Internalism and Externalism #2: Major Objections

1. Recap

**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.

2. The Introspection Objection

“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** 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.

- PSK admits of different strengths. How strong a version of it should we endorse? How strong a version do we need to raise problems for externalism?

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)
3. **What’s-a-theory-of-content-even-for (family of) Objection(s)**

What do we want from a theory of content for?

i. To explain how intentional states can feature in *causal* explanations, within a naturalistic world view

ii. To explain how intentional states can *rationalise* behaviour in a manner consistent with (i).

iii. To do (ii) in a manner consistent with (i).

iv. To mesh with a *computational* theory of mind (currently supposed to be our best bet for making good on the above goals.)

**Problem:** externalism about mental content problematises just about all of these

i. **The Causal Problem** *(locus classicus Fodor 1987)*

Fodor’s worry: there’s a difference between how commonsense (externalist thought experiments) and psychology individuate mental states… That’s worrying because psychology *needs* the commonsense notion of mental content (for (i/ ii / iii)).

There’s a tension between the following three claims:

a. Mental states cause behavior *in virtue of their content.*

b. Causal powers are *intrinsic features* of an entity

c. Content is an *extrinsic feature* of a mental state

➢ Which should we give up?

Why think causal powers must be intrinsic?

Fodor and his 10 cent piece: “I define ‘is an H-particle at ‘ so that it’s satisfied by a particle at iff my dimes is heads up at t. Correspondingly, I define ‘is a T-particle at ‘ so that it’s satisfied by a particle at iff my dime is tails up at t. I now bring it about that every particle in the universe is an H-particle…thus! And now I change every particle in the universe into a T-particle…thus!”

- These are not the kind of properties that feature in the explanatory apparatus of particle physics because these properties are irrelevant to their causal powers…

- Differences in *relational* properties of psychological brain states are *irrelevant to their casual powers* and hence to scientific taxonomy.

- N.b. to get this result we need to assess identify of causal powers across and not within contexts (don’t assess our relative strength when one of us is on the moon)

ii. **The Rationality Problem**

Again, there’s a tension between the following three principles:

a. The content of intentional states rationalises an individual’s behaviour

b. Rational assessment operates over content that is accessible to the subject

C. Content externalism implies the content of subjects’ intentional states may be inaccessible to them.

E.g. “Why did Burge’s chicken cross the road?” “Because he believed the arthritis clinic was on the other side and he wanted to get some relief from the pain in his thigh”.

- The content of the chicken’s belief and desire doesn’t rationalise the behaviour if the meaning of arthritis is determined by factors external to the individual.

This is a variant of Kripke’s Pierre case, (introduced as a challenge to direct reference theories of proper names).
- Pierre believes that “Londres est joli” and “Londres is not pretty” despite being absolutely scrupulous about his reasoning.
- The problem – we need to allow for his perspective when appreciating how his intentional states rationalise his action. Can externalism do that?

iii. The Computation Problem
Remember Cummins’ worry about historical (e.g. causal) theories of content?

Cummins: teleosemantics offer us essentially a historical notion of representation. That makes them a poor fit for computational theories of cognition which are committed to an ahistorical notion of representation.

We face a similar worry with externalism
- Computational processes operate on properties internal to the representational token
- If mental content is externally individuated, it’s hard to see how it can be the kind of content which computational processes operate over.

4. Narrow Content
Solution (?) : there are two kinds of content.
Wide content is individuated relationally. That’s the kind of content externalism is true of.
Narrow content, by contrast, is the kind of mental content that is shared between intrinsic duplicates

How exactly should we understand narrow content?

i. A function from context to truth conditions
Fodor: “the twin-earth examples don’t break the connection between content and extension; they just relativize it to context.”
- For Fodor, narrow content is a function from context to truth conditions (sometimes called the character of an expression)
- This is semi-familiar from indexicals, e.g. ‘I’, ‘now’.
- N.b. narrow content is not truth-conditional as a result.

ii. Conceptual Role Semantics (Block 1986)
Conceptual role is “a matter of the causal role of the expression in reasoning and deliberation and, in general, in the way the expression combines and interacts with other expressions so as to mediate between sensory inputs and behavioural outputs” (1986:93)
- Worry: does conceptual role determine meaning, or does meaning determine conceptual role? Do we want a descriptive or a normative relationship?
- Content, individuated by conceptual role, is holistic. The content of an expression depends on all its inferential relations.
  - Is holism compatible with the explanatory and causal roles we want belief to play?
  - Can subjects share content if it’s individuated holistically?
Suggested readings

- Fodor, Jerry, *Psychosemantics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), ch. 2 'Individualism and supervenience'