

Searle, Burge and Intentional Content

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1. Searle on Intentional Content

In his *Intentionality* Searle (1983) advocates a version of an internalism about mental content which embraces two claims. Firstly, the Intentional content of a given mental state is determined independently of any properties of the agent's physical and social environment, and, secondly, it suffices to determine the object of the state. Searle argues that internalism, when properly elaborated, can accommodate some "Twin Earth" examples that are traditionally treated as refuting the doctrine in question. Moreover, this view is capable of accounting for the particularity of mental and linguistic reference. Contrary to externalism, Searle points out, singular thoughts achieve their objects solely by means of their Intentional, internal satisfaction conditions.

Searle focuses on visual perception, which is commonly regarded as paradigm case of singular mental act. Some philosophers, like Tyler Burge (1977) and Kent Bach (1987), claim that the particularity of perception means that it is an irreducibly *de re* act. What they have in mind is the idea that the content of a perception-based thought contains a nonconceptual, contextual element, namely a phenomenally characterised percept. The percept designates its object by means of the agent's standing in an appropriate causal relation to the object. Therefore, Bach concludes, the Intentional content of a perception-based thought determines the intended object only in a relevant external context.

Searle's defence of his internalist account of perception rests on two ideas. The first one is that perceptual states are causally self-referential, which means that they figure in their own conditions of satisfaction and are described as being caused by their objects. According to the second idea the Intentional content of a given state determines its satisfaction conditions contextually. But contrary to externalists, the relevant context is comprised solely of internal items, such as the agent's other Intentional states (the Network) and its nonintentional, mental abilities (the Background). In short, the Intentional content of a given perceptual act determines its satisfaction conditions relatively to the agent's Network and Background.

Let's consider, following Searle, the truth conditions of a sentence "*d* sees the *F*". In order to reflect the intentional character of perception the sentence should be paraphrased as "*d* sees that the *F* is in front of *d*". This statement articulates the Intentional propositional content of *d*'s visual experience. The content determines the conditions under which the experience is satisfied. The Intentional content of *d*'s visual experience is the proposition that the *F* is in front of *d*. The conditions necessary to satisfy this are:

- (1) The *F* is in front of *d* and the fact that the *F* is in front of *d* causes this visual experience.

The above statement identifies the Intentional object of *d*'s perception by descriptive and indexical means. But what is indicated in this case is *d*'s own inner visual experience. The description, in turn, is causal, but the causation is defined from *d*'s internal point of view.

Statement (1) says nothing about the relation of the Intentional content of *d*'s present act to *d*'s Network and

Background. This dependence is crucial for the case of reidentification. The point is that *d* does not merely see something (or someone) in particular; he also sees *what* it is (or *who* he or she is). To allow for this, Searle claims, (1) is to be spelled out as follows:

- (2) The object with identical *F*-like features is before *d* and its presence and features cause this visual experience and it is identical to the object whose presence and features caused *d*'s previous visual experiences of the object *d* regards as the *F*, which in turn caused *d*'s present memories of these experiences.

The conditions so specified state, in my view, that two distinct methods of individuation determine the same object. Following Jaakko Hintikka (1975) we can call the first method perceptual and the second physical. The individuation in question is the so-called cross-world identification, since it establishes the identity between objects occurring in different possible courses of events. The frame of reference for the first method of individuation is the agent's perceptual space (more accurately, all possible worlds compatible with what the agent sees). As a result, objects so individuated are represented by descriptions referring to the agent's point of view. The frame of reference for the physical method consists of possible worlds representing what the agent remembers and believes. Corresponding to these two methods of individuation Hintikka proposes two distinct existential quantifiers: " \exists' " for speaking about objects individuated perceptually and " \exists " for speaking about objects individuated physically. Using this notation I propose to represent the formal structure of (2) as follows:

- (3) $(\exists x) (\exists y) (x = y)$

Statement (3) allows for two facts. First, *d* sees something in particular. Second, *d* sees what this particular object is. In other words, the perceptual and physical methods individuate one and the same object. According to Searle's version of internalism these two methods operate on internally characterised possible worlds.

2. The Dispute Between Searle and Burge

In his "Vision and Intentional Content" Tyler Burge concedes that statement (1) sets the conditions required for *d*'s visual experience to be satisfied. He also accepts the idea that these conditions are determined by the Intentional content of *d*'s perception. What he qualifies is Searle's claim that such determination depends exclusively on *d*'s internal factors.

For Burge "a theory of Intentional content is not just a theory of satisfaction conditions", but also "a theory of mental states – mental abilities and cognitive point of view" (1991, 203). From this point of view what makes an element of the satisfaction conditions internal is the fact that it is subject to the agent's reflection and its conceptualised experience. If this is the case, Searle's internalism boils down to the claim that to be able to perceive particular objects an agent has to be able to experience or be aware of its own experiences. But there is a mismatch between this claim and Searle's naive realism, namely the

doctrine that physical objects are direct objects of our perception. Burge concludes that statement (1) ascribes to the agent more reflection and conceptual resources than it really has. Therefore Searle should either abandon his account of Intentional content or his direct realism.

In his response Searle states that Burge's objection is based on two misunderstandings. First, Burge neglects the idea that the Intentional content of a given state determines its satisfaction conditions relative to the agent's Network and Background. Second, Searle rejects the idea that an adequate account of the particularity of perception presupposes the agent's epistemic access to its experiences. In short, what determines the satisfaction conditions of a given perception is the Intentional content *strictly speaking* – namely that the *F* is in front of *d* – incorporated in the context embracing the agent's relevant experience and its Network and Background. In spite of the agent's ignorance of the elements of the context, they are internal to it. As Searle puts it, "an adequate specification of conscious Intentional contents can use concepts that are not available to the agent" (1991, 230) and "not everything which is an internal mental precondition for determining the conditions of satisfaction of an Intentional state is itself part of a content of that very Intentional state" (233).

In short, to perceive something in particular the agent has to have a relevant experience that figures in its satisfaction conditions. But it is not required that the agent is aware of this experience.

3. The General Line Behind Searle's Responses

Let me start with an observation that there are at least two possible criteria of drawing a distinction between the internal and the external. The first one is ontic: the borderline between the internal and the rest is simply our skin. In this sense all elements determining the object of a perceptual act are, according to Searle's account, internal. The second criterion is epistemic. What is internal are elements accessible to a reflection. The point is that Burge appeals to the second criterion, whereas Searle uses the first one.

The epistemic criterion is controversial. It leads either to the conclusion that some of our experiences are not inner or – given direct realism – that physical objects are internal. It is not surprising Searle does not use it.

Nevertheless my conclusion in this paragraph concerns epistemological views presupposed by Searle's account of Intentional content. In my view, there is a uniform strategy behind his responses to the objection posed by Burge and the scepticism about perceptual knowledge. The strategy resembles, at least in one crucial respect, the externalist approach to the analysis of knowledge. Let me say a word about the sceptical objection in question.

The objection starts with a statement that the necessary condition for the agent's seeing that *p* is the fact that *p* causes the agent's relevant visual experience. In short:

- (4) *d* sees that *p* → the fact that *p* causes *d*'s relevant visual experience.

Next, the sceptic claims that it is impossible for *d* to know whether the implied proposition is true. The point is that such knowledge would have to be based on further perceptions, the reliability of which would have to be examined by further perceptions, and so on. Therefore, the

sceptic conclude, since there is no neutral point of view, that perceptual knowledge is impossible.

Responding to the objection Searle points out that one can have perceptual knowledge – in short, one can see that *p* – without necessarily knowing that the very conditions for perceptual knowledge are satisfied. That means that Searle rejects an epistemic principle the sceptic tacitly assumes:

- (5) $S_d p \rightarrow K_d S_d p$

where " $S_d p$ " stands for the proposition that *d* sees that *p* and " K " is an epistemic operator for knowledge. The formula (5) is a version of the so-called KK-thesis for perceptual knowledge. The rejection of the thesis in question is motivated by some considerations concerning the nature of knowledge and justification that support the externalist account of these epistemic concepts.

The proposition that *d* knows that *d* sees that *p* implies, first, that *d* knows the elements figuring in the satisfaction conditions of his visual experience and, second, that these conditions are satisfied. In his dispute with Burge, Searle rejects the first implication, whereas in his response to the sceptical objection he abandons the second. In order to justify these steps he could appeal to the reliabilist account of justification.

Independently of whether Searle's epistemology is true or not, it has some problematic implications. Nevertheless, it does provide a sufficient basis for rejecting scepticism as well as Burge's objection. On the other hand, it seems to pose a threat to the doctrine of privileged self-knowledge.

4. Internalism and Self-Knowledge

According to the doctrine of privileged self-knowledge we can have non-empirical knowledge of our current thought contents. In other words, we are able to justify our first person content attributions *via* introspection. Some philosophers (Boghossian 1997) argue that the doctrine is incompatible with content externalism. According to the latter view the contents of our thoughts depend not only on our internal properties, but also on properties of our environment. If these two doctrines were compatible, Boghossian argues, we would be in a position to know certain external facts just by simple reflection, which is absurd. Others (Bernecker 2000) attempt to reconcile externalism with the doctrine of privileged access. Independently of whether they succeed or not, it is commonly agreed that it is externalism, not internalism, that poses a genuine or alleged threat to the doctrine of self-knowledge.

It turns out, however, that Searle's version of internalism about content can be reconciled with the doctrine of self-knowledge only with difficulty. Statement (2) lists elements determining the particular satisfaction conditions of a given perceptual act. These elements, Searle argues, do not have to be available to the agent by reflection. What determines the content of this act, therefore, are factors that the agent is usually ignorant of.

Let me consider once again the case of *d* seeing the *F*. One can say that what *d* knows by reflection is the Intentional content *strictly speaking*, namely the proposition that the *F* is in front of *d*. Does it suffice to maintain the thesis about privileged access? I am not sure. In Searle's view, what determines a particular content of a given state is the agent's Network and the state itself. Therefore, in order to maintain the thesis about privileged access, one

could acknowledge that although content-determining facts are not subject to immediate introspection, they can be known by more thorough reflection. Such a claim, nevertheless, is incompatible with the general line of Searle's defence of his account against the objections raised by Burge and the sceptic.

One solution to the problem is simply to maintain Searle's internalism and simultaneously reject the doctrine of privileged self-knowledge. But such a step puts some limits on Searle's principle of expressibility, namely the claim that whatever can be thought can be said. Furthermore, it blurs Searle's distinction between third-person and first-person accounts, namely the difference between the answers to the questions "Under what conditions does [Jones] refer to Sally, whether he knows it or not?" and "Under what conditions does he *take himself* to be seeing that Sally is in front of him?" (Searle 1983, 64).

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