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DISPOSITIONALISM AND REALISM

SUMMARY: In this commentary, I invite Krzysztof to adopt a dispositionalist analysis of the belief concept and to draw the distinction between what is real and what is not in a way that does not beg the question against dispositionalism. Because his arguments against the dispositionalist analysis of the belief concept fall short, he certainly could do so.

KEYWORDS: dispositionalism, eliminativism, beliefs, mental causation.

1. Introduction

Having been a card-carrying eliminativist in the past, I know how hard it is just to get philosophers to give the view a fair hearing. I am therefore impressed not only by Krzysztof's persistence in pursuing these questions but also by his accomplishments, which I certainly cannot claim, the most recent of which is this book. For this reason alone, it would be both an honor and a pleasure to comment on this book. But, in addition to that, in writing this book, Krzysztof has done philosophers of mind a great service. The slim book we have in our hands is an up-to-date investigation into the reality of beliefs, or lack thereof, which should and most probably will serve as the starting point for any serious work on the metaphysics of beliefs. Therefore, if I happen to make some interest-

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ing and, maybe, some true claims in this commentary, it will be due in no small part to Krzyszttof's work.

Krzyszttof tells us that his book has three aims. These are, roughly: (i) to provide a new logical space of positions on the metaphysics of beliefs, (ii) to argue for a specific position in this logical space, minimal non-realism, and (iii) to state the relationship between this position and common sense. Unfortunately, I cannot cover all these points in depth. I will focus on (i) but I will also draw some of the consequences of what I will say for (iii). And even with this limited scope I will keep many of my questions and worries for myself. I should also say that given the nature of this contribution, I will allow myself to be less guarded when making claims, and more speculative. Hopefully this will make for a more lively read.

I favor a dispositionalist view of our mental state concepts, that is, I take mental states to be best conceptualized as dispositions to behave in specific ways in specific circumstances. Two comments on this. First, I do not say "behaviorist". Behaviorism is a dispositionalist view of a reductive kind, that is, to wit, according to behaviorism, mental states concepts are best conceptualized without using mental terms. I think, like virtually everyone else, that this kind of dispositionalism is a dead end. When I write "dispositionalism" to denote the view I favor, one should then hear "non-reductive dispositionalism". Second, if I say "best conceptualized" it is not because I intend to do any kind of conceptual engineering. I am interested in understanding what we ordinarily mean by "belief", not in reforming our uses. It is just that, given that the search for necessary and sufficient conditions is a goose chase, some choices have to be made if one wants to arrive at a reasonably precise characterization of beliefs. And these choices are going to be driven mainly by one's philosophical position on other topics, i.e., there is going to be a best way to conceptualize beliefs depending on one's philosophical commitments.

Given that I favor dispositionalism, my reader will not be surprised to hear that I am going to focus on what Krzyszttof writes about dispositionalism in this book. I think, though, that this will allow me to uncover a number of problems with the ideas Krzyszttof defends.

I take it that the first and still to this day best articulation of dispositionalism ever published has been given by Ryle in *The Concept of Mind*. I will not, however, discuss Ryle here.¹ So when I talk about dispositionalism, I talk about the view as just defined and I express my vision of it.

The way I will proceed is that I will follow the book and pick up on the passages that are relevant for my purpose. I could have chosen, instead, to go directly to the passage(s) which I think is (are) central to what I have to say. But I think this way of proceeding is better for several reasons. First, it will hopefully make for a more pleasant read (more than what precedes, hopefully). Second,

¹ I should note though, that, unfortunately, Krzyszttof endorses the old saw that Ryle was an analytic behaviorist (6) (cf. Graham, 2023). Even a cursory reading of *The Concept of Mind* will show that this is not the case (for recent scholarship on this, see Crawford, 2013; Kremer, 2017).

I hope this will show my fellow dispositionalists that, though, from a dispositionalist perspective, things start getting problematic on page 74 at the latest, they should read on, as there is a lot to get out of reading the book in its entirety. Third, this should make it easier for the reader of this commentary to understand what I am driving at. Without further ado, then, let us start.

2. That Dispositionalism Is Not (Necessarily) a Non-Realist View

In the first four chapters of the book Krzysztof describes a new logical space of positions on the metaphysics of beliefs. The idea, in a nutshell, is to say that even if one agrees that some of the claims we make about beliefs are true, i.e., beliefs exist, one can still claim that they are not real. (It is therefore a non-realism but it is minimal; hence “minimal non-realism”). And this turns, roughly, on whether beliefs are natural properties—that is, whether (i) they constitute a natural kind, (ii) they are causally efficacious and (iii) there is a naturalistic story to tell about their content. Then, before arguing for negative answers to these questions in Chapter 6 (and therefore for minimal non-realism), Krzysztof, in Chapter 5, looks at recent history to find precedents to his view. His view, he tells us, is “modelled on some of the existing positions”.

One of these positions is dispositionalism. Here, his reasoning seems to be as follows. Dispositionalists take it that beliefs are dispositions. This means two things. First, beliefs are superficial features whose existence is easily ascertainable. And indeed, they exist. Second, beliefs are not “cogs in a cognitive architecture” (to use Devin Curry’s helpful turn of phrase; Curry, 2018) and are therefore not explanatory. It follows from this that they are not natural entities. As a consequence, they are not real.

To my mind, something went wrong in this chain of reasoning. Dispositionalists say that beliefs are dispositions. Krzysztof contends that, *just because* they say this, they are then committed to saying that beliefs are not real. Now, needless to say, he is free to draw the line between the natural and the non-natural where he wants to draw it, but then, if he goes on saying that dispositionalists are therefore, ipso facto, anti-realists about belief, it seems to me that he is using the word “anti-realist” in such a way that, I think, dispositionalists should leave the boat. Why would beliefs not be real *just because* they are dispositions? Why would dispositionalists, just because they are dispositionalists, be considered anti-realists?

If one wants to continue characterizing the debate between anti-realism and realism in terms of the distinction between the natural and its negation, one does best, it seems to me, to draw this distinction in a way that is sensitive to the kind of things to which it applies and, consequently, in a way that does not immediately put dispositions on the non-natural side. Is there a way to do that? There is. I will not give a complete account because this is not my goal here but here are two (partial) options:

- (i) According to dispositionalists, believing is a multi-track disposition, that is, a disposition composed of distinct dispositions. (Think of dispositions as being specified by counterfactual conditionals and think of a multi-track disposition as being specified by a conjunction of such conditionals).

First option:

- Ask the following question: Do these dispositions cluster together, that is, do they co-occur with the same entity in a law-like way?
- How do you answer this question? Look at (scientific) psychology. If the answer is yes, then the multi-track disposition is a natural property and beliefs are real. If not, then it is not, and beliefs are not real.

- (ii) Dispositions are often taken to have categorical bases. The categorical basis of a disposition is the property or the set of properties such that it is in virtue of having this property/these properties that the entity has this disposition.

Second option:

- Ask the following question: Is this categorical basis the same across believers?
- How do you answer this question? Look at (cognitive) neuroscience. If the answer is yes, then the multi-track disposition is a natural property and beliefs are real.

I invite Krzysztof to revise his conception of what is real in light of these suggestions in order to make room for dispositionalism.

3. Looking for the Non-Dispositionalist “Superficial” Analysis of the Belief Concept

The fact that Krzysztof assumes that in order to be real beliefs would have to be internal states is clear from a number of passages in the book. For example, commenting on his negative verdict on the viability of eliminativism (which, in this context, he calls “irrealism”), he writes:

even if we had good reasons to reject both irrealism about beliefs and the negative ontological claim about them, this would not in itself show that there are good reasons to think that there are indeed beliefs *in the sense that we have internal, causally active states which are vehicles of propositional contents*. (Pośtajko, 2024, p. 31, emphasis added)

What makes it especially clear that he makes this assumption, however, is the fact that “the position that can be said to relate to the strong realist view most closely [...] is the position of representationalism about beliefs” according to which—leaving details aside that I do not think are relevant here—beliefs are mental representations.

Thus, in Krzysztof's rendering of the debate over realism about beliefs, his view, minimal non-realism, has two rivals: dispositionalism and representationalism about beliefs. Each view disagrees with a part of Krzysztof's view. Krzysztof's view is close to dispositionalism in that he holds that beliefs are not real (I have just argued that this is not the right way to conceive of the distinction between the real and the non-real as it applies to mental states, but, for the sake of the argument, I now go along with Krzysztof). However, when it comes to analyzing the concept of belief, Krzysztof parts ways with dispositionalism. Krzysztof's view is close to representationalism in that he holds that the belief concept is not a dispositional concept. However, Krzysztof parts ways with representationalism in that he contends that beliefs are not real. The three views can be contrasted along two lines: (i) whether beliefs are real and (ii) whether they analyze beliefs as dispositions or not. Here is what it looks like:

Table 1

"Minimal Non-Realism" Compared to Its Rivals

	Dispositional Analysis of the Belief Concept	Realism
Dispositionalism	Yes	No
"Minimal Non-Realism"	No	No
Representationalism	No	Yes

Note. Table prepared by the author.

Remember that all three views agree on the fact that beliefs exist, which means, in this picture, that, in order to determine whether someone believes something, "we only need to engage in trivial conceptual analysis and empirical observations" (p. 37). Now, it is clear that the content of the dispositionalist concept of beliefs can deliver this: the conceptual analysis is not complicated, and one can check by empirical observation—I suppose—whether someone has the requisite multi-track disposition.²

It is unclear, however, how Krzysztof delivers this. He seems to want to distinguish his view from dispositionalism, but, if his analysis of the concept of belief is not the dispositionalist one, what is this analysis? (If, as it seems, he agrees with the representationalist on that point, the latter faces the same ques-

² If one wants to say, as I have done in the previous section, that the dispositionalist can distinguish between the existence of beliefs and their reality, we have to imagine that the concept of beliefs places very little demand on someone to be deemed a believer. We can imagine for example a disjunction of disposition to assert things or to act in a way that would be successful if the belief was true or something like that. Schwitzgebel speaks of the concept of belief as being a stereotype (2002). That is congenial to this picture.

tion). Maybe I missed the relevant passage, but as far as I can see, he never states what it is. On page 65, Krzysztof does talk about “common-sense criteria” for the ascription of a belief that p , but the criteria he gives (having claimed that p , answering affirmatively when asked whether p , “exhibit[ing] some behavioral dispositions related to this belief”) are all things a dispositionalist could agree with. He concludes by writing “and so on”. It may be, then, that a dispositionalist would disagree with what he has in mind. But in order to make this determination, I would need to know what other criteria he is thinking about.

Answering this question is supposed to be easy. It is “easy ontology”, according to Thomasson (2015), who is Krzysztof’s main source of inspiration. Do tables exist? Just check whether some entities in the world have a plane surface that supports stuff, such that you can put things on it. If there are, then tables exist. If there is a “superficial” analysis of the belief concept, which is not the dispositional analysis, however, it is unclear to me what it could be. Here, things do not seem to be easy. Maybe I put too much stress on this source of inspiration, and I should read Krzysztof differently, but I do not see a better way. Hopefully, he will offer some clarifications that will help. (I make a suggestion in the next section).

4. Packing Concepts is Bad for One’s Back

Up until now, I have only been discussing the new logical space of positions on the metaphysics of beliefs that Krzysztof aims to provide. That is his first objective in the book. His second objective is to argue that beliefs are not natural and therefore not really real. I will not have anything to say about this. I am too much of a dispositionalist to spend time discussing Krzysztof’s argument against the representationalist theory of mind. I also find this theory wrong, and I have arguments of my own, more fundamental than Krzysztof’s, against this theory.³ What I will now do is take a look at what he says as a way to reach his third aim, namely, “to inquire into the relation between the minimal non-realist approach and commonsense” (2). I follow my thread of discussing what Krzysztof says about dispositionalism. This is going to lead us to that.

As I just said, Krzysztof does not tell us what a superficial analysis of the belief concept, which is not the dispositional analysis, is. That he does not explicitly say what it is, is surprising. What he says about what he calls “common-sense functionalism”, which is the view presented by Jackson and Pettit as a response to eliminativism, might help: it is about people satisfying a number of platitudes, namely asserting that p and other things (p. 36). Close to dispositionalism, then, but not dispositionalism: functionalism. Krzysztof does not endorse this view. But maybe he should. I will not focus on this, though. Instead, I will focus on what Krzysztof explicitly does, namely criticizing the dispositionalist analysis of

³ They can be found in (Bantegnie, 2026). If reviewer permits, this paper will be published at some point. The interested reader should feel free to reach out to me.

the belief concept. What I will say below may or may not show that the way I have laid out Krzysztuf's view about the logical space of positions should be revised. Given that I am not entirely sure what he says, I will not examine the question, preferring to leave all the interpretive threads loose instead of tying up the loose ones. He will most likely pick them up. This should make for interesting discussion.

In Chapter 7, he argues that part and parcel of our belief concept is the idea that beliefs are concrete internal states entering into causal relations. To me this is the most puzzling part of the book. I have a hard time understanding why Krzysztuf argues for this conclusion because I do not see why he thinks that he needs to do that. Actually, there seems to me to be clear reasons why he should *not* argue for this view (more on this below). I am genuinely looking forward to hearing what he will say about this but, in the meantime, allow me to explain why I think he should not argue for this view, as far as I can see.

Krzysztuf seems to think that dispositionalism is a threat to his view. In Chapter 7, and in contradiction to what he says in Chapter 5, he seems to think that a dispositionalist can say that beliefs are real. I have criticized what he says in Chapter 5 and argued for this very claim above, in Section 1. I therefore agree with him. And yet I find it very hard to understand Krzysztuf's shift. Here is what he seems to think in both chapters.

- In Chapter 5, he seems to take dispositionalists to think that the folk conceive of mental states as internal states entering into causal relations and to argue that this is not so: beliefs are dispositions. Therefore, according to dispositionalists, or so they are presented, the folk are mistaken; hence the fact that dispositionalism is seen as a form of non-realism.
- In Chapter 7, he seems to take dispositionalists to think that the folk conceive of mental states as dispositions. And beliefs are indeed dispositions. Therefore, according to dispositionalists, or so they are presented, the folk are right; hence the fact that dispositionalism is seen as a form of realism.

With this in hand, how are dispositionalists, as presented in Chapter 7, seen as a threat to Krzysztuf's minimal non-realism? Krzysztuf, let's assume, has shown in Chapter 6 that beliefs are not internal states entering into causal relations. But, if this is not how the folk conceptualize beliefs, then the folk are not wrong; ergo, Krzysztuf's non-realism is mistaken.

I do not see what else Krzysztuf could be saying in the first Section of Chapter 7 and several passages point towards this interpretation, the last paragraph of the Section being maybe the clearest example:

Minimal non-realism, in opposition to neo-behaviourism and interpretivism, is intended to be a version of anti-realism about belief. But, as the considerations presented above show, adherence to the claim that belief properties are not natural in Lewis's sense is not in itself enough to classify a position as being a specimen of belief anti-realism. What is also needed is some sort of commitment to the idea that the folk notion of belief is in the wrong with respect to mental reality. (Pośajko, 2024, p. 117)

However, this strikes me as wrong-headed. Krzysztof offers us a criterion for what is real and what is not: it is about the property being natural or not. What the folk think about this is not relevant. Whether this is a thought that they have just in virtue of thinking about beliefs (it is part of their concept of belief), or whether this is a thought that they have about beliefs that is not constitutive of what beliefs are according to them (this is an empirical view), what the folk think is irrelevant either way. To put it otherwise, if we adopt the characterization Krzysztof gives of what is real, whether non-realism is true has nothing to do with what the folk think.

But that is not all: if Krzysztof says that contrary to what people think is constitutive about belief, beliefs are not internal entities entering in causal relationships, if, as he says, “there is some error involved in this concept” (p. 128), how can we still say that there are beliefs in the first place. That is, how does minimal non-realism not collapse into classical eliminativism? I do not see how. And if it does, it is Krzysztof's whole enterprise of offering an alternative form of non-realism that collapses; hence my claim that he should not argue for the view that part and parcel of our belief concept is the idea that beliefs are concrete internal states entering into causal relations.⁴ This is not good for him!

5. That the Dispositionalist Analysis of Belief Concepts is Still Standing

As I argued in Section 1, a dispositionalist can make perfect sense of the distinction between natural and non-natural mental entities. A dispositionalist can therefore be a minimal realist, or so it seems. Maybe Krzysztof should adopt dispositionalism then. The problem, however, is that he gives arguments against the dispositionalist analysis of the belief concept. Therefore, if I wanted to con-

⁴ Here I continue to mean by “eliminativism” what Krzysztof means by it himself when he introduces it in Chapter 2. There he writes: “[...] in its purest form, eliminative materialism is committed to the claim that all elementary attributions of beliefs are false and beliefs do not exist” (p. 14). Later, in Section 7.5, titled *Truth in Eliminativism* he seems to be implicitly using a different characterization of eliminativism, as the contrast which he draws with his view, that he calls “revisionist-preservationist” (p. 136), and eliminativism, suggests that eliminativism is the view that we should stop using the belief concept. This is not what I mean by “eliminativism”.

vince him that he should join me in the dispositionalist camp, for his own good, I should address his worries. Unsurprisingly, I think the arguments he gives are weak. Before drawing this commentary to a close, I will show why.

The first argument he takes from Frances Egan, in a paper from the nineties (1995).⁵ I might as well cite the passage he cites and whose argument he endorses:

We often say things such as “He believed he was about to be fired because he saw a confidential memo that criticized his job performance” and “She quit smoking because she believed it was affecting her health”. There is no reason to suppose “because” functions any differently here than in locutions which are clearly causal, such as “The fire started because the electrical system was overloaded”. In claiming that common sense explanations of belief fixation and action are not causal, despite appearances, the neo-Rylean assumes a rather heavy burden of proof. (Egan, 1995, pp. 187–88)

Krzysztof concurs, saying that we should take the folk idiom at face value and not attempt to paraphrase it. The first comment I would like to make on Egan’s objection is that she presents a mistaken view of dispositionalism in this passage. Dispositionalism need not and probably should not say that belief fixation is not causal: a dispositionalist has no good reason, just in virtue of being dispositionalist, to say, to paraphrase, that the fixation of the multi-track dispositions that beliefs are is not causal. (Why would not the acquisition of a disposition be caused, I wonder...). The second thing to say is the following. In many contexts, “because” is used to express a non-causal explanation, as when we say, “The temperature in the room has dropped because the kinetic energy of the air molecules has lowered” or when we say, “7 is a prime number because it is divisible only by 1 and itself”. There is a huge literature on explanations of actions by means of reasons which *are not* causal explanations. Obviously, many people do not think that these explanations just appear as causal. Therefore, I would be curious to hear Egan explain to me how she determined that explanations by means of beliefs “appear” causal. Krzysztof does allude to non-causal views of action explanations. Yet he begs the question when he writes:

this putative special character of folk psychology does not provide us with enough evidence for the claim that the word “because” functions differently in the context of explanations in which we use beliefs than it does in other forms of causal explanations. (Pośtajko, 2024, p. 120)

Second, Egan also writes:

⁵ I do not know whether Egan still subscribes to what she wrote in this paper.

The case for a causal construal of belief-desire attributions does not rest solely on linguistic intuitions [...]. Of present relevance is the fact that a large and influential body of research in empirical psychology is predicated on the claim that beliefs, desire, and more permanent conditions such as character traits are implicated in causal explanations of behavior. (Egan, 1995, pp. 187–188)

Krzysztof concurs. My first comment is of the same nature as before: one of the things Egan says in this passage is completely false. She talks about explanations by means of character traits as causal. However, it is—at the very least—plausible to conceive of character traits as dispositional in nature. And, if so, explanations by means of character traits are not causal. Second, Krzysztof invokes the literature in mind-reading. It is not entirely clear to me what his argument is. He writes the following: “there is a strong consensus among psychologists that the attribution of beliefs to other subjects is used for behavior prediction” (p. 120). And this suggests that he takes it that dispositionalists cannot vindicate this. But they can: if I know that sugar is soluble at room temperature, this helps me predict what will happen to a sugar cube if I put it in water at room temperature and stir the water for a few seconds. Here once again, arguing against dispositionalism would take much more than this, namely, it would require showing that one *has* to interpret psychological findings in a way that constitutively mental states are taken to cause our actions in order to make sense of them. And this, neither Egan, in this paper, nor Krzysztof, have done (cf. Footnote 3 of the current paper).⁶

6. Conclusion

In the end, I think that the picture of the logical space of positions on the metaphysics of beliefs Krzysztof offers is mistaken (dispositionalist is not well located) because he draws on a mistaken conception of what it is to be real (this was Section 2). He has not provided us with a non-dispositional analysis of the belief concept (that was Section 3), which, even though that is awkward, is not that big of an issue. But he packs the belief concept with too many things for the good of his minimal non-realism (that was Section 4). I suggest he should go for dispositionalism and, because his arguments against the dispositionalist analysis of the belief concept fall short (that was Section 5), he certainly could. I therefore

⁶ I should note that both Egan and, following her, Krzysztof assume that dispositions are not causes. I agree with this claim. And this is why I do not dispute it. An action that is the manifestation of, e.g., a belief is not an effect of the belief; it is partly constitutive of what it is to believe. One could say that a belief is a causal power the agent has, that is, a power to cause specific actions in specific circumstances. However, according to dispositionalism as I mean it here, in the wake of Ryle, the right analysis of the concept of belief is not that believers are disposed to cause their actions but that they are disposed to act. Showing as much is irrelevant to my purpose here. I will therefore stop here.

invite Krzysztof (i) to adopt a dispositionalist analysis of the belief concept and (ii) to draw the distinction between what is real and what is not in the way I did.

Krzysztof's book is very much a product of its time. This is a good thing: he updates the debate. This is also less than a good thing. First, the way he conceptualizes the distinction between the real and the non-real seems to reflect a view of science that overstresses its explanatoriness. Second, the weakness of his arguments for the thesis that we conceptualize beliefs as internal states entering into causal relationships suggests that he is beholden to this dogma of contemporary philosophy of mind.⁷

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⁷ Thanks to Eric Schwitzgebel for helpful discussion.