

The New Mind: thinking beyond the head

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Abstract Throughout much of the modern period, the human mind has been regarded as a property of the brain and therefore something confined to the inside of the head—a view commonly known as ‘internalism’. But recent works in cognitive science, philosophy, and anthropology, as well as certain trends in the development of technology, suggest an emerging view of the mind as a process not confined to the brain but spread through the body and world—an outlook covered by a family of views labelled ‘externalism’. In this paper, we will suggest there is now sufficient momentum in favour of externalism of various kinds to mark a historical shift in the way the mind is understood. We dub this emerging externalist tendency the ‘New Mind’. Key properties of the New Mind will be summarised and some of its implications considered in areas such as art and culture, technology, and the science of consciousness.

Keywords Internalism · Externalism · Conscious mind · Neuroscience · Technology · Culture

1 Introduction

For much of recorded human history, in both the European and Asian traditions, the question of how to understand that

most ever present yet elusive property of our existence—that fact that we have conscious minds—has occupied some of our greatest thinkers and provoked endless controversy. Since at least the time of Descartes, which marked the beginnings of modern science and philosophy, it has been widely held that the mind is a subjective entity that is ultimately separate from the objective material world. As Whitehead (1925), among others, pointed out, this notion was intrinsic to the conceit of scientific objectivity, sustaining a programme of scientific investigation that was free to omit subjective properties like quality, intentionality, meaning, and free will from its calculations.

The latter part of the last century, however, witnessed a significant shift in which it became respectable, indeed fashionable, for scientists to apply newly emerging methods of experimentation (such as brain scanning) to the ‘search for consciousness’ (Jennings 2000) and to find a place for the subjective mind inside the ‘natural order’ (Searle 1992). Unfortunately, despite much good work, the question of what the mind is has not become clearer, with multiple competing theories and viewpoints vying for attention within the increasingly crowded field of ‘consciousness studies’. Even a brief survey of literature reveals that many prominent views about the nature of the conscious mind conflict on basic assumptions (such as the question of where the mind is located, as we will see), and there is little, if any, common agreement about the fundamental criteria that constitute a conscious mind as opposed to any other kind of entity (see for example Searle 2000; Seth et al. 2005; Ward 2011). Indeed, some of the key researchers leading the so-called quest to locate the conscious mind have admitted that trying to define the very thing that is being sought is, at the present stage of research, neither necessary nor useful: “Historically, significant scientific progress has commonly been achieved in

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