

Two Aspects of Content: Semantic Inferentialist's Reconciliation of Authoritative Self-Knowledge and Content Externalism

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Abstract: This paper aims to dissolve the problem of the compatibility between authoritative self-knowledge of propositional attitudes and content externalism. The basic strategy to do this is to appeal to pair concepts of semantic inferentialism, i.e., the propositional content and the representational content. Inferentialists can explain how the former content can be authoritatively known from the first-person perspective, and why the latter content is partly determined by external factors. In addition to this, it is also shown how this inferentialistic conception of content succeeds in dodging the attack on authoritative self-knowledge derived from the physical externalism about the mental content. What makes it possible is that the inferentialistic conception of content rejects the traditional but problematic presumption that the intension is the determinant of the extension. In this way, this paper reconciles the authority of self-knowledge of propositional attitudes with the thesis of (physical) externalism.

1 Introduction: The Problem of Compatibility

It is, on the one hand, often stressed that our language has a public character. Content externalism is one of the clear manifestations of the character. On the other hand, it is also difficult to deny that our self-knowledge of mental states (including propositional attitudes) has a certain kind of authority. Moreover, since the self-knowledge is normally achieved relying on no inference, the authority is based on no empirical evidence. Although both of these claims (the public character of our language and the non-inferential authority of our self-knowledge) seems quite plausible respectively, there is, at least apparently, a tension in simultaneously accepting both of them. This is what I call 'the problem of compatibility', which is the subject of this paper.

But what exactly is the problem? Although the controversy is complicated, the gist of the problem is easy to grasp.¹ Content externalism claims that the contents of linguistic expressions are determined partly by certain (environmental or social) factors external to an individual speaker's inner state. Once we endorse this thesis concerning the contents of linguistic expressions, then it becomes almost unavoidable to endorse the same thesis concerning the contents of propositional attitudes, since those two sorts of contents are arguably dependent on each other. But the external factors that

¹ The following formulation of the compatibility problem is first proposed by Boghossian (1989).

the thesis claims partly determine the contents of our statements and propositional attitudes can be completely unknown to ourselves. Consequently, the thesis of content externalism entails that the contents of linguistic expressions and propositional attitudes are in a sense beyond our own grasps. Now this gives rise to the problem of compatibility. For authoritative self-knowledge of propositional attitudes seems to demand the opposite. It seems that we can authoritatively know our own propositional attitudes without relying on any evidence or inference based on it. But if the contents of propositional attitudes are determined partly by certain external factors, of which we can be completely unaware, then the authoritative self-knowledge is threatened.

That seems to be a contradiction! But is that really contradictory? The crucial point on which we have to reflect is what the word ‘contents’ means here. To begin with, (1) it is not at all obvious that the contents of which we can have authoritative self-knowledge and the contents that are beyond our grasps are the same. Then, if they are different, (2) in what do the former and the latter contents consist respectively? And finally (3) how are the former contents authoritatively known to us through no evidence and no inference, and why are the latter contents beyond our own grasps?

2 Key Ideas from Semantic Inferentialism

In my opinion, the answers to all these questions can be given adequately from the semantic inferentialist’s standpoint. Therefore, briefly turning aside from the problem of compatibility, I introduce the main points of semantic inferentialism.²

Semantic inferentialism is concerned with the question of what it is for statements uttered or propositional attitudes held by us to be meaningful or to have contents. And it answers the question basically in the spirit of the use theory of meaning. Traditionally, philosophers have divided meaning into two distinctive categories—the intension / the extension, or in Brandom’s terminology the concomitant aspect / the representational aspect of the propositional content.³ Roughly speaking, many of the philosophers try to explain the former based on the latter. Semantic inferentialists, however, base on our normative practice of inference and invert the order of explanation.⁴

To begin with, according to inferentialists’ explanation, a statement one utters has some propositional content when it is *inferentially articulated*, i.e., when it counts as a move in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Then, the propositional content of a claim has two different aspects, which are the inferentialist’s alternatives of the traditional distinction of intension and extension. First, the *concomitant aspect* of the propositional content that the uttered statement has consists in the *inferential commitments*⁵ that the original statement, along with the background beliefs of *the utterer*,

² This view is rigorously and exhaustively developed in Brandom (1994), and we can see the outline of it in Brandom (2001).

³ Strictly speaking, the distinction of extension / intension, slightly but importantly, differs from the inferentialist’s version of their alternatives, the distinction of representational aspect / concomitant aspect. We will see the difference at length in section four below.

⁴ See Brandom (1994, pp. 93-4, pp. 135-6). This inversion is crucial for our discussion. See section four.

⁵ The adjective ‘inferential’ is contrasted with ‘substitutional.’ For details, see the following paragraphs and note seven.

rationally makes her prepared to undertake, and the *entitlements* that *the utterer* rationally regards as justifying the original statement.⁶ Thus, we understand the concomitant aspect of the propositional content of a statement (for short, I simply call this the ‘propositional content’ of a statement) in terms of *its distinctive roles in intrapersonal inference*.

Second, in order to understand the *representational aspect* of the propositional content of a statement (in short, ‘representational content’ of a statement), we should attend not merely to the inferentially articulated dimension, but also to the socially articulated dimension of our game of giving and asking for reasons. To begin with, the representational content of a claim, contrasted with the propositional content of the claim (i.e., what is *said* by the claim), is the object that the claim talks *about*. And what the object is like is determined by the identity condition of the object. Then the representational content of the claim consists in *the inferential roles of various true identity statements that describe the identity condition of the object*. But what inferential roles do these identity statements play? Their roles are enabling us to make new *substitutional commitments*⁷ through substitutional inferences, i.e., the inferences that draw a consequence by simultaneously replacing a certain term occurring in a premise with another term based on an identity statement. Therefore, grasping the representational content of a statement consists in the ability to derive various substitutional commitments from the original statement together with those true identity statements through making substitutional inferences. But for what purpose does such an ability serve? We employ this kind of ability in our social and communicative practice. Grasping the representational content of a claim is indispensable for assessing the claim made by another person from *de re* standpoint and for extracting useful information from the claim. In this sense, the representational content of a statement is not only inferentially but also *socially* articulated in our inferential practice.⁸

Finally, all the above explanations can be, *mutatis mutandis*, applied to the explanations of the contents of beliefs. Additionally, for the sake of argument, I presuppose that the contents of the other propositional attitudes than beliefs (e.g., desires and intentions) can be also explained in similar ways.

3 The Basic Line

⁶ See Brandom (1994, pp. 168-70, pp. 186-90). Strictly speaking, a third factor, i.e., the incompatibility relation between commitments and entitlements, is also needed in full explanation of inferential articulation of the propositional content. But, for reasons of space, we have to leave it out.

⁷ The distinction between the inferential commitment and the substitutional commitment consists in the difference between *de dicto* viewpoint and *de re* viewpoint. An inferential commitment of a claim is an inferential consequence of the claim together with the *speaker's* auxiliary background beliefs. So, the speaker herself is prepared to acknowledge the commitment from her own standpoint. Oppositely, a substitutional commitment of a claim is the commitment undertaken by *a interlocutor* from *de re* viewpoint. The substitutional commitment is undertaken through the substitutional inference based on an identity statement to which *the interlocutor* is committed, regardless that the speaker may acknowledge the commitment or not.

⁸ See Brandom (1994, pp. 136-40, pp. 370-6, pp. 495- 520).

Now we can come back to the series of questions concerning the compatibility problem. The basic line of my position is very simple. Let me answer briefly the questions (1) and (2) at a stroke. In my opinion, the two sorts of contents, i.e., the contents that one can authoritatively know without relying on any evidence and the contents that are in a sense beyond one's own grasp, are different. And my suggestion is that, from the semantic inferentialist's viewpoint, we should regard the former as 'propositional contents' and the latter as 'representational contents.'⁹

But how can we authoritatively know the propositional contents of our own attitudes based on no evidence? As we saw in section two, grasping the propositional content of one's own belief is grasping the inferential commitments and the entitlements connected to the belief. And the inferential commitments of a belief, on the one hand, are the statements that the belief, together with other auxiliary background beliefs of the believer, makes her prepared to acknowledge.¹⁰ On the other, the entitlements of the belief are the statements that the believer is prepared to acknowledge as justification of the belief. For our purpose, what is important in these characterizations of commitments and entitlements is that both of them contain the normative phrase of '(the believer is) prepared to acknowledge....' In virtue of this feature, we

⁹ But I have to note that this direction has been already suggested in Brandom (1994, p. 507). So what I try to do below is to flesh out his idea and thereby to apply it to an attempt of dissolving the compatibility problem.

¹⁰ Strictly speaking, there can be an inferential commitment that a subject is not prepared to acknowledge. Brandom pointed out that there are two ways of undertaking an inferential commitment. (Brandom 1994, pp. 193-8) One way is to directly acknowledge the commitment, and the other is to undertake the commitment as a consequence of the other commitments that she explicitly acknowledged. Let us call the former 'commitments as acknowledgement' and the latter 'commitments as consequence.' The latter (the commitment as consequence) poses an apparent problem to our claim that we have authoritative self-knowledge about the propositional contents of our own beliefs. For a commitment as consequence can be unknown to its subject since her capacity of inference may not be complete. Indeed, this kind of incompleteness of inferential capacity is a familiar and widely observed phenomenon. For example, consider a person who knows all the axiom of Euclidean geometry but who does not know the Pythagorean theorem. Making complex inferences often requires a special talent. Now, does this kind of unconscious commitments form the counterexamples to our claim?

Probably, this is true. But I think that it is no flaw of inferentialistic conception of mental content. For our ability of self-knowledge is *actually* limited to some extent. For instance, consider a person who explicitly acknowledges both that free wills exist and that Newtonian mechanics is true. Then, an incompatibilist philosopher appears and starts to persistently persuade her step by step. The persuasion succeeded, and she accepts and acknowledges all these steps, e.g., that the existence of free will entails the ability to do otherwise, that the ability requires the rejection of determinism, but that Newtonian mechanics do imply determinism etc.. Now she convinces that the original two beliefs are incompatible and may say, 'I did not completely grasp what my beliefs mean!'

In this sense, our authority of self-knowledge about propositional contents that we are going to explain is in fact not perfect. But by contrast with normal knowledge, there still remains something special in the self-knowledge about propositional contents. This is what we are going to explain. In the following argument, for simplicity, I will focus exclusively on the commitment as acknowledgement. But our argument can be also applied to the commitment as consequence, to the extent that we normally admit the authoritative self-knowledge about them.

can explain the self-knowledge at issue, appealing to so-called ‘Transparency Thesis.’ In the following, I will elucidate this point.

To begin with, let us turn to the explanation of our grasping the inferential commitments of our own beliefs. Suppose that B(P) is one of my beliefs, and Cs are the inferential commitments associated with B(P). As we saw in the above paragraph, a statement S is C if and only if B(P), together with other auxiliary background beliefs of mine (call them ‘B(Qs)’), makes me prepared to acknowledge S. However, in fact, *being prepared to acknowledge S* is equivalent to *believing* that S. So, the above biconditional can be put in the following way; a statement S is C if and only if B(P), together with B(Qs), makes me *believe* that S. In other words, A statement S is C given that B(P) and B(Qs), I believe that S. This means that in order to judge whether a given statement S is C or not, I only have to judge whether I believe that S or not given that B(P) and B(Qs).

Here, it is helpful to remember the ‘Transparency Thesis’ about self-ascription of beliefs, which is first proposed and named by Roy Edgley, and is afterward developed by Gareth Evans and Richard Moran.¹¹ According to the thesis, in order to judge whether I believe that S or not, all I have to do is judging whether it is the case that S or not. (The relevant question is directed not to myself, but to the world.) Why? For asserting the following sentence (what is called ‘Moore’s sentence’) sounds awkwardly irrational; ‘It is the case that S, but I do not believe that S.’ Note that the Transparency Thesis holds only in the case of *self*-ascription. (It is not at all irrational to assert that it is case that S, but *she* does not believe that S.) Now, let us apply this thesis to the question at issue. In order to judge whether I believe that S or not given that B(P) and B(Qs), all I have to do is judge whether it is the case that S or not, given that P and Qs. As long as I am equipped with minimal rationality and with the normal ability to make inference concerning the world, I can judge whether a given statement S is C or not, based on this kind of transparency procedure. Therefore, we can authoritatively know what inferential commitments our own beliefs have.

This type of explanation, *mutatis mutandis*, can be applied to the grasp of the entitlements of one’s own beliefs. In addition to the previous notation, suppose that Es are the entitlements associated with B(P). Then, a statement S is E if and only if I am prepared to acknowledge that E is a justification of B(P). But again, for the synonymy of ‘being prepared to acknowledge’ and ‘believe’, we can translate the above biconditional into the following form; a statement S is E iff I believe that S is a justification of B(P). Through the transparency procedure, the right side of this biconditional can be judged by judging the question of whether it is the case that S justifies P or not. Consequently, we, who have minimal rationality and the ability to assess evidence, can authoritatively know what entitlements our own beliefs have. Now, we obtain the explanation of the authoritative knowledge about the propositional contents (the inferential commitments and the entitlements) that our own beliefs have.

Next, why are the representational contents of one’s attitudes beyond one’s own grasp? According to the inferentialist’s view, grasping the representational content of a claim —grasping the object that the claim talks about—demands of us to grasp the substitutional commitments that the original claim plus the relevant *true* identity

¹¹ See Edgley (1969, p. 90), Evans (1982, p. 225-6), and Moran (1988, pp. 142-8; 2001, pp. 61-5).

statements make us undertake. Here, the adjective ‘true’ is essential. For instance, my belief that the Morning Star is very bright is, needless to say, directed to the Morning Star. Of course, I know that. But this belief can be also said to be directed to Venus since it is true that the Morning Star = Venus, whether or not I know it. In other words, my belief that the Morning Star is very bright conveys some information about Venus too. I, however, may not be able to utilize the information since the truth of the relevant identity statement is objective, and I have to make certain empirical inquiry to know whether it is true or not. In a word, *a posteriority* of true identity statements makes a lot of room for my not completely grasping the representational contents of my own beliefs.

These are the basic line of my argument. And they seem to suggest a way to reconcile authoritative self-knowledge with content externalism. For our picture can admit both that we can, in the propositional sense, authoritatively know the contents of our own propositional attitudes, and that the contents of our propositional attitudes are, in the representational sense, determined by certain external factors. In the following section, we will turn to investigate at length exactly what implications this line of thought has to content externalism.

4 Implications to the Physical Externalism¹²

4-1 Putnam’s Argument

Now, let us consider Putnam’s physical externalism (see Putnam (1975)). In order to establish the thesis, Putnam devised a science-fictional thought experiment of Twin Earth, which is a ‘Doppelganger’ of Earth except that the liquid that people call ‘water’ has the different micro-structure, XYZ, although as to the macro-level properties XYZ is indistinguishable from H₂O. Then, imagine a person who lived in 1750 on Twin Earth. Since the technique of chemical analysis had not been yet invented in 1750, she did not have any knowledge of the micro-structure of XYZ and cannot distinguish it from H₂O. Hence, in 1750 she had the exactly same set of beliefs about the substance that she called ‘water’ as her counter-part on Earth. This, however, entails that the meaning of the word ‘water’ is not determined by her mental states. For despite that she and her counter-part share the exactly same types of mental state, the reference of ‘water’ differs between Twin Earth and Earth. Consequently, Putnam says, “‘meanings’ just ain’t in the head!” (ibid., p. 227) and claims that it is partly determined by the physical environment where the speaker has been living.

In order to be more rigorous, the following two points are worth noting. The first is that when Putnam uses the word ‘mental state’ above, he uses it in the ‘narrow’ sense, i.e., that the mental states that he supposes are individualistic in the sense that they supervene just on subject’s inner states, not on the physical / social environment of

¹² Although the social externalism proposed by Burge (1979) is also important, for reasons of space, we have to omit the consideration of it. My prospect is that though Burge himself asserts that his externalism encroaches on the territory of propositional contents of our beliefs, inferentialists can reconcile Burge’s argument for social externalism with authoritative self-knowledge again. I will elaborate on this reconciliation some other time.

the subject. He calls this premise ‘methodological solipscism’ about the mental. And the second note is that when he says, “‘meanings’ just ain’t in the head!”, the word ‘meanings’ refers to *intensions* in the traditional sense. Traditionally, the intension of a word is supposed to be something that determines the extension (reference) of the word, although the explanations of exactly what intensions are diverge among philosophers. According to this terminology, the core of the above thought experiment can be reformulated as follows: the extension (reference) of the word ‘water’ is determined partly by the physical environment of a speaker; but every (narrow) mental state that the speaker holds is determined by her inner states, regardless of her physical environment; therefore, the word’s intension (the determinant of its extension) cannot be fit inside her (narrow) mental states.

From this argument, Putnam concludes that we have to reject either of the two familiar claims, i.e., (1) the claim that the speaker’s mental states determine the intension of a word, or (2) the claim that the intension of a word determines its extension. As is widely known, Putnam selected the first option of rejecting the claim (1). This means that the understanding of word’s meaning— connecting an intension with a word—is not a matter of the mental since the connection obtains partly by the causal link between a speaker and her environment. Thus, the physical externalism follows.

Although Putnam himself applies his argument only to the meanings of words, his argument, as McGinn (1977) correctly pointed out, can be also applied to their mental counter-parts, the contents of propositional attitudes. And this expansion will lead us into the compatibility problem of self-knowledge and physical externalism. Again, imagine that Emily, who lived on Twin Earth in 1750, held a belief that water is transparent. To what was her belief directed, or what did her belief represent? For the same reason as the above, the answer will be XYZ, not H₂O. But from the assumptions of the argument, she had the exactly same types of bodily state and narrow mental state as her counter-part on Earth, i.e., she had the brain states and the phenomenal states¹³ that were qualitatively identical to her counter-part’s. So what her belief represents is not fully determined by these inner states. It is partly determined by her physical environment. And if we suppose that, as parallel to the case of the intension, the content of a propositional attitude is the determinant of what the attitude represents, then the content also bulges out of these inner states, i.e., the content does not supervene on them. Such a content is generally called ‘wide content.’ Then, the problem of compatibility between self-knowledge of one’s own propositional attitudes and physical externalism occurs. If the contents of our propositional attitudes are wide, i.e., if they are partly determined by speaker’s physical environment, of which we can be completely ignorant, how can we have non-inferential authoritative self-knowledge of our own propositional attitudes?

4-2 Reconciling Putnam’s Argument with Self-Knowledge

Roughly speaking, our reply to this problem is rejecting claim (2) and sustaining claim (1), which is just the opposite of Putnam’s position. In his argument, the rejection of (1), which is equivalent to endorsing content externalism, depends on the

¹³ For the argument, here I presuppose that the phenomenal states are generally narrow. But this presupposition is not indispensable for my discussion.

rightness of (2). However, is claim (2) really essential for our concept of content (or intension)? Isn't there any other conception of content (or intension) that does not imply claim (2)? Here, the standpoint of semantic inferentialism is crucial. As I pointed out in section two, inferentialism reverses the traditional order of explanation between the extension and the intension. Traditionally, philosophers tend to explain what the intension is based on its relation to the extension, presupposing an independent explanation of what the extension is. And the view that the philosophers widely shared was that the intension is something giving the sufficient condition of the extension (although it is open exactly what the intension consists in). However, the inferentialist radically departs from this way of thinking. Inferentialist's alternatives of the intension and the extension, i.e., the propositional content and the representational content, are both explained in terms of our inferential practice. What is crucial for our discussion is that inferentialist's explanation of the two concepts does *not* imply the traditional claim (2). I want to elaborate on this point below.

According to inferentialism, on the one hand, grasping the propositional content of a statement (or a belief) is grasping the inferential role that the statement (or the belief) plays, namely the inferential commitments that the subject who asserts the statement (or holds the belief) undertakes and the entitlements that she regards as support for the statement (or the belief). On the other hand, grasping the representational content of a statement (or a belief) consists in grasping the substitutional commitments derived from the statement along with the relevant true identity statements. It follows from this explanation that grasping the propositional content of a statement (or a belief) does not necessarily contain fully grasping its representational content. For, as I pointed out in section three, the relevant true identity statements may be a posteriori.

For example, consider the statement,

The Morning Star is observed at peep of day. (a)

And imagine a rational person, Nancy, who asserts this statement with a good grasp of its *propositional content* (its entitlements and its inferential commitments): e.g., she grasps what perceptual statements she can use to support the statement, and she grasps that by asserting the statement she is committed to the statement that the Morning Star is a certain large substance floating in the space etc.. But, in this case, it is possible that she refrains from undertaking the commitment to the following statement,

The Evening Star is observed at peep of day. (b)

Since the following identity statement is undoubtedly a posteriori, she may be ignorant of it.

The Morning Star = the Evening Star. (i)

Nevertheless, we, who has already known that (i) is empirically true, know that her statement (a) is directed not only to the Morning Star, but also to the Evening Star. So we can derive the commitment to (b) from the commitment to (a) together with the

commitment to (i). In other words, the inferential role of (i), in this context, is enabling us to make substitutional inference from (a) to (b). Nancy, however, cannot make such a substitutional inference. Consequently, she does not grasp the substitutional commitment derived from the proper substitutional inference, and therefore, she does not fully grasp the representational content of her own statement (a).

To summarize, the inferentialist defines the propositional content of a statement in terms of the entitlements and the inferential commitments that a rational utterer connects to the statement. So, in uttering the statement, the rational utterer, as I argued in section three, always grasps the propositional content of her statement. On the contrary, grasping the representational content of the statement consists in grasping the proper substitutional commitments (like (b)) that can be obtained through proper substitutional inferences based on *true* identity statements (like (i)). But since the truth value of the identity statements is objective, and knowing the value is an empirical matter, it is possible that the rational utterer does not know which identity statement is true. Therefore, the representational content of the statement can be unknown to the utterer. In a word, grasping the representational content of a statement demands the utterer of empirical inquiry although grasping its propositional content does not.

If grasping the propositional content of a statement does not necessarily contain grasping its representational content, then it follows that its propositional content is not something providing the necessary and sufficient condition of its representational content. This is just the same as rejecting the above claim (2). Consequently, the inferentialist can dissolve the compatibility problem, in full agreement with Putnam on his externalist insight that Emily's belief that water is transparent is directed to XYZ, not to H₂O. Since the inferentialist rejects (2), accepting the authoritative self-knowledge about propositional contents of one's own belief is no bar to the belief's representational content being partly determined by her physical environment, of which she may be completely unaware. Indeed, the inferentialist, as we saw in the above paragraph, positively asserts that the representational content of a propositional attitude varies depending on her physical environment.¹⁴ For the inferentialist too, the representational content is an empirical matter.

Concluding Remarks

In my diagnosis, the problem of compatibility between self-knowledge and externalism arises, due to a bias traditionally shared in several conceptions of intension or mental content, i.e., the bias that the intension (or the mental content) somehow determines the extension. Inferentialism, however, rejects the bias, and thereby can reconcile the distinctive self-knowledge with the externalist's insight. This shows an important advantage of inferentialistic conception of meaning and mental content. For each of the distinctiveness of our self-knowledge about propositional attitudes and the public character of our language is not easy to throw away. The large quantity of papers concerning this topic shows the seriousness of this dilemma. But inferentialism dissolves the dilemma by offering two new conceptions of meaning (or mental con-

¹⁴ Brandom is much self-conscious of this externalistic character of his view. He focuses on this topic in Brandom (1994, pp. 631-3, pp. 645-649).

tent), i.e., the propositional content and the representational content. In other words, by offering them, inferentialism neatly accommodates both the subjective, authoritatively known aspect and the public, empirically known aspect of meaning (or mental content). In this sense, inferentialist's conception of meaning (or mental content) brings us a significant insight.

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