

Externalism about Content: Its Social and Its Physical Roots¹

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Abstract

Externalism about content is the view that the social and / or the physical environment contributes to determining the content of the beliefs of a person. The strongest argument for social externalism derives from the rule-following considerations that motivate a social theory of conceptual content. The best argument for physical externalism goes back to Putnam's twin earth thought experiment. The aim of this paper is to point out that these two sorts of externalism give contradictory accounts of what determines the conceptual content of our beliefs and individuates them. According to physical externalism, the physical environment is sufficient to perform that task owing to suitable causal relations. According to social externalism, the conceptual content of our beliefs is determined by us owing to certain social practices. Possible strategies to reconcile both these accounts are considered.

Externalismus in Bezug auf begrifflichen Inhalt ist die Position, dass die soziale und / oder die physikalische Umwelt dazu beiträgt, den begrifflichen Inhalt der Überzeugungen einer Person festzulegen. Das stärkste Argument für den sozialen Externalismus ergibt sich aus den Überlegungen zum Regelfolgen, die für eine soziale Theorie begrifflichen Inhalts sprechen. Das beste Argument für den physikalischen Externalismus geht auf Putnams Gedankenexperiment zur Zwillingserde zurück. Das Ziel von diesem Artikel ist, herauszustellen, dass diese beiden Arten von Externalismus sich in ihren Erklärungen dessen widersprechen, was den begrifflichen Inhalt unserer Überzeugungen festlegt und was diese individuiert. Gemäß dem physikalischen Externalismus ist die physikalische Umwelt dazu hinreichend dank bestimmter Kausalbeziehungen. Gemäß dem sozialen Externalismus wird der begriffliche Inhalt unserer Überzeugungen von uns selbst in bestimmten sozialen Praktiken festgelegt. Der Artikel erwägt abschliessend Möglichkeiten dafür, diese beiden Positionen einander anzunähern.

1. Introduction

Externalism in the philosophy of mind and language is the view that any finite being is with respect to having beliefs with a determinate conceptual content ontologically dependent on being embedded in an environment. The point at issue is not causal, but ontological

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dependence; the latter applies irrespective of which natural laws and in particular which evolutionary constraints there are. The claim of externalism is this one: It is not metaphysically possible that there is a world in which there is only one finite being that has beliefs with a determinate conceptual content. The conceptual content of the beliefs of any finite being is at least in part determined by and individuated by the constitution of an environment in which that being lives. Thus, if the environment changes, the content of the beliefs of a person can change without that person undergoing any change; and if there is no environment at all, there cannot be any beliefs with a determinate conceptual content at all. The externalism that will be considered in this paper concerns only the property of having beliefs with a determinate conceptual content. "Content" in this paper always means "conceptual content", and beliefs are regarded as those items that have conceptual content.

Externalism is opposed to internalism in the sense of the view that the content of the beliefs of a person is self-sufficient: It is metaphysically possible that the content of the beliefs of two persons (or of two time-slices of a person) [388] is the same, although these persons live in remarkably different environments. It is furthermore metaphysically possible that there is a finite thinking being in a world that has beliefs with a determinate conceptual content, but no environment. The most prominent source of internalism is Descartes' doubt exercise in the first of his *Meditations*: Descartes keeps the content of all his beliefs fixed and doubts in the last resort whether there is any environment at all. A main motivation for externalism is the opposition to what is perceived as the Cartesian tradition in modern epistemology. In short, externalism opposes representationalism in the sense of the view that having beliefs consists in entertaining internal representations which can be the same whatever the constitution of the environment is (or even if there is no environment at all).

The environment which contributes to determining the content of the beliefs of a person can be the physical environment as well as the social environment, that is, the interactions with other persons. These two sorts of externalism are often treated together, in particular when it comes to setting out externalism as an alternative to the view that having beliefs consists in entertaining internal representations (e.g. Pettit and McDowell (1986), Introduction, and McCulloch (1995)). The aim of this paper, by contrast, is to show that externalism with respect to the physical environment (physical externalism, for short) and externalism with respect to the social environment (social externalism, for short) contradict each other (see also Rudd (1997)). I first recall the main arguments for physical externalism and social externalism (sections 2 and 3 respectively). I then elaborate on the conflict between physical and social externalism (section 4). Finally, I consider a possible resolution of this conflict, namely a social externalism that integrates a certain physical externalism (section 5).

2. The argument for physical externalism

One prominent form of physical externalism is the following position: The paradigmatic example of singular beliefs is beliefs that employ an indexical or a demonstrative in order to refer to a particular thing in the world. It is a necessary condition for having such a belief that one stands in a certain causal relation to the thing in question. Thus, having singular beliefs about a certain thing is ontologically dependent on the existence of the thing in question. For instance, one can have the belief that the man over there is fat only if there [389] is a man over there. The thesis hence is that some beliefs, namely those singular beliefs in which indexicals or demonstratives are employed, are such that a person can have these beliefs only

if their purported referent exists. The main argument is that if the purported referent of these beliefs did not exist, these beliefs would not be about anything at all; consequently, they would not be beliefs at all. This position owes much to Gareth Evans' *Varieties of Reference* (Evans (1982), in particular Chapters 6 and 9; see also McDowell (1986) and McDowell (1998), lecture III, pp. 471–491).

Externalism about singular beliefs implies the following: If I can have the belief that the man over there is fat only if there is in fact a man over there, then, for any singular belief considered in isolation, I may doubt whether I am really in the state of believing that, say, the man over there is fat or whether I am in a state which is subjectively indistinguishable from this state, but possibly not a belief state at all. This sort of externalism about the physical environment does not lead to a conflict with social externalism. For this sort of physical externalism imposes a constraint on the acquisition of certain beliefs, namely that a singular belief about a certain thing can only be acquired if that thing exists. But it does not impose a constraint on the content of these beliefs in the sense that it takes the specific content of these beliefs to be ontologically dependent on specific features of their referent.

The most prominent form of physical externalism that does impose a constraint on the content of beliefs is externalism about beliefs in which natural kind concepts are employed. In the following, »physical externalism« always means this sort of externalism. The claim is this one: The content of beliefs in which concepts such as “water” or “tiger” are employed depends on the physical constitution of the things referred to. That is to say: These things have a real essence, which is independent of our beliefs about these things; their physical constitution is their real essence. The real essence of the things referred to contributes to determining the content of our beliefs about these things, and it individuates these beliefs. If two things are referred to by the same beliefs, but do not have the same real essence, then the content of these beliefs is different and they are different beliefs – whatever else the two things may have in common and whether or not there is any difference in the use of the statements that express these beliefs.

[390] The main argument for physical externalism is the famous twin earth thought experiment of Hilary Putnam in “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” (in Putnam (1975), essay 12). Independently of whether or not the members of a social, linguistic community know that water is H₂O, it is part of the content of their beliefs about water that water is H₂O. On the imaginary twin earth there is a stuff that is indistinguishable from water on the surface, but its microphysical composition is XYZ. The content of all beliefs about that stuff is different from the content of all beliefs about water. Putnam's thesis is that natural kind terms like “water” have an indexical component: By pointing to a liquid and saying “This is water”, a person means that everything which is the same as the stuff pointed to is also water. That relation of sameness is determined independently of the way in which the person uses the term “water”, namely by the real essence of the thing referred to; the real essence is its microphysical composition. It is not necessary that the person who uses the term “water” or anybody else know that real essence. Even if people are ignorant of the real essence, the real essence of the things they refer to individuates their beliefs and contributes to determining the content of their beliefs.

The term “real essence” is not Putnam's. It is employed, for instance, by McCulloch (1995), Chapter 7, in his discussion of Putnam's argument. Putnam speaks of the nature of water in “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” and of “essential nature” in “Is Semantics Possible?”

(in Putnam (1975), p. 233 and pp. 140–141 respectively). If one did not assume that there is a real essence which fixes the relation of sameness, Putnam's suggestion would face the objection against ostensive definitions (e.g. Wittgenstein (1953), §§ 1, 28–33): It would not be clear what is picked out by the ostension. This form of physical externalism does not have to be restricted to beliefs in which concepts for natural kinds are employed. It can be maintained with respect to beliefs about anything that is considered to have a real essence.

The background of Putnam's suggestion is the Fregean view that content (Fregean sense) is sufficient to determine reference ("On Sense and Reference" (1892) in Frege (1984), pp. 157–177). If we admit that the reference of a belief, in turn, contributes to determining its content, we can hold on to the Fregean position that content is [391] sufficient to determine reference in view of the examples that Putnam considers. The consequence of this position is that the content of beliefs does not have to be transparent to the person who has the beliefs in question – or indeed to anyone else. If people do not know the real essence of certain things to which they refer, they do not fully grasp the content of their beliefs about these things.

3. *The argument for social externalism*

A popular type of arguments for social externalism is modelled on thought experiments that are similar to the one of Putnam. Tyler Burge (1979), in particular, develops thought experiments in which he keeps all the factors that are internal to a person fixed and varies the social environment. He thereby intends to show that the social environment takes part in determining the content of the beliefs of a person. However, Burge's argument for social externalism is not the most fundamental one, because it does not go as far as showing that if there were no social environment at all, there would be no finite thinking beings that have beliefs with a determinate conceptual content.

There is an argument for social externalism available that sets out to establish this latter point. I shall focus on this argument because of its wider scope. This argument goes back to the so-called rule-following considerations. Its starting-point are the *Philosophical Investigations* of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) and, in particular, the interpretation of Saul Kripke (1982). Consider a concept F . Let F be a basic concept in the sense that it is not regarded as a function of other concepts. For instance, the concept "blond" is conceived as being derived from the concepts "hair" and "yellow", whereas these latter concepts are not conceived as being derived from other concepts. If a person masters a concept F , she has the capacity to apply this concept to an indeterminate number of new situations by forming beliefs and uttering statements of the type "This is F ". We can put this matter in this way: By mastering a concept, a person follows a rule that determines what is correct and what is incorrect in employing the concept in question. The rule determines which concept the person masters and, consequently, what the conceptual content of the beliefs in which the concept in question is employed is. However, any finite thinking being applies any rule only finitely many times. Furthermore, any mental representation of a rule (such [392] as a mental idea or the mental act of grasping an abstract object) or any implementation of the rule in dispositions to behaviour is finite, too, in the following sense: Any such thing satisfies infinitely many logically possible rules. Any such thing can therefore not determine which one is the rule that the person follows. The problem of rule-following then is this one: How can a finite thinking being follow a particular rule?

The point that Kripke makes on behalf of Wittgenstein is not tied to employing the notion of a rule. We can make that point without mentioning rules at all: The point is that any mental idea, any mental grasp of an abstract object, any disposition to behaviour, etc. is compatible with infinitely many logically possible contents of any of the beliefs of a person. Two aspects of the Kripke–Wittgenstein challenge have to be distinguished:

- the *infinity problem*: How can a finite sequence of whatever items instantiate only one rule rather than infinitely many rules?
- the *normativity problem*: What determines which is the correct manner to continue a finite sequence in such a way that a person can follow a rule (so that she has a distinction between following the rule correctly and following it incorrectly at her disposition)?

The solution that Kripke (1982) (Chapter 3, in particular pp. 86–95) proposes on behalf of Wittgenstein is that social practices are necessary for something to be a rule-following subject. Social practices determine a conceptual content for those who participate in them by means of sanctions. Sanctions provide a distinction between what a person takes to be correct or incorrect and what is correct or incorrect in the light of others. What is more, sanctions lead to a process of determining conditions under which persons agree on the way in which certain sequences of examples should be continued. These then are the normal conditions for the application of a concept *F* in statements or beliefs of the type “This is *F*”. These conditions determine for the persons in question which concepts are applied and thus which rules are followed.

The social solution to the problem of rule-following implies that with respect to having beliefs with a determinate conceptual content, any finite thinking being is ontologically dependent on a social environment in the sense of social interactions with other such beings. In short, the conceptual content of our beliefs is determined by social practices. Thus, our beliefs are individuated by social practices (since they are individuated by their conceptual content). In the [393] following, I shall understand by social externalism a social theory of conceptual content such as the one that is motivated by the rule-following considerations.

4. *The conflict between physical and social externalism*

Let us come back to Putnam’s example of water that is H₂O on earth and XYZ on twin earth. What is the position of social externalism with respect to this example? The social practices are identical on earth and twin earth, if we assume that both communities are ignorant of the microphysical composition of the stuff they refer to. Since conceptual content is determined by social practices, it follows that the content of the beliefs of the persons on earth is the same as the content of the respective beliefs of the persons on twin earth. That is to say, the content of “water” is the same on both earth and twin earth, but the extension is H₂O on earth and XYZ on twin earth. Within the framework of the theory of reference that Putnam presupposes in “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’”, social externalism therefore is committed to the conclusion that conceptual content fails to determine reference. Putnam (1975), pp. 219–235, acknowledges the logical possibility of this conclusion. But he proposes physical externalism in order to be able to continue to maintain that conceptual content determines reference. Thus, physical and social externalism are committed to drawing contrary conclusions from the twin earth thought experiment.

According to social externalism, microphysical composition becomes relevant to content only upon discovery. Prior to the discovery of the microphysical composition of the liquid in

question on both earth and twin earth, it is indeterminate whether the beliefs about the liquid have the conceptual content that the liquid is H_2O or that it is XYZ. The rules of the respective communities do not determine this, because it is beyond the scope of their practices. As a result of the discovery of the microphysical composition of the liquid on earth or twin earth, it is possible that the content of the beliefs about the liquid changes in such a way that being H_2O or being XYZ is included in the content of the beliefs in question. But it is not necessary that such a change occurs. Thus, there can be a difference in the content of the beliefs in question only if at least one of the communities is aware of the microphysical composition of the liquid in question.

Imagine the following variant of Putnam's thought experiment. We people on earth, who know the microphysical composition of water, discover samples [394] of a liquid that is like water, but whose microphysical composition is XYZ instead of H_2O – either on earth or by meeting people from twin earth that have twin earth water in their luggage. One can maintain that this is a case which is not determined by the rule or the norm that governs our use of the concept “water”. The rule that governs our use of the concept “water” does not select one particular way of dealing with this case as the correct one – at least if we limit ourselves to the common sense use of the concept “water”; the scientific use of the concept “water” may by definition be identical with the use of the concept “ H_2O ”. There seem to be at least two ways open in which the content of “water” can be further determined in this case by communal agreement:

- One can explicitly include being H_2O in the content of “water” and thus form two different concepts, one whose content includes being H_2O and another one whose content includes being XYZ.
- One can hold on to one concept and maintain that “water” is a role-concept. This concept stands for whatever realizes the role of being a liquid that is odourless, that quenches thirst, etc. Thus, water can be realized as H_2O , but it can also be realized as XYZ.

In any case, it is not the physical, but the social environment that determines the content of “water”.

Let us now apply Putnam's physical externalism to the argument for social externalism that has been discussed above, namely the problem of rule-following. Physical externalism may be received as providing a solution to this problem that is an alternative to the solution in terms of social practices. Recall that according to Kripke's reconstruction of Wittgenstein's argument, there is nothing mental – such as ideas or the grasp of abstract objects – which determines the content of the beliefs of a person. The solution to the resulting sceptical paradox is that certain social practices determine the content of the beliefs of a person to the extent that content is determined at all. Externalism about beliefs in which natural kind concepts are employed can be seen as attempting an alternative solution to this problem: it is nothing mental that determines the content of the beliefs of a person, but the physical environment; physical things have a real essence, and the content of our beliefs about them is determined by this real essence. The person herself need not fully grasp the rules that she follows. The essence of physical things can at least in some cases determine which rules she follows, even without the person herself being able to distinguish between some different rules (such as the water-rule and the twater-rule) in her beliefs and her actions including her assessments of the actions of other persons by means of sanctions.

[395] One can say that real essences are those natural properties that make something a sortal in the sense of a natural kind. Consequently, one can maintain that there are finite sequences of examples which instantiate only one real essence. One may then say that the real essence which a finite sequence of examples instantiates objectively determines one correct way to continue this sequence, and, owing to suitable causal relations, the real essence determines one correct way for a person to continue a finite sequence of actions. Thus, the assumption of real essences may enable one to solve the infinity problem at least for some cases, namely concepts of natural kinds.

However, if we maintain that real essences of physical things determine conceptual content via a suitable causal relation, then we cut off not only reference, but also conceptual content from our practices. Given Putnam's thought experiment, it is legitimate to imagine the following scenario: what applies to water applies to all beliefs of the people on earth about the physical things with which they deal in everyday life. There is a twin earth which is exactly like the earth in its macroscopic features, but entirely different from it in its microphysical composition. This is surely not a physical possibility; but that is irrelevant to the thought experiment. Both the people on earth and the people on twin earth are ignorant of the microphysical composition. Assume that a person from earth is transported to twin earth. This person becomes perfectly integrated into all the social practices of the people on twin earth. Nevertheless, according to the externalism under consideration, we have to say that the content of all the beliefs of this person about the physical things on twin earth is different from the content of the beliefs of the natives about these things.

Cutting off meaning from our practices does not answer Kripke's challenge. At least the normativity problem seems to remain anyway. Recall that the problem is not simply what determines a correct way to continue a finite sequence of examples or actions, but what determines this in such a way that a person can *follow* a rule. Real essences in the world do not seem to be able to solve this problem: How does a person grasp a content in applying statements of the type "This is *F*" to each of the members of a finite sequence of examples in such a way that for her there is a distinction between correct and incorrect rule-following? Is grasping a real essence a mental act? Is it a disposition to behaviour? In both cases, one faces the objections that Kripke (1982), Chapter 2, develops.

The root of the conflict between social externalism and physical externalism is this one: According to social externalism, the content of all our beliefs is [396] something that we ourselves set up by engaging in certain social practices. In traditional vocabulary, one may say that the content of our beliefs is a product of the spontaneity of – social – reason. Content hence is always transparent to us and individuated by social practices. Qua rule-following subject, a person cannot be programmed by whatever causal relations to be attuned to the real essence of reality in her intentional states. According to physical externalism, by contrast, the content of beliefs at least insofar as they employ concepts for natural kinds is individuated by the physical environment, namely the real essence of the things to which beliefs that employ these concepts refer. The causal relations to a specific physical environment determine at least in part the content of at least some of our beliefs about the physical environment, and these relations are on their own sufficient to individuate some of our beliefs. Consequently, the content of our beliefs does not have to be transparent to us; for we can be ignorant of the real essence of physical things. Thus, the driving intuitions in social externalism and in physical

externalism are opposed to one another in such a way that they result in positions that contradict each other.

5. *A possible resolution of the conflict*

Is it possible to alleviate the conflict between physical externalism and social externalism? Physical externalism has a rather limited extension. The physical externalism that has been discussed here is concerned only with beliefs in which concepts for natural kinds are employed. Whatever the exact extension of physical externalism may be, there are apparently concepts and beliefs that are not touched by it. It is no problem to grant social externalism with respect to all those concepts and beliefs for which it is not claimed that the physical environment takes part in determining their content and individuates them.

Furthermore, the claim under consideration is only that the physical environment *contributes to* determining the conceptual content of some beliefs. This leaves room for some contribution of the social environment. For instance, to come back to Putnam's example, the stereotype that consists in features such as being odourless, quenching thirst, etc. belongs to the conceptual content of the beliefs in which the concept "water" is employed as well (Putnam (1975), pp. 229–230, 249–252). One can maintain that it depends on the social as well as the physical environment which ones are the features that make up the stereotype. Nonetheless, even if some [397] contribution of the social environment is granted, the physical environment has the upper hand: it does the job of individuating the beliefs in question. The beliefs in question belong to the same type if and only if they refer to a substance whose real essence is H_2O , whatever the stereotype with which they are associated may be. Imagine a community that is acquainted with water only in the form of a liquid and a community that is acquainted with water only in the form of ice. The beliefs about the substance in question are of the same type for both communities, although the stereotypes may be entirely different. In the case of earth in comparison to twin earth, on the contrary, the stereotypes are the same, but the beliefs belong to different types, because the substances referred to differ in real essence.

If one wishes to alleviate the conflict between social and physical externalism, the more promising strategy is to start with social externalism. There is a possibility to integrate Putnam's twin earth thought experiment into social externalism. In a later essay, "Is Water Necessarily H_2O ?", Putnam writes:

I won't insist (any more) that "it is conceivable that water may turn out not to be H_2O but it isn't logically possible that water isn't H_2O ." ... I still believe that a community can stipulate that "water" is to designate *whatever has the same chemical structure* or *whatever has the same chemical behavior* as paradigms X, Y, Z ... (or as most of them, just in case a few turn out to be cuckoos in the nest) *even if it doesn't know, at the time it makes this stipulation, exactly what that chemical structure, or exactly what that lawful behavior, is.* (in Putnam (1990), p.70)

According to this quotation, the microphysical composition of water determines the content of the beliefs about that liquid only as a result of a stipulation of the community to that effect.

This suggestion implies that the constitution of the physical environment as such does not have the force to determine the conceptual content and to individuate the beliefs of persons. Instead, persons can stipulate in their social practices that the content of their beliefs about physical things is to be determined by the microphysical composition of the things referred to, whatever that composition may be. If persons make such a stipulation, they are not committed

to attributing to microphysical composition the status of a real essence. Hence, by making such a stipulation, they are not committed to admitting real essences.

[398] Being H₂O thus is part of the content of beliefs about the liquid in question (picked out by what Putnam calls a stereotype) only if the social practices are such that the members of the community in question regard their beliefs about physical things as being individuated not by the macroscopic features with which they are acquainted in their practices, but by whatever the microphysical composition of the physical things may be. Supposing that both the people on earth and the people on twin earth are ignorant of the microphysical composition of the liquids in question, there is a difference in the content of the beliefs about the respective liquids only if the members of at least one of these communities consider the content of their beliefs about physical things to be determined by whatever the microphysical composition of these things is. Consequently, social externalism can integrate a physical externalism that takes the content of specific types of beliefs to be dependent upon specific features of the physical environment, but only by insisting that this contribution of the physical environment is to be traced back to social practices. We in our social practices can decide to let the physical environment take part in determining the content of and individuating some of our beliefs.

However, one can with reason doubt whether in fact the members of any community can be expected to intend their practices to be such that not plain macroscopic features, but a hidden physical microstructure determines the content of their beliefs about the physical things with which they deal in everyday life (see, for instance, Searle (1983), pp. 203–204; Mellor (1996), §§ 3–4). It is plausible to maintain that the sketched scenario applies to a scientific community, because it is an explicit aim of scientific research to discover the microstructure of physical things; but this is not an aim of our common sense talk about the physical things with which we deal in everyday life.

However that may be, social externalism implies in any case a very general physical externalism: There is no social environment without a physical environment. Social practices presuppose that all those persons who take part in certain social practices live in a shared physical environment. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the shared physical environment somehow constrains these social practices. Nonetheless, this point establishes only a very general and weak physical externalism. It shows that having beliefs with a determinate conceptual content is ontologically dependent on being embedded [399] in a physical as well as a social environment. But it does not go as far as showing that the content of beliefs of specific types is ontologically dependent on the specific constitution of the physical environment. The resulting position then is a social externalism in that it regards the specific content of our beliefs as being ontologically dependent on social practices; it is a physical externalism in that it considers our beliefs having content at all as being ontologically dependent on our being embedded in a physical environment.

To sum up, physical externalism and social externalism are rooted in different conceptions of ourselves as thinking beings. According to physical externalism, certain causal relations to the physical environment as such are sufficient to individuate at least some of our beliefs about the physical environment. According to social externalism, the content of our beliefs is always determined by ourselves insofar as we engage in certain social practices, and these practices individuate our beliefs. Nonetheless, it is possible to alleviate the conflict between social and physical externalism: There is no social environment without a physical

environment. One can go as far as maintaining that we in our social practices make it at least in some cases dependent on the constitution of the physical environment what the exact content of some of our beliefs about the physical environment is.

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