

First Prize

Are beliefs 'in the head'?

By Paul Dixon

It might seem an obvious statement of fact that beliefs are 'in the head'. But to philosophers of mind, this is far from obvious. Externalists claim that beliefs consist in a coupled relationship between the believer and external objects. Externalism is a radical departure from traditional dualist theories of mind, which hold that mind and body are distinct entities; and from monist, mostly physicalist theories, that the mind is a purely physical thing. I argue that externalist theories, and particularly the 'active externalism' of Clark and Chalmers in 'The Extended Mind' (1998) offer convincing evidence that beliefs are not solely 'in the head'. I attempt to see off seven objections.

Prior to Clark and Chalmers, Hilary Putnam argued through his 'Twin Earth' thought experiment that beliefs consist in the relationship between a subject (the believer) and some external object; and cannot be restricted to what is called a *narrow psychological state*: that is, a state independent of anything external (1975). Putnam imagines a Twin Earth ('TE'), where everything is identical to Earth except that the substance those on TE call 'water' is in fact some substance XYZ, not H₂O. A person, Oscar, lives on Earth, and his identical twin, Twin Oscar, on TE. Putnam draws out important "semantic and epistemological implications" from this¹:

- i) that the words 'water' on Earth and TE have different *meanings*,
- ii) this is true even if no-one *knows* a difference exists in the underlying formulae, and yet,
- iii) at some time ('T₀'), before chemical formulae were discovered, Oscar and Twin Oscar would hold qualitatively identical *narrow psychological states* about the thing they *knew* as 'water'.

At T₀, Oscar and Twin Oscar would have had indistinguishable beliefs. However, in fact Oscar's 'water' was H₂O, whereas Twin Oscar's 'water' was in fact XYZ. Putnam points out the subsequent discovery of formulae would uncover the *essence* of a 'natural kind', whereby 'natural kinds' are categories of things that "reflect the structure of the natural world, rather than the interests and actions of human beings" (Bird & Tobin, 2022, Para 1). At T₁, on discovering the essence of TE's 'water' to be XYZ, Twin Oscar would acquire a new belief. But if Earth's Oscar were to magically teleport to TE and believe the substance Twin Oscar regards as 'water' to be 'Earth' water, Oscar would have a false

¹ (Talbot, M., Course Materials, Putnam reading guide).

belief. So why is this important? According to Putnam, this shows us that beliefs cannot be limited to *narrow psychological states*: they must depend in some way on propositional content 'outside the head'. Or in other words, "beliefs are not states inside us, they are instead *states we get into*" (Whiston, A., Course Materials, Week 9).

Some have objected that what provides the *content* ('Q') of a propositional attitude is incompatible with what makes for *causation* in a belief, and that causation must be an internal or intrinsic process (i.e., a *narrow psychological state*). A propositional attitude is a statement like: "P believes Q". The content is the 'Q' object; for example, 'gold is valuable'. The Q object (partly) causes the psychological state of P. However, a defence is that intrinsic causation could *necessarily depend on* the existence of a subject-object relationship, and that this *makes it true* that P's belief is about Q (Whiston, A., Course Materials, Week 9).

According to Clark and Chalmers (hereafter 'C&C'), Putnam argues for a 'passive' externalism, as the external features it relies on are "distal and historical" (1998, p.506). For example, if Oscar stands on TE, surrounded by XYZ, his belief that this is 'Earth' water relies on a "lengthy causal chain", and not a live cognitive process in the "here-and-now" (ibid., p.506). C&C, in contrast, propose a more radical, 'active' externalism based on an "*active role of the environment*" in driving cognition (ibid., p.505). According to C&C, humans and the environment form a "coupled system" that is itself a cognitive system. C&C offer many compelling examples, but maybe the simplest is how a person uses a pen & paper to engage in long multiplication (ibid., p.505). The human and the pen & paper form a coupled cognitive system. It takes little imagination to then imagine the entire world around us (e.g., all the books in the Bodleian Library; the Internet, etc.) as coupled, or potentially coupled, with our internal minds. The *prima facie* evidence of how we think, reason, and form beliefs suggests we constantly make use of such extended media in our everyday lives. C&C cite the example of how the physical arrangement of Scrabble tiles on a tray, or rotation of Tetris blocks in the computer game, is not just an external action, but is a "part of thought" (ibid., p.506). If we accept C&C's view, then cognition is not 'in the head', or even 'in the room', but is potentially spread out all over the world, or even the universe. But do C&C overreach here? First, some have objected by arguing that cognition implies consciousness, and that it is too much of a stretch to conceive of "consciousness extending outside the

head”² (ibid., p.507). But it is generally accepted that cognition exists outwith consciousness in “memory formation, linguistic processing and skill acquisition” (ibid., p.507). A second objection is that human cognition must be necessarily ‘portable’, and so must be contained within the head. What is the durability of a ‘coupled cognitive system’, if so easily decoupled? One answer is that the ability to decouple, i.e., remain portable, does not deny that cognition *can sometimes* extend outside the head, just like plug-in memory for a portable computer. C&C maintain only that “reliable coupling” is required for cognition to incorporate the environment; not unlike a person who *always* carries their notebook around (ibid., p.510).

I have argued in line with C&C that *cognition* extends beyond the head; but what of *‘belief’*? Belief is a mental state, like desire, emotion, and experience. C&C grant that some states, such as experience, could be wholly internal, but here I only need show that *belief* relies on external components. To support this, C&C postulate the example of Inga and Otto, two persons alike in every respect except that Otto has Alzheimer’s condition and carries a notebook to remember many basic facts. When Inga wishes to visit a particular museum, she remembers its location, whereas Otto looks it up every time in his notebook. Deniers of the ‘extended mind’ must claim that Otto “has no belief about [the location of the museum] until the moment he looks it up in his notebook” (ibid., p.509). But this would suggest Otto has no beliefs when his notebook is missing, and miraculously regains them when he finds it, which seems implausible.

A fourth objection might quibble over the definition of belief, but C&C respond: this is a distracted debate over ‘standard usage’. What matters is that the ‘extended mind’ definition of belief reasonably describes Otto’s mental states as stable and credible, and is not affected by the location of the notebook, availability of light to read by, etc. (ibid., p.509).

A fifth objection is that Inga “has more *reliable* access” to information than Otto (ibid., p.510). But C&C counter: this has merit only if Otto *occasionally* uses his notebook. One could say that Inga would suffer the same loss of ‘belief’ if she suffered a brain injury, a possible but not regular or likely occurrence. Could one then object that Inga has ‘better’ (higher quality, higher bandwidth) access to information? This surely founders on the problem that those with lower cognitive capacities (e.g., the young, the elderly, the impaired) would somehow have weaker or lesser beliefs – which does not seem a defensible position.

² However, those arguing for pan-psychism, including Chalmers (2013), might disagree.

Maybe the most difficult, seventh objection to overcome is proposed by Gertler (2007, p. 519); that it is implausible that all 'standing beliefs' form part of the mind. Standing beliefs include memories and other non-occurrent beliefs that are "not currently entertained" (ibid., p. 514). Gertler claims that if we admit 'standing beliefs' to be part of the mind, then the mind can be indefinitely extended. By introducing, via a thought experiment, a robot³ linked to Otto's [digitised] notebook, Gertler shows that the robot could conceptually perform tasks, following C&C's argumentation, that could be wholly attributed to Otto. This leads to the idea of *no boundaries* to the actions a person could perform, and hence no limit to the extension of the mind (ibid., p.516). C&C acknowledge this line of attack, but respond reasonably: a mind restricted to occurrent beliefs would "shrink the self into a mere bundle of occurrent states, ...threatening psychological continuity" (ibid., p. 512).

So, seven objections to C&C's active externalism have been met with plausible defences. I find C&C make an appealing and intuitive argument, despite residual problems for the extended mind posed by boundary conditions. Active externalism gives credible support to the claim that beliefs aren't solely 'in the head'.

Bibliography

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Whiston, A., 2022. *Oxford Conted: Philosophy of Mind - Course Materials*. [Online] [Accessed 20 March 2022].

³ owned by Otto

In-Line reference notes:

Years in parentheses (e.g., 1975) refer to the year of the original publication.

Page references (e.g., pp. 505-513) refer to the page numbers in the *loose-leaf* version of

Chalmers, D, *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (2021).