

# *Reflections on Putnam, Wright and brains in vats*

HAROLD W. NOONAN

Following Crispin Wright (1992) we can express Putnam's Brain-in-a-Vat argument (see his 1981, chapter 1) as follows:

- (A) 'Snow is white' in my language has disquotational truth-conditions.
- (B) If I am a BIV then 'Snow is white' in my language does not have disquotational truth-conditions.
- (C) I am not a BIV [from (A) and (B)].

(Putnam, and following him Crispin Wright, has 'I am a BIV' where 'Snow is white' occurs in the formulation in the text. What difference does this make? There are three points to be made. (1) Replacement of 'Snow is white' by 'I am a BIV' would make no difference to the *soundness* of the argument. (2) It would, however, guarantee the argument's availability for first-personal rehearsal by any philosophically knowledgeable reader of this paper, independently of the contingencies of his linguistic resources – whether, that is, he be an Alaskan Eskimo or Saharan Arab. (Saharan Arabs are hereby permitted to replace 'Snow is white' throughout the text by 'Palm trees are green'.) (3) Replacement of 'Snow is white' by 'I am a brain in a vat' would enable the conclusion of the argument to be expressed as the claim that the sceptic's position is *self-refuting* (as, indeed, Putnam does express it), or, as Crispin Wright puts it, *absurd*. But, as Wright in effect notes towards the end of his paper, so long as the argument refutes the sceptic, that is enough, self-refutation is merely the icing on the cake.)

(A)–(C) is an argument for the conclusion that I am not a BIV. The sceptic's claim is that I *cannot know* that I am not (since I cannot know this without empirical investigation – hereafter 'a.p.' – and cannot know it with empirical investigation). To get an argument whose conclusion is in explicit contradiction with the sceptic's claim we can restate Putnam's argument as follows:

- (1) I can know a.p. that 'Snow is white' in my language has disquotational truth-conditions.
- (2) I can know a.p. that if I am a BIV then 'Snow is white' in my language does not have disquotational truth-conditions.
- (3) I can know a.p. that I am not a BIV [from (1) and (2)].

The sceptic may object to the first premiss of this argument on the ground that I can know that 'Snow is white' has disquotational truth-conditions in my language only if I can know that 'Snow is white' means that snow is

white in my language. But, he may say, when this knowledge is distinguished from the knowledge that the *sentence* “‘Snow is white’ means that snow is white’ expresses a truth in my language it can be seen to be question-begging to assume it in the context of this debate (for the BIV does not know that ‘Snow is white’ means that snow is white in *his* language, though he does know that the sentence “‘Snow is white’ means that snow is white’ expresses a truth in his language).<sup>1</sup> However, (1) is dispensable as a premiss, as the following modification of the argument shows (in which, for good measure (2) has also been derived from two supplementary premisses in order to make its content clearer):

- (1a) I can know a.p. that the sentence “‘Snow is white’ is true in my language iff snow is white’ is true.
- (1b) I understand the sentence “‘Snow is white’ is true in my language iff snow is white’.
- (1c) “‘Snow is white’ is true in my language iff snow is white’ means in my language that ‘Snow is white’ is true in my language iff snow is white.
- (1d) I can know a.p. that ‘Snow is white’ is true in my language iff snow is white [from (1a), (1b) and (1c)].
- (1) I can know a.p. that ‘Snow is white’ in my language has disquotational truth-conditions [from (1d)].
- (2a) I can know a.p. that if whatever is necessary for its being the case that ‘Snow is white’ has disquotational truth-conditions in my language is not the case, then ‘Snow is white’ does not have disquotational truth-conditions in my language.
- (2b) I can know a.p. that a necessary condition of its being the case that ‘Snow is white’ has disquotational truth conditions in my language is that I am not a BIV.
- (2) I can know a.p. that if I am a BIV then ‘Snow is white’ in my language does not have disquotational truth-conditions [from (2a) and (2b)].
- (3) I can know a.p. that I am not a BIV [from (1) and (2)].

The argument from (1a), (1b) and (1c) to (1d) is of the form:

- (1af) I can know a.p. that S is true.
- (1bf) I understand the sentence S.
- (1cf) The sentence S means in my language that p.
- (1df) I can know a.p. that p.

This is a valid form of argument, as is the rest of the argument from (1d) on to (3).

<sup>1</sup> Wright notes this worry on p.75 of his paper.

The sceptic must therefore question one of the premisses if he is to resist. Which one(s)? It would not be relevant for the sceptic to object to (1b) or (1c).<sup>2</sup> He might try, rather desperately, I think, to stick at (1a), but in fact (1a), like (1), seems to be dispensable as a premiss, for the following argument seems to be sound:

- (1b) I understand the sentence “Snow is white” is true in my language iff snow is white’.
- (1c) ““Snow is white” is true in my language iff snow is white’ means in my language that ‘Snow is white’ is true in my language iff snow is white.
- (1e) I can know a.p. that any instance of the following is true when the blanks are replaced by two occurrences of the same declarative sentence of my language:
  - ‘...’ is true in my language iff ... [from (1b) and (1c)].
- (1f) I can know a.p. that ““Snow is white” is true in my language iff snow is white’ is a declarative sentence of my language [from (1b) and (1c)].
- (1g) I can know a.p. that ‘Snow is white’ is a declarative sentence of my language [from (1b), (1c) and (1f)].
- (1a) I can know a.p. that ““Snow is white” is true in my language iff snow is white’ is true [from (1e) and (1g)].

The only premiss that now looks at all vulnerable is (2b). But *if* philosophical reflection can establish particular instances of externalism then (2b) (or some substitute which will serve just as well for the argument) is safe, so it looks as if the sceptic must argue that philosophical reflection cannot establish particular instances of externalism. So he must either find fault with the arguments for (particular instances of) externalism of Putnam, Burge and so on, or argue that these are arguments the soundness of which cannot be established by philosophical reflection.

<sup>2</sup> Re (1b): it is part of the BIV scenario that *the BIV* understands the sentence “Snow is white” is true in my language iff snow is white’ – in his own way, of course. And I am no worse off in respect of understanding than the BIV, so I understand that sentence too – in my own way, of course. To put this point another way. The sceptic Putnam’s argument is directed against is not Kripke’s (inappropriately named) ‘sceptic about meaning’, who denies the possibility of meaning and understanding and so Putnam’s sceptic has no ground for denying (1b). Of course, he *can* do so in order to block the argument if he can see no other way of resisting and yet wishes to retain his scepticism, but if the only recourse of Putnam’s sceptic is to embrace Kripkean meaning scepticism that in itself is a significant and surprising conclusion. Re (1c): this simply says *what* the quoted sentence means, it does not say anything about anyone’s *knowing* that it means this and so it would be irrelevant for the sceptic to question it.

However that may be, if (1d) is acceptable the following argument would seem to be sound:

- (1d) I can know a.p. that ‘Snow is white’ is true in my language iff snow is white [from (1b) and (1c)].
- (1h) I can know a.p. that if ‘Snow is white’ is true in my language iff snow is white then I am capable of entertaining the thought that snow is white
- (1i) I can know a.p. that I am capable of entertaining the thought that snow is white [from (1d) and (1h)].

Since this pattern of argument can be repeated for any declarative sentence of my language which I understand we have the general conclusion that: *for any declarative sentence of my language which I understand, concerning the thought that sentence in fact expresses I can know a.p. that I am capable of entertaining that thought.*

It follows *first* that any defender of Putnam’s argument must accept that this is so, and *second*, that anyone inclined to regard externalism as putting in question the possibility of a.p. knowledge of the content of one’s (externalistically determined) thoughts must say which of (1b), (1c) and (1h) he rejects, and why.<sup>3</sup>

*University of Birmingham  
Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK  
h.w.noonan@bham.ac.uk*

### *References*

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Wright, C. 1992. ‘On Putnam’s proof that we are not brains-in-a-vat’. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 92: 67–94.

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