The Acquaintance Argument for Intrinsic Intentionality

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ABSTRACT: Intentional properties are those properties of intentional states that individuate such states by their contents. Because we have the capacity to tell, from the first-person perspective, when two mental states in different psychological modes have the same content, some intentional properties are, essentially, *intrinsic* to the mental states in which they are instantiated. This is because the only adequate explanation of our cross-modal discriminatory capacities requires that we have acquaintance-knowledge of at least some of the contents of some of our mental states; no theory that appeals exclusively to propositional-knowledge or ability-knowledge is successful. Given that we can only be acquainted with intrinsic properties of our mental states, it follows that some intentional properties are intrinsic.

1. Introduction.

We creatures with minds are able to instantiate intentional mental states. For a state to be intentional is for it to be *about* or *directed at* something, such as a proposition, a property, an object, an event, or a state of affairs. *Intentional properties*, as I will understand them, are those properties of intentional states that individuate such states by their contents, rather than according to their psychological modes (believing, wondering, hoping, imagining, thinking, etc.). Examples of intentional properties include: *meaning that p*; *representing F*; *being about o*, *referring to o*.

It is easy to motivate the idea that intentional properties are, in some intuitive sense, *intrinsic* to mental states. When someone gives us advice, we say, "I'll keep it in mind." When someone pitches a general suggestion and we want to hear specifics, we ask, "What do you have in mind?" The spatial metaphor thus invoked in these colloquiums suggest that thought-contents are somehow contained within the manifold of the mind.

It is also easy to unsaddle these intuitions. First of all, the language of

"directedness" associated with intentional properties suggests that intentionality is a

relation, where one relatum is the thinker or a mental state and the other relatum is an

intentional *object* outside the confines of my mind.

Second, the famous thought experiments of Hilary Putnam, Saul Kripke, and

Tyler Burge in the 1970s persuaded many philosophers that which intentional properties

a subject instantiates is often a matter of mind-independent facts about the subject's

environment, such as the actual chemical composition of physical substances nearby, the

historical origin of certain terms in the language, and the opinions of experts in the

linguistic community.

Third, the naturalistic theories of intentionality developed in the 1980s by Jerry

Fodor, Fred Dretske, Ruth Garrett Millikan and others made essential reference to causal

and historical goings-on outside the minds of cognizers.

I will argue, nonetheless, that our intuitive sense that intentionality is intrinsic—

i.e., wholly determined by the intrinsic properties of mental states—is at least sometimes

correct. To anticipate: we have certain cognitive capacities whose only adequate

explanation is that we are *acquainted* with the intentional properties contained in our

mental states, and we can only be acquainted with our mental states' intrinsic properties.[1]

2. The Acquaintance Argument

I lay out my argument briefly here and then proceed to argue at length for its premises.

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[1] My argument has affinities with the arguments of Boghossian (1994), Bonjour (1998), and Pitt (2004). None of these arguments is explicitly abductive, as mine is, nor do any appeal explicitly to cross-modal discriminability.

(1) We sometimes have the capacity to reliably and confidently judge when two mental states in distinct psychological modes share intentional properties.

(2) Such judgments are epistemically grounded either in propositional knowledge, in know-how, or in acquaintance.

(3) They are not epistemically grounded in propositional knowledge or in know-how.

(4) So, they are epistemically grounded in acquaintance.

(5) We can only be acquainted with intrinsic properties of our mental states.

(6) So, some intentional properties are intrinsic.

Call this "The Acquaintance Argument." I will address its premises in order.

Premise 1: *We sometimes have the capacity to reliably and confidently judge when two mental states of distinct psychological modes share intentional properties.* Here's an illustration of the capacity invoked in (a). A boy works as an apprentice to a potion-master. The potion-master makes concoctions of sundry ingredients, samples of which he has meticulously collected over his many years. While the potion-master is at work, he calls out identifying descriptions of the receptacles to his apprentice. "Bring me the glass vial on the third shelf with the blue liquid in it! Bring me the wooden crate in the second cabinet with the black beetles in it!" The apprentice dutifully runs to the pantry, retrieves the items that satisfy his master's descriptions, and delivers them.

My focus is on the apprentice's cognitive process that allows him to succeed at the task. First, he has an auditory experience as of the potion-master's vocalizations, and understands those vocalizations as linguistically encoding a certain content. Next, when he enters the pantry, he has visual experiences as of the cupboards and all they contain.

Finally, he visually identifies those items that satisfy the linguistic content of his master's vocalizations.

As a mere *recognitional* task, the apprentice is doing nothing that a well-trained dog cannot do (viz., identifying an object upon receiving verbal orders to do something). But the apprentice can do more than retrieve the right object. He can also "check his work," so to speak, so as to ensure against making catastrophic, abomination-conjuring mistakes. "Am I seeing what he asked for?" He asks himself, and then answers in the affirmative only once he has carefully attended, on the one hand, to his memory of his master's verbal instructions, and, on the other, to the visual array before him. That is: he succeeds in his task because he is able to reliably and confidently judge that one of his experiential states shares intentional properties with another of his experiential states. To put it more succinctly, he can *cross-modally discriminate* among conscious mental states according to their intentional properties.

I take it as obvious that such a capacity is not unique to the potion-master's apprentice; examples of cross-modal discrimination are pretty common. (To name just one example: somebody has verbally described poison ivy to you, so that you can visually identify it and avoid it.)

Premises 2 & 3: Such judgments are epistemically grounded either in propositional knowledge, in know-how, or in acquaintance; they are not epistemically grounded in propositional knowledge or in know-how. Assuming that the three types of knowledge I mention are exhaustive, premise 2 needs no defense. I now take up the burden of showing

that attempts to account for our cross-modal discriminatory capacities in terms of propositional knowledge or in terms of ability-knowledge are unsuccessful.

First, propositional knowledge. The epistemic capacity of interest to me (cross-modal discrimination with respect to intentional contents) is an instance of a more general category, viz., our knowledge of the intentional contents of our mental states, which henceforth I'll refer to as 'semantic self-knowledge'. There is now an extensive literature on whether/how semantic self-knowledge is possible, given the non-intrinsicality of intentional properties.

According to one influential suggestion by John Heil (1988) and Tyler Burge (1988), knowing the intentional contents of my mental states is a matter of my forming trivial beliefs about them. To know that I am having the thought *that jar is blue*, I need only have the second-order thought, "I am having the thought *that jar is blue*," where the italicized bit is an actual tokening of the first-order thought.

Two worries about the strategy: first, the strategy works only so long as the subject is actually thinking the thought, so it doesn't secure knowledge of what I was thinking a second ago. Second, it's not clear that it really is possible to think both thoughts at the same time (the first-order thought, and the second-order thought in which it is embedded). A closely-related strategy addresses these worries at the cost of giving up on triviality. The idea is that semantic self-knowledge can be accounted for in terms of a *reliable mechanism* (Nichols & Stich [2003]), or a *norm of rationality* (Byrne [2005]), that generates, or sanctions the generation of, a second-order belief that mentions first-order thoughts. Following Peacocke (1996) I'll call a strategy that accounts for semantic

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self-knowledge in terms of (either trivial or substantive) second-order beliefs 'the redeployment strategy.'

Let us see if the strategy can serve present purposes. When the potion-master's apprentice judges that his visual experience has the same content as his previous auditory-linguistic experience, what does the redeployment strategy have to say by way of explanation? Something like the following: the apprentice (a) forms the belief that he has heard his Master say thus-and-so and the belief that he is visually experiencing in such-and-such a way; and then he (b) judges that the beliefs have something in common—i.e. that thus-and-so = such-and-such. But it's murky how either one of these steps is supposed to occur.

What is it for the apprentice (a) to form the requisite beliefs? When the apprentice believes that he is visually experiencing in such-and-such a way, 'such-and-such' will amount to a demonstrative, filled in either by his actual visual experience (the selfsame token), or else a representation of it (perhaps an imaginative episode?). Consider an analogy with monetary currency. Suppose you put a coin in front of me and ask me to how much it is worth. I tell you that it is worth *this much*, while nudging the coin forward; or I tell you it worth ____, where the blank is filled in by a hand signal that, I insist, represents whatever the coin is worth. It is vacuous beliefs of this sort that the redeployment strategist appeals to in accounting for the apprentice's discriminatory judgments.

But now, how is the apprentice supposed to (b) recognize that the two beliefs have something in common? If you set a second coin in front of me, I can form a similar

belief about its value. But I am not in a position to tell you, on the basis of the intrinsic[2]

features of the two coins, whether the two coins have the same denomination. The trouble

here is that the apprentice's two mental states—his auditory-linguistic experience and his

visual one—appear to have nothing in common *save* their intentional properties. (This is

why *cross-modal* discriminatory capacities are so interesting.) If intentional properties

are non-intrinsic, then there is nothing on the basis of which sameness of intentional

properties could be recognized, from the first-person perspective.

An advocate of the redeployment strategy might reply that while what makes it

the case that same-contented mental states have the content they have is non-intrinsic,

nevertheless there is some additional, non-intentional intrinsic feature that they all have

in common. This is an empirical speculation, akin to suggesting that there is some

intrinsic property shared by all similarly-valued currency. But since it is not an a priori

truth, a transition from *my mental states x and y share intrinsic feature F* to *my mental

states x and y share intentional property G* would not be a *rational* transition. In short:

the sense in which the apprentice is "redeploying" anything is immaterial to his ability to

recognize sameness and difference of intentional type, and that ability has to be

epistemically brute, built into his cognitive wiring.

So, propositional knowledge can't account for our ability to judge when mental

states in different psychological modes have the same content. But could we account for

such an ability directly, in terms of epistemically basic ability-knowledge? This is Ruth

Millikan's view. She writes, "Knowing what one is thinking of is, just, having the

capacity to recognize when two of one's thought tokens are thoughts of the same."[3] I'll

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[2] Not so much intrinsic as readily perceptually available, but close enough.
[3] Millikan (1993), p. 96-97.

call Millikan's proposal "the reidentification strategy." There are three reasons to think that it is inadequate.

First, it does not adequately capture the phenomenology relevant to cross-modal discrimination. As far as the reidentification strategy is concerned, there is no further court of appeal than the discriminatory judgment itself, which is the product of a foundational epistemic ability. But this is not what it is like to make such judgments: we can more or less carefully attend to the contents of our mental states if we are worried we have made a mistake. As I said above, the apprentice can 'check is his work,' attending extra carefully to his memory of what his Master said and to his visual experience. But this makes no sense on the reidentification strategy.

Second, it isn't clear that a system's ability to discriminate mental states with respect their non-intrinsic properties *could* be brute. Analogy: suppose you were charged with the task of building a robot that could sort currency of arbitrary origin for sameness of denomination. Without knowledge of the other relata in the relational property *having monetary value such-and-such*—viz, whatever states of affairs confer value on currency—there is no non-magical way to build the robot. The reidentification strategist will be forced to say—as the redeployment strategist was—that intentional mental states have intrinsic properties that covary one-to-one with their intentional contents. But it is at best a contingent, speculative suggestion to say that content-bearing structures and intentional contents covary in that way.

The third problem amounts to a mismatch between the extensive role that semantic self-knowledge plays in our cognizing, on the one hand, and the more limited role that the ability to discriminate intentional contents plays. Semantic self-knowledge—

that is, our grasp of the contents of our thoughts, percepts, images, memories, intentions, utterances, and so forth—provides the epistemic grounding for a lot of different types of abilities, not just the ability to tell when one mental state has the same content as another, such as: bringing to mind mental states with the same content as previous mental states; expressing the content of a mental state in words (e.g. describing what I want); expressing the content of a mental state in images (e.g. drawing what I see). Furthermore, there is a very close connection between semantic self-knowledge and semantic *understanding*. What exactly this connection comes to is behind the scope of the present inquiry, but it is plausible that the two are mutually entailing: to the extent that I grasp the content of my mental states, to that extent I understand what it is that those mental states are about, and vice versa. And while *understanding* underwrites a whole host of epistemic capacities, a mere ability to sort mental states for sameness and difference of contents does not do this. For example, it is plausible that it is in virtue of my understanding of the addition-function that I am able to make corresponding arithmetical inferences; but merely being able to tell when two mental states each represent the addition function isn't enough to underwrite that capacity. The point is: whatever accounts for semantic self-knowledge ought to explain much more than our ability to re-identify mental contents. Probably it ought to explain semantic *understanding*, too—and indirectly, all that understanding makes possible.

Now, it is open to the re-identification strategist to list all of these abilities, draw a circle around them, and call the lot 'semantic self-knowledge'. But motley lists make for really inelegant explanations. If we're trying to understand how our epistemic capacities are possible, a list of such capacities should serve as the explanandum, not the explanans.

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Thus, our capacity for cross-modal discrimination with respect to intentional content is not grounded in prior propositional knowledge, nor is it a brute bit of know-how. It must therefore be grounded in acquaintance-knowledge.

Premise 5: We can only be acquainted with intrinsic properties of our mental states. Acquaintance is that direct cognitive relation that a subject bears to her conscious mental states when, and because, she attends to them. Acquaintance is not reducible to any propositional attitude or to any ability, but is rather a form of thing-knowledge, of *knowing-what*.

Perhaps this claim seems obvious; in case it doesn't, I think it can be derived from some facts about introspection that are widely accepted—facts which shed light on why it seems so strange to deny it. It is well known that one's judgments about one's own mind are not infallible. There is, nevertheless, a certain form of fallibility that a certain type of introspective judgment cannot have: when one forms an introspective judgment on the basis of an act of introspective acquaintance with a conscious mental state, one cannot go wrong *by being misled by the appearances*. In introspective acquaintance, appearance and reality go together. Hence acquaintance-based introspective judgments are not subject to what Terry Horgan (2012) calls "appearance/reality fallibility".

By contrast, judgments about non-intrinsic features of our conscious mental states *do* admit of appearance/reality fallibility. This is because non-intrinsic features of a mental state supervene on states of affairs external to that state, i.e. states of affairs that are no more closely connected to that state than via a causal connection. And appearances can mislead, when it comes to judgments about items that are no-more-closely-than-

causally connected to one's mental states: the familiar effects of a familiar cause can be replicated by a *distinct*, non-familiar cause (even if it would take an evil demon to pull off the stunt.) It follows that one can only form acquaintance-based introspective judgments about items that are more-closely-than-causally-connected to one's mental states—i.e. their *intrinsic* features, those features that supervene on nothing inessential to states in which they are instantiated.

3. Conclusion

Semantic self-knowledge—our ability to *know what* we are consciously thinking, perceiving, or imagining—is epistemically fruitful: it explains our ability to tell when two mental states express the same content. We should take such talk of 'knowing-what' at face value: we are *acquainted* with the intentional properties instantiated in conscious mental states. We should take it at face value because it is the only adequate explanation of a certain type of semantic self-knowledge, viz., our capacity to cross-modally discriminate among mental states according to their content. A theory of semantic self-knowledge

Theories of semantic self-knowledge that appeals exclusively to propositional knowledge collapses into theories on which such a capacity is *brute*; but identifying semantic self-knowledge with a brute discriminatory capacity (a) fails to do justice to the phenomenology of discrimination; (b) requires the implementation of a potentially impossible sorting-mechanism, and (c) fails to account for the full spectrum of epistemic capacities that semantic self-knowledge does, in fact, ground.

We must be at least sometimes be acquainted with at least some of the intentional properties of our conscious mental states, then. But we can only be acquainted with the intrinsic features of such states. I conclude that some intentional properties are intrinsic features of the mental states in which they are instantiated, and consequently that all theories of intentional properties that entail their non-intrinsicality—including all of the leading naturalistic theories—are at best incomplete.

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