

Lecture 4 - Internalism vs externalism about intentionality

Suggested reading

- Putnam, H. (1975), 'The meaning of 'meaning''
- Burge, T. (1979), 'Individualism and the mental'
- Farkas, K. (2003), 'What is externalism?'
- Perry, J. (1979), 'The problem of the essential indexical'

1 The "Twin Earth" argument for externalism

Externalism about intentionality is the view that the content of our intentional states is *essentially* determined by things that are outside our brains and bodies.

- Internalists can accept that there are things outside us that can cause us to have intentional states. But they hold that such relations are not essential to those intentional states. Those states can occur even if none of those external things existed.

The classic argument for externalism is based on the 'Twin Earth' thought experiment invented by Hilary Putnam (1975).

Suppose there is a planet, Twin Earth, that is identical to our Earth with only one exception: what they call water, the stuff that flows in rivers and quenches thirst and so on, has a different chemical composition called XYZ, rather than H₂O. Suppose I and my identical twin on Twin Earth are both thinking about the thing we call "water" (E.g. we both think "Water quenches thirst"). The argument runs as follows:

- (I) My twin and I are molecule-for-molecule identical.*
- (II) The object of my twin's thought is XYZ, the object of my thought is H₂O. (My twin is thinking about XYZ, I am thinking about H₂O.)
- (III) XYZ ≠ H₂O.
- (IV) If two people are thinking the same thing, then they are thinking about the same thing. (Same content, same object)
- (V) My twin and I are not thinking about the same thing.
- (VI) Therefore, my twin and I have different thoughts when we both think "Water quenches thirst". (Our thoughts have different contents, because our objects of thought are different.)

(*Ignore for the moment that our bodies are made up of quite a bit of water, so my twin and I cannot actually be molecule-for-molecule identical. See Farkas 2003 for why this complication doesn't affect the argument.)

- This argument shows that the contents of many of our intentional states do not essentially depend on internal brain/bodily states. Even though my twin and I are identical, we have different thoughts when we think "Water quenches thirst", because the content of our thoughts are essentially determined by external objects - H₂O for me, XYZ for my twin.
- Burge's (1979) variation on this Twin Earth case aims to establish 'social externalism' - that intentional contents essentially depend on the norms of our social environments. This argument is different to the one above and so calls for different responses. (See the SEP entry 'Externalism about Mental Content'.)

2 Indexical thought

The crucial premise is (IV) – ‘same content, same object’.

Indexical thoughts – thoughts expressed using indexical terms like ‘here’, ‘now’, ‘I’ – present a possible counterexample to it.

- If I say in London ‘It’s raining here’, and you say in Cambridge ‘It’s raining here’, there is a clear sense in which we’ve both expressed the same thoughts (the content of our thoughts is the same). But we are thinking about different places. So we have a case where (IV) doesn’t hold - we are thinking the same thing, but we are thinking *about* different places.

The externalist could respond by saying that indexical terms can be eliminated in favour of non-indexical ones.

- ‘It’s raining here’ uttered in London and ‘It’s raining here’ uttered in Cambridge are thoughts with different content, because ‘here’ in the first instance should be replaced by ‘in London’, and in the latter instance by ‘in Cambridge’.
- See Evans (1981) ‘Understanding demonstratives’ for a defence of the Fregean view that the sense associated with indexicals is different for everyone who utters them.
- But this move doesn’t *always* work, e.g. see Perry’s (1979) case of the messy shopper. The indexical judgement ‘I am making a mess’ (as opposed to the merely descriptive judgement ‘the shopper with the leaky bag is making a mess’) is essential to explain why the messy shopper acts as he does.

3 Seeing and hallucinating

- If the object-directed states must be directed on objects that exist, how can they be states which fundamentally involve the mind representing objects a certain way?
- Representationalists about visual perception hold that all visual experiences are fundamentally states with intentional content. If the subject is causally related in the right way to the object of the visual experience, then the visual experience counts as a state of seeing. If not, then the subject is hallucinating. (See SEP entries ‘The problem of perception’, section 3.3, and ‘The contents of perception’.)
 - This is analogous to the solution Crane offers to the problem of non-existence. Hallucinations are like thoughts about the non-existent.
- In contrast, naive realists hold that states of seeing fundamentally involve relations to the objects seen in the external world. They accept the *disjunctivist* view that seeing and hallucinating are fundamentally different kinds of state - visual experiences are *either* seeings *or* hallucinations.

So - do we go with a unified representationalist theory of intentionality, or might we have reason to adopt a disjunctive view?

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