



The Inviability of Narrow Mental Content

Anya Wang
Knox College

Abstract

Different theories of narrow content give different accounts of how narrow content, i.e. mental states that are in some sense entirely independent from environmental factors, can be construed. By surveying Chalmers', Jackson and Pettit's and Block's accounts of narrow content, I argue that narrow content must meet its challenges by clarifying how the intrinsicity of beliefs, i.e., the intuitive conviction that there is something private to our own mental states which secures a sense of identity, comes about. Then I argue that, although it is plausible considered from a theoretical point of view, the belief in intrinsicity does not find reciprocation in the way we actually behave. Rather, the conception of ourselves revealed in ordinary behavior is one where historic factors—hence environmental, external ones—have a much more influential role than the purported intrinsic narrow content.

In this essay I will survey three theories that argue for the existence of narrow mental content: the content of such mental states as beliefs, desires, and intentions completely determined by the individual's intrinsic properties. Two theories—namely, Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit's theory and David Chalmers' theory—hold that intrinsicity of certain beliefs is necessary but cannot be adequately explained by theories that only make use of broad content. Another narrow-content defender is Ned Block; however, he argues that a function of narrow content is necessary but could possibly be replaced by broad content. He is mistaken because he trivializes intrinsicity within narrow content. Hence, the more plausible account is strong enough to necessitate narrow content. I will argue that even the stronger argument remains indefensible, because it generates a problematic and convoluted account of how beliefs interact with behavior, compared to one using broad content only.

To assert that narrow mental content exists is to claim that there exist mental states independent from an individual's environment. In contrast, broad mental content depends, in some way, on features external to the individual. An example of broad mental content is the belief that one's lecture is over, where thinking about attending a lecture depends on the environmental circumstances and not on my mental properties; an example of narrow mental content might be the belief that one's lecture is over despite (e.g., one does not have any lectures

in this term), or independent of (e.g., one has never been a student), one's external circumstances. Whereas the existence of broad mental content is widely agreed upon, the existence of narrow content is controversial. All of the attempts examined below view content first as beliefs of some sort, and then characterize intrinsicity, or narrowness, as the uniqueness of an individual's beliefs.

Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit defend a version of narrow content derived from belief-desire psychology.¹ On their account, the set of possibilities associated with a person's beliefs and desires used to predict behavior in circumstances entails narrow content. This kind of narrow content is truth-evaluable because it depends on the inner state of the person whose behavior is being predicted. It is also restrictive because it applies only to "some predictive content." For example: when I see Fred moving towards Mary in a number of different occasions (observing Fred's behavior), I can say that his behavior is Mary-directed (projecting Fred's belief), and that, given other circumstances, he will move towards Mary as well (projecting Fred's desire) (Jackson and Pettit 265). However, the definition is already divisive. Anti-individualists—those who are against the notion that the internal state completely determines some property—would classify it as broad content, pointing out that one's psychological states are dependent on environmental factors. Jackson and Pettit partly disagree. On the one hand, they admit that the reference to external factors is necessary because physical behavior is involved. In this sense, a mental property can only be understood by knowing what physical behavior it entails (Jackson and Pettit 271). On the other hand, it is possible that behavior can be copied, even though the mental property causing it may be different depending on the person involved.

This is illustrated by the *doppelgänger* phenomenon, whose explanation warrants the existence of a sense of narrowness distinguished from that above, called "intra-world narrowness." The *doppelgänger* phenomenon concerns Twin Oscar, an inhabitant of Twin Earth, which is a planet where a compound with the chemical composition of XYZ exists; XYZ has all the external properties (such as consistency, taste, properties when frozen and so on) as H₂O on Earth. When Oscar from Earth refers to "water," his reference will be to H₂O, even though he may not know the compound composition, but Twin Oscar's mentioning of "water" will refer to XYZ. This will hold in all cases where Oscar and Twin Oscar mention "water," e.g., "Water can freeze" (Putnam, "Reference" 701). Intra-world narrowness builds on the *doppelgänger* case: any person x's property P is intra-world narrow "if and only if in every possible world any *doppelgänger* of x has P" (Jackson and Pettit 272). P properties derive from folk uses of belief-desire psychology, which just means that they are restricted to those properties which we use when predicting behavior. Intra-world narrowness is a property of how "the

1. Belief-desire psychology, also sometimes referred to as folk psychology, can be described as a theory that assumes, based on the (willed) action of a person, a) that there is a desire the person seeks to fulfill, and b) that this person believes that carrying out that specific action will fulfill their desire. For further discussion on this topic in the Philosophy of Action and Philosophy of Mind, see Ravenscroft.

subject is from the skin in,” that is, how the subject maintains intrinsicness, as opposed to changing according to external circumstances (Jackson and Pettit 271).

The link between belief-desire psychology and narrow content can be described as follows. Due to our ingrained understanding of intra-world narrowness, we predict behavior according to the beliefs and desires we project onto others. If any observed subject were to be substituted by a twin who possesses an identical history but is not the same person, we would naturally make the same sort of predictions of the twin’s behavior in all possibilities and all possible worlds by appealing to narrow predictive content (Jackson and Pettit 275). If there were only broad content, we would tend to alter our projections of the twin’s behavior merely because he is a different person. As a result, Jackson and Pettit take narrow content to secure the uniqueness of an individual, despite the identity of external properties. Were there only broad content, this would be impossible, for identity which did not depend on outside properties could not be established in such a world.

Ned Block, in his argument for functional role semantics², gives an account of narrow content which significantly overlaps with Jackson and Pettit’s account. Unlike them, however, he considers its existence optional. For Block, narrow content emerges because there are two functions of mental states: 1), to explain normal properties of thoughts, as well as similarities between “Twin-Earth” utterances (such as “Water can freeze,” which presumably refer to different things for Oscar and Twin Oscar), and 2), to explain differences between Twin-Earth utterances by moving beyond the scope of internal states. The first function overlaps significantly with Jackson and Frank’s account. Moreover, Block also specifically notes that this factor can be used to explain common behavior thus acknowledging the legitimacy of the folk psychology method of deriving narrow content (170). However, he argues that, for the first function of explaining Twin-Earth scenarios, narrow content is not the only means, and can even be removed. The discrepancy arises because Block views the fundamental characteristic of narrow content, its “identity-confirming” function, as a *function that is used only for the individual*: whatever mental state there is, its use is first intrinsic to the individual, and only subsequently made available to public declaration (“use”). Identity securing is necessary for imposing the individual-public sequence. Hence, also Block’s further observations related to narrow content that meaning is “semantically active” (173)—i.e., “manipulated in thought” and therefore “lively,” compared to, say, printed words, *as well as* the fact that, compared to public language, private meaning is unrelated to observers. However, these functions are weak and do not commit one to a theory of concrete “inner language,” i.e., robust inner content (Block 173).

In contrast, Jackson and Pettit’s version of narrow content is such that intrinsic nature maps onto behavior, because narrow content is necessary for

2. Functional role semantics is the theory that meaning in language is functional. Put less abstractly, this theory allows for the acquisition of novel words, phrases, etc. by learning how to use them. This theory thus provides an alternative to models where meaning in language is somehow innate.

predictive content. For instance, when a fictional character is well devised, even if she acts “unexpectedly,” i.e., contrary to what previously divulged traits of her personality would suggest, it would nevertheless be natural for her to do, and thereby show great artistic merit of the creator. The sense in which the act is linked to her beliefs and wishes is “narrow” in Jackson and Pettit’s sense, because it is, ultimately, “true to her nature.” This is something which broad content alone cannot anticipate. Even Block’s notion of narrow content cannot be applied satisfactorily; his definition of narrow content is misplaced, for the trait of *prioritizing* private knowledge is not central to narrow content. Block cannot give a robust notion of narrow content because the contrast in which he is invested is between private and public language, in which narrow content, being a minor player, has to be trivialized.

Jackson and Pettit’s account of narrow content is consequently the most plausible, since their characterization of narrow mental content is tied essentially to one’s identity. I spend the remainder of the paper showing that this notion of narrow content is nonetheless indefensible. The first problem is that Jackson and Pettit’s notion of grasping the content or meaning in mental states individualistically is unfounded. In “The Meaning of ‘Meaning,’” Hilary Putnam criticizes the careless use of “intension,” which he sees as a further distortion of the term’s “intrinsicity”—itself also an unexamined notion. By this he means that the meaning itself is traditionally thought of as being “grasped,” and thus associated with unique psychological states, implying that grasping meaning is an individualistic (or narrow) fact (Putnam, “The Meaning of Meaning” 134-135). However, there is also a long-held position in philosophy that intensional content³ *determines* extensional content (i.e., the set of things of which the intension is true) (218). But for this notion *and* “the grasping of meaning as individual” to hold together, intensional content cannot be narrow, because no mental state can be *posited* as intrinsic. Rather, just as Oscar is referring to H₂O and Twin Oscar is referring to XYZ in their respective mental states of “water,” it is not the intrinsicity (or psychological state) that determines what the word means. Since intrinsicity is semantically equivalent to the “identity-confirming” trait of narrow content, a parallel argument can be applied to the narrow mental states previously discussed—indicating that external factors, instead of narrow content, determine intrinsicity (and therefore identity).

It is possible for a modified account of narrow content to confront this issue. David Chalmers distinguishes a truth-evaluable, narrow notion of content called epistemic content, which is based on “epistemic intensionality,” or that which picks out a thought or concept’s extension from epistemic possibilities, instead of the more limiting metaphysical possibilities (Chalmers par.10). The result is

3. Not to be confused with “intention,” the intension (or intentional content) of a term is its specific description. Intention is distinct from extension, which refers to the set of things that satisfy a description. These terms give rise to different uses of the word meaning: for instance, “creature with a kidney” and “creature with a heart” have the same extension, i.e. they mean the same things extensionally, but differ in their intensional content, thus mean different things intensionally. See Putnam 1975.

akin to an expectation but not, unlike Jackson and Pettit, limited to projections of behavior. The epistemic intension of a thought T is true “at a scenario W when W verifies T , and is false at a scenario W when W falsifies T ” (Chalmers par. 24). The scenario W is a “maximally specific epistemically possible hypothesis,” such that every epistemically possible belief is verified by at least one scenario (Chalmers par. 25). This means that a scenario is a detailed consideration which is taken to be actual. Instead of being ostensibly posited as an external reality, it is a mental response to some actuality. Because the scenario requires focusing on the detailed hypothesis without thinking of it as real, epistemic intension depends on “centering;” that is, it depends on one’s own “location,” on one’s inhabiting a particular perspective *by* considering something as actual.

Chalmers’ notion of centering solves Putnam’s twin world problem—“is XYZ different from H_2O , and in what way?”—because epistemic intension determines extension. The centered world is based on the standpoint of the individual, which provides truth conditions. Hence, it is necessary to determine first whether one is on the planet of XYZ or H_2O ; but to establish either is to dissolve the problem—of course XYZ is different for someone from H_2O Earth. Epistemic truth conditions apply, narrowly, to epistemic intensions—a thought is true when the centered world satisfies those conditions. Although the notion of an intrinsic property as narrowness resurfaces, for Chalmers, its influence on external behavior and circumstances is such that it inverts the common conception of the relationship between the “environmental” and the “internal.” That is, instead of internally “reacting” toward the environment, the environment *satisfies* the internal. Chalmers’ conception of the intrinsic (or narrow) is that of a centered world that the subject sustains all by herself. Chalmers’ epistemic intension thus contains more information than the previous notion of narrow content.

Chalmers holds that this epistemic content is involved in rational thinking. Pierre the Frenchman, who is first monolingual and has never seen London before, thinks that “*Londres est jolie*.” After actually seeing London and becoming competent in English, he thinks that “London is ugly.” Pierre’s beliefs seem to contradict each other in terms of broad content, because he is making contradictory statements about his environment. Chalmers is able to dissolve the logical dilemma: to make these distinct propositions possible, one must envision two distinct *scenarios*, in the sense described above. As such, Pierre’s “*Londres*” in “*Londres is pretty*” and “London” in “London is not pretty” have epistemic intensions which are non-conflicting (Chalmers par. 74).

Chalmers has bolstered the claim that narrow content is important for rational thinking. An extension of the theory then shows how narrow content is linked to actual behavior through rational thinking. More specifically, the centered world provided by narrow content determines the possibilities that the subject envisions and thus directly controls her behavior. In this respect, Chalmers’ view converges with Jackson and Pettit’s: predictions of behavior using narrow content are reliable, especially in cases where doppelgängers are concerned, precisely because narrow content *creates* robust, autonomous belief-

desire patterns (Jackson and Pettit 277). Both consequently argue that epistemic content *controls* behavior by its very nature, making it indispensable. In contrast, external information, environmental factors, and the like are only passive data without the capacity to regulate behavior. Anti-individualists might reply that environmental factors *influence* behavior, so narrow content is not as effective as it seems. Narrow content proponents could point out that this “influence” entails no more than “providing information.”

However, if one traces the actual historical causes of behavior, narrow content seems much less important. For instance, when a friend and I both think “I am hungry,” when I am in fact hungry and the other person is not, our epistemic content is different. But what motivates my behavior need not be epistemic content; the narrow expression to myself in epistemic content is not necessary to relate myself to the environment in the first place. My thinking “I am hungry” or its equivalents is not required for further action. Moreover, the “centeredness” is firstly an external property, and only secondly an internal one. These are the circumstances *most relevant to my hunger*—relevance being a flexible but not entirely arbitrary standard—which depend on my body and are physical. These historical conditions are different from the other person’s conditions hence my hunger and his absence of hunger. Scenarios contradict the way in which beliefs work, since for our beliefs to work rationally, questioning the consistency of an entire set of possibilities is superfluous. It might also divert attention, and it seems that scenarios exist for the sole need to create a segregated space for narrow content.

In belief-desire psychology, the prediction of behavior involves the projection of possibilities, an ability which is not overtly physical. However, even insisting that predictive content can be narrow is an overestimation of what mental states must contribute to behavior and behavior prediction. This is because predictions need to conform to relevance of the situation, and therefore to external circumstances. Generally speaking, a prediction that one makes must conform to the immediacy of one’s surroundings within one’s history, such as Twin Oscar’s stemming from a planet of XYZ. This conformation generates robust patterns that are perhaps not as neat as Jackson and Pettit’s, but are nevertheless sufficiently functional and flexible. The diversity of human behavior in the face of similar circumstances does not constitute a legitimate problem, for different behaviors can still be categorized according to such relevance. For instance, reactions such as my opening an umbrella or running towards a building are more relevant to a sudden rain shower, because such acts are regular reactions towards rain. In contrast, sitting down immediately or shouting at the rain are less relevant, and might therefore be clues that there exist at this moment other external factors more important to the individuals who start doing these “abnormal” things. As a result, predictability does not have to stem from mental narrow content or “intrinsic differences.” Instead, it might originate from having a history of being physically centered in the world. And this is a more plausible account of how beliefs, as mental content, are informed.

Narrow content is not a necessary concept. It begins with a construction

of “mental isolation,” which aligns with how the individual commonly experiences the world. Its appeal is strengthened by noting the difficulties with opaque context, idiosyncrasies in beliefs and related behavior, and by the appeal of being able to project possible scenarios or worlds. Individualists contend that these problems and abilities are best explained by narrow content. The problem of Pierre the Frenchman is more directly concerned with squaring logical conflicts than it is with actual behavior and its relation to mental content. Consequently, it may be an elegant way to solve the former, but might not translate well into the latter. Placing emphasis on idiosyncrasy, as narrow content theories do, undermines regularity in behavior as well as beliefs. It should rather be thought of as directly related to one’s history in the environment.

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