The Philosophy Gym
25 SHORT ADVENTURES IN THINKING

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One of the most famous and persistent philosophical problems concerns our knowledge of the world around us. You and I suppose we have good reason to believe we're surrounded by various physical objects: cars, houses, trees, mountains and, of course, other people. That we possess this sort of knowledge is one of our most fundamental, 'common-sense' beliefs. But there are powerful philosophical arguments that appear conclusively to show that none of us has any more reason to suppose that Earth, and everything on it, exists than we have to suppose that it is all some sort of elaborate illusion.

One of these philosophical arguments involves the hypothesis that you might be a brain in a vat. Consider the following story.

**A Brain in a Vat**

Colin Spiggott settled down in front of the television as he had a thousand times before, his dinner balanced on his knees. He was looking forward to watching the evening film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Unfortunately for Colin, there was to be no film or dinner. As he lifted the first morsel to his lips, something utterly odd happened. He heard a tiny voice, a voice that seemed to come from inside his head.

'Testing. Testing . . . Hold on.'

The voice was muffled and indistinct. Then, after a couple of seconds, it came back crystal clear and deafeningly loud.

'Testing, testing . . . Colin clamped his hands involuntarily to his ears, his fork flying into the air. ' . . . ER . . . COLIN SPIGGOTT, CAN YOU HEAR ME? SORRY. Too loud. Is that better? Look, Colin, we have important news.'

Colin leaped to his feet, his dinner crashing to the floor. He stared around the room in panic. 'Who is it? Who's there?'
'I'm not in the room that you seem to see around you, Colin. I'm somewhere else. Somewhere far away.'

'Where? Who are you?'

'I have some news, Colin. News you may find shocking. Please sit down.'

'What's happening?'

'I will tell you. I do not inhabit Earth. I come from another planet. And I am here to thank you for taking part in our experiment.'

'Experiment? I don't understand. What experiment?'

'I am afraid we have been deceiving you a little, Colin. Things are not as they seem.'

The voice in Colin's head proceeded to explain what was happening to him. Or, more accurately, what had happened to him.

'I'm afraid that the world you see around you is not real. It is a virtual world. Six of your earth months ago we came to visit you. Do you remember having a particularly disturbed night's sleep – a night plagued with nightmares?'

'Er... I think I do, yes.'

'That was the night we entered your house while you were sleeping. We drugged you and placed your unconscious body in our flying saucer. Currently, you are located not on Earth, but on another planet entirely. You are on Pluto.'

Colin had started to get a little more of a grip on himself. 'On Pluto? But that's ridiculous. I can see that I'm on Earth. There's my TV set over there.'

'Oh, yes. It looks as if there is a television set over there. I admit that. But as I have explained, things are not as they seem. You see, when your body arrived at our scientific laboratory here on Pluto, an operation was performed. We removed your brain.'

'My brain?' Colin was beginning to feel sick.

'We removed your living brain and discarded your body. Then we placed it in a glass vat. We connected it up to one of our VE4 supercomputers. Your brain is currently floating in vat of life-supporting nutrients here in our laboratory beneath the surface of Pluto.'

'Then why do I see that TV in front of me?' said Colin, pointing to the TV set.

'The supercomputer is generating the illusion of a television set. It's a virtual television set that you see. It is not real. Let me explain how the VE4 computer has been programmed to function. The situation is a little complicated. You must concentrate.'

'I am concentrating!'
'This is a nightmare! I have to wake up!'
'I see you remain unconvinced. That surprises me. I thought you would be more rational. Very well. Perhaps the time has come for me to confront you with the facts in a more dramatic fashion. In a moment or two I shall disconnect your brain from the VE4. I shall connect you instead to a camera that I have set up here in my laboratory. I have arranged things so that, if you try to turn your head, the camera will respond by panning round. So you will be able to have a good look around the laboratory. I should warn you that one of the first things you will see will be me.'

Colin looked feverishly about the room. He grasped the arms of the settee in a desperate attempt to hold it in place. But it was useless. The room was beginning to change. The walls rippled as if they were fluid. Then they began to melt away to reveal quite a different scene. The image was vague at first. Colin could make out only a white background against which were silhouetted strange, bulbous shapes. Then the resolution suddenly sharpened and the shapes turned into test tubes and vats arranged along rows of white shelving. Directly in front of Colin was a larger, darker, closer shape. Finally, it, too, came into focus. Before Colin loomed the hideous shape of the Plutonian.

'Good evening, Colin,' said the Plutonian. 'My name is Zpaplaft. What you are experiencing now is no longer an illusion. Everything you see before you is real. It's been a long time since you were last in contact with the real world. Allow me to show you around. To your right you will notice the VE4 computer - the computer into which you were plugged but a few moments ago.'

Colin turned to the right and saw a large silver box covered in tiny dials. He noticed that one of the little windows displayed the word 'goldfish'.

'And now, Colin, it is time for you to take a look at yourself.'

Trailing from the computer were a number of leads. Colin strained to follow the leads, and as he did so a large laboratory bench came into view. On top of the bench was a glass vat. In the vat was something resembling a large grey walnut. It bobbed gently up and down amid a stream of little bubbles fizzing from the bottom of the vat. Leads trailed everywhere, partly obscuring Colin's view. But it was recognisably a human brain that he could see. Two of the leads snaked across the floor towards him. As he looked down, Colin could see that, as the two leads disappeared out of his line of sight, they were labelled 'camera left' and 'camera right'.

Zpaplaft pointed to the glass vat. 'Here you are, Colin - a brain in a vat.'

The Brain-in-a-Vat Hypothesis

The story I have just told raises an interesting question. How do you know that you are not a brain in a vat? Consider the following two hypotheses:

1. What you see around you is merely virtual: your brain was removed six months ago by Zpaplaft and plugged into a computer running a virtual earth program. The computer is so sophisticated that the experiences it generates are indistinguishable from those you would have if what you experienced was real.
2. What you see around you is real.

Is it more rational to believe one of these hypotheses rather than the other? Of course, you believe that the second is true and the first false. But what justifies you in holding that belief? After all, everything would seem exactly the same to you either way. The evidence furnished by your five senses - taste, touch, sight, hearing and smell - is equally consistent with both hypotheses. It seems, then, that you have no more reason to believe one hypothesis than you do the other.

Now, in order to know something, one presumably needs grounds for believing it. You must be justified in believing what you do. So in order to know that what you see is real and not virtual, you must be able to justify that belief. But it seems you cannot justify it. So, astonishingly, it seems you do not know that what you are now experiencing is real.

This is an astonishing conclusion, a sceptical conclusion. Sceptics claim that we do not know what we might think we know. The claim that we do not know anything about the world around us is called scepticism about the external world.

Bear in mind that scepticism about the external world does not commit one to the view that one cannot know anything at all. After all, even the sceptic is claiming to know something: that knowledge of the external world is impossible.

Another Brain-in-a-Vat Hypothesis

Perhaps you're not convinced by this sceptical argument. You might argue like this.

I know perfectly well that there are no Plutonians or underground Plutonian laboratories. Pluto is a huge gas ball without a solid surface. So all this blather about underground laboratories is obviously false. And there is no reason to deny that I

though see Chapter 19, What Is Knowledge?, where this assumption is questioned.
do know all this stuff about Pluto because, on both your hypotheses, I was experiencing things as they really are up to six months ago. All your weird Plutonian hypothesis throws into doubt the reality of what I have been experiencing for the last six months. But I was aware that Pluto is a giant gas ball way before that. As I do know that Pluto is a giant gas ball, I know your first hypothesis must be false.

This is a good reply. However, we can easily change the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis in such a way that it throws all your knowledge about the external world into doubt, including your knowledge that Pluto is a giant gas ball. Consider the hypothesis that you have always been a brain in a vat. Perhaps the earth and everything on it do not exist and never have existed. The town in which you live, your family, house, friends and even the hospital in which you were born: all are illusions generated by a supercomputer. They are no more real than the places and characters that one finds in a fantasy computer game.

How do you know that this brain-in-a-vat hypothesis isn't true? It seems you don't know. All the evidence available to you is consistent with the hypothesis that everything you have ever experienced has been part of some sort of elaborate computer-generated hoax.

There is no point in arguing that Pluto is an uninhabitable gas ball incapable of supporting underground laboratories. After all, the only reason you believe Pluto is a giant gas ball is that this is what your experiences seem to confirm (for example, perhaps you picked up this belief about Pluto from the TV, or when you were at school). But as the Plutonians are controlling all those experiences, they may have deliberately misled you about what Pluto is like.

Philosophers remain divided over whether or not such sceptical arguments are cogent. Many are convinced by them. Others defend the common-sense view that we do know about the external world. The difficulty is in establishing where the flaws in the argument lie.

One popular response to scepticism is to appeal to ordinary language. Surely, one may argue, the sceptic's claim that we do not know anything about the world around us makes no sense. For we actually explain the meaning of the word 'know' by pointing to such examples as knowing that the bus is coming, knowing that the sun will rise at eight a.m., knowing that there is a tree in Fred's back garden, and so on. But if it is, at least in part, by means of such 'paradigm cases' that we actually determine and explain what the word 'know' means, then to suggest that we don't know in such cases would be to involve oneself in a kind of contradiction.

This sort of focus on 'ordinary language' - on how we ordinarily use words - was particularly popular in the 1950s. Today, however, such appeals command far less respect. One problem with the ordinary-language response is that it simply does not follow that if we typically apply and indeed explain the meaning of a word by reference to certain 'paradigm cases', then that word must be correctly applied in at least some of those cases. For it may be that we're making an assumption when we apply or explain a word in this way, an assumption that is, in fact, false.

Indeed, in the case of the word 'know', it seems we are making such an assumption. That's precisely the sceptic's point. The sceptic draws our attention to the fact that when we say that Fred 'knows' that there is a bus coming towards him, we make the background assumption that Fred has at least some good reason to suppose that he isn't and hasn't always been a brain in a vat. The sceptic simply draws our attention to this assumption and then shows it to be false. Once we realise that the assumption is false, we conclude, quite properly, that the term 'know' is not correctly used in this and other such cases after all. To draw that conclusion is not to involve oneself in any sort of contradiction.

The 'Invisible Pebble' Response

Here's a different reply to the sceptic. Some argue that the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis is really an empty hypothesis. Suppose I were to say that I have an invisible, intangible pebble in my hand. I ask you to put your hand out and I place my 'pebble' in your palm. Of course, you can't see or feel the pebble. But I insist that it's there. You would rightly question my sanity, of course. But, more than this, you might ask whether there really is any content to the suggestion that there is an invisible, intangible pebble in your hand. A pebble that can make no difference to anything you might possibly observe is surely no pebble at all.
Can't a similar move be made against the sceptic? Some philosophers think it can. The brain-in-a-vat hypothesis, they will say, is also an empty hypothesis. For, even if it were true, it could make no possible difference to what you might experience. Everything will seem the same whether the hypothesis is true or false. But a situation that can make no difference to anything you might possibly observe is surely no situation at all. But the sceptic's argument is based on the assumption that the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis is a genuine situation. So the sceptic's argument collapses.

This is an ingenious reply. But it fails. The problem is that, unlike my invisible pebble hypothesis, the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis could have an impact on what you experience. That's precisely what happens in my short story about Colin. He has experiences that indicate that he is a brain in a vat after all. Perhaps the same thing will happen to you tomorrow evening.

The Dismissive Response

Many new to philosophy quickly become infuriated by such sceptical arguments. 'Look,' they shout, 'it's just obvious that I know there's a tree in front of me. I can see it standing there. What you claim is patently absurd.'

But just because a claim seems 'obvious' is no guarantee of its truth. It was once considered 'obvious' that Earth is stationary. And if an 'obvious' claim is shown, by means of a cogent argument, to be false, then the rational thing to believe is that it is false. Those who blindly hang on to the claim come what may and dismiss the argument's proponents as 'idiots' are themselves being idiotic. They are like those who, having been presented with overwhelming evidence that Earth moves, nevertheless dismiss that evidence by stamping on the ground and saying: 'But look, it's obvious it's stationary!'

The Unbelievable Truth?

The sceptic argues that we have no knowledge at all about the world around us. You have no reason to believe that your home, family, place of work and even Earth itself aren't all virtual. For all you know, you have always been a brain in a vat, at the mercy of Zapplait's VE4 computer.

This is an astonishing claim. In fact, no one can really believe it. No one really believes it is just as likely that they are a brain in a vat as it is that they are living out their life in the real world. Not even the sceptic.

Yet this may just be a psychological fact about us. We were made natural-born believers. We can't help ourselves. Despite our overwhelming disposition to believe the contrary, the sceptic's conclusion that you do not know that you are holding a book in your hands would appear to be true. Scepticism about the external world would appear to be the unbelievable truth.