Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind

Contemporary Debates in Philosophy

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Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind

Edited by

Brian P. McLaughlin and Jonathan Cohen

We dedicate this volume to Judy H. McLaughlin and Liza Perkins-Cohen.

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Notes on Contributors

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Introduction

Jonathan Cohen

Philosophy of mind today is a sprawling behemoth whose tentacles reach into virtually every area of philosophy, as well as many subjects outside of philosophy. Of course, none of us would have it any other way. Nonetheless, this state of affairs poses obvious organizational challenges for anthology editors. Brian McLaughlin and I have attempted to meet these challenges in the present volume by focusing on ten controversial and fundamental topics in philosophy of mind. "Controversial" is clear enough: we have chosen topics about which there is not a settled consensus among philosophers. By "fundamental" we don't mean that the issues are easy or that the approaches taken toward them are introductory. Rather, we mean that (i) the resolution of these topics has implications for other issues inside and outside philosophy of mind, and (ii) past rounds of debate have revealed these topics as underlying broader disagreements. We asked leading philosophers of mind to defend one side or another on these topics. The result is what you now have in your hands.

In the remainder of this introduction I'll say something by way of explanation of the topics covered and attempt to say how the topics relate to one another.

Content

A first cluster of topics concerns the nature of mental content. To say that mental states have content is to say that they can be *about* other things: for example, my current belief that there is a coffee cup on my desk is about the coffee cup and the desk. That mental states can be about things is a striking fact about them, and one that distinguishes them from most entities in the world (e.g., atoms, rocks, tables, numbers, properties). Moreover, insofar as things other than mental states (e.g., words, some paintings, scientific models) can have content, many philosophers have followed Grice (1957) in maintaining that they do so only by deriving their content from that

of the mental states of the makers or users of these other things; thus, while a painting might also be about the coffee cup, the Grice-inspired thought is that it has this content only by virtue of the content of the painter's intentions (e.g., her intention to produce a painting that is about that particular coffee cup), which are of course mental states. If this general picture is right, then mental content is more fundamental than other sorts of content. But what sort of a thing is mental content? And how is it constituted? What makes it the case, for example, that my current thought is about a coffee cup rather than a palm tree or nothing at all? These and related questions lie at the heart of the first cluster of topics in this volume.

Our first topic in this cluster is best appreciated against the backdrop of work starting in the mid-1970s (e.g., Putnam, 1975; Burge, 1979) arguing that the content of a thought is not wholly determined by the internal state of the thinker's brain. On the contrary, these writers argued for what has come to be called *content externalism* – the view that what a thought is about is partially determined by factors outside the head of the thinker, such as the thinker's physical and social environment. In Chapter 1, Gabriel Segal argues against content externalism. More specifically, he argues that what he calls "cognitive content" – the kind of content invoked in psychological explanations and propositional attitude ascriptions – is not fixed externalistically. His claim is that, even if externalists are right that the *extensions* of public language words (e.g., "water") are determined by factors outside the thinker's brain, nonetheless the cognitive content expressed by such terms is (i) idiosyncratic to individuals (or even time-slices of individuals), and (ii) determined by factors inside their heads. If so, then cognitive content is best understood as a kind of narrow or individualist (as opposed to externalist/anti-individualist) content. Sarah Sawyer argues against this approach in Chapter 2. She argues that if cognitive contents were to float free from the shared meanings and extensions of the public language words we use to attribute contents, as Segal holds, then it would be a rare miracle if any verbal attribution ever succeeded in capturing anyone's cognitive contents. And this, she claims, would make a mystery of the utility and ubiquity of our practice of making verbal ascriptions of psychological contents to others. Ultimately, she contends, proponents of narrow content have failed to appreciate the significance, force, and scope of extant arguments for content externalism.

A second issue connected with content externalism comes up in Chapters 3 and 4, and concerns privileged access about the content of our mental states. It seems deeply plausible that our access to the content of at least some of our thoughts has some sort of epistemic privilege. For example, it seems deeply plausible that if I take myself to be thinking about water, it is truly *water* (not coffee, not a palm tree, and not some clear, tasteless liquid other than water) that is the subject of my thought. However, in recent years philosophers have argued that content externalism poses a serious threat to this plausible idea. The thought here is that if, as per externalism, the contents of my thoughts depend on factors outside my head (including contingent facts about the existence of particular elements of my physical and social environment), then I won't know what those contents are whenever I am ignorant about the relevant external factors. In Chapter 4, Michael McKinsey argues that privileged access and content externalism are indeed incompatible, and that we should respond to the incompatibility by giving up the former. Anthony Brueckner holds, in Chapter 3, that

the alleged incompatibility is merely apparent. He argues that, although content externalism entails that the content of my thought depends on contingent facts about my environment, it does not entail that my *knowing* the content of my thought requires *knowing* contingent facts about my environment: consequently, Brueckner holds, it is consistent with content externalism that I can know the content of my thoughts without having knowledge of contingent facts about my environment. Their debate raises important issues about exactly how to understand the entailments content externalism has about thinkers' environments, and about how we should individuate thoughts.

The volume also contains debates on two other foundational debates about content: one about the alleged normativity of content and one about how best to think about non-conceptual content.

The debate about the normativity of content is joined in Chapters 5 and 6 by Ralph Wedgwood and Georges Rey. The issue here is whether intentional (/contentful) mental states, such as beliefs, desires, the acceptance of inferences, and so on, are constitutively tied to "normative" properties such as value, goodness, and, in particular, rationality. Such normative properties are traditionally contrasted against the "descriptive" properties one finds invoked in the natural sciences. Thus, this debate has important implications for the question of whether the standard explanatory apparatus of the natural sciences can provide a complete account of contentful mental states.

Wedgwood argues that the intentional is essentially normative. He holds that intentional states are constituted by concepts, and he argues that the best theory of concepts has them constitutively linked to the normative. In particular, Wedgwood is attracted by a two-factor theory of concepts according to which each concept is constituted by (i) its correctness condition together with (ii) "certain basic principles of rationality that specify certain ways of using the concept as rational (or specify certain other ways of using the concept as irrational)" (p. 86). Thus, for example, on this account, we might understand the concept of logical conjunction as constituted by (i) the systematic contribution made by AND to the truth conditions of the complex contents in which it appears (its correctness condition) together with (ii) a principle specifying that (*inter alia*) the inference from (P AND Q) to P is rational while the inference from P to (P AND Q) is not. Insofar as this conception of the constitution of concepts ineliminably invokes notions of rationality, it results in an essentially normative view of the intentional; but Wedgwood argues that his is the most plausible view of concepts, so we should embrace the latter result.

Rey argues against Wedgwood's view in Chapter 5, and urges that our best scientific and philosophical accounts of mentality support a non-normative ("merely" descriptive) understanding of the intentional. Among the many complaints he levels against normative theories of the intentional, Rey worries (i) that there is no serious account of just which norms characterize particular concepts; (ii) that normative accounts of concepts don't do justice to the portions of our mental lives that don't seem to be governed by rational norms at all; and (iii) that even where applicable, such accounts give at best a superficial account of our mental lives. Rey suggests that Wedgwood and other proponents of an essentially normative account of the intentional base their view largely on intuitions about which rational inferences they are disposed to make involving particular concepts; but, while allowing that these intuitions are often

widely and deeply held, he echoes Quine (1951) in worrying that their wide and deep support may show only that these inferences are deeply ingrained (as opposed to concept-constitutive, as Wedgwood claims). If so, Rey points out, then such intuitions (despite being widely and deeply held) should not be taken as revealing the nature of our concepts; but if taking these intuitions to be concept-constitutive really is the source of the view that concepts are normative, then Rey's worry threatens the case for the essentially normative character of the intentional.

In Chapters 7 and 8, Jerry Fodor and Richard Heck take on the topic of non-conceptual content. Discussion of this issue has centered in part on issues about perceptual justification. Many writers have thought that the best way to understand how perception justifies belief is by attributing content to perceptual states – thus, for example, my belief that there is a coffee cup on the desk would receive its justification from being appropriately related to a perceptual state with the very same content (that there is a coffee cup on the desk). But (a suitably generalized version of) this picture threatens to impose high cognitive demands on perception: it seems to require that our perceptual contents, in order to play any justificatory role, must be fully conceptualizeable (see Sellars, 1956, for a famous articulation of this worry). But many philosophers have felt that this demand is unreasonable – for example, because it threatens the idea of a preconceptual "given" that could justify belief, or because it threatens to rob the possibility of perceptual justification from non-human animals and human infants.

Some philosophers of mind have maintained that the best response to these threats is to credit perceptual states with a special kind of "non-conceptual content" – content whose tokening is both (i) suited to justify the conceptual content of beliefs, and (ii) not dependent on sophisticated conceptual capacities of the perceiver. The problem for theorists sympathetic to this move is to provide an informative characterization of this hypothesized non-conceptual content, and then to give reasons for believing there is any mental content satisfying that characterization.

This is where both Fodor and Heck begin in their essays for the present volume. Both accept the existence of non-conceptual content (in this sense they are both giving kinds of "yes" answers to the question "is there non-conceptual content?"); but they differ in how they understand what it is, and how to distinguish non-conceptual content from conceptual content. In his contribution, Fodor spends most of his effort massaging the philosophical question "is there non-conceptual content?" into a form that makes it susceptible to answers by empirical psychology. In particular, Fodor holds that a mental state is conceptual if and only if it is an instance of representation-as, and he takes it that such states count as bearing content in virtue of the information they carry about the world. Thus, for Fodor, the existence of non-conceptual content hinges on the evidence in favor of mental states that are contentful (in the informational sense) but not instances of representation-as. But, Fodor argues, there is ample psychological evidence of states of this kind, so we have reason to accept the existence of non-conceptual content. Heck also spends much of his essay trying to get clear on what sort of a thing non-conceptual content might be. According to Heck, it is structural features of a contentful state that make it conceptual or non-conceptual: the state will count as conceptual if it has constituent structure, and non-conceptual if not. This criterion allows Heck (unlike Fodor) to accept that