themselves quite spuriously that they were not brains-in-a-vat?’ No, they could not. They might work through these words, and soundly convince themselves of something. But only creatures which are not brains-in-a-vat can have these thoughts (Wright 1992, 85).

Even if you, as a BIV, have sense-impressions as of being a BIV, you still cannot have real thoughts about the reality of your situation. Why not? Because your utterances do not disquote and your thoughts do not represent. It was soon recognized, even by Putnam himself, that *disquotation* plays the central role in the semantic version of the anti-skeptical argument (Putnam 1992, 404, fn 29):

Here is the simplest form I know of the Brain in a Vat Argument (this form is due to Crispin Wright, based on a suggestion from me):

In Vat English (the language spoken by the Brains in a Vat) "vat" does not refer to vats. [From the description of the Brain in a Vat world and the causal constraints on reference];

in my language "vat" refers to vats [Disquotation applied to my own language].

Therefore my language is not Vat English-i.e., I am not a Brain in a Vat.

All the work is done by the *semantic* ingredients: (i) reference to common objects like vats, and their physical properties is only possible if one has information carrying causal interactions with those objects; (ii) the disquotation scheme for reference and the predicate ‘true’.

According to Putnam "one cannot refer to certain kinds of things, e.g., trees, if one has no causal interaction at all with them" (1981, 16). By hypothesis BIVs have no causal interaction with trees, brains and the like, so their terms do not refer to these things. In vat-English 'brain in a vat' does not refer to (real) brains in a vat, so disquotation fails. It is usually assumed that they have non-standard truth conditions – computer states that causally affect my brain so as to produce corresponding experiences (designated as 'BIV*'). So:

My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are true iff I am a BIV*.

The vat-English truth conditions of my utterances are non-disquotational. But why assume *any* truth-conditions at all? A BIV's utterances might lack truth conditions altogether. This much is recognized by Brueckner who gives the following stripped-down semantic argument:⁶

- (I) If I am a BIV, then my utterances do not have disquotational truth conditions.
- (II) My utterances of sentences have disquotational truth conditions and express disquotational contents.
- (III) I am not a BIV. [(I),(II)]

Two premises only, (I) looks OK, but how is (II) defended?

The second premise seems as good as gold: of course my sentences have disquotational truth conditions and express disquotational contents. My utterances of 'A rabbit is present' are true iff a rabbit is present, and they express my belief that a rabbit is present (Brueckner 2010, 138-139).

Not much of an argument. In some version Brueckner analyses the following reasoning (Brueckner 2016a, 24, I have modified the numbering of premises):

- (A*) If I am a BIV, then it is not the case that if my word 'tree' refers, then it refers to trees.
- (B*) If my word 'tree' refers, then it refers to trees.
- (C) I am not a BIV.

(B*) is licensed by my knowledge of the semantics of my own language (Brueckner 2016b):

But I do know certain things about my own language (whatever it is and wherever I am speaking it). By virtue of knowing the meaning of 'refers' and the meaning of quotation marks, I know that disquotation can be correctly applied to any successfully

⁶ Slightly changed. Brueckner credits Loar for the remark that a BIV's utterances might lack truth conditions altogether. Still, in the main text he follows Putnam in assuming that a BIV's terms refer to computer states (BIV*) and states premise (I) as "If I am a BIV, then my utterances of sentences have non-disquotational truth conditions and express non-disquotational contents" (2010, 138).

referring term of my language, in the way that (B*) indicates for my word ‘tree’. This is a priori knowledge of semantic features of my own language (whatever it is — English or vat-English). I know (A*) in virtue of my a priori, philosophical knowledge of the theory of semantic externalism and of how it applies to the case of the BIV. Knowing (A*) and (B*), I can then knowledgeably deduce that I am not a BIV.

Surely, I know the language I am speaking and I am justified in believing the disquotation principles in virtue of understanding my own language? But what if my singular terms lack reference? Do I not beg the question by assuming that my utterances disquote? The disquotation scheme for sentences is just the Tarski’s schema:

(T) “P” is true if and only if P

According to the disquotational principle for the predicate ‘true,’ a true biconditional results whatever sentence is substituted for the variable ‘P’ in this scheme. If truth-value gaps are admitted, then this principle is no longer valid. Van Fraassen (1966) in his classical development of supervaluation semantics denies this principle in the cases of reference failure for singular terms (empty names). His reasoning is usually applied in the logic of vagueness, but the idea is clear. Consider (Williamson 1994, 196)

The phrase ‘this dagger’ may fail to single anything out when used by someone under a hallucination. Arguably, utterances such as ‘This dagger is sharp’ in which the phrase is used fail to say anything in this context, and so are neither true nor false. That includes complex utterances; even the biconditional ‘“This dagger is sharp” is true if and only if this dagger is sharp’ fails to say anything, for it uses the phrase ‘this dagger’ on its right-hand side.

If we adopt for vat-English a semantic treatment of names which lack reference, then a BIV’s utterances do *not* have the disquotational property – this much we knew that already. But it seems to me that disquotation cannot be automatically “licensed by my knowledge of the semantics of my own language” and it cannot be true that “disquotation is, on both the standard and skeptical hypotheses, a valid step within either English or vat-English” (Christensen 1993, 305). It is not valid in vat-English, when the BIV utterances are interpreted as neither true nor false. Moreover, it is not uncontroversially valid even in plain vernacular English containing empty names (and perhaps vague expressions). Our knowledge of semantic features of our own language cannot be *a priori* or obvious. Contrary to Christensen and Brueckner the plausibility of applying disquotation to *ourselves* really does seem to rest on first rejecting the brain-in-vat hypothesis and assuming that our terms refer and our thoughts represent.

4. Quasi-beliefs and quasi-thoughts

Forming beliefs (according to Sosa) is incompatible with dreaming, every time we actually form a perceptual belief, we are not dreaming. The preconditions of having a belief and truly affirming are not fulfilled when dreaming. In the same vein – thinking that I am a BIV is incompatible with the BIV scenario, since the preconditions of forming such a thought are not fulfilled according to Putnamian conception of meaning and intentional content of thoughts. Every time we actually make utterances with genuinely referring expressions, we are (at the very least) not in a BIV scenario. If the imagination model of dreaming is correct, then the belief that one is awake has a cogito-like status—necessarily, if one believes that one is awake, then one is awake (Sosa 2007, 20): “We can just as well affirm <I think, therefore I am awake> as <I think, therefore I am>.” We might now add <I disquote, therefore I am not a brain in a vat>. It is impossible to *affirm* falsely: “I am awake” and it is impossible to *utter* falsely “I am not a brain in a vat.” If I were dreaming, I would not have that belief, only an *imagining* with that content, a quasi-belief, perhaps. And if I were a BIV, I would not have that thought, only a quasi-thought, perhaps.

Small comfort, though. I can be in a state subjectively indistinguishable from one in which I judge that I am awake, even though I am asleep and so not judging anything at all. So we do not really affirm:

But we do engage in another activity that is in some ways similar to affirmation: we come to imagine. I shall call this activity ‘quasi-affirmation’. Quasi-affirmation is not affirmation, but it is in many ways similar to affirmation, just as imagination is in many ways similar to belief. From an internal point of view, for the dreamer quasi-affirmation is importantly like affirmation and indistinguishable from it (Ichikawa 2008, 523).

Instead of worrying that my belief is false, I now have to worry whether my mental state is a belief and not a quasi-belief. I avoid the risk of believing falsely, but I do not avoid epistemic risks in general. The risk of quasi-belief, internally indistinguishable from real belief, is equally severe. And so, it seems to me, is the risk of “quasi-thought” expressed in vat-English internally indistinguishable from real thought expressed in normal English. Early Brueckner was aware of this deficiencies (1986, 164):

If I do not know whether I am speaking vat-English or English, then I do not know which proposition my utterance of ‘I am a BIV’ expresses ... I cannot apply [disquotation] to my own utterances of ‘I am [in a vat]’ as a step toward the conclusion that I know that I am not [in a vat].

He later claimed that we have *apriori* semantic knowledge of our own

language which is enough to justify the disquotation. How could that be if we cannot tell the difference between thought and quasi-thought, when the principle of disquotation fails even for some of the terms in our own language? Analogously, Ichikawa (2008, 253) complains:

It does not follow from the fact that I know no affirmation of p will be a mistake that it is rational for me to affirm p . If, for all I know, the mental act I am to engage in will be a false quasi-affirming, then knowledge that I shall never affirm falsely is insufficient.

There is no threat of our having false perceptual beliefs when dreaming but this is insufficient as a reply to dream skeptic in the same way as my knowledge that I shall never think falsely that I am a BIV seems to be insufficient as a reply to BIV skeptic.

But can we really have any sensible doubts about disquotation in our own language, e.g.: (2) "My word 'brain' refers to brains"? Several authors have argued that I cannot even *entertain* the skeptical hypothesis unless I have thoughts about BIVs and unless I can refer to brains and vats.⁷ Here is Button (2013, 125-126):

... even to understand or talk about the BIV scenario at all, we need to rely on disquotation. Otherwise, the BIV scenario does not confront us with the worry that we are brains in vats. In short, premise (2) is required by the BIV sceptic herself. ... the falsity of (2) is genuinely unrepresentable.

The issue is complex, but let me notice, first, that the target of skepticism will now really be *different*. Usually we are confronted with the skeptical possibility ("Bad") of having massively false beliefs. In Bad (dreams, BIV) our beliefs are *insensitive*. I do not know that I am not a BIV, for if I were, I would falsely believe not to be. According to Putnam and semantic externalism about thought content I know that "I am not a BIV" since the opposite belief, expressed as "I am a BIV," (as uttered by a BIV) fails to meet necessary condition for being a real belief at all, its content is not representational (alternatively, the sentence does not disquote). The new skeptical challenge will now be more *general*, for instance:

If I accept the argument, I must conclude that a brain in a vat can't think truly that it is a brain in a vat, even though others can think this about it. What follows? Only that I cannot express my skepticism by saying "Perhaps I am a brain in a vat." Instead I must say "Perhaps I can't even think the truth about what I am, because I lack the necessary concepts and my circumstances make it impossible for me to acquire them!" If this doesn't qualify as skepticism, I don't know what does (Nagel 1986, 73).

There are, for instance, contexts in which disquotation fails, but, for all

⁷ Thanks to anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this problem.

we know, we might be in such a situation. Dream scenarios on *both* models are an example – hallucination was mentioned above (Williamson 194, 196), and some influential theoreticians of imagination (e.g. Walton 1990) argue that names in the context of imagination do not refer.

The skeptic will thus draw attention to intelligible cases which are incompatible with the disquotation principles and unproblematic semantic knowledge. The anti-skeptic might reply: *represent* them (describe them in meaningful linguistic terms)! But something peculiar is going on in this dialectics. The *ripосто* of the anti-skeptic reminds of Berkeley's Master argument, sometimes simplistically put as: show me an unobserved tree! Now, Berkeley's argument seems to conflate the *representation* (what we conceive with) and the *represented* (what we conceive of—the content of our thought).⁸ The fact that we cannot *really* entertain (represent) the sceptical scenario does not entail that the scenario *represented* is impossible. A similar point is sometimes made in terms of the first person / third person distinction – a brain in a vat can't think truly (of itself) that it is a brain in a vat, even though others can think this about it:

The hypothesis that I'm a brain-in-a-vat is unthinkable (thinking it requires the use of symbols tokenings of which are causally linked to actual items in ways in which no tokenings by the brains-in-a-vat in his scenario can be) (Wright 1992, 86).

We might interpret this with a help of a comparison – I can never truly (and loudly) say "I am silent now", but the others can report about the fact of my silence. But the situation with the BIV scenario is different, it seems to me. In the same way as there are genuine similarities between the dream state and a waking belief there might be genuine similarities between states with representational (referential) and nonrepresentational (non-referential) mental contents. In the vat I cannot think "I am a brain in a vat" since I cannot think about real world brains and real world vats. But, as Folina (2016, 172) rightly notices, it does not follow that I cannot have thoughts that are epistemically identical to the BIV thought (or nearly so). Or, to be more cautious, quasi-thoughts.

Consider the analogous question – can we, in our dreams, entertain the hypothesis of dream scepticism? In a sense, *no* – the preconditions of our having any beliefs are not fulfilled (according to the imagination model). Still, if there are genuine similarities between the dream state and a waking belief we might be engaged in "quasi-thinking". Now the objection can be made that the BIV scenario is significantly different since "even to understand the BIV scenario at all, we need to rely on disquotation." But BIVs cannot be like ants, for instance, they have to be

⁸ Downing, L. "George Berkeley", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/berkeley/>>.

relevantly similar to us – capable of engaging in cognitive mental activities. And one cannot just stipulate that engaging in these activities presupposes disquotation – we can imagine or hallucinate that "tree" refers to tree. Perhaps we just "quasi-understand" and "quasi-entertain" and not really understand or entertain in these scenarios, where quasi-understanding is similar to understanding in the same way that imagination is similar to belief.

5. Conclusion

Both, the full anti-skeptical argument which includes deception and the stripped down version, which rests only upon the claim that the referents and contents in the BIV scenario differ from normal referents and contents, are question-begging. This has been noticed before (Brueckner 1986 and many other commentators). How do I know that I speak English and not Vat-English? Do I have thoughts or quasi-thoughts? How does my negation behave? Do my terms disquote? Until we establish answers to these questions the core version of the semantical argument fails as a fully satisfactory reply to the skeptical challenge posed by the BIV scenario. But wait – what *kind* of skepticism is this? Ichikawa, in his discussion of dream scepticism (2016, 159), is aware of this question:

The central question becomes, what is required of skeptical scenario? It is clearly not enough that the belief in question is false; the imagination, dreaming, and hallucination subject must be in some sense similar to the subject's actual state. But whether belief is necessary, or sufficient, or neither is an outstanding question at this stage in inquiry.

The sceptic will add the BIV subject to the list and argue, against Putnam, that the doubts raised above are enough to cool down our epistemic hyper-ambitions. True, the skeptical challenge has now become more general⁹ and consequently more radical. Putnam (1994, 284) offers the following protection against certain radical types of skepticism:

One sort of skeptic — a very uninteresting sort — may raise a skeptical doubt only so that, no matter what premises one may rely on in answering the doubt, he or she can respond, "and how do you know that?" Obviously, this sort of skepticism — call it infinitely regressive skepticism is "unanswerable," but equally obviously the existence of infinitely regressive skepticism shows only that justification must end somewhere. My argument was obviously not meant to refute infinitely regressive skepticism.

⁹ Or less specific, »I might not be able to say, utter, know, or imagine the precise conditions that yield my situation of ignorance.« (Folina 2016, 172).

“Infinitely regressive skepticism” – is this not the very essence of skepticism since the times of Pyrrho? Maybe not very attractive nor particularly worthy of serious consideration, but this alone does not make it refutable. As an antidote for skepticism Putnam’s reasoning remains unconvincing (most of the vast literature has been critical). Still, the argument remains intriguing and I have far from explored all of the challenges it poses. As a philosopher I am also tempted to use a reflection on our use of language (our concepts, ideas ...) and thereby acquire some concrete information about the (external) world. But how can that be?

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