

Penultimate draft of Rowland Stout, "Decontaminating our view of the mind: a critical notice of *The life of the mind* by Greg McCulloch", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 11:4, 2003, 465-75.

I suppose that most people think their minds are inside their heads, and not spread around in the environment outside. Now that we are not able to make sense of the old Cartesian doctrine that minds exist in some non-material realm this looks like the only option; our minds are lodged in our brains.

Perhaps we have learnt enough from Gilbert Ryle's (1949) attack on the very meaningfulness of this way of talking about minds that we might modify our way of putting this. What we would say instead is that facts about the mental depend on facts about the brain. To put it more technically, the mental *supervenes* on the neurophysiological. This means roughly that if any of the facts about your mind were different then some neurophysiological fact about your brain would have to be different too; facts about the mind do not float free from facts about the brain.

Accepting this sort of supervenience is supposed to be a way of maintaining an anti-dualistic naturalism without making any commitments to strong materialist reductions. The stuff of the universe is matter (or energy or whatever else Physics comes up with). And, mental facts depend in some way on neurophysiological facts. But perhaps we cannot even in principle translate or reduce our mental descriptions to neurophysiological ones.

As I have stated it the supervenience claim is too strong since there are plenty of *extrinsic* facts about the mind that do not supervene on purely neurophysiological facts about the brain. For example, consider the fact that I see an apple tree in front of me. Suppose my brain to be in the very state it is in fact in but that there is no apple tree in front of me but just a convincing hologram. Then it would not be a fact that I see an apple tree in front of me even though all the neurophysiological facts about my brain remain the same.

For the supervenience claim to have any content it must be restricted to purely or *intrinsically* mental facts. The fact that I see an apple tree would have to be taken to be partially mental and partially environmental. The purely mental component might be taken to be something like the fact that I have an experience as of seeing an apple tree in front of me.

Greg McCulloch denies any such supervenience claim. He sees the idea that the mind is somehow in the head as a remnant of dodgy Cartesian internalism. He thinks that facts about your mind involve facts about your body and the environment it inhabits.

McCulloch would say that the fact that I see an apple tree in front of me is as purely mental as such facts can be and that there is no set of intrinsically mental facts that do supervene on neurophysiological facts about the brain. His slogan, extending Hilary

Putnam's famous claim (1975, chapter 12) that meanings just ain't in the head (by which he means brain), is that the mind just ain't in the head (p. 12). And by saying this McCulloch intends to reject any attempt to locate some crucial aspect of the mental which really does supervene on the neurophysiological. Not only is the mind itself not entirely within the head but no part of the mind is entirely in the head. There are no facts about a person's conscious life that are not facts about that person's relationship with their environment.

So McCulloch's externalism about the mind comes in at least two strengths. The weaker and less controversial externalism is the one that much of McCulloch's argument is apparently aimed at. This is that 'an adequate characterization of an agent's consciousness must advert to factors in the agent's environment' (p. 12). To adapt his slogan, this is to say that *not all* the mind is entirely in the head.

But McCulloch advocates a stronger type of externalism, which is that an adequate characterization of *everything* in an agent's consciousness must advert to factors in the agent's environment. In other words, *none* of the mind is entirely in the head. This does not mean that all facts about the mind are independent of facts about the brain. What it means is that no facts about the mind are *solely* dependent on facts about the brain.

Unfortunately for the reader it is not always clear which of these two types of externalism – the weaker and the stronger - McCulloch is arguing for at any one time. Indeed it is a distinct weakness of the book that, although there are plenty of arguments to be found in it, they are rather jumbled up. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that much of the material in the book is adapted from previously published articles and chapters.

McCulloch's main official argument for his externalism about the mind uses Putnam's externalism about meaning as a premise – meanings are not in the head. His second premise is that meanings are themselves part of conscious experience – meanings are in the mind. From these premises he infers the weaker externalist thesis that conscious experience is not entirely within the head.

The quick version of the argument is as follows (pp. 11-12):

(PM) meanings just ain't in the head,
 (PC) meanings are in the mind,
 Therefore
 (PE) the mind just ain't in the head.

And spelt out more clearly we get:

(PM) means that in accounting for meanings, we must advert to factors in the agent's environment; (PC) means that meaning, and grasping meaning, are (conscious) mental phenomena; (PE) therefore means that an adequate characterization of an agent's consciousness must advert to factors in the agent's environment. (p. 12)

This is still in shorthand really, for what McCulloch intends to be included in the term ‘meaning’ is the *intentional content* of mental states – what is represented by a person in their mental state or what their state of mind is directed upon. Put without the jargon, it is what the person believes and knows, what they desire and intend, what they perceive, and what they fear, love, are envious of, etc.

McCulloch argues that facts about intentional content are both internal to consciousness and at the same time dependent on the environment. They are both *phenomenological* and *externalistic*, to use McCulloch’s jargon. And this involves no contradiction so long as one accepts that facts about consciousness depend on the environment.

Phenomenology is to do with the subjective, and externalism *does* invoke the objective: but it does not follow, and it is not true, that the subjective *excludes* the objective. Rather, the objective has to be invoked in the course of laying out the structure of the subjective: to know your mind I need to know your world (in your way). (p. 12)

This is an argument for the weaker type of externalism. It is important to make explicit what is implicit in McCulloch’s presentation of the argument here that (PM) and (PC) apply to *all* aspects of intentional content. If one thought that some aspect of intentional content (call it wide content) was not all in the head, but that some other aspect (narrow content) was, and that some aspect of intentional content (narrow content) was in the mind, but some other aspect (wide content) was not, then there would be no problem with holding onto the internalist thought that the mind was entirely in the head. On this view McCulloch’s argument would be guilty of the fallacy of equivocating between two senses of “intentional content” or “meaning”.

To block this response to his argument McCulloch needs to show that for at least one of (PM) and (PC) the premise applies to *all* intentional content. Indeed it is clear from the way he argues that he thinks that this is the case for both (PM) and (PC).

What is interesting also is that when McCulloch comes to argue for the premise (PC) in chapter 1, he is not satisfied just with the claim that all the intentional content of a person’s mental state is part of their conscious experience. He claims that there is no other part of their conscious experience. It is not just that meanings are in the mind; nothing *else* is in the mind. With that strong version of the second premise, it is possible to infer the stronger externalist claim that there is no aspect of an agent’s conscious experience that does not depend on the environment.

Here is the argument (as reconstructed by me) for strong externalism:

There are no facts about the intentional content of experience that do not depend on the environment.

There is no aspect of an agent’s conscious experience that is not a fact about the intentional content of the experience.

Therefore there is no aspect of an agent's conscious experience that does not depend on the environment.

What McCulloch needs to show here is that there are no purely qualitative (i.e. non-representational) aspects of conscious experience. His argument is extremely brief and relies to some extent on the rhetorical device of ridicule – “wretched evasion” (p. 36) or “What nonsense!” (p. 39). It is that conscious experience is “world-presenting” rather than “world-suggesting” (p. 39). This means that what is experienced are things in the world, not things that suggest things in the world. Experience of sensations, like a stinging sensation on the leg for instance, suggests the existence of something in the world (nettles), while presenting something not in the world (the stinging sensation). But this is very different from the normal case of visual perception where sensations are not involved.

An opponent might say that purely qualitative things are not experienced as such in normal perception, but are the *vehicles* by which things in the world are experienced. They are present in conscious experience, but only become the objects of experience when we reflect introspectively on the *manner* of our being aware of things in the world. This may indeed be a “wretched evasion”, but I think it is a shame that McCulloch lost patience so soon with the task of trying to show his opponent why.

McCulloch's first premise, (PM), that any account of meanings must advert to factors in the agent's environment comes straight from Putnam's Twin Earth argument, bolstered by McDowell on singular thought. A common response to Putnam has been to distinguish narrow and wide content, and argue that some aspect or type of meaning (narrow content) is entirely in the head, while the other aspect (wide content) does depend on the environment. Narrow content is content from the first person perspective, while wide content is content from a third person perspective. Although the two are related in various ways, the thought would be that narrow content would exist even in a world where there was no third person perspective and no wide content.

McCulloch delays his argument against this until the final chapter, where he considers vat brains. His claim is that vat brains could have no conscious thoughts about anything, or at least none that are recognizable as such to us. He argues in two ways. On the one hand he attacks some presumed justifications for describing a vat brain as having contentful mental states. At the same time he works through some possible ways of understanding the intentional content of the thoughts of different kinds of vat brains and finds them all incoherent.

This indeed is the technique of much of the argument in the book. By trying to flesh out the details of any account in which the mind is in the head and finding these details to be not properly motivated and also to lead to nonsense, he tries to persuade the reader of the folly of starting with that assumption. It is a technique that is vulnerable to the awkward response that he is shying at straw men and that there is a better way to flesh out an internalist account. But at any rate it leaves the ball on the other side of the net.

Part of McCulloch's aim is the therapeutic one of releasing people from the common philosophical view that the mind is somehow cut off from its environment. He sees this view as embodying a lingering commitment to Descartes' Real Distinction between Mind and Body, regarded as what he calls an *ontological* distinction. And he sets himself up with the aim "to make the life of the mind recognizable to people who have been contaminated by Cartesianism" (p. 1). I take it that this does not mean that he wants to make the life of the mind recognizable to people despite their contamination by Cartesianism, but that he wants to decontaminate his readers of their Cartesianism and thereby make the life of the mind recognizable to them.

This is a task explicitly set for himself by Gilbert Ryle (1949) in *The Concept of Mind* and by John McDowell in much of his work (see for example 1994), as well as implicitly by Wittgenstein and his followers. But I think it is too deep a task for this little book, and indeed McCulloch does not make much of an attempt at really eliminating Cartesian contamination. Furthermore I will argue later that his own positive claims about the mind are themselves at least superficially contaminated.

When McCulloch claims that standard internalist approaches to the mind preserve a lingering commitment to Descartes' Real Distinction he is not accusing them of holding a mind/body dualism in which mind and body are constituted out of radically different stuff. But he is nevertheless claiming that the internalists maintain *some* sort of ontological dualism, and this is what leads them awry.

It is a dualism grounded firmly in materialism. Descartes' distinction between mind and body is glossed as a distinction between the mind and the world outside the mind. This distinction has to be understood in the light of the materialist denial of any special mental substance; within the material world there is a distinction between the mind and the rest of the world. The natural way to mark this distinction given the close relationship between mind and brain is at the boundary of the brain and the rest of the world. And this gives us McCulloch's opponent's thesis that the mental is distinct from the environment outside the head.

The point is that there is a structural aspect of Descartes' Real Distinction which is preserved by materialist internalists. That is the assumption that the mind exists in a self-contained space – whether it be the mental realm or the brain. There is a world within and a world outside (even if they are both material). For both Descartes and the materialist internalists there is the metaphysical possibility of a scenario in which someone's mind is as it is but that the whole of the material world or almost the whole of the material world (all but the brain) is quite different or does not exist at all. The evil demon scenario becomes the brain-in-a-vat scenario.

But this structural similarity is not in fact strong enough to sustain the argument that McCulloch tries to rest on it – an argument he calls the Demonic Dilemma. The argument starts out being a challenge for Descartes. The challenge is to decide where intentionality is – is it in the mind or in the non-mental world? The question is whether

facts about the intentional content of our mental states are facts about our conscious experience or whether they are facts about the world outside of our minds.

Intentionality cannot be completely outside the non-mental world or else thoughts would never be about anything. This is shown by seeing that brains in vats could not have thoughts about anything. But intentionality cannot be completely outside the mind either. If it were then it would not be a feature of our thoughts as such. Facts about what our thoughts represent must at least partly be facts about those thoughts.

The two horns of the Demonic Dilemma are indeed hopeless. But, of course no one, not even the die-hard internalist, thinks that intentionality must be either all in the mind or all outside the mind. Facts about what our thoughts are about are clearly facts about the *relationship* between mind and world. So the internalist opponent to McCulloch says that in a sense, intentionality is both in the mind and in the non-mental world outside.

McCulloch rejects this possibility in a most unsatisfactory way. He argues (p. 6) that, for the internalist whose position is structurally similar to Descartes' Real Distinction, intentionality cannot be in both the mind and the world or else the distinction between world and mind would not be a Real Distinction. Even if this move worked against Descartes, and I am not clear that it does, it has no force whatsoever as an argument against the *materialist* internalist. The materialist does not take the distinction between the mind and the environment to be a categorical distinction in the way Descartes does. There is no *metaphysical* objection to the idea of entities spanning the two realms of mind and world or of facts being about the relationship between the two realms, since the two realms are both part of the ordinary material world.

In fact, I am sure that McCulloch's real objection to the idea of intentionality spanning the mental and the non-mental must be his contention that intentionality is entirely within conscious experience. This is the second premise – (PC) – of his central argument for weak externalism. The real argument embedded in McCulloch's Demonic Dilemma is just that central argument. Unfortunately he leaves it to the reader to make that clear.

The view that intentional content spans the mental and the non-mental worlds, with one aspect – narrow content – purely mental and another aspect – wide content – purely non-mental is named "bipartism" by McCulloch. Fodor and McGinn are taken to be the key proponents. By treating wide content as blankly external to conscious experience they fail to capture the idea that such content is *presented* to us in experience. On their view, wide content must *stand aloof* from experience as McCulloch puts it (p. 120), quoting John McDowell.

At this point McCulloch does something rather puzzling. In the place of bipartism he offers up *tripartism*. According to tripartism, states with intentional content are assigned:

- (i) a 'wholly subjective' element,
- (ii) a corresponding entity in the world, and
- (iii) something 'in between'. (p. 116)

The scare quotes might suggest that McCulloch does not endorse this view quite as stated. But he makes absolutely no modifications to it and claims (p. 125) to be able to complete the case for it with his argument against brains in vats having thoughts.

Just about everything is wrong with this idea of tripartism, and McCulloch himself has told us why elsewhere. The proposal is reminiscent of those philosophers who, finding a difficulty in making sense of the causal connection between mind and body given Descartes' dualism, thought they could solve the problem by adding a third substance – something in between mind and body. But the problem with dualism is the distinction between mind and body; the problem does not go away with tripartism. Equally, the problem with bipartism is that part of intentional content is taken to be entirely outside conscious experience. This problem does not go away if we subdivide intentional content even further.

It is a central thesis of McCulloch's book that the subjective does not exclude the objective. The notion of the 'wholly subjective' can have no place here. He is clear elsewhere in the book that we need a unified notion of intentional content, one which is at the same time subjective and objective. I think the charitable interpretation here might be to assume that tripartism was introduced as an arguing position to be fixed up properly later and that McCulloch just lost track of it.

Certainly it only figures in a small part of the book. But it seems to be taken to be equivalent to a position that McCulloch calls with an even less happy use of jargon 'behaviour-embracing mentalism' (p. 93), and which he advocates with more confidence. It is not perhaps quite as obvious that behaviour-embracing mentalism involves the very features of Cartesianism that McCulloch is trying to rid from our conception of the mind. But it does.

According to behaviour-embracing mentalism, there is no problem with using full-blooded mentalistic vocabulary – this is the mentalism bit. The behaviour-embracing bit is explained by saying that embodiment and bodily behaviour are taken to be necessary but not sufficient conditions of thought and cognition (p. 94). Putting it the other way round, inner mechanisms are also necessary but not sufficient for thought and cognition (p. 110). Inner mechanisms and the capacity for outer behaviour are necessary (and jointly sufficient) for the existence of mental states, but neither by itself is sufficient.

What is this talk of inner mechanisms doing? Isn't McCulloch committed to denying that there is any useful sense of inner in which there are inner mental mechanisms? He explains his position using the terrible idiom of the mind as a black box:

Think of the box: for behaviourists, the inside is black, the surface is the real; for behaviour-rejecting mentalists, the inside is the real, the surface a mere container; and for the behaviour-embracing mentalist, *both* surface *and* inside are part of the real. (p. 94)

If we are to take this idiom seriously it commits us to the idea that there are two parts to the mental; one part is completely inner and the other part is outer. But this is certainly in direct contradiction with the claim argued for in chapter 1 that there are no purely qualitative (i.e. non-representational) features of the mental. The only mental facts are facts about intentional content, and all such facts are dependent on the environment. This is what gives him the stronger externalist thesis that there is no aspect of an agent's conscious experience that does not depend on the environment. Behaviour-embracing mentalism seems to be incompatible with such strong externalism, since it is a stated feature of behaviour-embracing mentalism that the aspect of the mental that does depend on the environment is not sufficient for thought and cognition.

It is hard to find a charitable interpretation of this apparently direct contradiction in McCulloch's book. He seems to hold on to some version of the ontological Real Distinction between mind and body, despite his avowals to the contrary. One final sign of this is in his endorsement of what he calls an epistemological Real Distinction. According to this, the way we know minds is different in kind to the way we know the rest of the world. "[K]nowledge of the intentional is both radically distinct from and privileged with respect to scientific knowledge." (p. 13)

This is not supposed to be Descartes' distinction between first-personal knowledge of one's own mind and all other knowledge. It is a distinction between both first-personal and third-personal knowledge of what people think, see, feel, etc on the one hand and all other knowledge on the other. However what makes it slightly difficult to interpret McCulloch here is that he describes all other knowledge as 'scientific knowledge'. By completely ignoring our non-scientific everyday knowledge, he has made his epistemological observation somewhat vacuous. There is I imagine a useful distinction between non-scientific and scientific knowledge. McCulloch has identified this with the distinction between knowledge of minds and all other knowledge, thus completely confusing the issue.

McCulloch distinguishes between knowledge of the intentional and other knowledge by distinguishing between acquiescent knowledge and objectifying knowledge. Acquiescent knowledge requires a dramatic involvement in the perspective of someone else. One can have objectifying knowledge of the utterances of an alien community of the form: "She said "a rabbit is coming". But to know that she said that a rabbit is coming, we need to 'go native' and find out how to think and speak like the aliens.

The point is that in learning to think and speak like the aliens (even though only in make-believe), the linguist has to take on more or less of the aliens' world-view, at least subject to suspension of disbelief, and hence gain a facility with the aliens' conceptual repertoire. Only then will the point of the initially unintelligible doings come into focus. If this is now generalized across something as complex as a real-life culture, then, I say, it is obvious that a considerable departure from the giving of 'literal theory', and in the direction of 'dramatic portrayal', is involved. (pp. 81-82)

McCulloch (wisely) balks at endorsing a full-blown Simulation Theory as an explanation of the minds of others. Knowledge of what people mean is supposed to be given directly in perception. It should not be regarded as knowledge of a secret realm that has to be inferred from some more privileged knowledge of one's own simulated states. What people mean is out there in the observable world. McCulloch's point is just that the ability to observe meanings requires the capacity to share or engage with their perspective.

My real problem with this is that it is supposed to be contrasted with objectifying knowledge of things - knowledge which requires no engagement with the perspectives of others. McCulloch considers a series of knowledge areas as follows: "physics – chemistry – biology – folk psychology" and claims "that an interesting discontinuity occurs when we make the final move to intentional understanding" (p. 82). The discontinuity occurs because we must know what people *mean* to know their psychological states. Knowledge of intentionality is a special kind of knowledge.

But it is at least arguable that knowledge of what people mean is essential for all sorts of other knowledge (presumably *including* scientific). To know that a rose in front of me is yellow I have to know what people mean by "yellow" (or some other word with the same meaning). My knowledge is not *mediated* by knowledge of what people mean; knowing the colour of the rose is quite direct. But knowledge of what people mean is still required, in the background as it were. The same can be said of my knowledge that what someone just did was funny, aggressive or exhibited the sin of pride. I cannot know that there is a pelmet above my curtains unless I know what people mean by "pelmet" (or some synonym). And I cannot know that there is water in the glass without knowing what people mean by "water" (or some synonym).

Another problem with the idea of an epistemological Real Distinction is that our knowledge of our *own* minds does not involve any special 'dramatic portrayal'. I know that I am seeing a pen on the table and I know that there is a pen on the table. These two pieces of knowledge are extremely closely related. Nothing like a Real Distinction can be drawn between them. If McCulloch was really only trying to show that our knowledge of minds should not be assimilated to a disengaged sort of scientific knowledge, then this talk of an epistemological Real Distinction is completely out of place.

In his Introduction, McCulloch makes the very interesting claim that "to know your mind I need to know your world (in your way)" (p. 12). I was sorry that this claim was not explored carefully and in depth. In place of such an exploration there is a lot of very suggestive material - and a lot of bluster.

References

McDowell, J. 1994, *Mind and World*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Putnam, H. 1975, *Philosophical Papers vol 2: Mind, Language and Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ryle, G. 1949, *The Concept of Mind*, London: Hutchinson.