Internalism and Externalism #1

➢ What is it that you come to know when you learn a word?
➢ Do you know what you are thinking?
➢ Does the content of your mental states explain why you do the things you do?
➢ Where does your mind end and the world begin?

The next two weeks’ lectures concern THIS AND MORE!

1. Semantic externalism

Semantic externalism: The meaning/reference of some terms is not solely determined by the internal physical state/other relevant intrinsic features of the speaker who uses them.

Semantic internalism: the denial of semantic externalism, i.e. the view that the meaning of a term is solely determined by intrinsic features of the speaker (generally their psychological states (where those are construed individualistically)).

Putnam introduces semantic externalism….

Quick overview:
Two “unchallenged assumptions”:
   i. The meaning of a term determines its extension (in the sense that sameness of intension entails sameness of extension)
   ii. Knowing the meaning of a term is just a matter of being in a certain psychological state

Putnam presents us with a thought experiment designed to elicit the judgement that these are incompatible. Putnam holds onto (i) (or does he?*) and rejects (ii).

Upshot: meaning is not in the head

Reminder: Intension vs. Extension
The intension of a term is its intrinsic “meaning”, what a speaker grasps when they understand the term. Its extension is the set of objects it designates or refers to.

- If meaning determines reference (intension determines extension), then anytime we find a difference in reference, there must be a difference in meaning.
- If two intrinsically-identical individuals use the same term and it has different references, and if we hold fixed that meaning determines reference, then it cannot be the case that the meaning of the term depends on intrinsic features of those individuals.

Twin Earth
A world exactly like our own with a few tiny differences

“One of the peculiarities of Twin Earth is that the liquid called "water" is not H20 but a different liquid whose chemical formula is… XYZ. I shall suppose that XYZ is indistinguishable from water at normal

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*Putnam writes on p. 710 that “The theory that natural-kind words like ‘water’ are indexical leaves it open, however, whether to say that ‘water’ in the Twin Earth dialect of English has the same meaning as ‘water’ in the Earth dialect and a different extension – which is what we normally say about ‘I’ in different idiolects – thereby giving up the doctrine that “meaning (intension) determines extension,” or to say, as we have chosen to do, that difference in extension is ipso facto a difference in meaning for natural-kind words, thereby giving up the doctrine that meanings are concepts, or, indeed, mental entities of any kind.”
temperatures and pressures. Also, I shall suppose that the oceans and lakes and seas of Twin Earth contain XYZ and not water, that it rains XYZ on Twin Earth and not water, etc. If a space ship from Earth ever visits Twin Earth, then the supposition at first will be that 'water' has the same meaning on Earth and on Twin Earth. This supposition will be corrected when it is discovered that "water" on Twin Earth is XYZ, and the Earthian space ship will report somewhat as follows. "On Twin Earth the word 'water' means XYZ." Symmetrically, if a space ship from Twin Earth ever visits Earth, then the supposition at first will be that the word 'water' has the same meaning on Twin Earth and on Earth. This supposition will be corrected when it is discovered that "water" on Earth is H2O, and the Twin Earthian space ship will report: "On Earth the word 'water' means H2O."

- Oscar and Twoscar have all their mental states in common
- The word “water” picks out different substances on Earth and Twearth. The extension or “meaning” of the term varies.
- So the extension or “meaning” cannot be determined just by what is “in the head” of Oscar and Twoscar…

So… “Cut the pie any way you like, “meanings” just ain’t in the head!”

**Division of linguistic labor**

“We could hardly use such words as ‘elm’ and ‘aluminum’ if no-one possessed a way of recognizing elm trees and aluminum mental; but not everyone to whom the distinction is important has to be able to make the distinction … everyone to whom gold is important for any reason has to acquire the world ‘gold’, but he does not have to acquire the method of recognizing whether something is or is not gold. He can rely on a special subclass of speakers…” (p.705)

Take home “Traditional semantic theory leaves out two contributions to the determination of reference – the contribution of society and the contribution of the real world; a better semantic theory must encompass both.”

**N.b.** Externalist theories can vary in their scope…

- Natural kind externalism: Natural environment plays a role in determining content, primarily content relevant to the environment, e.g. natural kind terms.

- Social externalism: social institutions play a role in determining the contents of some words.

2. **Externalism about Mental Content**

Semantic externalism is a thesis about linguistic meaning. What are the ramifications of this for our theories of mental content?

**Externalism about mental content:** the content of certain mental states supervenes not just on intrinsic features of an individual but on relevant features of their environment.

Internalism / individualism about mental contents: the content of certain mental states supervenes only on intrinsic features of an individual.

Uninteresting ways in which externalism w.r.t. mental content could be true:

i. **Indexicals** E.g. here, now, I…
   a. Indexicals have an extension which depends on the context of utterance. No-one thinks in these cases that “intension determines extension”

ii. **Factive mental states** E.g. know, see

iii. **De re attitudes**
    *De dicto* attitudes concern an object under a description. *De re* attitudes concern a particular object.
E.g. “We’re going to elect the least qualified candidate as president!”
“I’d like to spend Christmas on a damnably damp, dark and drizzly island” is true of me *de re* but not *de dicto*.

Burge’s Thought Experiment (in “Individualism and the Mental”)

**UPSHOT:** “Social context infects even the distinctively mental features of mentalistic attributions. No man’s intentional mental phenomena are insular. Every man is a piece of the social continent, a part of the social main.”

“A given person has a large number of attitudes commonly attributed with content clauses containing ‘arthritis’ in oblique occurrence. For example, he thinks (correctly) that he has had arthritis for years; that his arthritis in his wrists and fingers is more painful than his arthritis in his ankles, that it is better to have arthritis than cancer of the liver, that stiffening joints is a symptom of arthritis, that certain sorts of aches are characteristic of arthritis, that there are various kinds of arthritis, and so forth. In short, he has a wide range of such attitudes. In addition to these unsurprising attitudes, he thinks falsely that he has developed arthritis in the thigh. Generally competent in English, rational and intelligent, the patient reports to his doctor his fear that his arthritis has now lodged in his thigh. The doctor replies by telling him that this cannot be so, since arthritis is specifically an inflammation of joints. Any dictionary could have told him the same. The patient is surprised, but relinquishes his view and goes on to ask what might be wrong with his thigh.” (p.77)

Counterfactual scenario: individual is intrinsically identical but in his society “arthritis” applies in addition to various rheumatoid ailments including the one in his thigh.

“The upshot of these reflections is that the patient’s mental contents differ while his entire physical and non-intentional mental histories, considered in isolation from their social context, remain the same…. The differences seem to stem from differences “outside” the patient considered as an isolated physical organism, causal mechanism, or seat of consciousness.” (p.79)

a. The traditional view:

(b) Putnam’s twin-earth thought experiment
- same IPF’s, different extension… so “meaning” depends on more than IPF’s.
- chiefly targeted at *linguistic* content
- focuses on the environment-dependence of natural kind terms

C. Burge’s “Arthritis” thought experiment
- Two subjects with same IPFs and to whom we’d ascribe the same propositional beliefs about Arthritis…
- When Original Subject thinks “I have arthritis in my thigh” he is mistaken. When Counterfactual Subject thinks “I have arthritis in my thigh” he is correct. This is in spite of their having all the same intrinsic properties, and all the facts about their bodies being the same.
- So the content of their thoughts is different, despite the identity of their IPF’s, and the fact we use the same words to ascribe those beliefs to them.
- So mental content also depends on more than IPF’s. It depends on the social context you’re located in.

1. **Objections to externalism about mental content**

   i. **Introspection**
   
   “From the inside” you may not be aware of the content of your thoughts, if that content depends on extrinsic factors

But we generally think that we are able to introspect with some success at least on the content of our own thoughts.

Paul Boghossian’s raises a version of this as a problem for the compatibilist: someone who claims externalism about content is compatible with privileged self-knowledge.

Privileged self-knowledge: we are able to know, without the benefit of empirical investigation, what our thoughts are in our own case.

The compatibilist should be able to reason as follows:

1. If I have the concept *water*, then water exists.
2. I have the concept *water*.
   
   Therefore
3. Water exists

This is intended to be a *reductio ad absurdum*. It is supposed to be absurd to conclude that we can know *a priori* that water exists, therefore, the compatibilist position is unsustainable.

➢ If the argument is valid should we accept the conclusion, or reject externalism or self-knowledge?

... “if you could know a priori that you are in a given mental state, and your being in that state conceptually or logically implies the existence of external objects, then you could know a priori that the external world exists. Since you obviously don’t know a priori that the external world exists, you also can’t know a priori that you are in the mental state in question. It’s that simple. “(McKinsey, 1991, p. 16)

Recommended reading:
