

What Putnam and Burge can tell us about Belief

In light of the arguments of Putnam and Burge, some theorists have made the distinction between two types of content: broad and narrow. These categories designate content which is individuated with respect only to the individual (narrow), and that which is individuated with respect to the individual taken in a certain context (broad). Analogous are the distinctions of *de re* and *de dicto* belief ascription. In *de dicto* ascriptions the semantic content of the subject's belief are taken privately, characterising the belief of the subject through her own eyes.¹ On the contrary, *de re* ascriptions take the semantic content of the subject's belief publicly, such that the belief of the subject is related to her context (believing *of* as opposed to *that* – see (1) and (2) below). In the arguments of Putnam and Burge (henceforth 'Butnam') *de dicto* ascriptions are taken broadly, which results in an apparent tension with the private nature of *de dicto* semantics. In this discussion I shall be attempting to resolve this conflict by searching for a type of content that can maintain the solipsistic² nature of *de dicto* semantics; that is, I shall be looking for a workable account of narrow content to function as belief content. Finding this project untenable, I shall suggest that the Butnam considerations expose an inconsistency in Folk Psychology (henceforth 'FP'). This inconsistency, I suggest, illuminates the pragmatic nature of FP which, in turn, illuminates why we should approach a science of behaviour as eliminative materialists.

I shall proceed by giving an exposition of Butnam's arguments and their bearing on *de re/de dicto* (I), searching for content narrow enough for *de dicto* belief in the manner of (a) descriptivism and (b) phenomenalism (II), questioning the prospects and reasons for eliminativism (III), and finally concluding (IV).

I

Putnam (1975) asks us to imagine a world just like Earth (Twin-Earth) except that the chemical composition of the watery stuff there is XYZ, not H₂O. NN is a resident of Twin-Earth, and on Earth is her doppelganger N; both are ignorant of the molecular composition of the watery stuff around them. When N thinks 'water is wet', it is intuitive to say that her thoughts are about H₂O and not XYZ; and vice versa for NN. This being the case, we must hold that the content of one's thoughts and beliefs are *not* wholly determined by one's internal properties, but that one's environment plays a role in shaping one's mental content – we must individuate mental content with respect to one's natural environment.³

For Burge's thought-experiment (1979) we are asked to imagine that N and NN occupy different linguistic communities. N is an English speaker with many true beliefs about arthritis as well as the belief that she has it in her thigh. NN's beliefs are homonymous, though in her community 'arthritis' denotes a condition which blankets both arthritic conditions and certain muscle conditions. We cannot attribute to NN the belief that she has arthritis in her thigh since this would make her true belief false. However, we would say that N believes that she has arthritis in her thigh. Thus, the contents of one's beliefs cannot wholly

¹ Generally speaking, this means that what might ordinarily be taken as synonymous cannot necessarily be taken as such (and so cannot be substituted in) when we're dealing with contents of the subject's belief. This is because these terms may not be taken as synonymous by the subject herself. In other words, the *de dicto* belief will express the *de re* belief in the subject's own terms.

² Rather lazily I will talk of 'private semantics' and 'solipsistic semantics' interchangeably. I take them both here to amount to the same thing; namely, the content of belief as based in the subject's world-view irrespective of how the world actually is.

³ Putnam's initial story focuses on meaning; it was later applied to mental content.

be a matter of one's internal properties – we must individuate mental content with respect to one's linguistic community.

What is the bearing of these arguments on *de dicto* belief?⁴

It is often held that the mark of a *de dicto* ascription is that it precludes substitution *salva veritate*. For example, if N does not know that $x = y$, substituting y for x in (*) yields a false sentence:

(1) N believes that Fx .

De re ascriptions on the other hand exhibit no such semantic feature. For example:

(2) N believes of x that F .

Here ' x ' is not featuring in the singular term ('that F ') which refers to N's belief, so it can be substituted without upsetting that reference. It is sometimes taken that, with *de dicto* ascription, a disquotation principle can determine its truth-conditions; namely, that N believes that p iff N assents to ' p '. Since *de dicto* is meant to deal in private content, this principle is then meant to serve as the means of determining that solipsistic aspect of N's belief which properly characterises N's conception of the world. The Putnam arguments have important consequences for this. In these arguments N and NN would both assent to ' p '. However, this would mean something different in their individual contexts, and so they would be taken to have different belief contents. However, as the arguments stipulate, they are intrinsically identical and so, intuitively, they conceive of the world identically. This suggests that the disquotation principle is inadequate for its task, it fails to cut beliefs fine enough to properly characterise one's private belief state. Our interest here then is to work for an account of that content which the disquotation principle was intended to safeguard. Why should we think that there is content narrower than that which N and NN assent to?

Holding that all belief is broad conflicts with our understanding of the type of things that beliefs are; indeed, it conflicts with that very understanding which underpins *de dicto* opacity. Holding that all content is broad further appears to falsely attribute irrationality. Shaping this point into the form of Moore's paradox, let us imagine that N has acquired the term 'H₂O' but doesn't know that it and 'water' are coreferential. N then asserts:

(3) Water is wet, but I don't believe that H₂O is.

On the broad-only reading, this statement is as paradoxical as Moore's original example; but the statement seems reasonable given N's epistemic state. The broad theorist might just bite the bullet and say that N is being inconsistent, but N's assent to the law of non-contradiction is compatible with an assertion of (3). Clearly N is rational, and it seems that this could be accounted for if we were to consider N's private belief content. In what ways, though, does a broad-only account conflict with our understanding of belief?

⁴ Both arguments conclude that the contents of our beliefs are not wholly determined by (should not be individuated with respect to) our internal properties. Burge's case does, however, give rise to a more pervasive phenomenon. For Putnam, the implication is that our mental contents depend on the nature of the natural kinds in our environment. Burge's case carries none of the implicit metaphysical baggage and, furthermore, will seemingly apply to any term of the language. Burge's point is more easily taken: we don't have to imagine what the content would be in light of the way the world is, but only in light of our linguistic community and in terms of our actual practices – a far more tangible thing. Despite these differences, for our purposes we can just bunch them together as 'Putnam'.

Two features of our concept of belief look threatened on a broad-only reading: (i) self-knowledge and (ii) the relation between belief and action. These two related aspects inform the view that belief *de dicto* deals in private semantics. The point of self-knowledge is linked to privacy in that our total belief state is taken to consist in how we conceive of the world, and so to properly characterise our beliefs one is required to go through a semantics indexed to this conception. To say that we have access to our beliefs is just to insist (somewhat tautologously) that we have access to the way we conceive the world – as Wittgenstein says: ‘One can mistrust one’s own senses, but not one’s own belief’ (1953, p.162). Furthermore, relating (i) to (ii), it can be noted that were we to lack such self-knowledge our actions would appear mysterious to us. This is an interesting point. Loar (1988) has argued for narrow (‘psychological’) content through the observation that we can understand an expressed explanation of an action without knowing its context of origin; Wilson (1995, pp.104-5) has, however, contended that understanding in such cases is still reached through a broad reading, albeit one more vaguely understood.⁵ Whether we accept Wilson’s point or not, it cannot be extended to the first-person case. We can imagine that N has an incomplete grasp of her words (though enough of a grasp to get by). But in this case *no* broad reading is available to her, even though presumably she can understand *her own* actions.⁶

Both (i) and (ii) have been argued to be compatible with broad content. Lepore and Loewer (1986, p.611) argue that N could know the contents of her own thoughts whilst being ignorant of the semantically pertinent features of her context. Since she knows that ‘water is wet’ is true iff water is wet, she knows the content of her belief that water is wet. However, we can apply similar considerations to see how this approach doesn’t work. Since knowing the truth-conditions of an assertion is tantamount to knowing its meaning, the knowledge needed to understand its truth-conditions exposes the semantic knowledge one has in relation to that assertion. What N knows is the truth of ‘the proposition ‘water is wet’ is true iff water is wet’, but the knowledge needed here is just knowledge of a general semantic principle.⁷ Thus knowing its truth doesn’t amount to knowing the meaning of either side of the biconditional. N still lacks knowledge of the contents of her thought since understanding the truth-theoretic relation between what is used and mentioned doesn’t amount to understanding that which is being used and mentioned. With respect to (ii) it has been argued by Stalnaker (1989) that we can explain, say, N’s going to get the mop through the *broad* belief that there is water in the basement. Here we can agree but also ask that the intimately related notions of causation and explanation be distinguished. We happen to explain actions through belief because we understand that beliefs cause actions,⁸ but explanation might become modally detached from causation. N would have got the mop even if there was XYZ in the basement, and so (tentatively) going by a counterfactual account causation, the belief that there is water in the basement cannot have played the requisite causal role. (i) and (ii) look to be substantive issues, so what we are looking for is an account of content narrow enough to play the role in *de dicto* belief such that it: (i*) respects self-knowledge, (ii*) maintains the causal link between belief and action, and (iii) issues in sensible judgments of rationality. Our project is thus one of aiming to reconcile various conflicting elements in our belief-concept – conflicting elements which the Butnam arguments have drawn our attention to.

⁵ For example, suppose that we read in N’s diary, ‘Arthritis in thigh, went to doctor’. Wilson claims that we can understand this, regardless of N’s context, through taking ‘arthritis’ in a wide, albeit less fine-grained sense and coupling this with the generalisation that if a person has a disease and believes that a specialist can treat it, then, *ceteris paribus*, that person will see a specialist. We simply take N to be such a person.

⁶ Perhaps this is put too strongly. I want to avoid the implication that our epistemic relation to our own actions is ideal. Put more weakly we can just note that her actions wouldn’t become more comprehensible if she became more semantically aware.

⁷ There will also need to be an understanding of certain syntactic principles.

⁸ More precisely, that belief has a *causal role* in actions.

McDermott's (1986) suggestion that narrow belief be taken as *de re* beliefs about our inputs and outputs will not do for us. *De re* beliefs fail to satisfy our criteria (namely (i*)). But more than this, we should be highly suspicious of accounts of belief that break out of intentional vocabulary in this way (for example by severing the link with propositions).⁹ Unless we fix identity conditions through related intentional categories, we risk just changing the nature of our concept rather than reconciling its *prima-facie* conflicting elements.

It's often understood that with *de dicto* belief, a proper name can be substituted for a definite description. This relates to *de dicto* belief dealing in private semantics: the relation between the object and content of belief is mediated by a mode of presentation.¹⁰ It would be a natural thought to try and extend this to our case. We might try and take N and NN to share the narrow belief that 'the boat-riden, sometimes salty, transparent stuff...[around here] is wet' (where the indexical is needed to determine the correct broad content in their respective contexts). However, as Lepore and Loewer point out, the language used in the description itself looks broad. Clearly the language of narrow content will have to be semantically immune to contextual variation. Fodor has suggested that content expressed in those terms denoting phenomenally accessible properties might do the trick.¹¹

Fodor's thought seems to be that such terms will be synonymous across contexts and serve as means of trimming content fine enough to stay constant from N to NN. For example, 'water' would then be characterised in terms of its phenomenal properties such as being transparent, odourless, etc.¹² However, it has been argued that even terms such as these are not immune to Twin-Earth treatment. For example, on Twin-Earth atmosphere might alter the wavelength of light such that things on Earth that are red look green on Twin-Earth. Consider NN saying 'Roses are red'. How do we translate 'red'? Both Lepore and Loewer and McDermott suggest that we should translate it as 'green', otherwise we will end up attributing many false beliefs to NN because those things that NN thinks are red are actually green. Thus, although N and NN may both look at a rose and be neurophysiologically identical, they will have different belief content. The objection, however, is questionable.

We understand that the colours of objects can appear different in abnormal conditions, but an object has a true colour (the predicate of which has a judgment-dependent extension) which obtains under normal conditions. Thus our colour ascriptions are elliptical. For example, when we say that 'the book is red', we mean that 'the book is red [under normal conditions]'. However, 'normal' is an indexical better expressed as 'that condition which *commonly* obtains'. On Twin-Earth the condition which commonly obtains is one by which there are certain atmospheric conditions. To then translate their term 'red' as 'green' would, in fact, attribute Twearthians with many false beliefs since, for example, their roses are not red under *their* normal conditions. Perhaps one would want to translate their 'normal conditions' into ours, but this is poor play. The truth-conditions of their claims should be taken from their assertoric context, just as I relate the implicit 'here' to the context of my Californian

⁹ He concedes that for these *de re* beliefs, there are no corresponding *de dicto* counterparts. Later considerations will give us reason to find such suggestions very fishy indeed.

¹⁰ For example, N might think of Joseph Conrad as the author of *Lord Jim*, and so in terms of a semantics indexed to her total belief state, 'Joseph Conrad' means 'the author of *Lord Jim*.'

¹¹ Unfortunately the suggestion is in an unpublished manuscript I've been unable to get my hands on. Should the reader feel particularly determined, what you're after is called 'Narrow Content and Meaning Holism.'

¹² Obviously such terms will not avoid Burge's case; however, begging the reader's indulgence, we should think in terms of communities that lack the semantic deference involved with Burge's story.

grandfather when he tells me ‘it’s sunny’. This point will apply to all phenomenal properties since they all change under abnormal conditions. That problem aside, there is a more serious concern for Fodor.

The concern is whether we are going to be able to account for our concepts in purely phenomenal language. Part of our concept of water is that boats sail on it, it can be salty, that it is sometimes treated with fluoride, etc. To fully classify our water-concept (and so get the narrow content of belief right), given these conceptual-interrelations, will be a practically impossible task – in practice, we shall never be able to pin-down the narrow content of belief (if this is the case, how will such an account satisfy (i*)?). Even supposing that a phenomenal breakdown of these terms is possible, what about non-observationally derived beliefs like ‘2+2=4’? However this might be phenomenally accounted for, it will fail our conditions since we do not think (*de dicto*) of arithmetic in any such way.¹³ Are there any last resorts?

Perhaps we could *think*, for example, ‘water is wet’ and name the thought assertion. Calling the assertion *F*, we could then say that ‘N believes that *F*’. Since we are taking the content of belief experientially, N and NN can share the same belief in this sense since their experiences will be identical – they will both believe that *F*. Furthermore, other people can believe the same thing since they can instantiate type-identical states. But what are the identity conditions for these states? When N thinks that *F* she might be looking at a leaf or any thing else – how are we to isolate the relevant features of her state to be that which is essential for the state *thinking that F*? To make rigorous this idea, it seems we are going to have to specify the identity criteria of the state in terms of the thought sentence (‘water is wet’) – this seems fine as long as we stay metalinguistic. However, this identity criteria is too general, all those that think ‘water is wet’ will not be all those we would want to ascribe the same narrow content. There is the further problem of non-English thought – to relate it back to the stated identity criteria it seems we will have to go semantic, and so self-defeatingly go to the object level. I think our inability to find a sustainable account of narrow content was inevitable.

3

We were trying to give a solipsistic breakdown of the content of our beliefs. Fodor’s suggestion was to pick those terms of public language which are contextually immune and so serve as public correlates to a private language; this is shaky ground. The picture this approach is working by is one of semantic hierarchies such that one linguistic level can be semantically accounted for through a more primitive one. This reductionism can’t hold (that is, if we want to keep our distance from a ‘language of thought’); in use, acquisition and meaning language is too eclectic to allow that some aspects of it stand semantically prior to others. Without reductionism, however, it would seem that our private languages can only be expressed through public means. If this is the case, then it seems there is no scope for a workable account of narrow content; but are we resting too heavily on a propositional construal of belief content?

Conceptual roles and mappings have been appealed to in order to play the role of narrow content, so jettisoning a propositional account – I advise suspicion. If we can see why we have a propensity to think of belief propositionally, we might see why giving alternate accounts of belief might be wrongheaded. Why might belief be this way? FP arises from our interactions with others; it is a model by which we can understand the behaviour of others. To

¹³ This might go by taking a set-perceptual account. If our knowledge of arithmetic is derived by set-perception, then sets will denote phenomenally accessible properties such that a phenomenal breakdown of 1+1=2 might be $\{\emptyset\} \cap \{\emptyset\} = \{\emptyset, \{\emptyset\}\}$.

reach this understanding we must first feel that we inhabit an intersubjective world, that our experiences are congruent. This congruence is established through language, communication presupposes intersubjectivity; this is why we explain the behaviour of others through language (through beliefs *that*) since this is the point of established experiential congruence. We domesticate the behaviour of others by relating their actions back to our mutually understood forms of behaviour, namely, language.¹⁴ If belief is bound-up this way with language, why should accounts of narrow content that aren't propositional warrant being regarded as pertaining to belief? Those components of our concept that we were out to reconcile with contextual individuation of beliefs should have further included their propositional nature. If we have to drop one of these aspects along the road to narrow content (as in mapping accounts), we have failed in our aim. But some have loftier aims than ours, some want to find narrow content for the sake of science – but haven't our reflections shown that this attitude is also wrongheaded?

The Butnam considerations have revealed an inconsistency in FP. By the nature of this inconsistency and those considerations I've propounded, I think we can see the essentially pragmatic nature of FP. In explaining its origins we can get a grip on this aspect of its nature. So tentatively: we need a theory of mind in order make sense of the behaviour of others. Language is a means of affirming intersubjectivity and so, as we've seen, we posit beliefs which relate the actions of others through language. In relating actions back to language (beliefs *that*), we further relate that language back to our community and so make sense of the agent's actions in relation to the shared community (these Butnam considerations are then a more fine-grained instance of comprehension-through-intersubjectivity). So far then we have the propositional nature of belief and the social nature of propositions. I'd now like to reverse what was said earlier about causation: we infer that beliefs cause actions because they happen to sufficiently well explain actions. What about self-knowledge? This occurs when we turn that model by which we understand others onto ourselves; to cohere with our sense of authorship with regard to our actions, we infer that we must have direct access to our own beliefs (since beliefs cause actions). The conjuring trick is then switching the belief-model to explain our own actions; this move coupled with our sense of authorship makes it seem that we must have direct access to our belief content. However, this illusory basis for propositional self-knowledge then shows how FP is not in the business of being representational, but in the business of being sufficiently self-consistent to provide a satisfactory *working* model – one whose inconsistency (as revealed by Butnam) never had occasion to be resolved for it never manifested in practice. Where there is this governing pragmatism, it makes little sense to revise or develop FP in anyway (e.g. through narrow content), for by its nature, revision is only needed when the mechanics go awry. However, its inconsistency has never manifested and so never hindered us from getting along. So we really we can't say that it's broken, and if it's not broken, why fix it?

The above observations suggest that there can be no question of FP being 'saved' (Fodor:1987, p.2). There can be no question of conflict between FP and some, say, neurophysiological account since what's governing their respective criteria of acceptance is different. FP's domestic nature means that it can only be displaced by a model whose everyday use is simpler and more familiar (certainly not a neurophysiological account).¹⁵ But

¹⁴ We might think that insofar as a private language is possible, it would have no word for 'belief' since self-understanding comes unmediated – without a community there'd be nothing in need of explanation for which beliefs would serve the purpose.

¹⁵ Though I am an eliminativist I am not sympathetic to the way in which Churchland (1981) treats the issue. By taking FP as any other theory whose fate could well be the grave (e.g. alchemy) Churchland misrepresents what a neurophysiological account of behaviour will do. By suggesting that FP is the type of thing that can be *replaced*, Churchland poorly advertises eliminativism. The familiarity and comfort of FP makes us want to grip

why, in science, leave FP behind? Well, why not? It has great explanatory success, but then so too does folk physics *at the level in which we engage with the world*. We have no reluctance in parting with folk physics, why should we treat FP any differently? Perhaps it is felt that we have a qualitatively different relation to the phenomenon of FP than we do in folk physics, we can see its truth from the inside. This forthright Cartesianism is unsettling. Certainly we might say that we have some direct relation to our phenomenal states, but this doesn't transmit to a direct relation to our constitutive nature – we should expect to be just as surprised by our own nature as we are by the nature of (e.g.) matter. Allowing the Cartesian grip to be loosened will lead to a science of behaviour whose explanatory capacities far exceed those of FP, and will radically alter our self-image...for a few minutes. At the level at which we engage with world, our folk science is what frames our everyday conception. The eventual displacement (if it can be called that) of FP will no more bother us than the fact that, say, space is not really Euclidean (or some such analogy).

4

The Butnam considerations have revealed an inconsistency in FP, one which we have failed to resolve. By reflecting on the nature of *de dicto* belief we have taken FP's inconsistency as indicative of its essentially pragmatic character. As such, that the FP pieces fail to fit together is not a concern, a full science of behaviour will have no room for our intentional categories. It seems it was some such lesson Wittgenstein tried to teach us long ago - these categories are essentially based in the way in which we engage with the world, to expect something (some reductive/rigorous account) more is to misunderstand their place in our 'forms of life'. I hope I've succeeded in propounding an interesting and different way of framing this same point. But what of our starting problems? The various aspects of our belief-concept don't fit, but they fit enough to get along, and get along we shall. But why don't we find N irrational in light of (***)? I'm sure that we have some loose notion of narrow content, nothing susceptible to theoretic formulation, but enough to, with 'one eye on the background facts' (as Loar (1988, p.574) puts it) (e.g. N's epistemic state), get along. As to Davidson's (1987) objection to Putnam's spatial metaphor, we can actually concur with Putnam that beliefs ain't in the head, they ain't anywhere – cutting the pie the way we have, we see that beliefs are not the sorts of things to which we should expect ontic correlates.

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onto it, but if Churchland emphasised that nothing will be taken from us, we'd see the eliminativist cause as it is – just the conviction that science will part with our everyday conceptions in behaviour just as it has done in all other areas of enquiry.

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