

Lecture 2: Externalism

1. Internalism vs. Externalism about Mental Content

What does externalism mean? It means that there can be two identical physical duplicates that nevertheless have *different* mental states. This means that, contrary to a common intuition, thoughts are not in the head (or at least not entirely)! Which thoughts, beliefs, desires you have depends partly on your environment.

2. Independent Motivations for Externalism

Distinguish between intrinsic (narrow) and extrinsic (broad, wide) properties:

A property is *intrinsic* just in case it can be shared by perfect duplicates, otherwise it is an *extrinsic* property

Imagine two buildings that are perfect duplicates, e.g the Eiffel tower.

- What properties can these duplicates share? – shape, color, etc.
- What properties do these duplicates not share? – being in Paris, being next to the Bellagio.

Are mental properties (content) narrow (intrinsic) or broad (extrinsic)?

According to Frege's theory of meaning (and mental content), mental properties are narrow. This position is called *internalism*.

Internalism: mental properties or mental content is narrow (intrinsic); the content of a person's beliefs is a matter of how they are internally. External relations are in no way constitutive of a belief's content.

Why think internalism is plausible?

Brain-in-a-vat thought experiments. A brain in a vat can have a rich mental life, a mental life just like that of a person with a body in a normal environment. My brain-in-a-vat twin and I can have exactly matching mental lives. So, our mental states are narrow properties of us. Since my vat twin and I have completely different environments but exactly matching mental lives as far as mental content is concerned, mental content depends most immediately on internal features of a subject.

Putnam disagrees. According to Putnam, mental properties are broad (extrinsic).

3. Putnam's Argument for Externalism

Premise 1: Suppose Oscar and Schmoscar are in the same narrow psychological states, and that Oscar knows that intension I is the meaning of term A.

Premise 2: By 1, if Oscar knows that intension I is the meaning of term A, then Schmoscar knows that I is the meaning of A.

Premise 3: If Oscar and Schmoscar both know that I is the meaning of A then Oscar and Schmoscar both use A with the same meaning or intension

Conclusion: By 2, A as used by Oscar has the same extension as A used by Schmoscar.

Putnam rejects the last claim. That is, he attempts to show that two speakers can be in exactly the same narrow psychological state even though the extension of the term A in the language of the one is different from the extension of the term A in the language of the other.

Twin earth is perfect duplicate of earth except the oceans and lakes contain "XYZ", which is very different chemical kind from H₂O. So, on twin-earth everything seems the same, including the fact that the stuff that fills oceans and lakes is colorless, orderless (all superficial properties are the same) except what they call "water" is composed of XYZ.

Oscar on earth utters "water is wet" and it's true just in case H₂O is wet.

Schmoscar on twin-earth utters "water is wet" and it's true just in case XYZ is wet.

So, the extension of 'water' as used by Oscar is different from the extension of 'water' as used by Schmoscar despite their being in the same narrow psychological state.

Meanings can't be in the head because the same things are in the heads of Oscar and Schmoscar. The meaning of "water" for earthlings and the meaning of "water" for twin earthlings is different. The meaning of 'water' on Earth and the meaning of 'water' on TE is determined by causal relations in which speakers stand to indexically presented substances. "Water" on earth means whatever has the same structure as this indexically presented stuff.

'We claim that it is possible for two speakers to be in exactly the same psychological state (in the narrow sense), even though the extension of the term A in the idiolect of the one is different from the extension of the term A in the idiolect of the other. Extension is not determined by psychological state.'

According to Putnam, meanings are in part determined by the *environment*.

4. From Meaning to Content

Philosophers went on to argue that Putnam's twin-earth example also shows that mental properties or content are not narrow or intrinsic.

Broad (wide, extrinsic) content—beliefs get to have the content they do have in virtue of connections between the beliefs and how matters are outside the subject.

The content of my water beliefs are partly determined by my environment, and the content of my twin's 'water' beliefs are partly determined by his environment. The reason why my water-belief has the content it does is because it has certain causal connections to my environment, and the reason why my twin's 'water'-belief has the content it does is because it has certain causal connections to his environment.

5. Beyond Externalism about Content

Knowledge

Consider Jerry Fodor:

Since, on that assumption [that knowledge is factive], knowledge is involved with truth, and since truth is a semantic notion, it's going to follow that there can't be a psychology of *knowledge* (even if it is consonant with the formality condition to hope for a psychology of *belief*" (1981, p. 228)

But, if we are happy to accept externalism about content, why not go further and accept externalism about mental states themselves? Thus, Timothy Williamson has argued that knowledge is a mental state. It's a mental state that necessarily involves the agent's environment.

Cognitive Processes:

Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin? The question invites two standard replies. Some accept the demarcations of skin and skull, and say that what is outside the body is outside the mind. Others are impressed by arguments suggesting that the meaning of our words "just ain't in the head", and hold that this externalism about meaning carries over into an externalism about mind. We propose to pursue a third position. We advocate a very different sort of externalism: an *active externalism*, based on the active role of the environment in driving cognitive processes. (Clark & Chalmers)

Consider three cases of tetris:

1. To assess fit, the person must mentally rotate the shapes to align them with the sockets.
2. To assess fit, the person can choose either to physically rotate the image on the screen, by pressing a rotate button, or to mentally rotate the image as before. We can also suppose, not unrealistically, that some speed advantage accrues to the physical rotation operation.
3. Sci-Fi Scenario: The person has a neural implant which can perform the rotation operation as fast as the computer in the previous example. The agent must still choose which internal resource to use (the

implant or the good old fashioned mental rotation), as each resource makes different demands on attention and other concurrent brain activity.

According to Chalmers & Clark, there is no fundamental difference between (1), (2), and (3). Case (1) and (3) seem on the par. But case (2) has exact the same computational structure, it's just that it's distributed across agent and computer.

If, as we confront some task, a part of the world functions as a process which, *were it done in the head*, we would have no hesitation in recognizing as part of the cognitive process, then that part of the world *is* (so we claim) part of the cognitive process. Cognitive processes ain't (all) in the head!

Beliefs

We propose to take things a step further. While some mental states, such as experiences, may be determined internally, there are other cases in which external factors make a significant contribution. In particular, we will argue that *beliefs* can be constituted partly by features of the environment, when those features play the right sort of role in driving cognitive processes. If so, the mind extends into the world.

Two cases:

Case 1: Consider a normal case of belief embedded in memory. Inga hears from a friend that there is an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and decides to go see it. She thinks for a moment and recalls that the museum is on 53rd Street, so she walks to 53rd Street and goes into the museum. It seems clear that Inga believes that the museum is on 53rd Street, and that she believed this even before she consulted her memory. It was not previously an *occurrent* belief, but then neither are most of our beliefs. The belief was sitting somewhere in memory, waiting to be accessed.

Case 2: Now consider Otto. Otto suffers from Alzheimer's disease, and like many Alzheimer's patients, he relies on information in the environment to help structure his life. Otto carries a notebook around with him everywhere he goes. When he learns new information, he writes it down. When he needs some old information, he looks it up. For Otto, his notebook plays the role usually played by a biological memory. Today, Otto hears about the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and decides to go see it. He consults the notebook, which says that the museum is on 53rd Street, so he walks to 53rd Street and goes into the museum.

...just as Inga had her belief even before she consulted her memory, it seems reasonable to say that Otto believed the museum was on 53rd Street even before consulting his notebook. For in relevant respects the cases are entirely analogous: the notebook plays for Otto the same role that memory plays for Inga. The information in the notebook functions just like the information constituting an ordinary non-occurrent belief; it just happens that this information lies beyond the skin. [...] In both cases the information is reliably there when needed, available to consciousness and available to guide action, in just the way that we expect a belief to be.

Chalmers & Clark conclude:

The moral is that when it comes to belief, there is nothing sacred about skull and skin. What makes some information count as a belief is the role it plays, and there is no reason why the relevant role can be played only from inside the body.

6. Readings

Burge, Tyler. "Individualism and the Mental".

Clark, Andy & Chalmers, David. "The Extended Mind."

Putnam, Hilary. "The Meaning of Meaning."

These Readings can all be found in Chalmers Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings. Oxford University Press, 2002.