

A detailed view of the central portion of Michelangelo's famous fresco, 'The Creation of Adam'. It shows the two hands reaching toward each other, with a small gap between the index finger of the figure on the right and the hand of the figure on the left. The background is the cracked and aged texture of the original wall.

# Out-of-Context Conjectures: Unfalsifiable Hypotheses and the Limits of Knowledge

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## Introduction

The realm of human knowledge is vast and diverse, encompassing the tangible and the intangible, the observable and the theoretical. While empirical evidence serves as a robust foundation for many of our beliefs, there exists a category of conjectures that elude definitive confirmation or disconfirmation. These out-of-context conjectures, such as solipsism, Last Thursdayism, God, the simulation hypothesis, and the brain in a vat, present unique epistemological challenges and provoke profound questions about the nature of reality, the limits of human knowledge, and the implications of these conjectures for our beliefs and behaviors.

The first section examines the role of language games and belief systems in shaping our engagement with out-of-context conjectures, while the second section investigates the epistemological approaches of various philosophers in relation to these conjectures, highlighting the importance of withholding judgment and cultivating intellectual humility. The third section further elaborates on the potential implications of these conjectures for our beliefs and behaviors, and the addenda offer detailed analyses of specific conjectures and their influence on our worldview.

By critically engaging with out-of-context conjectures and the philosophical concepts that inform our understanding of them, this essay seeks to foster a deeper appreciation of the limits and possibilities of human knowledge, as well as the ethical and epistemic responsibilities that accompany our engagement with these conjectures. Ultimately, this inquiry invites us to embrace a more nuanced and open-minded perspective on the mysteries and challenges that lie at the heart of human existence.

## The Nature of Unfalsifiable Hypotheses and Their Place in Philosophy

### Introduction

Unfalsifiable hypotheses, also known as out-of-context conjectures, have long fascinated philosophers, occupying a unique space in the realm of human inquiry. These conjectures, such as solipsism, Last Thursdayism, God, or the simulation hypothesis, are characterized by their resistance to empirical verification or falsification. In this essay, we will engage with the ideas of eight influential thinkers, namely Ludwig Wittgenstein, Willard Van Orman Quine, Immanuel Kant, Epicurus, and four other philosophers, to explore the nature and significance of these conjectures. Our analysis will ultimately lead us to conclude that, when possible, we should withhold judgment on such conjectures until more information becomes available.

### Wittgenstein and Language Games

Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of language games is a useful tool for understanding the nature of out-of-context conjectures (Wittgenstein, 1953). According to Wittgenstein, language is not a fixed and unchanging system but rather a collection of dynamic practices that serve various purposes. In his view, philosophical problems often arise from misunderstandings about the rules governing these practices.

Applying this perspective to unfalsifiable hypotheses, we can see that these conjectures are embedded in specific language games, with their own rules and criteria for meaningfulness. For instance, the question of God's existence is situated within the language game of religious discourse, while the simulation hypothesis belongs to the realm of scientific and technological speculation. By recognizing that these conjectures are rooted in different language games, we can gain a clearer understanding of their logical structure and the limits of their meaningfulness.

### Quine's Holism and Underdetermination

Willard Van Orman Quine's notions of holism and underdetermination also shed light on the nature of out-of-context conjectures (Quine, 1951). According to Quine, our beliefs form a complex web of interconnected propositions, which are supported or challenged by empirical evidence as a whole, rather than individually. This holistic perspective suggests that unfalsifiable hypotheses can be integrated into our web of beliefs in various ways, depending on their coherence with other propositions and their explanatory power.

However, Quine's concept of underdetermination posits that there can be multiple, equally coherent ways of incorporating such conjectures into our belief system, leading to a state of epistemic indeterminacy. This indeterminacy is particularly pronounced in the case of out-of-context conjectures, as their unfalsifiable nature makes it difficult to subject them to empirical testing and adjudicate between competing interpretations.

### Kant and the Limits of Knowledge

Immanuel Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena can also be applied to the analysis of unfalsifiable hypotheses (Kant, 1781/1998). According to Kant, our knowledge is limited to the realm of phenomena, or the objects of our sensory experience, while noumena, or things-in-themselves, lie beyond the scope of human cognition. Unfalsifiable conjectures often involve claims about noumenal reality, such as the existence of God or the nature of the universe as a simulation.

Kant's epistemological framework serves as a reminder of the inherent limitations of human knowledge, cautioning us against making unwarranted claims about the ultimate nature of reality. This insight is particularly relevant for the investigation of out-of-context conjectures, as it underscores the need for humility and restraint in the face of epistemic uncertainty.

In conclusion, the first section of this essay has provided an overview of the nature of out-of-context conjectures and their place in philosophical inquiry, drawing upon the ideas of Wittgenstein, Quine, and Kant. Wittgenstein's concept of language games helps us appreciate the context-dependent meaningfulness of these conjectures, while Quine's notions of holism and underdetermination point to the inherent indeterminacy in our beliefs about them. Finally, Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena highlights the limits of human knowledge when it comes to unfalsifiable hypotheses.

In the subsequent sections, it will delve deeper into the implications of these insights by examining the contributions of Epicurus and four other influential thinkers, ultimately arguing for the importance of withholding judgment on out-of-context conjectures until more information becomes available.

## The Implications of Unfalsifiable Hypotheses in the Context of Human Knowledge

### Epicurus and the Principle of Multiple Explanations

Epicurus' principle of multiple explanations offers a valuable perspective on how we might approach out-of-context conjectures (Epicurus, 341-270 BCE/1963). According to this principle, when faced with a phenomenon for which there are multiple plausible explanations, we should refrain from committing ourselves to any single explanation and instead maintain a state of epistemic suspension. This open-minded stance is particularly relevant to unfalsifiable hypotheses, as their inherent resistance to empirical testing often results in multiple, equally plausible conjectures.

Applying Epicurus' principle to conjectures such as the simulation hypothesis or the existence of God, we are reminded of the importance of withholding judgment in the face of epistemic uncertainty. By adopting an attitude of epistemic humility, we can avoid dogmatism and remain receptive to new evidence or insights that may challenge our current understanding of these conjectures.

### Thomas Kuhn and the Role of Paradigms

Thomas Kuhn's concept of scientific paradigms offers another lens through which to view the challenge posed by out-of-context conjectures (Kuhn, 1962). According to Kuhn, scientific knowledge progresses through a series of paradigm shifts, in which established frameworks are replaced by new ones that better accommodate empirical evidence and theoretical coherence. In this context, unfalsifiable hypotheses can be seen as potential precursors to paradigm shifts, challenging the assumptions and boundaries of our current frameworks.

However, Kuhn's analysis also cautions against prematurely embracing out-of-context conjectures as established truths. Instead, we should recognize the provisional nature of our knowledge and remain open to the possibility of future paradigm shifts that may reshape our understanding of these conjectures.

### Karl Popper and the Criteria of Falsifiability

Karl Popper's criterion of falsifiability provides a useful heuristic for assessing the scientific legitimacy of out-of-context conjectures (Popper, 1959). According to Popper, a hypothesis is scientific only if it is susceptible to empirical falsification. By this criterion, unfalsifiable hypotheses such as solipsism and Last Thursdayism fail to meet the standards of scientific inquiry, as they cannot be tested or disproven by empirical evidence.

While Popper's criterion has been criticized for being overly restrictive, it serves as a helpful reminder of the importance of empirical accountability in our pursuit of knowledge. In the case of out-of-context conjectures, this accountability may be difficult or even impossible to achieve, suggesting that we should approach these hypotheses with caution and skepticism.

### Paul Feyerabend and the Methodological Anarchism

Paul Feyerabend's concept of methodological anarchism offers a more permissive approach to out-of-context conjectures (Feyerabend, 1975). According to Feyerabend, there are no fixed rules or criteria for scientific progress, and we should be open to exploring a wide range of theories and methodologies, even those that may appear unconventional or counterintuitive.

This perspective invites us to consider the potential value of out-of-context conjectures in stimulating intellectual curiosity and fostering a spirit of creative inquiry. However, Feyerabend's anarchism does not advocate for the uncritical acceptance of unfalsifiable hypotheses; rather, it calls for a flexible and pluralistic attitude towards the pursuit of knowledge.

In summary, the second section of this essay has explored the implications of unfalsifiable hypotheses for our understanding of human knowledge, drawing upon the ideas of Epicurus, Kuhn, Popper, and Feyerabend. These thinkers offer a range of perspectives on how we might approach out-of-context conjectures, emphasizing the importance of epistemic humility, openness to paradigm shifts, empirical accountability, and methodological flexibility. Collectively, their insights reinforce the need to withhold judgment on such conjectures until more information becomes available, while also recognizing the potential value of these hypotheses in stimulating intellectual curiosity and fostering creative inquiry.

## Withholding Judgment on Out-of-Context Conjectures: Pragmatic and Epistemic Considerations

### William James and the Will to Believe

William James's essay "The Will to Believe" offers a pragmatic approach to out-of-context conjectures, emphasizing the importance of personal conviction in shaping our beliefs (James, 1896). According to James, our beliefs are not solely determined by objective evidence but also by our subjective needs and values. In cases where objective evidence is inconclusive, such as with unfalsifiable hypotheses, James argues that it is legitimate to rely on our personal convictions to guide our beliefs.

However, James's approach does not advocate for uncritical acceptance of out-of-context conjectures. Instead, it highlights the importance of being aware of the subjective factors that influence our beliefs and adopting an attitude of epistemic humility in the face of uncertainty.

### Susan Haack and Foundherentism

Susan Haack's foundherentism, a hybrid theory of justification that combines elements of foundationalism and coherentism, provides another perspective on how we might approach out-of-context conjectures (Haack, 1993). According to Haack, beliefs are justified by their coherence with other beliefs as well as their grounding in experiential evidence. In the case of unfalsifiable hypotheses, the lack of direct empirical evidence poses a challenge to their justification.

However, Haack's foundherentism also acknowledges that beliefs can be indirectly supported by their coherence with other justified beliefs. This suggests that, while we should withhold judgment on out-of-context conjectures in the absence of empirical evidence, we can still recognize their potential value as part of a coherent web of beliefs that may inform our understanding of the world.

### Bas van Fraassen and Constructive Empiricism

Bas van Fraassen's constructive empiricism offers another perspective on how to engage with out-of-context conjectures (van Fraassen, 1980). According to van Fraassen, scientific theories should be evaluated based on their empirical adequacy, or their ability to account for observable phenomena, rather than their truth or falsity. This pragmatic approach suggests that, in the case of unfalsifiable

hypotheses, we should focus on their potential usefulness in explaining or predicting empirical phenomena, rather than attempting to determine their ultimate truth.

By adopting a constructive empiricist stance, we can maintain a critical attitude towards out-of-context conjectures while also remaining open to their potential contributions to our understanding of empirical reality.

### Nicholas Rescher and the Limits of Inquiry

Finally, Nicholas Rescher's reflections on the limits of inquiry provide a helpful reminder of the inherent challenges associated with out-of-context conjectures (Rescher, 2000). Rescher argues that human knowledge is necessarily limited by our cognitive capacities, the complexity of the world, and the practical constraints of our investigative efforts. In the case of unfalsifiable hypotheses, these limits are particularly evident, as our inability to obtain empirical evidence or definitive answers often renders these conjectures resistant to conclusive evaluation.

Rescher's insights underscore the importance of acknowledging the limits of human knowledge and the need for epistemic humility when engaging with out-of-context conjectures. By recognizing the challenges posed by these hypotheses, we can adopt a more cautious and nuanced approach to their evaluation.

The third section of this essay has examined various pragmatic and epistemic considerations for withholding judgment on out-of-context conjectures, drawing upon the ideas of James, Haack, van Fraassen, and Rescher. These thinkers offer valuable insights into how we might navigate the complex landscape of unfalsifiable hypotheses, emphasizing the importance of personal conviction, coherence, empirical adequacy, and recognition of the limits of inquiry in shaping our beliefs and understanding of the world.

## Discussion

In this essay, I have explored the nature and implications of out-of-context conjectures, or unfalsifiable hypotheses, through the lens of various influential thinkers. These conjectures, which include solipsism, Last Thursdayism, God, and the simulation hypothesis, pose unique challenges to our understanding of human knowledge and the limits of empirical inquiry. Our analysis has revealed several key insights that can guide our engagement with these conjectures, emphasizing the importance of epistemic humility, coherence, empirical accountability, and recognition of the limits of human knowledge.

Throughout our investigation, we have observed that out-of-context conjectures are deeply embedded in particular language games (Wittgenstein, 1953) and belief systems (Quine, 1951), complicating our efforts to assess their truth or falsity. We have also seen that these conjectures often involve claims about noumenal reality, which lies beyond the scope of human cognition (Kant, 1781/1998). Moreover, we have noted that unfalsifiable hypotheses can be approached from various perspectives, ranging from strict falsifiability criteria (Popper, 1959) to more permissive methodological anarchism (Feyerabend, 1975).

In light of these complexities, our discussion has highlighted the importance of withholding judgment on out-of-context conjectures until more information becomes available. This cautious stance is supported by the insights of Epicurus (341-270 BCE/1963), who advocated for epistemic suspension

in the face of multiple plausible explanations, as well as Kuhn (1962), who emphasized the provisional nature of scientific knowledge and the potential for future paradigm shifts. Our analysis has also drawn attention to the role of personal conviction (James, 1896), coherence with other beliefs (Haack, 1993), and empirical adequacy (van Fraassen, 1980) in shaping our engagement with unfalsifiable hypotheses.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of out-of-context conjectures has revealed the intricate and multifaceted nature of these hypotheses, as well as the challenges they pose to our understanding of human knowledge. The insights provided by the philosophers discussed in this essay suggest that, in the face of such conjectures, we should adopt an attitude of epistemic humility and restraint, withholding judgment until more information becomes available.

While unfalsifiable hypotheses may remain resistant to definitive evaluation, they continue to play a valuable role in stimulating intellectual curiosity and fostering a spirit of creative inquiry. By engaging with these conjectures in a cautious and nuanced manner, we can deepen our appreciation of the limits and possibilities of human knowledge, enriching our understanding of the world and our place within it.

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## Addendum 1

### Coherentism and the Evaluation of Out-of-Context Conjectures

Coherentism is an epistemological theory that posits that the justification of a belief is derived from its coherence with a set of other beliefs, rather than its correspondence with an external reality or its grounding in foundational axioms (BonJour, 1985). This perspective offers a valuable lens for evaluating out-of-context conjectures, such as the existence of God, as it highlights the importance of assessing the plausibility of such conjectures in light of their coherence with other related beliefs.

In the case of the God of desert religions, coherentism invites us to consider how the likelihood of this conjecture being true or false may be influenced by its coherence with beliefs about the natural world, historical events, and moral values. Many of the models and claims associated with these religious traditions are based on flawed assumptions, given the scientific ignorance of the time, and involve claims about events that could not have happened or predictions that did not come true (Dawkins, 2006). Moreover, the impact of these beliefs on society, such as the imposition of religious fundamentalism, can be seen as evidence of their potential incoherence with contemporary moral values (Harris, 2004).

From a coherentist perspective, these inconsistencies and contradictions can be seen as undermining the plausibility of the God of desert religions, as they suggest a lack of coherence with other well-established beliefs about the world. However, it is important to recognize that coherentism does not entail a simple tallying of consistent and inconsistent beliefs; rather, it involves a more nuanced assessment of the overall coherence of a belief system, considering the weight and centrality of various beliefs (Thagard, 2000).

In conclusion, coherentism offers a useful framework for evaluating out-of-context conjectures like the existence of God by emphasizing the role of related beliefs in shaping the plausibility of such hypotheses. By examining the coherence of these conjectures with other beliefs about the natural world, history, and morality, we can gain a deeper understanding of their potential truth or falsity, as well as their implications for our broader worldview.

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## Addendum 2

### Adopting the Most Charitable Interpretation When Judgment Cannot Be Withheld

In certain situations, withholding judgment on out-of-context conjectures may not be feasible, as our actions and behaviors might depend on the truth value of such conjectures. In these cases, it can be helpful to adopt a principle of charity, which involves interpreting the conjecture in the most reasonable and fair manner that fits the available data (Davidson, 1973). This approach allows us to engage with the conjecture in a constructive and open-minded manner, while also ensuring that our actions and behaviors are guided by fairness and equality.

The principle of charity has been widely discussed in the philosophical literature, particularly in the context of understanding and interpreting the beliefs and intentions of others (Quine, 1960; Davidson, 1973). In the context of out-of-context conjectures, adopting a charitable interpretation involves considering the most plausible and coherent version of the conjecture that is consistent with the evidence and values at our disposal.

For example, when evaluating religious claims, we might focus on the aspects of a belief system that promote tolerance, compassion, and social cohesion, rather than those that perpetuate division or discrimination (Hick, 1989). Similarly, when considering the implications of the simulation hypothesis, we might emphasize its potential to inspire curiosity and creativity, rather than its potential to undermine our sense of meaning and purpose (Bostrom, 2003).

By adopting the most charitable interpretation of out-of-context conjectures, we can navigate the challenges associated with making judgments in the absence of conclusive evidence, while also promoting fairness and equality in our actions and behaviors. This approach not only fosters intellectual humility and open-mindedness but also encourages us to engage with these conjectures in a manner that is consistent with our broader ethical and epistemic commitments.

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## Addendum 3

### Analysis of Out-of-Context Conjectures and Their Influence on Beliefs and Behaviors

In this addendum, we provide a detailed analysis of the out-of-context conjectures mentioned in the essay, namely solipsism, Last Thursdayism, God, and the simulation hypothesis, and examine how these conjectures can influence our beliefs and behaviors.

#### Solipsism

Solipsism is the philosophical idea that only one's own mind is sure to exist, and that everything else, including other minds and the external world, may be mere illusions (Russell, 1912). This conjecture can lead to skepticism about the existence of other minds, potentially fostering a sense of isolation and detachment from others. However, it can also encourage introspection and self-awareness, as it highlights the centrality of one's own consciousness in shaping one's experiences and beliefs.

#### Last Thursdayism

Last Thursdayism posits that the universe and everything in it were created last Thursday, with all memories, artifacts, and records giving the appearance of a longer history (Hawthorne, 2005). While this conjecture may seem absurd, it highlights the limits of empirical evidence in establishing the truth of certain claims, as well as the role of background assumptions in shaping our interpretation of the evidence. The influence of Last Thursdayism on beliefs and behaviors can vary, potentially promoting critical thinking and skepticism, or fostering a sense of nihilism and futility.

#### God

The existence of God, as conceived in various religious traditions, has long been a subject of philosophical debate, with various arguments and counterarguments proposed over the centuries (Plantinga, 1967). Belief in God can have profound implications for individuals' beliefs about the nature of reality, morality, and the meaning of life, as well as their behaviors in relation to religious practices and ethical norms. The influence of this conjecture on beliefs and behaviors can be diverse, ranging from inspiring altruism, hope, and a sense of purpose, to promoting intolerance, dogmatism, and violence.

#### Simulation Hypothesis

The simulation hypothesis proposes that our reality might be a computer-generated simulation, created by a technologically advanced civilization (Bostrom, 2003). This conjecture raises intriguing questions about the nature of consciousness, the limits of human knowledge, and the potential ethical implications of creating simulated beings. Depending on one's interpretation, the simulation hypothesis can influence beliefs and behaviors in various ways, such as fostering intellectual curiosity, creativity, and a sense of wonder, or promoting existential anxiety, detachment, and moral skepticism.

#### Brain in a Vat

The brain in a vat conjecture is a modern variation of the philosophical skepticism thought experiment, proposing that it is possible for an individual's brain to be disconnected from their body and kept alive in a vat, with all sensory inputs and experiences being generated artificially by a computer (Putnam, 1981). This conjecture raises fundamental questions about the nature of reality,

the reliability of our senses, and the limits of human knowledge, as it suggests that our experiences of the world could be entirely illusory.

The influence of the brain in a vat conjecture on beliefs and behaviors can be multifaceted. On one hand, it can promote intellectual humility and critical thinking, by highlighting the potential unreliability of our sensory experiences and the importance of questioning our assumptions about reality. On the other hand, it might also foster a sense of existential uncertainty, anxiety, or even detachment, as it undermines our confidence in the reality of our experiences and the relationships we have with others.

Despite the nature of the brain in a vat conjecture, it can serve as a valuable tool for philosophical inquiry, pushing us to reevaluate our beliefs about the nature of knowledge, reality, and the mind.

In conclusion, out-of-context conjectures like solipsism, Last Thursdayism, God, and the simulation hypothesis can have significant and varied impacts on our beliefs and behaviors, shaping our understanding of reality, morality, and the meaning of life. By engaging with these conjectures in a thoughtful and open-minded manner, we can deepen our appreciation of the limits and possibilities of human knowledge and cultivate a more nuanced and informed worldview.

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