New Terms of Envatment

Samuel Montplaisir*

Abstract

The argument against skepticism relying on content externalism, which was made famous by Hilary Putnam, has been considered inconclusive by many philosophers. However, some believe that this argument has precluded the possibility of skeptical hypotheses. These hypotheses typically are fictional scenarios where a deceptive power makes your experiences indistinguishable from those you would have if you were not in such a scenario, making most of your justified belief false. Some philosophers, such as Anthony Brueckner and Jon Altschul, have taken this problem seriously and, in response to Putnam, have developed an alternative to the argument from ignorance: the piecemeal fashion strategy. I wish to defend, contra Brueckner and Altschul, the idea that some skeptical hypotheses remain untouched by content externalism, making the piecemeal fashion strategy obsolete.

1. The argument from ignorance

The most common argument presented to support skepticism about the external world is the argument by skeptical hypothesis, or "argument from ignorance"[1]. This argument, popularized by Descartes in his first meditation, has spawned a literature of its own. I plan here to examine a response to the skeptical challenge relying on semantic considerations. This response was first brought up by Hilary Putnam in *Reason, Truth and History*[2] and has been largely commented,

* L'auteur est étudiant au baccalauréat en philosophie (Université de Montréal).

[1] Lemos, N. (2007), *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, p. 140-141.

[2] Putnam, H. (1981), *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 10. We should note that Putnam himself never claimed that content externalism was an effective way to defeat skepticism.

even though many philosophers consider it inconclusive. Indeed, even if the skeptic accepts the idea of content externalism on which Putnam is relying, it appears that there is still room for him to attain his philosophical goals through various strategies. One of these is what I may call the "piecemeal fashion" strategy expounded by Anthony Brueckner[3]. This strategy was meant as a response to the claim that the content externalism thesis prevailed on the use of skeptical hypotheses. In this short paper, I defend, contra Brueckner, the possibility of skeptical hypotheses even if we accept Putnam's argument.

Let us first present the argument from ignorance. Suppose, for a moment, that you own a red car. Knowing that your car is red and knowing that red isn't blue, you should know that your car is not blue. In other words, if you know p and that p logically entails $\neg q$ (in which case, q is a "counterpossibility" of p), then you know $\neg q$. This rule of inference concerning knowledge is called the "closure principle". By *modus tollens*, if you do not know $\neg q$, then you do not know p. The argument from ignorance holds that, since you do not know that you are not in a given skeptical hypothesis, a counterpossibility to most of our claims about the external world (we'll define such scenarios in a moment), you do not know most propositions you would make about the external world. In a more formal way, the argument from ignorance could be presented as such, where '$\rightarrow$' stands for the material conditional, '$\rightarrow>$' for the strict conditional and '$K_S(p)$' stands for 'S knows that p' :

1) $[K_S(p) \wedge K_S(p \rightarrow > \neg sk)] \rightarrow K_S(\neg sk)$
2) $K_S(p \rightarrow > \neg sk)$
3) $\neg K_S(\neg sk)$
C) $\neg K_S(p)$

where p is any ordinary proposition about the external world that must be supported by some empirical evidence in order to possibly become a justified belief and sk a skeptical hypothesis in which p is false.

[3] Brueckner, A. (2010), « Terms of Envatment (with Jon Altschul) », p. 174-176.

This leads us to the question "What is a skeptical hypothesis?". I do not wish to present a detailed definition of such a scenario in this paper. However, it appears to me that a skeptical hypothesis must have at least two core features. First, the sensory experiences one has in a skeptical hypothesis must be indistinguishable from those one would have if they weren't in such a situation (roughly, if they were in a "normal situation"). Let us call this feature the "insensitivity requirement"[4]. Second, most of the beliefs someone has about the external world must be false in a skeptical hypothesis.[5] Let us call this second feature the "massive error requirement". If a fictional scenario does not fulfill these two requirements, I do not believe we could call it a skeptical hypothesis at all.

2. Content externalism and skepticism

Let us now consider the following scenario: somewhere in the universe is a brain in a vat, wired to a supercomputer. For the sake of the example, let us suppose that this situation is purely accidental: it is only a pure cosmic coincidence. The brain in this vat has no causal contact with ordinary objects, such as trees. However, the supercomputer generates impressions of ordinary objects in the brain in such a way that its impressions of trees are identical to ours. Some might be curious of the reasons to use such a peculiar scenario: indeed, the brain in a vat never had any contact with trees, hands or other objects. However, as we shall see, this apparent skeptical scenario can be dismissed by content externalism *because* of its peculiarity. Let us call a brain in this situation a Putnamian Brain in Vat (P-BIV).

[4] Pritchard, D. (2009), *Knowledge*, p. 109-113.

[5] Some may be more demanding than me concerning this second feature and ask that *all* beliefs in such scenarios should be false. Although I do not have any strong argument against this request, I believe it is too demanding. Skepticism, at least the sort in which I am interested in, does not require us to be ignorant on everything about the external world (this is why most authors do consider the brain in a vat scenario to be a standard skeptical hypothesis, even though it does not hold every justified belief to be false: a belief such as "There is an external world" still appears to be true).

It may be difficult for our previous hypothesis to fulfill our two requirements. According to our skeptical argument, since we do not know we aren't such P-BIV, we shouldn't know that a normal sense-based proposition such as "This is a tree" is true. However, it isn't clear that we don't. In his book *Reason, Truth and History*, Hilary Putnam argued that the word "tree", when uttered (or thought) by a P-BIV, does not refer to trees. So what does it refer to? What are the truth-conditions required for the sentence "This is a tree" to be true, when it goes through the mind of a P-BIV? Putnam gives three possibilities of what could be the reference of the word "tree".[6] It could mean i. the succession of experiences this brain had about this object, ii. the electrical impulses that stimulate the brain to have the experience of what a normal human feels when perceiving a tree, or iii., the computer program features responsible for the electrical impulses described in ii[7]. Putnam does not say which of these candidates should count as the reference of the word "tree" when thought by the P-BIV. However, it appears that all these possible references are correct for the P-BIV. The P-BIV, speaking vat-English, will most likely utter a true sentence when saying "Trees exist". This idea goes on for most words describing the external world, including "brain", "vat" and "supercomputer". Indeed, since the words "brain" and "vat" refer to (given that we accept iii.) computer programs, the P-BIV would say something false by uttering "I am a brain in a vat". This threatens both the skeptic's claim that we do not know anything of the external world but the fact that we do not know that we are not brains in a vat. It seems then that our P-

[6] Putnam, H. (1981), *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 10.

[7] I personally believe that we should reject i. and ii. on the basis that, if we accept one of these two candidates as the reference of the word "tree" in vat-English, there is nothing preventing us from accepting them as the reference of the word "tree" when uttered by a normal embodied human being. This leads to the inconvenience that the utterance "This is a tree" is true when you designate a tree and also when you designate a hologram of a tree. Since we do not wish our word "tree" to refer to the image of a tree nor to the electrical impulses caused by this plant, but rather to the object causing this experience, I suggest we apply the same logic to the reference of the word "tree" when uttered by a P-BIV (and thus, only consider iii. as a reference of this word).

BIV scenario does not meet our massive error requirement, preventing this scenario from being a skeptical hypothesis.

As Brueckner points out in his article *Terms of Envatment*, the skeptic might reply that the putnamian response to skepticism is only sound against a quite narrow range of fictional scenarios. What happens if you were just recently envatted? The word "tree" would still refer to actual trees (and not to a computer program generating the impression of a tree). Having the sensory experience of a tree inside the vat, you would think "this is a tree" even though it is not true. Could the skeptic reach his goals by mean of this alternative scenario? Hardly. This is because even if you have been envatted an hour ago, you would still retain most of your beliefs concerning the real world via memory. This leads to the happy conclusion that you would, even if recently envatted, have mostly true beliefs. This variation on the brain in a vat case does not fulfill our massive error requirement. At this point, believes Brueckner, the skeptic may try to go the other way around and use another variation of the brain in a vat case. In this new scenario, you would have been envatted many years ago, when you were very young. However, it seems that, if we accept the content externalism on which Putnam is relying to prove that the P-BIV did not meet our massive error requirement, this scenario still faces a serious threat. Most externalists consider that, if you spend enough time in an environment in which you have the same sensory experiences you would have if you were in your original environment, your language will eventually shift in order to refer to this new environment. If you were brought to twin-earth and spent enough time there, the reference of the word "water" would shift from the chemical substance H_2O to XYZ[8]. Hence, if the skeptic chooses to present a scenario in which you were envatted when you were young, chances are that your language has already suited your new environment. Consequently, most of your beliefs about what you now take to be trees would be true. This, again, concludes Brueckner, seems to keep the skeptic at bay, unable to present a hypothesis fulfilling our massive error requirement.

[8] This is not, however, the only conceivable alternative. Some externalists believe that the word "water" will refer both to H_2O *and* XYZ. In any case, your language will eventually change and connect to your new environment.

3. The piecemeal fashion strategy and the new skeptical hypotheses

Yet, the skeptic does have room to elaborate his skeptical designs. One of the strategy available to him is the "piecemeal fashion" strategy, proposed by Brueckner[9]. The strategy is rather simple: since the argument from ignorance isn't built to show that we don't know a whole group of proposition (even though it is the goal of the skeptic) but rather a single proposition *p* about the external world, the piecemeal fashion strategy suggests to conceive an irrefutable scenario in which *p* is false only after we have been informed of what *p* is. If the skeptic wishes to disprove the claim that "I know I have hands", he will propose a scenario where one was recently envatted. If *p* is "the earth existed many years ago", he will propose a scenario *à la* Russell where the earth has come to existence, say, only two years ago. With this strategy, the skeptic creates many irrefutable scenarios in which only small amounts of beliefs (which are those his opponent pretends to know) are false. The fact that you cannot dismiss any of the numerous scenarios the skeptic presented leads to the conclusion that you are ignorant of any proposition that would have been false in one of those scenarios, an honest equivalent to the massive error feature. However, this strategy may sound a bit disappointing since it relies on a reply the skeptic would possibly make (hence, it prevents us from attacking the skeptical position directly by refuting a single skeptical hypothesis). However, the skeptic seems to reach his goals without the use of skeptical hypotheses, allowing him to dodge completely Putnam's argument[10].

[9] Brueckner, A. (2010), "Terms of Envatment (with Jon Altschul)", p. 174-176.

[10] Of course, it may be possible to use some responses relying on epistemic disjunctivism to this new strategy. However, I do not think this is the right place to start an inquiry on this particular topic. Yet, I would like to prevent a possible reply here. Some might say that the skeptic will quickly find himself limited in the examples he brings to reach his skeptical designs since some of them will surely contradict some others. This is a bad reading of the argument. If you do not know you are not in a scenario A, then you do not know the propositions that would have been false in A. If you do not know you are not in a scenario B, then you do not know the propositions that

As I agree with Brueckner's thought about the possibility to use a plurality of non-skeptical hypotheses to achieve skepticism by the argument from ignorance, I do not believe the skeptic is forced in that direction. Considering that this strategy is particularly weak against other responses to skepticism, such as those brought by disjunctivism[11], we should make sure it's impossible to use skeptical hypotheses before relying on the piecemeal fashion strategy. I would like to submit here another way to construe skeptical hypotheses which would allow the use of our classical argument from ignorance. The problem with the previous hypotheses is that S's language will, after some time, be replaced with a language that properly connects with S's new environment. Let us say that "x" is the time S spends in a "normal" environment "e" before he gets envatted, falls under the demon's domination or etc. Let us say that "α" be the time required by S to master a language and "β" the time required to switch from one language to another[12]. If the skeptic wishes to present a hypothesis where S has a language that will allow at least some error, then, at least, $\alpha = x$. Now, if the skeptic wishes to continue and present a situation where S's justified beliefs are mostly false, he must introduce an environment v_1 drastically distinct from e (but similar in respect to S's sensory experiences) where S goes after x (let us call the time spent in this new environment "a_1"). The skeptic wishing S to hold justified beliefs concerning v_1 false must make sure that $\beta > a_1$. But why stop here? The skeptic could submit a hypothesis where S is transported, after a_1, in a third environment (v_2) entirely different from the previous ones. The time spent in this third environment would be a_2, where, of course $\beta > a_2$. In such a hypothesis, S's language is still the one that connects with e, despite the fact that most of his beliefs might concern v_1 and v_2. Needless to say, this can

would have been false in B and so on, even if A and B contradict one another.

[11] Conee, E. (2007), "Disjunctivism and anti-skepticism", p. 16-36.

[12] I make the distinction between α and β because is it not clear that $\alpha = \beta$. If you mastered your native language at 15 and lived 45 more years outside the vat, it would surprise me that you would starts speaking vat-English only after 15 years in the vat. I believe we are under the impression that it would take much longer before you switch from English to vat-English. The only situation I can imagine where $\alpha = \beta$ would be if $\alpha = x$.

go on and on. The skeptic can add any new environment v_n to his hypothesis. The point is just to make sure that $\beta > a_1$, $\beta > a_2$, $\beta > a_3$,… $\beta > a_n$ but that $\{a_1, a_2, a_3,\ldots a_n\} > x$. It seems then, that our blueprint BP2 may work just fine[13]. Let us now lay down a token of a scenario following the structure of BP2 (i.e. a skeptical hypothesis). With this general method of creating skeptical hypotheses, I would like to present a token of such scenario (T-*sk*) allowing the argument from ignorance to stand still.

T-*sk*: Suppose that you mastered your language at 12. Following your birthday, you were unfortunate enough to get yourself kidnapped by aliens. Taking you on their spaceship, they use a drug that plunges you into a dream lasting for, let us say, 5 years. The experiences you have inside your dream are undistinguishable from those you had when you were awake. Just as you were about to wake up, Descartes' evil demon appears and starts manipulating your senses so that you keep the impression you are still on earth, doing whatever you thought you were doing. This evil demon keeps you under his domination for another 5 years. However, just as the evil demon was about to release you from his power, an evil neuroscientist (perhaps an alien who had the opportunity to study human brains) takes away your brain and puts it into the famous vat. The neuroscientist keeps the deception going for another 5 years. After that, your mind is transferred into a computer, thanks to the amazing alien technology. From that point, you are deceived by a supercomputer for another 5 years. And this masquerade goes on and on, changing the way you are deceived every 5 years until you reach your current age.

[13] An alternative to the succession of new environments could be alternation between some of the environments in which S's language do not connect. Suppose that S spends x time in e (where $x = \alpha$) then he is brought into a new environment (v_1). After a_1, S spends the same time in a second (v_2), then a third environment (v_3). The skeptic could subsequently propose that S returned to v_1 for some time and then again to v_2 and v_3. Even though S's language only connects with e, most of S's experiences (and utterances) will concern v_1, v_2 and v_3. This has the advantage over our last strategy of being simpler in the formulation of skeptical hypotheses. It is, however, not entirely clear whether or not the time required to reach β in a given environment returns to zero if one leaves this environment for another.

In this skeptical hypothesis, most, if not all, of the justified beliefs you had concerning the external world in the last 20 years of your life are false. We could push the fiction even farther by adding that the earth was destroyed once you were on board the spaceship (hence, utterances such as "dogs exist", "my house is on earth", etc. would also be false). The insensitivity feature seems respected, allowing the skeptic to argue for the soundness of the second premise of the argument from ignorance, just as before. Furthermore, the fact that your language is still English (and not vat-English, dream-English, demon-English, etc.) allows the massive error feature to be generated. If, finally, we accept the closure principle, the argument from ignorance seems to succeed (or, at least, tends to keep the massive error feature available, even when faced with semantic responses in the spirit of Putnam). Despite what we might have first expected, this demonstrates that semantic externalism is, in the end, compatible with massive error.

Before concluding, I would like to add that skeptical hypotheses, despite my own token of such scenarios, do not require to imagine radically different deceivers. To demonstrate this point with an example, we could imagine that v_1 is a vat under the control of a supercomputer using the program ABC to simulate sensory experiences to S. If S stays long enough in this condition, his words might end up referring to the features of this ABC-program. Of course, in a skeptical hypothesis, S would be moved to a new environment v_2 before this. But here's the point: v_2 could be a new vat where another program, named XYZ, is used to simulate reality. XYZ is different from ABC in his inner operations but it generates the illusion of reality with the same precision S felt with ABC. Considering the presupposed differences between ABC and XYZ, I believe moving S from the ABC-vat to the XYZ-vat could be considered as a change in S's environment. Of course, this could be applied in any skeptical hypothesis in a limitless manner[14]. Let us

[14] Another tactic to formulate different environments for a skeptical hypothesis would be to simply say, as Thomas Nagel did, that S is placed in a world (v_1) different from ours in ways we cannot conceive where our impressions and thoughts are produced in ways we cannot conceive. Thanks to the mist surrounding v_1, the skeptic can postulate a second environment

specify that the fact that there is an infinite number of skeptical hypotheses do not contradict our claim that semantic externalism narrows the range of such scenarios. In calculus, there are, after all, some infinities that are greater than others.

Some, perhaps many, may have find themselves dissatisfied with the account I gave of skeptical hypotheses. The paradigmatic example of such hypotheses was Descartes', in whose writings it seemed that everything we believed about the external world was false. My personal account of such hypotheses was one in which only most of our beliefs were false. I must admit that this leads to a weaker form of skepticism. This charitable lecture of the skeptic's position, however, is not irrelevant. If one of the goals of epistemology is to face the skeptic's challenge successfully, I believe it must show that it must, at least, be epistemically possible that most of our beliefs constitute knowledge. This is exactly what is at stake when we start to consider the argument from ignorance. I tried to show that the classical argument from ignorance, seconded by skeptical hypotheses, was still potent, even if we accept content externalism. It appears that any philosopher hoping to defeat the skeptic will have to find a way to argue in favor of both positions against Brueckner's strategy *and* against the argument from ignorance supported by the sustainable form of skeptical hypothesis I presented.

Bibliography

Brueckner, A. (2010), « Brains in a Vat », in A. Brueckner (eds.), *Essays of Skepticism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 148-167.

Brueckner, A. (2010), « Terms of Envatment (with Jon Altschul) », in A. Brueckner (dir.), *Essays of Skepticism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 174-176.

Brueckner, A. (2010), « Semantic Answers to Skepticism », in A. Brueckner (dir.), *Essays of Skepticism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 200-219.

Conee, E. (2007), « Disjunctivism and anti-skepticism », *Philosophical Issues*, vol. 17, p. 16-36.

v_2 following the preceding definition who would be, nonetheless, different from v_1.

Descartes, R. (1992), *Méditations métaphysiques*, Paris, Flammarion, p. 55-91.

Forbes, G. (1995), « Realism and Skepticism: Brains in a Vat Revisited », *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 92, p. 205-222.

Lemos, N. (2007), *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 131-157.

Nagel, T. (1986), *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 67-89.

Putnam, H. (1981), *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 1-21.

Warfield, T. A. (1998), « A Priori Knowledge of the World », *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 92, p. 127-147.