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“Brain in the Vat”

This classic thought experiment was presented by Hilary Putnam in his book *Reason, Truth, and History*. While the puzzle is often as an epistemological (theory of knowledge) puzzle in order to get the reader to question the validity of experience much as Descartes’s Evil Demon (see the article “Epistemology and External World Skepticism” also in this issue), Putnam uses it to explore the mind-body relationship.

Putnam asks the reader to imagine that she has been unwittingly operated upon by a mad scientist. The reader’s brain has been removed from the body and placed in a vat which, being filled with nutrients, sustains the brain as though it were still in the body. The brain is then connected to a computer which creates the illusion that life is as it was before the operation; one experiences the world just as it was before with all the people, activities, sights, sounds, etc. as one had before. The experiences provide no way to discern that one’s brain is now in a vat instead of a body, and that in fact these experiences are electrical impulses coming from a computer to the brain instead of from sense organs in the body to the brain. Putnam adds the final note that it can even be made to seem to the reader/victim that she is sitting and reading this “very amusing but quite absurd supposition that there is an evil scientist who removes people’s brains from their bodies and places them in a vat of nutrients which keep the brains alive.”¹ It perhaps goes without saying that if indeed the experiment has been successful, the reader will have no reason to believe that this is anything more than an amusing and absurd supposition, when it fact it is true.

So, what makes the reader the reader? Is she still the reader now that the brain is no longer in the body? If we are our bodies, then the reader is no longer the same person. Perhaps she is even not a person at all, as she lacks a body. This same thought experiment can be used to raise a wide variety of philosophical questions on personal identity, the limits of what we can know from the experiences we have and how the world appears to us, and whether the personal identity is connect to the brain or an embodied thing.

—Editors

Notes

1 Putnam, p. 6.

References

Hilary Putnam. *Reason, Truth, and History*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 1981.

discussion was misled or too many students were talking, I had them close their eyes and breathe. I was pleased to see that this worked so well in centering the class back onto the topic.

I asked them, would they be a different person if their name was different? They understood quickly that names have no meaning when it comes to identifying a person. The next question then was, if names do not tell us who people are, then what does? We then discussed what makes a person the same person over time. The students did a great job exploring several options. I tried my best to play devil’s advocate and meticulously pulled apart their explanations. It was great to see the students get into contradictions and try to find ways out of them. I was also trying to tie in major theories on personal identity using their responses. We covered Ego Theory, Memory Theory, and Body Theory all from ideas they conceived.

Towards the end of the lesson, I gave them the “Brain in the Vat” concept and asked how they knew that that was what was actually happening currently. I felt that this was crucial for them to use everything that had been discussed to figure out whether or not that their brains could actually be in a vat somewhere. By this time, I could sense they were already catching on to what philosophy was. They were asking the minutest questions about every detail on the vat scenario. I was impressed at how quickly they learned that any reason they could justify would work in explaining their reasoning.

I closed the lesson with a journal question: What makes a person the same person over time? They gave mixed responses but there was definitely philosophical progress since the beginning of the discussion. I could not have asked for better experience. I had so much fun with the students and they seemed to enjoy the material. I think that they learned just what I was intending to show them, and learned also what philosophy actually is rather than the definition of what philosophy is.



Not everyone can be a magician, but there are a number of illusions which we can provide for students without great skill. Several of these are in pictures, such as the famous image in which one side of shape makes an old woman’s face while a change in focus brings a young woman into view. This discussion made excellent use of the time allotted for the “Why? Class.” Given more time or a follow-up day, it could also lead to a discussion about the trustworthiness of personal observations (see “Epistemology and External World Skepticism” in this issue) such as those which seemed to convince people that the magic tricks were real in some relevant sense, or to a discussion of the ad populum argument—the idea that if many people believe something to be true, it is—which is generally fallacious. Perhaps an interesting side observation is the manner in which the author’s own beliefs as outlined in the opening paragraph were shown to be based on illusions.—Editors

What Is Real?

Melissa Tellez

Teaching philosophy to a third grade class in south-central Los Angeles does not at first appear to be a simple task. Children so often appear jaded, as if there is nothing that they haven’t seen before. They are constantly surrounded by ugly reality. It seems as if every house is surrounded by a high fence while all windows and doors are covered with bars. There are few to no green plants growing. These students grow up surrounded by concrete and smog. Yet despite all of this I soon realized that they, like children everywhere, enjoy discovering and learning new things. They loved the philosophy lessons; it allowed them to ask questions that would normally be brushed aside. They liked the “Why? Class” as one student put it.

