

“Brains in Vats and the Evil Demon” Summary

Introduction

“Brains in Vats and the Evil Demon” discusses the possibility that we may be deceived as to the nature of our reality and thus our experiences may not be authentic. Descartes’ evil demon hypothesis and two versions of the brain in a vat hypothesis are presented as support for this idea. Potential solutions to this type of skepticism are also presented.

Thesis

Our ability to reason and our reliance on our senses do not supply enough evidence to deny the notion that we may be in a simulation not unlike the Matrix. This type of skepticism raises issues about reality and knowledge, meaning and language and the relationship between the mind and the world.

Support

Arguments for Skepticism

1) Descartes’ Evil Demon Hypothesis

- Descartes’ *Meditations*
 - Proposes that there could be a ‘malicious’ demon playing a trick on him
 - “How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now?” (*Meditations*, 15)
 - This demon could be making him believe that the world he’s experiencing is real, when in fact, it is not
 - The demon could not only be playing a trick on his perception, but also the way he thinks, so he can’t use reason to determine reality
 - Thus, everything he is experiencing and/or thinking could be a lie and nothing exists in reality

2) Brain in a Vat Hypothesis

- Jonathan Dancy
 - Suggests that we can not be certain that we are not a “brain in a vat and wired to a computer which is feeding ...current experiences under the control of some ingenious technician scientist (benevolent or malevolent according to taste).” (*Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, 10)
 - If we were such a thing, we wouldn’t be able to discern the difference between being a brain in a vat or not because our experience would be the same either way
 - “Since you have only your own experience to appeal to, and that experience is the same in either situation, nothing can reveal to you which situation is the actual one.” (*Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, 10)
 - Thus, everything we experience could be part of a computer simulation and our beliefs about the world are untrue.
- Hillary Putnam
 - Like the Matrix, Putnam’s proposes more than one brain being deceived (all brains)
 - Many brains are in either many vats or one big vat and they are connected to each other

- So, all of the brains have conjoining and corresponding experiences, a “collective hallucination”
- Thus, we cannot be certain about the truth or our reality and the authenticity of our experiences

Solutions to Skepticism

1) Descartes’ Solution

- Thinking entails a thinker
 - He is thinking and therefore at least, he must exist
 - “Cogito, ergo sum”: “I think, therefore I am.”
 - Thus, because thinking implies a thinker, one has an innate concept of self
- Also, we also have an innate concept of an all-good God
 - This benevolent God would not let an evil demon trick us
- Thus:
 - We must be living in some sort of reality

2) Putnam’s Solution

- For language to mean anything it must correspond to and/or refer to something and have intent
 - The reference has to have a causal connection between the speaker and the thing
 - If we were brains in vats, we could not “successfully refer to genuine brains, or vats, or anything else in the real world” (3)
 - Because if we were brains in vats, then our reality is false and our experiences and our references are also false
 - So we can’t genuinely refer to these things, or anything for that matter, as real
- Also, obviously if we are not brains in vats, then it would be false to say we were brains in vats
- Thus:
 - The statement that we are brains in vats is false either way

Major Conclusions and Evaluation

Despite Descartes’ influential argument for the existence of self, his theistic solution to the problem of reality seems to be a sort of “deus ex machina” and does not necessarily solve the problem. On the other hand, Putnam presents an ingenious argument through semantics. Nonetheless, even though this addresses the truth value of the statement, “We are brains in vats,” it doesn’t necessarily mean that we are not actually such brains. It just means is that if we were brains in vats, we would be unable to genuinely refer to ourselves in such a way. Thus, it seems that this type of skepticism leads to a type of regress. Nonetheless, skepticism of this kind emphasizes the undeniable role of the mind in perceptions of our reality and the importance of language in references to our reality.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Does reality happen in the mind or outside of it?
- 2) Do experiences happen in the mind?
- 3) If reality can’t be separated from the mind, then even if we were living in something like the Matrix would it matter because reality is just the experiences in our minds anyways and we are experiencing things in the Matrix?
- 4) Is there some qualitative difference between experiencing something in the Matrix and experiencing or doing something in reality?