

### What's in the head: Stalnaker

**EXTERNALISM.** Putnam declared: 'Cut the pie any way you like, "meanings" just ain't in the head!' (see also our selection from RTH). Burge took it further: 'beliefs, desires, hope and fears ain't in the head either'. He argued that intentional states depend not only on external environmental facts (like the chemical structure of water) but also on social conditions (facts about the linguistic practices of the speaker's community). Burge called the thesis being attacked—that intentional mental states are intrinsic properties—'individualism'.

Stalnaker notes that, in retrospect, this conclusion should not have been surprising, as semantic and intentional properties are generally relational properties, characterised by relations between an agent and the object of his thought.

**PARADOXICAL CONSEQUENCES OF WIDE CONTENT.** Despite the apparent necessity of wide content for talking and thinking about things outside ourselves, the anti-individualistic (=externalistic) thesis remains controversial because it yields strange consequences:

*Epistemic authority* If what we think is not solely determined by what is in the head, it seems we might not have the authority over what we mean or think.

*Causal relevance* The anti-individualistic thesis appears incompatible with the traditional explanatory role of intentional mental states: we normally explain behaviour based on what people believe and want...

**REVISIONISM.** According to the revisionist, ordinary concepts of belief and desire are relational and non-individualistic, but, since they don't serve well to explain behaviour, they must be revised to become properly scientific. We distinguish between two claims:

*Negative claim* No systematic explanatory theory of behaviour will be tenable unless it is individualistic.

*Positive claim* Ordinary intentional psychological concepts can be revised in a way that renders them individualistic while preserving the basic structure of intentional explanation.

The revisionist strategy is to forge an individualistic theory by 'factoring out the "organismic contribution" to an intentional mental state'. This 'contribution' is the component of the state dependent or supervenient on the internal states of the agent. The resulting notion of narrow belief must be: 170

*Ontologically intrinsic* Narrow belief must not be 'not contingent on anything external' to the believer (see the weight/mass analogy). 174

*Semantically relational* It must still be expressed as a relation between the believer and some kind of content, using a relational predicate together with content to pick out an intrinsic property.

The revisionist tries to accomplish this by narrowing the content of the belief. 175

**THE FOOTPRINT ANALOGY.** Stalnaker argues that the abstract strategy of factoring out faces conceptual difficulties illustrated by the footprint analogy. The ordinary concept of a footprint is causal-relational: it is a footprint in virtue of the way it was caused. You don't get to be a footprint merely by having a certain shape resembling the shape of a foot. 171

Now revisionists are likely to define a 'narrow footprint' as a 'foot-shaped indentation, whatever its cause', thereby isolating the internal state of the sand from the specific causal history. This narrowed concept is still relational. It no longer depends on the particular cause, but it still depends on 'general facts that are extrinsic to the sand', such as the normal shape of feet in the relevant environment. 172

The success of defining a narrow concept relies on a substantive presupposition that the things picked out by the original relational property are similar in an appropriate way. This often necessitates idealisation (e.g., excluding deformed feet or distorting conditions) to ensure the defined property is stable and can be generalized about. If, however, the initial relational concept is too broad (e.g., a print made by a foot of any animal, including hooves and paws), the attempt to abstract away from causal origin may result in a complex disjunctive concept that would be fairly useless for theory.

**CRITIQUE OF FODOR.** Jerry Fodor suggested to interpret narrow content as a function from context to wide content. This concept is modeled on Kaplan's distinction between character and content used in the theory of demonstratives.

*Remark 1.* Digression on Kaplan's view...

According to Fodor, narrow content is a mapping that takes a context (which includes any external fact relevant to content determination) into the thought's truth-conditions (wide content).

Stalnaker objects that this abstract argument tells us what narrow content *should* be, but doesn't tell us how to specify such mappings, or how the relevant function is determined solely by what is in the believer's head. Secondly, Fodor's abstract account is motivated by highly speculative empirical presupposition that beliefs are internal sentences (Language of Thought), whose internal functional role determines the context-to-content function.

Generally, Twin Earth situations makes it look easier than it is to 'factor out' the contributions of the external environment. We are simply told that X and Twin X share every intrinsic property, but we can't infer from this what those intrinsic properties are.

**CRITIQUE OF DENNETT.** Dennett suggested 'notional attitude psychology' to define narrow content without relying on the Language of Thought. Dennett's Definition: Narrow contents are propositions (sets of possible worlds = notional worlds) defined purely by the internal properties of the organism. Intrinsically identical individuals are defined to share the same notional world. The notional world is determined by trying to describe the environment for which the organism, as actually constituted, is best fitted. Propositions true in these ideal environments are the narrow contents.

Stalnaker objects to this strategy too, noting that the best fitted worlds often look more like worlds where the organism's conative attitudes are satisfied than worlds where its beliefs are true. Dennett fails to distinguish cognitive states from passive, non-cognitive features. For example, a porcupine's quills make it best fitted for a world with predators, yet if the porcupine is oblivious (well, in his own porcupinish way) to those predators, we oughtn't populate its notional world (which, by Dennett's definition, must exist!) with those predators.

Finally, we should be on guard against Dennett's unreasonable 'optimism'. If I walk in Boston going about my Boston-related business, we have no reason to expect a full explanation not to mention Boston and its topography. In other words, we don't expect to recover information about my behaviour in Boston from an internalist description of what's going with me that is purified of any mention of any thing beyond the boundaries of my skin.

**SUMMARY.** The narrow content project, Stalnaker concludes, is speculative. It is a 'highly speculative substantive hypothesis' that there is any notion of narrow content that can be used to individuate intentional states without any input from the external environment. The Twin Earth stories demonstrate that the fact that we are receivers and users of information is a fact, not just about us, but also about our relation to the external environments. This dependence is not mysterious: it is simply part of how we individuate states in explanatory science. But of course, my belief that there is water in my taps 'is in my head', but only in the same way that the scorpion bite on my leg is on my leg, and the footprint in the sand is in the sand. We individuate states in terms of interaction with environments and use them to explain behaviour, and we shouldn't try to do otherwise.