

Belief in the Head: The Externalist's Journey Towards Understanding the Mind and the World

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In this essay, I will give a general understanding of what belief is to the externalist and discuss a major skeptical objection (phenomenal complication) and how it might be overcome. Though there are other complications with externalism as well, such as self-verifying thoughts (Parent, 2013), a priori propositions, and the source of behaviour (Lau and Deutsch, 2002), I will forego these due to limited space.

Externalism states that meanings are in the external world and that we interpret them through our interaction with this world. How does this relate to belief? One must have a belief about something. For instance, to have a belief 'the mountain is dangerous' one must have the contents 'mountain', 'dangerous', etc. That is, one needs to know the meanings of all the words in the proposition. What externalism says is that you cannot have this belief, if (for instance) mountains didn't exist. It puts belief into the role of an interpreter of the external world not the mind.

Belief to an externalist has its roots in Hilary Putnam's article 'The Meaning of "Meaning"'. Putnam doesn't tackle belief explicitly. Instead, he challenges the traditional source of meaning, which considers meaning to be wholly generated in the head (2002, p.583).

Putnam (2002) proposes that meaning is dependent on the external world. He expresses this with his famous Twin Earth thought experiment. In this experiment, there are two Oscars who are identical enough that their mental/brain states are exactly the same. They also both live on planets that are exactly the same, Earth, and one we'll call Tearth. Except, on Tearth there exists water, which though identical in perceivable properties to water, is made of XYZ instead of H₂O. Both Oscars use the word 'water' to designate their respective waters (Putnam, 2002, p.584-85).

Let's say both Oscars suddenly (and unbeknownst to them) switch planets. Again everything is exactly the same except when they encounter a body of water and state "that is water". Putnam (2002, p.584-85), though he uses a slightly different illustration, argues that they will have the exact same psychological states (beliefs) as if they had pointed to their respective waters on their respective planets. Tearth Oscar is now on Earth when he says "That is water." Though his psychological state is the exact same as if he was on Tearth, his belief becomes false as on his world water is XYZ, not H₂O. Putnam's externalism argues that Tearth Oscar's interpretation (belief) of the external world is incorrect here and must be adjusted in order to be true.

Note that the psychological states of the Oscars are not dependent on the external world as it is, but on *as it seems* in their mind - in their phenomenal conscious experience - and this is the reason the psychological states are the same for both Oscars, despite the meanings of 'water' being different. Both Oscars are phenomenally unaware their external world has changed. This suggests that the external world itself is not accessible through their phenomenal experiences - their internal states. The world both Oscars know is a phenomenal experience of what it seems like, an internal world. How can one's belief interpret the external world it has no access to?

Putnam addresses the problem of 'the world as it seems' by saying the two Oscars intend to mean 'water' as it really is (on their respective planet), regardless if they know what that entails. (Putnam, 2002, pp. 585-86). In other words, the meaning is always its true meaning, which then needs to be

discovered through investigations of the world. Our *understanding* of the meaning changes with new knowledge of the world not the meaning itself. The difficulty here is that Putnam's reply appeals to investigations of a world as it is, again, a world unknown to beliefs.¹

Philosopher Fred Dretske (1996) offers a way in which phenomenal experiences themselves are reliant on external conceptual beliefs. Dretske's main argument is this: The contents of our conscious experiences (qualia) are not properties born from introspection but ones that rely on beliefs about what we are experiencing in the external world (Dretske, 1996, p.145). So, even though both Oscars have the same *general* phenomenal experience of water, their belief, thus the content (quale), of their phenomenal experience will be different. One believes he experiences seeing Tearth water and the other believes he experiences seeing Earth water even though they both experience the same-looking water. (Dretske, 1996, pp.150-151)

How can belief be qualia? Let's take the classic duck-rabbit photo (see figure 1.) and show it to two children, Bill and Ted. Bill knows the meaning of 'duck' but has no concept of a rabbit, and Ted knows the meaning of 'rabbit' but has no concept of a duck. If we ask them what they see, it seems obvious Bill will only see the duck whereas the opposite will be true for Ted. Furthermore, take the reverse - it is hard not to see a rabbit or a duck when one knows their respective meanings.

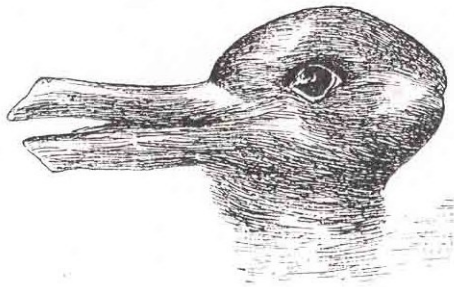


Figure 1. *The mind's eye.* (Jastrow, 1899)

It's important to point out that Dretske does not think phenomenal experience itself is necessarily externally derived, only the phenomenal contents of the experience - the qualia (Dretske, 1996, p.155). Both children in our duck/rabbit experiment can still experience the image as a whole regardless of knowing the meaning of duck or rabbit, but the content (qualia) of a duck or rabbit will be absent if they are not exposed to their meanings. Dretske's account of phenomenal externalism may suggest qualia can be phenomenal belief states we are put into by the external world, but again, only a world *as it seems to be*. A lack of access to the world *as it really is* still lingers here. We still seem to be stuck in the mind. To borrow from John Searle (1997 p. 112), "*...where consciousness is concerned, the existence of the appearance is the reality.*" (The italics are his). That appearance though does not entail any external world.

Is there a way out? Here, I'll offer my own crude and limited sketch. Let's say I am put into one belief state from another where I switch from seeing the duck to the rabbit. If we follow the physical laws the

¹ I will forego Putnam's response to the brain in the vat argument, which though relevant and informative regarding reference and the external world, also holds the assumption of an external world whether it's a vat or the world we commonly consider real.

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external world *seems* to have, there must be a transition or a process of interpreting (or process of thinking) that takes place from one belief to another. So it seems there is the interpreted state - the belief; and an interpreting state - a process that gets us there. Let's say the brain is doing the interpreting. It is a process we are unconscious of *as it happens*.² The transition is nowhere to be experienced. I am put there. It is unknown to my mind (phenomenal experience). It is external from my mind in nature. But this only holds true if the physical laws we seem to have are real and/or if we assume there is a process at all.

There are certainly issues left untouched here. Is the brain itself an external object? If so, what does that say about the mind/brain distinction. Could part of the brain be external while the part that produces (or is) the belief experience be considered internal? Does this finally move belief into a truly external world? I'm not sure, but it may be a place which externalism can explore.

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² One may be able to watch their brain on a scanner device as one is put into one belief from another and claim they are thus experiencing themselves interpreting, but it seems that would be similar to one watching woodworking and claiming they are experiencing doing the woodworking themselves.