

How to think about the debate over the reality of beliefs?

The aim of this paper is to propose a new way of conceptualizing the debate over the reality of beliefs. This issue is philosophically crucial as beliefs are thought to have two features: they are considered to be both bearers of semantic properties and causes of behaviour. In this way, beliefs can be seen as belonging to both the realms of causes and the space of reasons (as possessing the semantic content implies being able to enter logical relations). However, that there really are such things might seem dubious.

The opposition to the claim that people really have beliefs was historically presented in the form of eliminative materialism. As developed in its most classic form by Churchland, eliminativism contends that “belief” is a theoretical posit of folk psychology, which should be considered to be a proto-theory. As this proto-theory is false, we should consider beliefs to be non-existent and eliminate the word “belief” from our discourse.

The main claim of eliminative materialism, as proposed by Churchland, was the ontological thesis that there are no beliefs. This assertion has been met with significant opposition. The main counterarguments to eliminativism pointed that this theory is:

- (1) inconsistent, as claiming that there are no beliefs presupposes having a belief that this is the case (this is famous Baker’s “cognitive suicide” argument);
- (2) based on an unjustified assumption of descriptive theory of reference (this point was raised by Stich);
- (3) incompatible with certain platitudinous truths about criteria of belief possession (this is underscored by “common-sense functionalists” like Jackson and Pettit).

These arguments has been popular to such an extent that eliminativism is considered to be a non-starter by most philosophers of mind (this unpopularity has been conceded by Churchland himself). What is, however, striking about these arguments is that they do not constitute a direct proof that beliefs, understood as causally effective states with semantic properties, exist. They only show that the negative claim “there are no beliefs” cannot be accepted.

In my opinion the most important reason for the failure of Churchland’s project was his implicit adoption of Quinean approach to ontology: Churchland claims that beliefs do not exist, as they are not amongst the ontological commitments of the best theory. This Quinean presuppositions also show in the fact that Churchland presents his metaphysical scruples about the reality of beliefs as an ontological claim “beliefs do not exist”. But it is precisely this ontological phrasing of his conclusion that makes it unacceptable: if beliefs do not exist then our ordinary attributions of them can never be true, and this is seen as self-defeating and counter-intuitive.

In my opinion the metaphysical scepticism about reality of beliefs can be expressed without claiming that beliefs do not exist. The alternative way is to accept deflationary approach to existence, and try to draw the distinction between the real and the unreal in a different way (in general metaphysics such an approach has been proposed by e.g. Wright, Fine, and Thomasson; Fine, for example proposes to draw the division in terms of grounding). If we accept a broadly deflationary approach to ontological questions, then we might say that beliefs exist, as the criteria of application of the term “belief” are often met. However, this does not preclude us from making a distinction between the real and the unreal, and claiming that beliefs should be classified as unreal.

In the context of the debate over the reality of beliefs, the most fruitful, in my opinion, way of making the distinction between realist and anti-realist approach is by way of using Lewis’s theory of natural and non-natural properties. Natural properties, according to Lewis, ground objective similarities and are causally explanatory, whilst non-natural properties are just arbitrary collections of modal objects. (The idea to distinguish realism from anti-realism by reference to Lewis’s conception is inspired by recent developments in metaphysics of truth, and Stojlar’s reading of Chomsky’s eliminativism).

A realist about beliefs, as seen in this perspective, is a theorist who claims that beliefs should be seen as natural properties, i.e. there are objective similarities between people who share the same belief that p , and that the fact of belief possession is causally explanatory. Anti-realists, on the other hand would deny this – for them our folk-psychological classifications do not track any deep similarities, and that we should not expect beliefs to be causally relevant. Additionally, the realist would expect that there would be a way of connecting belief attributions to more fundamental/natural predicates, while the anti-realist would be sceptical about any form of naturalizing belief talk.

Such a way of marking the distinction between realism and anti-realism has important theoretical advantages. First, it allows to coherently formulate the anti-realist position, without the treat that this position could be dismissed out of hand as counter-intuitive and self-defeating. Secondly, it allows to operationalize the debate about realism: the question whether beliefs are real can be reduced to some more basic (and perhaps more tractable) issues, like the questions of natural kinds in folk psychology, of mental causation and of naturalization of content.

The anti-realist position, as it has been proposed here, is certainly more modest than the radical forms of eliminativism, as it does not attribute ontological error to the folk practice, but it still has some important ramifications. It denies that folk psychological categories would be indispensable in the mature science of mind and that explanations in terms of propositional attitudes attributions track actual causal relations; furthermore, folk-psychological classifications become conventional and not natural. In this way, anti-realism becomes both viable and controversial proposal; this should be seen as good news for the proponents of realism, as it makes their opposition to anti-realism non trivial.

In the final part of my talk, I'd like to point to some recent proposals in the metaphysics of belief that can be fit into the proposed framework: neo-dispositionalism by Schwitzgebel, which might be considered to be a mild form of anti-realism, and psychofunctional representationalism, defended by Quilty-Dunn & Mandelbaum, which can be seen as a paradigmatic realist position.

Selected references

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