

Are Meanings 'in the head'?

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The aim of this essay is to provide a brief overview of the notion of externalism, and to then provide a defence for it.

Traditionally in the philosophy of mind, it has been thought that the meaning of the world is determined by our minds; in other words, the categorisation into X, Y, and Z of what there is, is done by our intellect; this view is called 'internalism'. Recently however (Chalmers 2002, p.476), the traditional view of what determines meaning has been challenged by the view that the meaning of the world is actually determined by the world itself; in other words, the categorisation into X, Y, and Z of what there is, is to already be found in the world; this view is called 'externalism'.

The externalism that deals with meanings is called 'semantic externalism'. Indeed, externalism is a broad concept, with different permutations. For example, there is a notion known as 'phenomenal externalism' that asserts that the *experience* of something depends on something other than the intellect. It must be noted that for the purposes of this essay, I will be focusing on *semantic externalism*, which I will refer to simply as 'externalism'.

A key figure in externalism is the philosopher Hilary Putnam who popularised the notion in his essay "Meaning and Reference" (Putnam 1973) and more prominently in "The Meaning of "Meaning"" (Putnam 1975)¹. In order to argue for the validity of externalism, he introduces the now famous 'twin earth' thought experiment.

The twin earth thought experiment (Putnam 1975, pp.139-144) asks us to imagine an earth, call it 'earth-2' - though its inhabitants call it earth - that is exactly like ours in every possible detail. By every possible detail, it not only means that an exact same world exists, but also all of its inhabitants exist as well. There is another me, another you, and another fly on the wall. In addition, there is a part of earth-2, just like on ours, where people speak English as their main language, so what they say is perfectly comprehensible, and communication between earthlings and earthlings-2 is thus absolutely possible.

However, like all twins, there are discrete differences if attention is paid closely enough. In the case of earth-2, the main difference is that the natural kind² which is water, call it 'water-2', does not have the molecular structure of H₂O, but instead has the structure of X_YZ. However, water-2 maintains the same taste as water, and is also see-through and so on; the difference is only the molecular structure.

Now, imagine someone, call her Joey, who boards a spacecraft from earth and visits earth-2. When Joey asks Joey-2, her doppelgänger, to give her some water, Joey-2 presents Joey with water-2, though Joey believes that it is simply water. Initially, Joey thought that when she asked for water, she would be presented with H₂O, but in fact she realised that she got presented with X_YZ after closer examination; the same would apply if Joey-2 visited earth.

It is quite apparent now that water, though it sounds the same, has quite different meanings on earth and earth-2, respectively. On earth it means H₂O while on earth-2 it means X_YZ. In other words, the meaning of water is determined, not by how we classify it, but by how it is in the world; water *is* H₂O on earth and *is* X_YZ in earth-2.

Putnam highlights that what follows from the above is that that the issue is not with the word 'water', but the fact that it simply has two different meanings, one for earth and one for earth-2 (Putnam 1975, p.141). There are hence good grounds to believe that the meaning water has is not a product of the mind, but in fact a product of how things are.

¹ Not to be confused with C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards' book with the same title (Ogden & Richards 1946).

² More on natural kinds lower down.

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To further persuade us, Putnam now asks us to imagine a variant of the twin earth thought experiment set in 1750, that is, before Daltonian chemistry came into being. Now we have Oscar and Oscar-2, in earth and earth-2 respectively (Putnam 1975, p.141). If they say that what they have in front is water, and then somehow change places with one another – say by teleportation – and state the same, are they correct? It appears that the fact that Oscar and Oscar-2 do not know the molecular structure of what they call water does not alter the fact that water *is* H₂O on earth and *is* X₇Z in earth-2; my knowledge of X bears no weight on how it really is. This can be encapsulated in Putnam's phrase: "meanings just ain't in the head!" (Putnam 1975, p.144).

Putnam's thought experiment has made externalism a strong contender in the field of the philosophy of mind. As with any idea that is of any worth, there have been different criticisms that pick out different aspects of the argument and question it. A complete analysis or even overview of all criticism of Putnam's argument for externalism cannot be given here due to space. Thus, I will be focusing on an argument put against him by the philosopher John Dupré.

Dupré argues that Putnam's thought experiment is highly "improbable" (Dupré 1981, p.72) due to a variety of reasons. The main reason has to do with Putnam's use of what is known as 'natural kinds' in his argument. A natural kind, simply put, is the idea that there are certain natural ways of classifying things due to the fact that there are certain ways things are. For example, any animal that has mammary glands and gives birth to live young is a mammal. Dupré claims that this sort of classification, this taxonomy, has more to do with how people themselves classify things rather than how things actually are. For example, the classification of mammals as stated above is slightly problematic, for the platypus is a mammal, but lays eggs.

In essence then, Dupré takes Putnam's theory and applies it to biology in order to see if it holds. Since it does not hold as well as he would like it to, he questions the validity of the theory as a whole. So, does Dupré pose a problem for externalism? I will argue that he does not.

Initially, the fact that Putnam's theory of natural kinds does not work well in biology could be an indicator that we are living in a similar place like the 1750's, where the discovery of a specific science does not allow us to organise things as they are. Indeed, Putnam's theory has at its core a certain type of realism that asserts that there *is* a mind independent reality. Secondly, it is hard to argue against the fact that things *are* usually categorised according to certain common characteristics that they hold; one would never classify a strain of grass as a mammal. So then, it is not as if Putnam's categorisation does not work *at all*, but more like that it *does* work most of the time.

Focusing more on the second argument against Dupré, what is apparent is that Putnam's theory appears to work *all of the time* for simple cases, as for example with water; let us re-examine water and H₂O. Putnam and Saul Kripke (Kripke 2004, *passim*) have argued in a similar vein (Putnam 1975, p.149) that water cannot be H₂O and X₇Z simultaneously. The reason for this is that if water were X₇Z and H₂O, then X₇Z would be H₂O! This is an obvious contradiction, for to quote Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction, "it is impossible for the same thing at the same time both to be-in and not to be-in the same thing in the same respect" (Aristotle 2004, 1005b). It then follows that water on earth *can only mean* H₂O and water on earth-2 *can only mean* X₇Z, and hence are *different*. Their difference is *not* arbitrary based on us humans, but is based on the way they are.

Thus to recapitulate, Dupré argues that Putnam's theory is problematic with more complicated notions such as animals; because of this, we should be weary of it as a whole. This can be seen with the peculiar classification of the platypus, where it is a mammal, but also is not *really* one, for it lays eggs. However, due to the power of Putnam's argument for externalism, it is more viable to assert that we have not simply figured out the natural kinds, rather than to dismiss them.

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In conclusion, this essay presents a brief overview of Putnam's argument for externalism. Putnam provided the twin earth argument and asserted that water has a different meaning in earth and a different meaning in earth-2, namely H₂O and X₂Z, respectively. A worry was put forth via Dupré, who argues that Putnam's theory is not good at categorising complicated notions such as animals. However, it was shown that whatever might be the case, Putnam's theory works for simple cases like water. Hence, the Putnam thesis provides a strong claim that "meanings" just ain't in the head!" (Putnam 1975, p.144).

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