

Preface to *Mental Causation, Externalism and Self-Knowledge*

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A deep-rooted presumption about the human mind and human agency is that mental states have significant causal influence on the way people act: When we perceive a person as performing a certain action, e.g. as reaching for a glass of water, we cannot but assume that her behaviour is driven by her thoughts, convictions, wishes or feelings, e.g. by the desire to have a drink of water. In particular, we presume that the contents of a person's thoughts causally influence her outward physical behaviour: The person's belief that the glass in front of her contains water, rather than machine oil, causes her reaching for the glass to quench her thirst. At the same time, it is commonly supposed that we have privileged access to our mental states, including beliefs and desires, without having to draw on empirical evidence: If a person believes that the glass in front of her contains water and desires to have a drink, she does not have to rely on empirical observation of her body and environment in order to know that she has this belief and desire.

From a common-sense point of view, these assumptions appear highly plausible. From a philosophical perspective, however, they raise a number of controversially discussed issues. If one endorses, as most contemporary analytic philosophers do, a physicalist picture of the world, the first assumption—that there is mental causation—leads to the problem of causal exclusion famously pointed out by Kim: Given that each mental property is realized by a physical property and that each physical state has a sufficient physical cause, how is it possible that mental states can cause behaviour?

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The second assumption—that the content of people’s mental states is causally relevant to their behaviour—appears problematic in view of the thesis of externalism concerning mental content, according to which some mental properties involve contents which partially depend on causal, historical or social relations to the environment. For instance, whether a person who describes her belief by the utterance ‘the glass in front of me contains water’ has a belief about H₂O or about XYZ depends on whether the transparent liquid called ‘water’ in her linguistic community has the chemical structure H₂O or XYZ. Yet, this raises the question whether such external aspects can be causally relevant to a person’s actions or whether a person’s actions are rather completely determined by her internal states.

The third assumption—that we have privileged access to our own mental states—is also called into question by the thesis of externalism. For if, as externalism has it, the content of some of our mental states is partially determined by empirical states, it is not clear how subjects can have complete knowledge of their mental states without drawing on empirical observation.

The papers contained in this volume have been selected as novel contributions to the debate on these three fundamental questions. They are purported to cover a wide range of positions within the field. The first part of the volume consists of articles which are primarily concerned with the causal exclusion problem; the second part is devoted to articles on the topics of externalism and self-knowledge. Most of the papers were originally presented at an international conference on mental causation, externalism, and self-knowledge which took place in Tübingen in October 2005 as part of the research project “Self-Consciousness and Concept Formation” (project leader: Prof. Newen). We would like to thank the VolkswagenStiftung for financing this event and the chief editor of *Erkenntnis*, Hans Rott, for inviting us to organize a special issue on this topic.

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