Social Externalism and Psychological Explanations - The Problem of the Semantic Features of Contents

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1. Introduction

It starts to rain and I open the umbrella or, if I don't have one, I ask my colleague, who is walking with me, if he has an umbrella in the bag. Why do I do so? There are many ways to answer this question, but if I adopt the strategy to explain the causes of my acting or speaking by looking for the reasons that I have for doing it (for instance, I notice that it is raining and I don't want to get wet), I commit myself to an explanation of a psychological kind (Davidson 1980).

The following discussion tackles an internal problem of psychological explanations concerning the *taxonomy* (or *categorization*) of intentional contents. Intentional contents define what beliefs, desires, hopes, etc., are about. One believes *that something is so-and-so* (for instance, one believes *that it is raining*); one desires *that something is going to be so-and–so* (that tomorrow it isn't going to rain), etc. The content of intentional states is the object of those so-called *that-clauses*: 'it is raining' is, for instance, the content of the belief *that it is raining*.

Insomuch as the content of beliefs, desires etc. can only be expressed by use of propositions, psychological explanations are commonly framed in terms of propositional attitudes. The notion of a propositional attitude involves two components: on the one hand, the proposition that describes the intentional content; on the other hand, the attitudes one may have towards these contents (the attitude of *believing* something, of *desiring* something, of *hoping* for something, etc.). The idea behind this is that subjects will behave differently depending on both the specific attitude they have towards these contents (depending on whether they believe something or they desire something or they hope for something, etc.) and the peculiar content itself, which characterizes those attitudes. The particular topic that the present paper deals with does not concern the function of different attitudes, but the semantics of the propositions that describe the content of attitudes. In other words, this paper maintains, according to the view proposed by social externalism, that the semantic content of propositional attitudes are socially constituted by the linguistic practices of communities. Nevertheless, the paper also deals with a peculiar matter regarding social determination of content; namely, that not all subjective contents share the same semantic features, even if they seem to be determined by one and the same social constituted content. The goal is to show how a socially constituted content may 'affect' the contents of individual minds differently. The paper concludes with an assessment of the consequences that follow from this view with respect to psychological explanations.

2. Individuation of Content from an Externalist Point of View

The classical shape of the taxonomy problem is defined by the debate about the socalled 'narrow' and 'wide' approach to intentional states, which was introduced *chiefly* by Saul Kripke's, Hilary Putnam's and Tyler Burge's externalist theories of content (Putnam 1975, Kripke 1979, Burge 1979). Briefly, externalism maintains that certain intentional states, such as beliefs and desires, have contents that depend on factors external to the individual mind.

I am not interested here in tracing the differences between the existing forms of externalism.[1] Instead, I examine the externalist view insofar as it is relevant for delineating the taxonomy-problem in psychological explanation. This view consists basically in the social externalism proposed by Burge as well as by Putnam's thesis of the 'division of linguistic labor'.[2]

The essential features of social externalism can easily be shaped by using Burge's famous arthritis example. If I give voice to my belief by stating, 'I have arthritis', the proposition 'I have arthritis' expresses the content of my belief, while the word 'arthritis' conveys the concept that determines what my content refers to. Contents are described by propositions that are made up by words. Words express the concepts that determine what contents are about.

Social externalism maintains that the concepts occurring in sentences that describe intentional contents are constituted by the classification of the external world that a society develops through its experts and imposes through linguistic practices. This is to say that arthritis is what medical science and the doctors tell us it is, viz. only a disease of the joints.

What would be the case, however, if I did not have any idea about how medical science describes arthritis, but I still believed that I had arthritis: if, for instance, I had no idea that arthritis is a disease of the joints and thought that the pain in my thigh is caused by arthritis?

Putnam's idea of the division of linguistic labor and Burge's position differ on this matter. For Burge, social practices constitute the concepts that we use, and the socially constituted concepts are the only ones that actually exist. So, if I lack the concept of arthritis, I simply do not know (or, at least, do not know exactly) what I believe to be the case; for my belief is nothing more than a socially defined concept of arthritis.

Unlike Burge, Putnam maintains that subjects do know what they think even if they don't share the concept with the experts; they only identify these concepts on the basis of different criteria or properties. Putnam's point is that for identifying (viz. taxonomizing) the peculiar concepts and related contents of subjects, one has to rely on the corresponding concepts determined by the experts. From this point of view, the analysis of content bifurcates into two differently determined notions,[3] namely, the externalist (wide) *and* the subjective (narrow). On the one hand, there is a *wide* notion of content developed by externalism that points out how the individuation of

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[1] Among those the most relevant positions are social, physical, causal and causal-informational externalism. For a classification see Bilgrami 1992, 22-26.

[2] Here externalism is considered exclusively as a theory of content. Other matters connected with it such as, for instance, the problem of supervenience are set aside.

[3] The notion of the 'bifurcation' of content is taken from Bilgrami (1992).

concepts and, therefore, the evaluation of contents depends on the external (physical and social) world, which exists beyond and before the individual mind; on the other hand, there is a *narrow* notion of content, which aims to taxonomize the specific contents of individual thought in order to describe behavior as the causal product of intentional contents.

3. Semantic Features of Intentional Contents

Psychological explanations in intentional terms rest, as Fodor points out (Fodor 1987, 33), on the idea that intentional states have causal power. The behavior of subjects (viz. language and action of subjects) is explained on the basis of the causal interaction of attitudes and contents. Inasmuch as psychological explanations concern subjective intentional contents, the relevant question is not what doctors say arthritis is, but how I *intend* arthritis when I believe that I have it. Because I do not know that arthritis is a disease of the joints only, I can believe to have arthritis in the thigh; and this belief is what matters for explaining my behavior on the basis of the causal power of my propositional attitudes. Thus, what is needed for a psychological explanation is an individuation of the properties that a subject associates with a certain concept and the semantics of his correspondent intentional contents. From the point of view of a psychological theory, the idea that subjects do not know what they think is nonsense, because a subjects' behavior cannot be caused by a content, which the subject does not know. For this reason, we can suppose any kind of nebulously or wrongly individuated content, but we must say that subjects know what they think with it; otherwise, we must give up psychological explanations as well as the principle that grounds them, namely, that behavior of subjects is a causal product of their thought.

The matter in question is how to determine the semantics of subjective contents. If I utter bona fide 'I have arthritis,' it is because I believe that 'I have arthritis'. But this report of my beliefs must still be put in quotes because I don't believe to have arthritis in the wide or social sense of arthritis as far as my doctor understands it. For taxonomizing my subjective content, one needs to disquote the proposition, which describes my belief in a way that identifies its semantics 'objectively'. This is nothing but the old problem of intentional and extensional contexts. The natural suggestion for this problem seems to be Putnam's: to evaluate subjective properties relying upon the properties that identify the concepts in a wide sense, which is to say relying upon the properties that experts tell us to be the essential ones for determining objects in extensional sense.

But in this respect we have to distinguish between two sides of the externalist view. On the one hand, there are the concepts and contents defined by scientific theories, which are based on structural properties of reality. These properties may identify the reference in an essential way: water is only and univocally H_2O. This externalist view is most properly called 'physical externalism'. Although physical externalism relates with social externalism as far as its concepts and contents influence social linguistic practices, linguistic practices and scientific theories are not the same. More precisely, social linguistic practices include the concepts constituted by different scientific theories as well as everyday classification of concepts based upon simple categories like the shape of objects or their features. A concept can be univocally determined only in the field of a theory, which sets up its own vocabulary. Social linguistic practices are juxtaposed onto the same linguistic frame of concepts constituted on the basis of different 'fields of knowledge', which describe the empirical world on the basis of different properties. For this reason, linguistic practices do not determine their own concepts in an univocal way. What the relevant properties are for determining a concept depend upon the context within which this concept is used.

Social practices define many properties for identifying a concept, but none of them determines which features *necessarily* individuate it in every case. Concepts like 'cat' or 'Oedipus' are not characterized by an essential property, which is in every case the same. Social uses offer many properties for individuating, for instance, the concept of 'table' or of 'Oedipus,' but no one determines univocally the concept of table or of Oedipus in the sense in which H_2O determines the concept of water. As Davidson points out, there is no way to make sure that the individuals will "pick out 'the' relation that constitutes knowing which object some object is" because "any property of an object may, under suitable conditions, be considered the relevant identifier." (Davidson 2001, 56)

4. Concluding Remarks: Taxonomies and Psychological Explanations

If, as the previous part points out, linguistic practices do not determine univocally which properties identify a concept, then different subjects may be affected by concepts in different ways. In this case, every property may be the relevant one for the individuation of subjective content. From this point of view, my concept of arthritis, for instance, may be identified on the basis of properties that have nothing to do with the medical definitions of arthritis, joints and thigh, even if they arise from the linguistic practices of my society. I may actually individuate every one of those three concepts through features that diverge from anatomic criteria.

The taxonomical work, which has to be done in order to develop psychological explanations, consists, in this case, in pointing out the properties of the subjective content that are relevant for explaining a behavior as causal effect of propositional attitudes. Developing such an apparatus does not mean to be able to grasp the whole of the actual semantic features of subjective contents. The explanation elaborates, rather, the hypotheses about possible features of those contents, which may be the relevant ones for the aim of explaining a behavior. An easy way for solving Burge's mystery regarding the belief of having arthritis in the thigh could be to hypothesize that the relevant properties for the determination of this belief is that arthritis causes pain and, therefore, this pain becomes the relevant property identifying this concept.

Yet, psychological theories can only develop hypotheses. To identify subjective contents for the aims of a psychological theory is a tricky interpretative work. The difficulty of this kind of explanations depends on the fact that the taxonomies of subjective contents build on the language defined by the social practices, which does not determine its own concepts in a univocal way. Thus, the identification of the relevant properties that determinate a subjective content requires a definition of the 'contextual variable', viz. the 'level of language' or, as previously stated, the 'field of knowledge' to which a concept has to be attributed.

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