

Is the debate about doxasticism merely verbal?

The aim of the paper is to explore the metaphysical presuppositions of the doxasticism debate, i.e. the discussion whether delusions should count as beliefs. We argue that there are good reasons to worry that this debate is merely verbal, in the sense that both parties might be thought to be right, given charitable interpretation of their theses. The most natural way to avoid such a conclusion is to make a case for the claim that “belief” and “delusion” are natural kind terms. We aim to show that while “delusion” might reasonably be said to refer to a natural kind, it is much more problematic to say that “belief” does, especially given Schwitzgebel's account of folk psychology.

Adherents of the view that delusions are beliefs, typically use arguments from assertion or from first person reports to support their position (Bortolotti & Miyazono, 2015). The response to that is that delusions cannot be beliefs because beliefs are rational and delusions do not behave in a rational way (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002). Some theorists offer arguments based on the apparent irrationality of everyday beliefs to conclude that delusions could be beliefs despite their irrationality (Bortolotti, 2010).

Although support for the doxasticism is very popular among philosophers a variety of alternatives have been presented in recent literature. Some try to fit delusions somewhere between beliefs and non-belief states while others attempt to find other status for delusions. Thus, scholars of the former kind hold the view that delusions are bimaginations i.e. things located between belief and imagination (Egan, 2009; Currie and Jones, 2006) or that delusions are ‘in-between beliefs’ (Schwitzgebel, 2012). Arguing for the latter view, some scholars try to prove that we should build separate category for delusions. According to them, delusions could be perceptual states (Hohwy and Rajan, 2012) or acceptations generated by strong cognitive feelings (Dub, 2015).

The persistence of the doxasticism debate and lack of clear conclusions may lead to a question whether there is indeed such a thing as a right answer to the question whether delusions are really beliefs. A metaphilosophical sceptic might argue that the lack of clear conclusions in this case proves that this is yet another case of a merely verbal debate, in which philosophy abounds.

We are going to assume the conception of verbal debate developed by Eli Hirsch (2005; 2009). In order to show that a debate is verbal one needs to show that it is possible to read the claims of the participants of the debate in such a way as to show that on one reading the contested sentence turns out to be true and on the other – false. In our case the sentence in question is “Delusions are beliefs”. If it was possible to provide such interpretations of the both key terms of this statement as to get the result that this claim is true on one reading and false on the other, then the debate would be verbal.

A metaphilosophical sceptic might claim that the disagreement between a doxasticist and an anti-doxasticist stems from the fact that doxasticists and anti-doxasticist differently understand the terms “belief” and “delusion”; for example they differently conceptualize the definitional aspect of what is needed to count as genuine belief and genuine delusion. Consider Bortolotti's account of beliefs in her modest doxasticism (Bortolotti, 2010). She argue that beliefs might be characterized as opposed to desires and difference between those two might be cashed out in terms of so called dimensions: procedural (relation between beliefs versus relations between desires), epistemic (sensitivity to the evidence), agential (manifestation in behaviour) (Bortolotti, 2010). The core tenet of this account is strict pairing between these dimensions and rationality. Nevertheless central features of beliefs might be characterised in a different manner. Stephens and Graham (2004) stress out that the central features of beliefs are: representational content, subjective conviction and reason-giving. This only partially overlap with Bortolotti's account. Usually, the chosen characterisation of belief is mirrored in a characterisation of delusion, although for the latter there is core characteristics (DSM-5, 2013). Bortolotti's analysis rely heavily on rational dimension in analysis of delusions. This dimension however is not considered as the focal by all the scholars. For example, Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) stress out that the content of belief/delusion is crucial in evaluation and on that basis argue that delusions are cognitive hallucinations (Bayne and Pacherie, 2005)

Thus, it might well turn out that when a doxasticist and an anti-doxasticist disagree over the extension of the predicates “is a belief” and “is a delusion” they are using the terms in question in such a way that they effectively speak past each other.

In order to avoid such a negative metaphilosophical conclusion about the status of the doxasticism debate one would have to assume that there is such a thing as an objective extension of the central terms of the debate, namely “belief” and “delusion”. If this were the case, then the question of the relation of the extension of the terms in question would have an objective answer, independently of any conceptual tinkering by philosophers.

This can be achieved by adopting the natural kinds theory. On the standard account, a natural kind term like “tiger” denotes a set of certain object in virtue of the fact that all members of this set form a natural kind (Putnam, 1975; Koslicki, 2008). The facts that our conception of tigers might be different from the objective facts about the actual tigers, and that people’s beliefs about what count as a tiger differ have nothing to do with the actual extension of the term. This is because “meanings just ain’t in the head”: concepts and explicit definitions do not determine extensions (Wikforss, 2008).

If “belief” and “delusion” turned out to be natural kind terms denoting natural kinds, then indeed there would be an objective answer to the question “is every mental state denoted by the term 'delusion' also denoted by the term 'belief?'”. In such a case the fact that one theorist would conceptualize beliefs differently than another would have no bearing on the truth value of the answer to that question. Conversely, should “belief” and “delusion” not function as names of genuine natural kinds then it would seem that there is no guarantee that the doxasticism debate has an objective resolution. Thus, it might be claimed that the claim that doxasticism debate has an objectively correct answer presupposes the thesis that “belief” and “delusion” denote natural kinds.

It might be easily argued that “delusion” can be treated as natural kind term, given certain account of natural kinds. Beebe and Sabbarton-Leary (2010) claim that in order to account for the possibility of claiming that psychiatric terms denote natural kinds one must adopt the account of natural kinds developed by Boyd (Boyd, 1991). Delusion fit in this framework, as they seem to support inductive generalisations and might be thought of as being generated by homeostatic property clusters. Samuels (2009) also explicitly endorsed this account. Similar idea was put forward by Zachar (2014), who argued that mental disorders should be characterised as practical kind.

The question whether “belief” can be treated as term denoting natural kind seems far more difficult. This is due to the facts that, unlike “delusion”, “belief” has not been introduced as a scientific term but rather it functions as a part of our folk practice of talking about minds.

It seems obvious that the answer to the question whether “belief” can be treated as a natural kind term depends on the approach to belief one is willing to adopt. In what follows we shall assume that the neo-behavioristic approach, developed and defended recently by Schwitzgebel. According to him (Schwitzgebel 2013), having a belief, similarly to any other mental state, is a matter of fitting into a certain dispositional profile, i.e. exhibiting certain patterns of behaviour and introspectible qualities; those patterns should be similar enough to the paradigmatic case of the attitude in question in order to count as e.g. belief. On this conception the criteria of attitude possession are, as it were, shallow. This mean that there are no deep hidden facts about the subjects which count as arguments for or against ascribing certain attitudes. Such a conception seems to be incompatible with the idea of “belief” being a natural kind term, as the very idea of a term being a natural kind one presupposes that there are non-manifest application criteria for this term.

Thus, given Schwitzgebel’s account of folk psychology, there is no such thing as a correct answer to the question whether certain mental state is a “genuine” belief; this is consistent with his assumption that there are such things as in-between beliefs (Schwitzgebel 2013). However, the consequence of this approach seems to be that many debates in philosophical psychology, which are related to the question of the extension of “belief” are merely verbal ones.

To sum up, our conclusion is that, although “delusion” might reasonably be claimed to denote a natural kind, “belief”, as conceptualized by neo-behaviorists, is not. This makes the hypothesis that the doxasticism debate is to a large extent verbal quite convincing.

The problem with this conclusion, however, is that it makes the participants in the debate look confused, which is quite implausible given their theoretical grasp on the issue. Moreover, there is a sense in which the arguments put forward were touching on some important issues. Thus in the final section of our paper we should argue that even though the debate is verbal it is not cognitively vacuous.

The main idea here is that the doxasticism debate might be seen as an example of philosophical metalinguistic negotiations. Several authors (including Plunkett, Sundell, Burgess, and Thomasson) have proposed that many philosophical debates might be interpreted as a debates not about factual matters but as debates in which the issue is the proposed way of using such a term. In our opinion the doxasticism debate might easily be seen as a metalinguistic negotiation concerning the term "belief".

The idea of metalinguistic negotiation is based on the observation, that in some cases what seems to be a discussion about some feature of external word is - in fact - a discussion about the norms of using the central piece of vocabulary in the discussion. In the case of the doxasticism debate it is clear that both parties to the debate have certain ideas on how the word belief should be used and they try to convey these ideas in the discussion. Thus, the debate might be seen as substantial, while being merely verbal.

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