Wittgenstein and the Internalism-Externalism Dilemma

Maciej Witek, Zielona Góra

It can be said that Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument initiated the internalism-externalism dilemma. In one of its interpretations the argument is read as a criticism of methodological solipsism. Internalism, in turn, assumes that methodological solipsism is an adequate account of mental content. Therefore some externalists refer to Wittgenstein as their forerunner.

I argue, first, that the Private Language Argument does not support the claim of externalism that meanings are not in the head, even though it undermines methodological solipsism. I also claim that both internalism and externalism are not free from serious problems. Therefore we need a view that goes beyond the distinction in hand. To arrive at such a view I examine John Searle's account of mental content and argue that the real tension within the theory of content is between the first-person and the third-person point of view.

1. Terminological preliminaries

Let me begin with some terminological preliminaries. First, I shall define the distinction between narrow and wide content. The distinction has been introduced by Hillary Putnam in his article "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" (1975). The narrow content of mental states is fully determined by facts about these states. The content in question is sometimes described in terms of the functional or conceptual roles of mental representations. The wide content, on the other hand, consists in part of the referential relation mental states bear to social and natural aspects of their environment.

Putnam introduces the distinction in hand by means of the well-known Twin Earth thought experiment. The Twin Earth is just like our Earth except for the fact that the liquid filling the twin seas and falling from the twin skies is not H_2O. Actually, even though it is indistinguishable from water by our normal common-sense criteria, it has a complicated chemical structure abbreviated as *XYZ*. Imagine now that every citizen of the Earth has a doppelganger on the Twin Earth. Suppose next that $Oscar_1$ and his twin $Oscar_2$ are type-identical down to the last particle. Hence their mental states are also type identical. But when $Oscar_1$ and $Oscar_2$ utter the word "water", even though their minds are in indistinguishable functional states, they mean different substances. Whether they know it or not, $Oscar_1$ refers to the chemical compound H_2O, while $Oscar_2$ refers to *XYZ*. Putnam concludes that the description of the narrow content of a given mental state does not determine the thing the state refers to. Hence meanings are not in the head, since the determination of the referent of a given mental state calls for its description in terms of wide content.

The Twin Earth fantasy allegedly shows that the content of our mental states depends on physical and chemical properties of our environment. Another example aims to justify the view that our social environment affects the content of our mental states. Imagine a man, who – like Putnam in his own story – cannot tell beech-trees from elm-trees. The man attaches the same concepts – or, more precisely, the same stereotypes – to the words "beech" and "elm", though he knows that these terms denote two different natural kinds. However, Putnam points out, the extension of "elm" in the man's idiolect consists of elms and nothing else while the extension of "beech" in his idiolect is made up only of beeches. People who are ignorant about trees can nevertheless employ the words "elm" and "beech" correctly provided there are some experts in dendrology in their community. On the one hand, it is the case that an individual's narrow mental content fails to determine its extension. But, on the other hand, there is the so-called "linguistic division of labour" by means of which a given word on every occasion it is uttered has the constant extension, no matter whether the speaker is an expert or not.

According to Putnam the *Dendrologist Puzzle* and the *Twin Earth* thought experiment show that the linguistic content that is truly worth its name – namely the content that *does* determine extension – is to be described in terms of both social and natural aspects of the speaker's environment. In short, meanings are not in the head.

Now we can define other relevant concepts in terms of narrow and wide content. According to methodological solipsism – as well as internalism – the only notion of mental content we need in the philosophy of mind is the notion of narrow content. Externalists, in contrast, claim that the theory of narrow content fails to account for the referential character of mental states and therefore we have no alternative but to employ the notion of wide content. To determine the linguistic content of the words uttered by a speaker, one needs to take into account – in one way or another – the causal relations between his mind and external things. But the last remark gives rise to a real dilemma: whether the dependence of mental content on external factors is to be described from the first-person point of view or from the third-person point of view. The externalist adopts the third-person solution. He assumes, moreover, that the first-person solution inherits all problems from internalism. In my view, however, there is a considerable difference between the conception of narrow content and the first-person solution. While the former faces familiar problems, the latter seems to offer an account that goes beyond the internalism-externalism distinction and the problems it generates. In the rest part of my paper I examine whether the first-person account of mental content meets these expectations.

Before we get into details, however, it would be useful to say a word about Wittgenstein's influence on the discussion between internalism and externalism.

2. Wittgenstein on mental states

It is an interesting fact that some proponents of externalism suggest more or less openly that their views have their origins in Wittgenstein's remarks on the relation between language and thoughts. Granted, in the remark 304 of *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein dismisses, as a misunderstanding, the idea that the main aim of language is to convey thoughts. In other words, thinking is not a language-independent process, the components of which serve as the meanings of our words. In fact, our words owe their meanings to their use as tools of social interaction. Describing our thoughts, then, we have no option but to employ public language. In short, the Private Language Argument undermines the idea that our thoughts provide

our words with meanings. It is rather the social process of verbal communication that provides our thoughts with mental content.

One could be tempted to count Wittgenstein's view as a form of externalism. Of course there are some remarks in Wittgenstein's writings that can be construed along externalist lines. For example Gareth Evans in his paper "Causal Theory of Names" (1973) revokes the famous remark from *Philosophical Investigations* that if God looked inside my mind He couldn't tell who I am thinking about. Besides, Putnam's slogan "meanings are not in the head" resembles other remarks to be found in the same book. In my view, however, Wittgenstein's positive proposal is not so clear. There is no doubt that his Private Language Argument amounts to the rejection of methodological solipsism. But he does not settle the dilemma whether the first point of view in the theory of mental content is adequate or is a mere "grammatical puzzle".

I assume the minimal interpretation of Wittgenstein's conception of mental content. There is no obvious step from his rejection of methodological solipsism to his alleged embracement of externalism. What is more, we should be very suspicious of this step, since the internalism-externalism distinction does not cover the whole variety of positions.

3. Internalism, externalism and their problems

Internalism claims that every mental content worth its name is to be identified with a functional or conceptual role. In short, every mental content is narrow in the sense that its adequate description makes no reference to external factors, whether physical or social. In this connection internalism promises a homogenous explanation of mental activity. It simply assumes that what affects a given mental state is, in most cases, another mental state.

Putnam's examples show that the explanation of mental states in terms of narrow content is not adequate. The decisive objection is that narrow content conceived as a functional state of mind fails to determine extension. In short, internalism fails to account for the referential or intentional character of mental states.

Externalism attempts to explain the intentionality of mental states. It assumes that mental content depends on external aspects of the physical and social environment of the mind. Roughly speaking, according to the externalist solution my mental state is about that particular object and not another because it is the very object that causes my state. There are, however, some reasons for believing that this explanation fails.

First, the externalist explanation seems to miss the crucial idea of intentionality. As John R. Searle has pointed it out, "the solution is from a third-person point of view" (1983, 63). It sets the conditions under which an observer can tell whether I refer to that object or not. But it says nothing about my intentions. Namely it does not set the conditions under which I take myself as referring to that particular object.

Second, there is a tension between the externalist moral drawn from the *Dendrologist Puzzle* and the *Principle of Charity* (I am grateful to Adam Grobler for this observation). If Oscar utters a sentence "One beech in our avenue has been blown down" and actually it is an elm-tree that he is talking about, an expert can answer "That's true. But actually, it is an elm". The Principle of Charity supports the assumption that Oscar has made his statement in accordance with his best knowledge. The expert also knows, first, that people often cannot tell beech-trees from elm-trees and, second, that the last storm has blown down one of the elm-trees in our avenue. All these assumptions lead the expert to the conclusion that the word "beech" as uttered by Oscar was referring to the broken elm. The conclusion, however, contradicts Putnam's opinion that due to the division of linguistic labour the word "elm" in Oscar's idiolect, on every occasion it is uttered, denotes elms. The point is that Oscar has used the term "beech" referentially in the sense introduced by Keith S. Donnellan, and the referential use calls, as I state in the next section, for explanation from the first-person point of view.

It turns out that both internalism and externalism face serious problems. Therefore the tempting solution is to advance a theory that goes beyond the distinction. I think that Searle has developed such a theory, even though he calls himself an internalist (1983, 198).

4. Searle on mental content

According to the account developed by Searle in *Intentionality* every mental act is intentional in the sense that it has an intentional content that sets its conditions of satisfaction. The conditions are to be described from the first-person point of view and their specification involves the idea of causation.

In this section I focus on three of Searle's claims. First, Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment does not imply that meanings are not in the head. Second, the adequate account of linguistic content has to employ the first-person point of view. Third, contrary to appearances, the account in question has nothing to do with methodological solipsism, and hence is not subject to the Private Language Argument.

Searle argues that the Twin Earth fantasy can be spelled out along non-externalist lines (though, as I believe, not along internalist lines, for the reasons sketched at the end of this paper). Searle's main point is that the intentional content is self-referential. Namely, the description of an act's content makes reference to the act itself. Therefore Oscar$_1$'s tokens of "water" refer to the substance that has usually caused *his* previous utterances and perceptual experiences concerning water. Similarly, Oscar$_2$'s tokens of "water" refer to the substance that has usually caused *his* previous utterances and perceptual experiences concerning water. In short, we refer to the intended objects by means of their causal descriptions. The descriptions, moreover, makes reference to our own intentional states. The linguistic reference, therefore, is fully determined by what is in the speaker's head.

The first-person point of view, moreover, seems to be unavoidable in the theory of linguistic content. First, as the analysis of the Dendrologist Puzzle in the light of the Principle of Charity has shown, the interpreter has to take into account the supposed conditions under which the speaker *takes himself* as referring to that particular object. In this connection Putnam's idea of "the extension in one's own idiolect" has no application to the case under discussion, namely to the case of the referential use of the term "beech". Second, the interpreter refers to the world by virtue of the same mental capacities as the speaker does. The social linguistic authority, therefore, is not an abstract entity. It consists, instead, of particular people interacting with each other.

Finally, Searle's account doesn't involve methodological solipsism. It acknowledges, on the one hand, that we refer to the world by means of the descriptions of the way the world appears to us. Nevertheless, on the other hand, the descriptions are formulated in a public language, and hence they are subject to social control.

5. Conclusions

It turns out that the distinction Putnam has drawn between internalism and externalism calls for reformulation. According to externalism the mental content depends on external factors, both social and physical. The dependence, however, can be described either from the first-point of view or from the third-point of view. I have just argued, following Searle, that the former option seems to be adequate, while the latter faces serious problems.

I propose to replace the distinction with a somewhat more complicated picture. Let me start with two questions. First, can mental content be captured by that-clauses? Second, can mental content be individuated solely by means of factors internal to the mind? If the answer to the first question is "Yes" and to the second is "No", we arrive at the third-person solution or, in other words, Putnam's externalism. If the first question is settled negatively and the second is answered positively, we obtain internalism. If both answers are "Yes", we have the first-person solution.

The first-person solution is neither internalist nor externalist. It is not internalist, since it embraces the idea of truth-conditions and employs the notion of causal relations the mind bears to external things. Nevertheless, the causation is part of the internal, intentional conditions of satisfaction. Therefore the solution in hand cannot be counted as externalism.

Literature

Evans, G. 1973 "The Causal Theory of Names", *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 47, 187-208.

Putnam, H. 1975 "The Meaning of 'Meaning'", in K. Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind and Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 358-398.

Searle, J. R. 1983 *Intentionality. An essay in the philosophy of mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. 1958 *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.