

Where After All Are the Meanings? A Defense of Internalism. Searle Versus Putnam

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According to Putnam, although Oscar and Twin Oscar are in the same physical mental states (i.e., mental states interpreted in a physicalist way), Oscar points at and therefore means H₂O, whereas Twin Oscar points at and therefore means XYZ. Nothing in their heads would “tell” us the difference, that is, allow us to distinguish between these two different meanings. Therefore meanings are not in the head. Instead, we rely and depend on the world to give and assign meanings. As Putnam puts it, the world “takes over”. Searle by contrast argues that, although Oscar and his twin are in the same physical mental state, they grasp different abstract entities and their mental states have different Intentional contents. (Following Searle, “Intentionality” with capital “I” means directedness of the mind, encompassing perception, fear, desire, hope, and belief, together with what is usually meant by “intentionality”). When pointing at the water he sees in front of him, Oscar implicitly also points at himself (pointing at the water) and sets up conditions of satisfaction that refer to tokens and not mere types. It is part of his very act of *perceiving* the water that his mind sets up the condition of satisfaction that what he sees must be the stuff that *causes him* to have *that very* – here is the reflexivity! – perception. The “binding”, if I may say so, between him and the water is part of the Intentional content that we *create* by pointing and calling that stuff “water”. In this way, reality seems to be caught up into our minds. Now, is this “magic”, as Michael Devitt (1990, p. 90) claims it is?

I think there is much to be said in favor of Searle’s intuitions here. It seems to me that, on the one hand, there is more to meaning than the opponents of meanings being in the head seem to see or would be willing to accept, and on the other hand, that we should not expect too much from meanings so that they do not appear to have magical powers. To bring this out, let me begin by giving an example. Suppose you are in love with your girlfriend S (or your boyfriend P, if you wish). Now suppose someone replaces S by a copy S* and you do not notice the difference. In fact, the copy is so good that you would never find out by yourself that it is a copy. S* looks exactly like S and seems to have all the memories and habits of S. Being with S feels the same to you as being with S*. But as soon as someone told you that this is just a copy and not the real S, you would feel very odd indeed. You would ask: But where is S, my S? What happened to her? Told that she was sick, you would try to find and help her and you would turn away from S*. Told that she suddenly died you might be so sad as to turn away from S* as well. Told that she died and had wished that this copy of herself be created (or even that she created it herself) so that you can go on living with “her”, you might accept the situation because it was her gift and wish. Told that she was enjoying herself in another universe with a copy of yourself and that she knew all about this, you might accept that situation as well, whereas if she were not informed about all this you might want to get back to her and you would be very frustrated if you couldn’t.

The point of this example is that it brings out how Intentional content and conditions of satisfaction as Searle describes them are real and do very much matter to us. We are very sensitive to differences in Intentional contents

once we find out about them. Because of this it seems to me we can say we (or our acts or states of minds) *have* them, even *before* – and this is the point – we know whether they and their conditions are satisfied, met, and fulfilled. In our daily lives we tacitly assume that such conditions of satisfaction are met, that S and all our other friends and the things we are surrounded by are the same as they were yesterday. Even if we do not know for certain – there is always room for doubt – whether this is “really” S or not, we assume she is, and we become irritated if we find out that she isn’t. The fact that we *would* get very irritated if we *were* to find out that things are not as we take it for granted that they are is enough for us to say that we *have* that Intentional content (i.e., *are* in a mental state that has that content). When talking with S, we always *mean* the real one, the one we were together with yesterday and the days before that. (If we have been living with S* for several years already, things get complicated, and we have to rethink the whole situation.) The intention that this is the real S is always in our heads. Of course we also assume that the world cooperates and that we are not being tricked or make mistakes. On the spot we might not have any means to see (and be certain beyond any possible doubt) that this is S and not some substitute S*. It is in this sense that meanings are *not* in the head. But it seems to me that this is counter-intuitive, that this is not what we usually mean (and expect) when we use the word “to mean”. We mean and intend the real S, the good old S, the S where the causal chains are unbroken, even if it goes beyond our means to actually make sure and find out. We simply make this demand. We *expect* the conditions of satisfaction to be satisfied. This expectation is part of our meaning something, part of what we mean when we say: “Look! There is S”. It is based on this demand and these expectations that we can say meanings are in the head, and it seems to me that this is what counts.

Let us look at one more example. Searle writes: “The expression, ‘The murderer of Brown’, has an intension which determines as its extension the murderer of Brown... For someone who does not know who murdered Brown the extension of the expression, ‘The murderer of Brown’, is still the murderer of Brown even though he does not know who he is” (205). Suppose that the murderer was never found, that nobody knew who the murderer actually was (even the murderer himself might not know), still, there is a *general idea behind* saying “The murderer of Brown”, as there was one behind saying “Jack the Ripper”. We know there was a killing and we assume it was one person who did it. We might not have all the necessary facts in our heads to point the murderer out. But we have enough in our heads to get a *search* started. During the investigation we might make all kinds of discoveries and decisions: that it could not have been this or that person, that such and such factors would not matter whereas others would, and that the killing must have been done in this way and not in that. To do all this, we have to activate all kinds of background knowledge and particular pieces of knowledge about particular facts. These are in our heads and they help us *direct* our search. In this sense meanings are in the head. We might need to know more to point out the murderer, but we know that he must be somewhere out

there and we *have what it takes* to search for him, to begin a search and to evaluate and possibly add all kinds of new pieces of information in the process of investigation. It is based on *this* knowledge and these expectations that we mean what we say or think. Meaning is always related to the *past* (memories of past experiences and analogous cases) and the *future* (expectations and demands based on past experiences and background knowledge). Fulfillment is never guaranteed (even in cases of supposedly “direct” reference! – at least if it is to be *meaningful* reference). There is always room for doubt, discoveries, and revisions, for new theories of chemistry, new facts about S, or the actual murderer of Mr. Brown. (What a surprise, it was *him!*) Sometimes the discoveries will make us rethink what we meant, but that does not effect the general idea that meanings can be said to be in the head (especially if we focus on their Intentional aspects).

There is another aspect that might show that starting out with names, natural kinds, and reference-fixing will be getting out of bed with the wrong foot first if we want to theorize about meaning. Just think of such things as justice or love instead of water and murderers. We say, “What do you mean, she doesn’t love you?”, or, “Fair? What do you mean by ‘fair’ here?” Well, there are of course factors of socialization involved, and we do not mean these things independently of social and cultural contexts, but still, there are always conditions of satisfaction that we go by and that we can be said to have and to have set in our minds, even if we have to reflect about them (even if such reflection needs to be prompted) to become aware of them.

Now at the beginning I raised the question whether Putnam might agree that we “mean more than we know”. I believe that, in some sense, he might. If we do not know about H₂O (as different from XYZ) and if it is by means of the external world that this is what we happen to refer to and therefore can be said to “mean” (especially if, when pointing at water, we say “that stuff, whatever science will discover its inner structure to be”), then we mean more than we know. What about Searle? It seems to me that he too might subscribe to the thesis that we mean more than we know. But the difference is that for him we mean something because we ourselves have set certain conditions of satisfaction, and if we have set the condition that what we are pointing at is a sample of some liquid with an internal structure that science will discover, then that meaning, including the whole network of assumptions, memories, and expectations, is in our heads. The idea that nature cooperates is in our heads, too. Nature cannot literally “take over”, because nature does not act. Yes, we say that we listen to nature, but we also say that we ask questions. And whatever answers we get make sense only within a framework of interpretation that we have set in advance. When pointing at some stuff, what we expect and would be ready to accept (as satisfying our conditions of satisfaction) in the end depends on us. And it is those structures of expectation and acceptance that are at the heart of meaning, that is, “meaning” in the intuitive everyday sense with emphasis on its Intentional aspects. This actually comes close to what Putnam now says. He does not believe any more in Kripkean “metaphysical necessity” (as he tended to do in his paper on meaning from 1975), but has turned to “physical necessity” instead (see Putnam 1990). He now says that it is physical necessity that we can discover. But here, so it seems to me, the difference between Putnam and Searle comes out again. Putnam takes it that as long as we have not made this discovery about the watery stuff in front of us, nature must “take over” and “fix” the reference for us. Only later

might we *come round* and agree to what nature has fixed for us. Searle, on the other hand, takes it that if we already now have *what it takes* to come round, the later discovery will meet our Intentional content and can be integrated into our knowledge.

If we might (have to) modify or enlarge our knowledge, externalists would take this as counting in favor of their point of view. But it is not that modified knowledge that is part of our actual meaning, so it seems to me, but at best only our readiness for such modifications.

For Searle the background and the *potential* future discovery suffice. Not so for Putnam. For him the reference has to be *actually* fixed, and if we cannot spell this out now, nature will have to do it for us. But it seems to me that it is part of our everyday understanding of meaning that we implicitly, and more or less vaguely, simply count on potential future satisfactions and that this is enough – even more, that this is the essence of meaning. Thus we should think of meaning from the perspective of the *act* of meaning. This comes out more clearly if we look at dialogue, speech acts, and the Intentional aspects of meaning such as expectation and desire.

In setting up conditions of satisfaction we naturally count on nature to guarantee that things go as we expect. This is a result of evolution and our learning process. Our intentions are usually not frustrated. Should we then say that nature “takes over”? But what nature? Outer nature or our inner nature? Or both? I think it makes good sense to say that meaning (seen from the perspective of the act of meaning) has been absorbed into our Intentional abilities.

Bibliography

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