Some proposals for understanding narrow content

February 3, 2004

1 What should we require of explanations of narrow content?

To the extent that one is convinced by the arguments that self-knowledge or the explanation of behavior requires some notion of narrow content, one needs to explain what narrow content is.

What would it be to explain what narrow content is? Consider the following kind of explanation of what 'broad', or externalist, content is. One first gives a theory of the semantics of sentences we use to ascribe thoughts and beliefs to agents; e.g., the simple theory which says that a sentence of the form $\ulcorner A$ believes that $S\urcorner$ says that the referent of 'A' bears the belief relation to the proposition expressed by 'S' in the context of the ascription. Depending on one's view of linguistic meaning, the proposition expressed by the sentence — and so also the content of the belief ascribed — might be a structured object made out of individuals and properties, a set of possible circumstances, or something else.

This is the kind of explanation the narrow content theorist should be expected to give. It is important to note that this kind of explanation does not answer every question that one might have about broad, or externalist, content. Consider, for example, vague expressions like 'is bald.' If we consider a borderline case of baldness, and ask whether the predicate 'is bald' is true of that person, typically one's theory of the broad content of such a predicate will not deliver an answer. So it would be

unfair to require that the narrow content theorist should provide an answer to *every* question on might have about the conditions under which a certain narrow content is true, or the conditions under which the narrow content of one agent's beliefs is the same as that of another's. It will be enough if we get some sense of what narrow contents are supposed to be, how they relate to externalist contents (if at all), and some idea for how to establish sameness and distinctness of narrow contents in some main cases.

2   Narrow psychology as 'whatever is shared by intrinsic duplicates'

A first response to the question of whether any notion of narrow content can be defined may well be one of mystification. *Of course* we can define narrow content: narrow mental states are just what all intrinsic duplicates have in common!

A first step is to realize that this is not enough. This definition falls short in two ways: (i) It gives us sufficient conditions for being in the same total mental state without giving us necessary conditions; surely someone can be in the same (narrow) mental state as someone else without having each of their intrinsic properties being exactly the same! (ii) It gives us conditions on being in the same total mental state, but does not give us conditions on, e.g., having the same (narrow) belief. This is relevant since usually explanations of actions are given in terms of specific beliefs and desires rather than in terms of the complete set of mental states of an agent.

Further, if we answer these worries in the simplest way, saying that only intrinsic duplicates have any mental states in common, our ability to give general explanations of actions will suffer.

So more needs to be said about what narrow content is supposed to be.

3   Narrow content defined disjunctively

The above definition relies on the principle:

> If a and b are intrinsic duplicates, then, for any narrow mental state N, if a is in N then b is as well.

The problem is not that this principle was false, but only that it did not give us enough information about narrow content. A natural thought is that we can use this principle in a slightly more complicated way to define sameness and difference of narrow content. Consider the following definition:

> a is in a narrow mental state N iff there is some intrinsic duplicate of a that is in N

This is a bit better: it gives us necessary and sufficient conditions for being in a particular narrow mental state. But it still falls well short of being complete: it requires that we have some independent way of telling whether certain agents — the intrinsic duplicates of a — are in specified narrow mental states. So it seems that we need some account of what a narrow mental state is, not given in terms of sameness of mental states across intrinsic duplicates.

4 Defining narrow mental states in terms of broad mental states

One idea is that we can get a grip on the notion of narrow content by explaining it in terms of broad mental states. To do this, we need some principle connecting broad and narrow mental states. Here is one such:

> For every broad mental state, there is a corresponding narrow mental state. Let B be a broad mental state, and N be its narrow counterpart. Then we can hold: An agent a is in N iff some intrinsic duplicate of a is in B.

This appears to be an advance on the preceding definitions. It gives noncircular criteria for deciding whether an agent is in a narrow mental state, and it gives as much precision about this matter as we have about broad mental states. But this definition is not without its problems.

4.1 The thesis that sameness of broad state without sameness of mental state

This definition assumes that sameness of broad mental state entails sameness of narrow mental state. But many of the cases which originally motivated the search for some notion of narrow content were cases in which, intuitively, an agent had two distinct beliefs even though only one broad belief was (putatively) available. Recall, e.g., Loar's examples involving Pierre. This is a serious problem with the present account.

4.2 What's the point?

This definition of narrow content does succeed in singling out a determinate set of (actual and possible) agents who are in a certain narrow mental state. But what is the point of singling out this set? Presumably, the idea is that this set of agents have some interesting property in common, which will both explain behavior and explain introspective access to our own mental states.

But consider the narrow mental state that an agent is in only if that agent believes that water tastes nice. The property of being in that narrow mental state is the same property as (or at least necessarily coextensional with) the property had in common

by all the intrinsic duplicates of all the agents who believe that water tastes nice. There are two important points to note about this property.

(i) We haven't the faintest idea what it is. Hence the idea that this property is the thing which can really explain behavior and introspective access is, at this point, just a wild guess.

(ii) In an important sense, this property is defined in terms of an externalist mental property. So it is reasonable to assume that this property will be able to do useful work in explaining behavior only if the original externalist property can. But of course the internalist critique got started by denying that externalist properties can do that kind of work.

5   Fodor, character, and narrow content

Jerry Fodor's 1987 proposal about narrow content linked narrow content to the semantic notion of an expression's *character*. Character as a function from contexts of utterance of an expression to contents. 'I', 'now.'

How to generalize character from sentences to beliefs and other mental states; sentences and belief states. The 'character' of a belief state as a function from the context of the believer to the content of the belief. Fodor's idea: the narrow contents of belief states are their characters.

This raises the question: how do we figure out what function from belief states to contents is associated with a given belief? (For example, how do I figure out what the narrow content of my belief that water is nicer than kool-aid is?)

See the quote on Stalnaker p. 176. Fodor's idea seems to be this: consider me and my twin on Twin-earth. I believe that water is nice, and he believes that (say) twater is nice. There is some fact C about his environment, which, along with facts about his internal states, makes his belief about twater. (Intuitively, this fact may be something like the fact that his environment contains twater.) Just so, there is some fact C' about my environment which, along with facts about my internal states, makes my belief about water. We can think of C and C' as two different contexts for belief.

So far, this is unproblematic. The disputable claims come in several stages:

1. For each belief an agent has, that agent is in a belief state which underlies that belief. To believe a proposition p is to be in a belief state which has the content p. (We will presume that belief states are physical, but will make no further assumptions about their nature — e.g., we will not make any assumptions about whether they are 'sentences in a language of thought.')

2. The narrow content of a belief state is a function from contexts of belief to belief contents; in particular, the narrow content of a belief state is the function which is determined by asking what the content of that belief state would be in different

contexts of belief.

We can apply this to the case of me and my twin. Let x be the state which underlies my belief that water is nice. So, in the actual world it has the (wide) content that water is nice. This gives us some information about its narrow content. We know that the narrow content is a function from contexts of belief to broad contents; so we know that the narrow content of x is a function which has the proposition that water is nice as its value when given the actual world as the context of belief.

We also know that, since my twin shares all my physical properties, he is in x. But in Twin-earth, x has the content that twater is nice. So we learn something else about the character/narrow content of x: when given Twin-earth as the context of belief, it returns the proposition that twater is nice as its value.

This procedure suggests the following story about narrow content:

> The narrow content of a belief state x is that function which, for an arbitrary context of belief c, has as its value the proposition which is the content of the belief underwritten by x in c.

It is an advantage of this view of narrow content that it seems to answer to one of the intuitions behind internalism. The internalist has the view that externalist mental states are made up of an internal component, and an environmental component, and that the former is the really 'mental' part. On the present view of mental content, this intuition is made very explicit: narrow contents just are functions which yield externalist mental properties when given environmental input.

Analogy with 'diagonal propositions' and 'two-dimensionalism.'

Nevertheless, this view of narrow content is not without its problems.

5.1   What are contexts of belief?

The first puzzle is: what are C and C' supposed to be? In other words, what exactly is supposed to be built into a context of belief?

One idea is to let a context of belief be a 'possible environment' (more or less a 'possible external world'). But this leaves an important question unanswered: if we are determining the narrow content of a belief state x, are we allowed to consider belief contexts in which the intrinsic states of the agent in question other than x are changed?

There is a problem however we answer this question.

If we say 'no', then our theory is too restricted. The only agents who will ever share my narrow beliefs will be intrinsic duplicates of mine. Return to the theme of generality and explanation.

If we say 'yes', then it is hard to see how the class of agents who have a belief with a certain narrow content will be at all unified. Stalnaker makes this point in "Narrow Content":

> "Suppose we identify mental thought tokens [what we have been calling 'belief states'] by their physical or syntactic properties. These properties surely will not be sufficient to determine even the narrow content of a thought token. ... Suppose that in a counterfactual situation ... we find the pattern of sounds identical to the one that in fact constitutes an utterance of 'Water is the best drink for quenching thirst.' ... what they mean there might be roughly translated as 'what time does the next buss leave for the zoo?' Presumably, the similarity in the acoustical pattern will not be sufficient to give this utterance the same meaning or content that it has in the actual world in any sense, wide or narrow ..." (199)

If we let in every possible occurrence of a given belief state, then the class of agents with a specific narrow belief will be such a disjoint crew that no explanations involving narrow content are likely to be very good.

What this means is that, once again, we have not succeeded in sufficiently explaining the notion of narrow content.

5.2   Undefined functions

Another critical point made by Stalnaker in "Narrow Content" is that "the narrow content ... will be defined only relative to a very limited set of possible worlds: specifically, only for possible worlds containing the thought token. The realization conditions [narrow content] are satisfied in a given possible world if and only if the proposition expressed by the thought *in that possible world* is true." (200)

Why this is problematic.

5.3   Presuppositions of Fodor's account

The idea that we can identify belief states apart from their contents; relation to the language of thought hypothesis.

(For a more recent paper by Stalnaker & Ned Block on the topic of related definitions of narrow content, go to http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/philo/faculty/block/papers/ExplanatoryGap.html.)