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Phenomenological Externalism and Embodied Subjectivity

Dr. Sarat Chandra Bibhar

Department of Philosophy
Janki Devi Memorial College
University of Delhi
Email-sarat@jdm.du.ac.in

Abstract

The phenomenological externalism, which challenges the traditional Cartesian separation between mind and world, begins with the epistemological real distinction, according to which we know our own minds through privileged first-person access, whereas understanding the minds of others requires re-enacting their thoughts and appreciating their perspectives. Thus, scientific or objective descriptions alone cannot fully capture embodied subjectivity.

McCulloch distinguishes between world-presenting and world-suggesting conscious states. World-presenting states, such as seeing a white object, directly present properties of the external world and therefore possess intentional content. In contrast, world-suggesting states, such as the feeling of a nettle sting, provide information about their causes but do not present those causes within experience. The sting is experienced as a bodily sensation, while the nettle itself remains absent from consciousness. Nevertheless, sensations can become integrated with intentional judgments, demonstrating continuity rather than a strict division between subjective and objective experience.

Meaning is not passively received from the world but actively constituted through subjective and intersubjective engagement. Human beings assign values and meanings within shared social contexts, creating a common world of experience. Rejecting Descartes' ontological dualism, McCulloch proposes an embodied subjectivity in which mental states are inseparable from bodily existence and environmental relations. Consciousness is fundamentally intentional, extending beyond internal sensations to encompass objects, actions, and shared practices. Phenomenological externalism therefore presents the self as embedded in the world, dissolving rigid binaries such as mind/body, self/other, and subjective/objective, and offering a unified conception of consciousness grounded in lived experience.

Keywords: Subjectivity, Consciousness, Dualism, Externalism, Mind-Body Problem

The mind-body problem becomes more intractable with the notion of intentionality and consciousness. Recent debates on mind-body problem has direct bearings with the question of intentionality: having accepted the representational character of the mental how we can make sense of the fact of intentionality, if we accept that mind and body are distinct substances. These are questions for which no satisfying solution has been found. If we have a close reading of Descartes' original text one can find that Descartes' main concern at the bottom was epistemological. He was looking for certainty through skeptical method. So it is important to give a thought on the mind-body problem from epistemological perspective.

The representational character of mind or consciousness – its being 'of' or 'about' something - is "intentionality". Hence mental states are representational and they are contentful and are always object directed. By accepting the ontological real distinction where mind and body are two separate substances the question arises that how do we make sense of the manifest fact of intentionality, the fact that mental states have content or representational characteristics? By accepting mind and body as two separate substances where do you locate the fact of intentionality? We can locate intentionality either in the mind side or the world side of the distinction. Gregory McCulloch says these two choices will lead us to two horns of a dilemma.¹ If we locate intentionality in the mind side then mind would be itself intrinsically cut off from the world. It makes intentionality mysterious. If we locate intentionality in the world side then there is no genuine content or subjectivity on the mind side of the things. This is known as two horns of the Demonic dilemma. Hence there is a need to reformulate the mind-body dualism thesis and come to advocate a form of deeper dualism. This form of dualism, according to McCulloch is a distinction between self-contained mind and mindless world².

Self-Containedness of Mind

According to self-containedness of the mind my mental experience can exist without having any body or it can occur even if nothing bodily exists.

"It might seem that the self-containedness doctrine does not follow immediately from this immaterialist point alone, since immaterialism is compatible with the idea that thinking involves being related in a certain way to, say, structures in the brain. But one could not content as Descartes does that thinking is essential to the immaterial substance's existence, since if the substance can exist without the brain, it would be able to exist without thinking (without appropriately related to structures in the brain)."³

Thinking involves being related in a certain way to the structure of the brain states, that is, if there is a certain structure of the brain we get a particular pattern of thinking. If there is no such structure of the brain there are no such pattern of thinking. One may feel that the doctrine of self-

¹McCulloch, Gregory. 2003, *Life of the Mind: An Essay on Phenomenological Externalism*, Rutledge. p.xii.

² Ibid. p.xi.

³ Ibid. p.11.

containedness does not follow from this, because self-contained mind is distinct from their body and does not depend on anything for its existence. From this it follows that the existence of mental states like having my present experience is compatible with any possible bodily state of affairs whatsoever including the state of affairs where there are no bodies at all. In this way any mental state can exist just as it is without depending on other bodies or even the body that it inhabits.

Mindless world

The individual minds are self-contained with respect to their bodies. If the minds are self-contained with respect to the material world then the material bodies of the world are exterior to the mind. And here comes the traditional problem how do the self-contained mind and the world or bodies which are exterior to the mind connect with each other. However my concern is not to establish the relationship between self-contained mind and mindless world. The question is how we formulate an argument that these material things around us are exterior to our mind.

When we say something is external to us we always attempt to know about the external thing or inquire what can be known about it. Here we need to distinguish the two different concepts: externality and exteriority. The concept of exteriority we discussed before is completely ontological. Exteriority is concerned with the dependency of the existence of one thing on the other.

Let's take vat-brain example given by Hillary Putnam.⁴ In the vat-brain example one can treat vat-brain as sharing the same cognitive profile including having the same conscious thoughts of any one whose brain it matches independently of the context or surrounding which is similar to Descartes demon story. What both demon scenario and the story of evil scientist tell us is my conscious thought or my world directed thinking can take place when there is no such external world to which it can be directed. On the one side I have my self-contained mind and on the other hand there is a mindless world. Of course in both cases there is something that stimulates them but the sources of stimulation do not comprise the environment. Because sources are not what the vat-brain or immaterial mind intends to direct their thinking. Thus we can see a deeper distinction of self-contained mind and mindless world beneath the mind-body Cartesian substance dualism. Within this Cartesian substance dualism the picture of phenomenology (intentionality), externalism and epistemology is very much blurred. Due to which we need to accept a deeper dualistic distinction a self-contained mind and a mindless world.

To give a credible account of mind we must incorporate an intelligible conception of intentionality. Gregory McCulloch suggests that to give a credible account of intentionality we need to abandon the ontological real distinction and accept the radical externalist conception of mind. And this involves developing an account of phenomenology of mind both at the first person and the at the third person level. At the first person level it is to give an account of what it is like to have thoughts and experiences. At the third person level it involves giving an account of interpretation and our

⁴ Putnam, Hillary. 1983, *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.6

grasp of the minds of others. He argues that we will have correct conception of phenomenology of content only if we have correct conception of the subject as embodied and if we approach the issue from the perspective of an epistemological real distinction that is there is an important distinction between mind and body, a distinction between the ways we should know our minds as opposed to knowing the rest of the world. Therefore this involves three major aspects which are very much necessary to give credible and proper theory of mind.

1. Radical externalist conception of mind.
2. Phenomenological and intentional conscious states both at the first and third person level.
3. A proper account of epistemological real distinction of mind and body.

Radical Externalism

A significant aspect of the Internalism-Externalism debate involves setting out exactly what counts as *internal* to a person. The meanings you grasp at least depend not just on how things are inside you but also on what your surroundings are like. Here grasping meaning itself a mental affair implicated in ones' thinking and directed at worldly things. And there is no gap between thought and its object and thus Demonic Dilemma will not come into play. This is a way in which we can avoid Demonic Dilemma by rejecting Ontological Real Distinction and also embracing some form of externalism called content externalism. However the points to be noticed here: first, we should give importance to external factors to get meaning. Secondly grasping meaning is nonetheless a mental phenomenon. So in grasping meaning both mental aspect and external aspect are interwoven with each other. Therefore the meaning is not just in the head nor is it just outside the head. To grasp meaning we should give importance to agent's mental phenomenon as well as agent's environment. Thus we see a play of both phenomenological content and externalist content here. The theory of mind here propounded is radical externalism- the subject is embodied in a meaning-laden world and not just that mental states are relational states having intrinsic properties related to some external factors. Subject does not include the object but the subject embodies itself with the object.

Phenomenological and Intentional Conscious States

Consciousness and intentionality are perhaps the two central phenomena in the philosophy of mind. According to McCulloch,

“Contemporary discussion on consciousness is always concentrated on the deliverance of the senses; things like visual experiences, or bodily sensations like tickles and stings. It is uncontroversial that such things figures in the stream of consciousness- are part of the mind's phenomenology- although what this means is of course vexed. But far less attention is paid to something that is, or ought to be, equally uncontroversial: namely that episode of

reasoning or thinking can also figure in the stream of consciousness in the same sense whatever that is.”⁵

Besides the conscious bodily sensations and awareness there is also an aspect which takes place very much along with the stream of consciousness, which is the act of thinking or believing. This thinking aspect is always paid less attention when we talk about phenomenological conscious states. The occurrence of this thought in the stream of consciousness is always with content. Hence there is a first person phenomenological dimension of content. There is also third person intentional dimension of content like what others say and think about something. Thus in this case, other people's content figure as part of my phenomenology. So to give any account of intentionality one must accommodate the fact that content can appear in consciousness or has a phenomenological dimension both at the first and third person's way.

It is true that someone who thinks consciously that 'it is raining' can clearly notice that this is what he or she is thinking. So a phenomenon is what the mind notices, then my consciously thinking that 'it is raining' can figure in my phenomenology. It is just like seeing that 'it is raining' is a way of directing my consciousness at the intentional object 'rain' so that I can be thinking that 'it is raining'. The content that 'it is raining' can figure in my phenomenological domain when I consciously think of it. My conscious thinking informed by the content that 'it is raining' my consciousness is directed to the appropriate intentional object. This is when the content can be phenomenological and relate directly to the first person point of view.

It is also important to notice that there is another way which implicates that content is phenomenological at the third-person point of view. Suppose there is a person who speaks the language he speaks you understand. On the other hand there is a person who speaks a language you do not understand. In both the cases you have auditory sensations. But in one case you only hear the utterance of the sound alone. Whereas listening to someone who speaks your language is definitely a different kind of experience from hearing someone whose language you do not know. This suggests that phenomenology embraces some of the public aspect of thinking, speaking and understanding. In communication the shared content are very much part of one's sensory experience.

Now the question arises how the first person aspect of phenomenology of content relate to the third person aspect of the phenomenology of content. It is in the successful engagement or communication or interpretation with the other that I can find out what it is like to be that other person. It is true that knowing the consciousness of another is a component of knowing their intentional states. But knowing the intentional states of other requires the knowledge of its content. This requires interpretation. So in order to interpret someone consciously one must consciously entertain the content of that person's thought. An interpreter cannot understand the interpreted

⁵ McCulloch, Gregory. 2003, *Life of the Mind: An Essay on Phenomenological Externalism*, Rutledge. p.9-10.

unless he or she understands its component. Interpreting someone involves processing the concepts or ways of thinking that they deploy in their conscious life on it. It links with the Epistemological Real Distinction. Understanding another as a thinker requires re-enactment of their thought which is a defensible, full-blooded Epistemological Real Distinction which I will deal in the next section.

Epistemological Real Distinction

Knowledge of the mind as mind is fundamentally different from the knowledge of the body. If mind do not come under the coverage of physical science then we cannot have knowledge of the mind by using the same method and concept of physical science. Hence there is a clear distinction in knowledge of mind and knowledge of body. This thought gives us the room for Epistemological Real Distinction.

Understanding others and their doings as the manifestation of their minds involve a methodology and a kind of knowledge that is radically different from methodology and knowledge involved in the physical science. According to Quine:

“When we quote a man’s utterance directly we report it almost as we might a bird’s call. However significant the utterance, direct quotation merely reports the physical incident and leaves any implication to us. On the other hand in indirect quotation we project ourselves in to what, from his remarks and other indication, we imagine the speaker’s state of mind to have been. And then we say what in our language, in natural and relevant in the state thus feigned. In the strict scientific spirit we can report all the behavior, verbal and otherwise, that may underlie our imputation of propositional attitudes, and we may go on to speculate as we pleased up on the cause and effects of this behaviour; but so long as we do not switch muses, the essential dramatic idiom of propositional attitudes will find no place.”⁶

When we utter a direct quotation we report it like bird does. But the case if reporting indirect quotation we project ourselves in to what we imagine the speaker has in his mind. Here we arrive at intentional attribution concerning others by imagining how things are from their perspective. And we make certain predictions, what they will do in that particular state of mind.

But what can be highlighted here is that understanding another’s words even as they themselves understand them is not the same as being able to use those words in their way. For example, the words might belong to a language of which one has partial grasp. Still, it is clear that only unusual reticence or disability could prevent a move from understanding to use in the intralinguistic case: an ordinary English-speaker who understood would also be able to use them. And even in the interlinguistic case, it is arguable that full understanding of a decent range of the foreigner’s utterances requires more than mere passive understanding. Certainly this is so in the important case of the skilled translator as we shall see below. Other-understanding, in the normal case,

⁶ Quine, WV. 1960, *Word and Object*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press. p. 219.

involves not just understanding their words in their way, but also the ability to use those words in their way, as vehicles of self-expression.

Quine in his book *World and Object* treats translation as the exercise of correlating expressions in the alien language with expressions in the home language.⁷ McCulloch writes,

“The principal job of the translator is to make what is alien familiar, to render the exotic in terms that make it comprehensible to the home audience. There is thus a well-known pattern of trade-offs covered by the bland phrase ‘translator’s licence’. On the one hand, the aliens have to be brought closer to us if we are to understand: on the other, we have somehow to be nudged or moved towards them if it is them we are to end up understanding, howsoever imperfectly. The bigger the cultural gap, the more licence there is, and the more plausible are claims that more or less of the alien lore ‘has no exact translation’. Here the essential translator’s skill is as developer of analogy and purveyor of hints and winks and nudges.”⁸

The fact that we acknowledge all these, the cultural gap and translator’s license is not to embrace meaning-scepticism, because there is no plausible requirement that if something can be said at all it can be said in any natural language. “It is to acknowledge that something deeper underlies successful translation, namely the ability of the translator to understand the alien discourse in its own terms.”⁹ The practice of rendering the alien familiar cannot even begin if we do not accept that there is something deeper underlies in successful translation.

But for Quine the correct focus should not be on translating, but on *going native*: becoming bilingual so as to be able to ‘bicker with the native as a brother’.¹⁰ This suggests that the person who goes native to the alien language should be able to converse with the alien as like his\her own in his language. In this whole process first of all the outsider has no knowledge of the Alien’s language. Therefore the outsider first should acquire knowledge of it as a set of object, because the alien might present her\his with a complex written lexicon and grammar.¹¹ Again the outsider should learn to recognize all of these linguistics objects as uttered. This will help the outsider to report accurately whatever the alien uttered. For example let’s take a statment that ‘Gavagai Schmavagai’ as (M). Through these process the outsider learns the meaning of (M) ‘Gavagai Schmavagai’ and translate in his\her own language as (U) ‘Rabbit is coming’.

McCulloch says there are two important things happen here moving from(M) ‘Gavagai Schmavagai’ which is objectifying knowledge to (U) ‘Rabbit is coming’, acquiescent knowledge

⁷ Quine, WV. 1960, *Word and Object*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press. p.68.

⁸ McCulloch, Gregory. 2003, *Life of the Mind: An Essay on Phenomenological Externalism*, Rutledge. p.79-80.

⁹ Ibid. p.80.

¹⁰ Quine, WV. 1960, *Word and Object*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press. p.47.

¹¹ ¹¹ McCulloch, Gregory. 2003, *Life of the Mind: An Essay on Phenomenological Externalism*, Rutledge. p.80.

. First, the outsider getting to know what the words of Alien mean. Secondly, translating the Alien's word ones learned. "Whatever the problems and license involved in any rendition from Alien to Home, this two-step procedure will start with the outsider's having to 'go native' competence with Alien sentence such as 'Gavagai Schmavagai'."¹² The difference between (M) 'Gavagai Schmavagai' and (U) 'Rabbit is coming' depends upon the ascriber's competence with (U) 'Rabbit is coming'.

The more alien the culture, the more the outsider will have to detach him\herself from his\her ordinary world-directed stance and engage in various kinds of pretence. This involves learning to think in terms of an arbitrarily different world-view. McCulloch says, "In coming to understand the Aliens' initially unintelligible dealings with them, he may have to learn mechanics all over again, perhaps in a radically unsatisfactory form. This is why utterances of attitude ascriptions, even if they essentially involve a dramatic idiom, might still be caused by underlying 'knowledge' structures rather than off-line deliberation."¹³

Understanding another as a thinker requires re-enactment of their thought. This re-enactment and imitation in acquiring knowledge of mind other language do not echo in physical science. So there is a distinction between knowledge of the mind and gaining knowledge of the world which brings out Epistemological Real Distinction. In gaining proficiency with align concepts I as an outsider make available to myself new forms of consciousness, new way of seeing the world. Here, I as an outsider have to gain access to the third person phenomenology of their behaviour and learn to see and hear meaning where there was just noise and movement. So having 'gone native' in Quine's language the translator would have already the access to the Alien's meanings and made them his own. This process is not possible by physical science. That is how the epistemological real distinction flows rather naturally out of the idea that intentional attribution or attitude ascription is essentially dramatic idiom.

Conclusion

Epistemological Real Distinction emphasizes that there is a difference between the way we know our own mind and the mind of others. Which means a purely scientific understanding of the mind cannot be the right way of understanding of the embodied subject and their thoughts. And to know the mind of others we need to re-enact their thoughts. To understand others I need to understand them as they themselves understand. However when I want to know my mind I am privileged to have direct access to it as opposed to the knowledge of the world.

The world we experience cannot be neutral world. It is we who give certain values and meaning to the world. These values and meanings are given from our point of view. The point of view can be individual or it can also be collective forming an intersubjective world of experience and meaning. To consider the world we experience that cannot be neutral, we must be in

¹² Ibid. p.81.

¹³ Ibid. p.81.

communication with each other. Unless this happens there would be nothing to base our idea of being wrong or being right in giving certain values and meaning to the world or whatever we say or think. This requires a shared environment of an intersubjective world. The collective point of view can emerge only in a shared world, an intersubjective world where two or more people share with each other. Thus we see the meaning and the values we give to the world becomes collective forming an intersubjective world of experience and meaning.

To understand intentionality of the mental we can no more accept the Ontological Real Distinction of mind and body propounded by Descartes. This gives us a challenge to find an alternative: Instead of accepting mind and body as diametrically opposed substances, we need to accept an embodied subjectivity and mindful objectivity. Intentional mental states are essentially individuated in terms of object and properties external to the thinker's body. The position of radical externalism is that mental states are not just intentional states having inner or intrinsic nature but are related to external factors. Thus we come to the meaning of embodied subjectivity. To accommodate the fact of intentionality we must take into account of both the moral and cognitive externalism and the fact that content is a phenomenological notion. Hence any thinking about any aspect of the world has to be conceived as the presentation of the world itself to the mind. This is the conception of phenomenological externalism where, the subjective cannot exclude the objective. The picture that one gets is clearly of a self-in-the-world.

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