

Content ascriptions, indeterminacy, and naturalism

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There are various views about intentionality. There are realistic views and unrealistic views. Among the realistic views, there are primitivist views, that is, such that take intentionality to be a basic property of the mind, and reductive ones, such that ground intentionality in non-intentional properties. Among the latter, reductive naturalistic views – such as informational ones and teleological ones – are conspicuous in the philosophical landscape. I endorse intentional anti-realism, according to which there are, and can be, no intentional states, and content ascriptions cannot be true. However, intentional anti-realism can accommodate a naturalistic view of content ascriptions. In this talk, I will present a view of content ascriptions that gives a pride of place to naturalistic facts. The negative aspect of this view is the idea that content ascriptions can be neither true nor false, that is, they lack truth conditions, and this is because the concepts of content and intentionality are flawed. So this view is a conceptual view. Of course, such a view is also a (metaphysical) thesis about intentionality, according to which no concrete entity *can* carry or express intentional content. I refer to this conceptual view (in either its linguistic-form or its metaphysical form) as "intentional anti-realism", in contrast to the weaker contingent view called "intentional irrealism", according to which no concrete entity in fact carries or expresses intentional content. (Examples of intentional irrealist views are the views of Paul Churchland (1981) and Patricia Churchland (1986) and the early view of Stephen Stich (1983).) I will not present in this talk arguments for the negative thesis of intentional anti-realism. Rather, I will assume its truth, show that it entails a positive view of content ascriptions, and will explicate it and pursue some of its implications. In particular, I will argue that the application conditions of content ascriptions are naturalistic.

We can characterize the negative thesis of intentional anti-realism as the view that content ascriptions *in themselves* do not have truth conditions, or that they do not have *absolute* truth conditions (or, in a softer version, they cannot be true). I will argue that once we accept this thesis, we have to accept the "positive" thesis of intentional anti-realism, namely the view that content ascriptions have *practice-dependent* truth conditions (or at least "adequacy conditions" – see later). That is, content ascriptions have truth conditions, and can be true, *relative to practices of content ascriptions*. When a practice of content ascriptions is taken into account, individual content ascriptions – which may conform or fail to conform to the practice under given

circumstances – are, respectively, true or false under those circumstances. In the Kripkean Gödel/Schmidt example (Kripke 1980), in abstraction from a practice of content ascription, the name 'Gödel' – as used by one who only believes about Gödel that he is the person who proved the incompleteness theorem – refers to no one; relative to a causalist practice of the kind suggested by Kripke, it refers to Gödel, and relative to a descriptivist practice of the kind suggested by Russell (1912 and 1956), it refers to Schmidt. (The practice-dependence view is not committed to there being a single practice of content ascriptions among humans, and would not be undermined by a diversity in practices of content ascription of the kind argued to obtain by experimental philosophers of language and mind, such as Machery, Mallon, Nichols, and Stich 2004)

The argument for this idea starts from the claim that we assign truth values of both kinds to many content ascriptions, and so take them (at least implicitly) to have specific truth conditions. And thus, although we may err (and even systematically) about content ascriptions' truth values, we know what makes them true and what make them false. *A fortiori*, content ascriptions have truth conditions in some sense. (I will argue against some alternatives that threaten to block this conclusion.) So, assuming intentional anti-realism, that is, assuming that content ascriptions do not have truth values in an absolute sense (or, in other words, that they do not have truth values in themselves), content ascriptions have truth conditions in some relative way, one that explains the fact that we assign them specific truth values. That is, accepting the negative thesis of intentional anti-realism commits one to accept the idea that content ascriptions can be true or false relative to practices of content ascriptions, where the criterion for their truth values is relative all the way down – it is anchored in no absolute true value. We seem to recognize absolute, practice independent, truth values of content ascriptions because the practice of ascription in which we are immersed evades our glance, and so we project content ascriptions onto absolute, or independent, or objective (semantic) reality. Our projectivist error can be thus explained from the perspective of the practice-dependence version of intentional anti-realism. (Note that intentional anti-realists can assign absolute truth conditions (or at least adequacy conditions) to standard non-semantic ("first-order") statements and thus maintain a clear difference between such statements and content ascriptions if, as various philosophers hold, the notion of non-representational truth conditions (or adequacy conditions) – e.g., a pragmatist one, or a coherentist one, or a combination thereof – is feasible. According to intentional anti-realism, content ascriptions do not cohere with our body of knowledge and so, unlike standard non-semantic statements, they cannot have practice-dependent truth conditions (or adequacy conditions) not only in the representational sense but also in the coherentist or pragmatist sense.)

So, on intentional anti-realism, no content ascription can be true. However, content ascriptions are made in response to certain conditions. What, specifically, the conditions that underlie our actual content ascriptions are is a contingent matter, for gaining knowledge of which we cannot be satisfied with armchair theoretical reflection. Rather, we have to carry out a probe and analysis of the principles underlying our actual practice(s) of content ascription (an enterprise that must involve experimental work of the kind that is done in experimental philosophical semantics). It is not my purpose to identify those conditions, but I wish to make a few remarks and a suggestion on this issue, in the context of reductive naturalistic semantics.

Reductive naturalistic accounts of intentionality attempt to reduce the intentional relation to an extrinsic (world-mind) naturalistic relation (“tracking” relation). Whatever exactly a naturalistic relation is, these accounts purport to reduce the intentional *to the non-intentional*. The basic conviction behind this idea is that the world can be conclusively described non-intentionally, and its complete non-intentional description implies its complete intentional description. Intentional reductive naturalists wish to show that the intentional relation is a relation of a familiar kind, not a *sui generis* one. As Jerry Fodor maintains, "If aboutness is real, it must be really something else." (Fodor 1987, p. 97) Thus, this naturalization project is meant to be a realist project, telling us how the mind hooks up to the world. (Among the naturalistic relations that have been specified as the intentional relations are informational relations, causal relations of various kinds, and teleological relations. See, e.g., Dretske (1981, 1986, 1988 and 1995), Fodor (1987 and 1990), Millikan (1984, 1989, 1993 and 2004), and Papineau (1984, 1987, 2016 and 2022).)

But while, being realist, the "predictions" of reductive naturalistic accounts of intentionality are supposed to match semantic reality, the main test for the success of such accounts is whether (beside meeting some other constraints) they match the practice of content ascription. (Intentional naturalists surely do not hold that we have a direct epistemic access to such a reality.) Indeed, according to most critiques of these accounts, they fail on this front: their "predictions" do not match the practice and so the accounts suffer from empirical or extensional inadequacy. But there are also critiques against the very idea of naturalistic intentionality. A family of such critiques centers around the idea that such accounts are doomed to involve indeterminacies, that is, they cannot be compatible with various intentional interpretations on given occasions, and I will present my version of such a critique, arguing that the indeterminacies in question are irremediable.

This will bring us back to content ascriptions. Such a failure of the reductive naturalization of intentionality means that naturalism and intentional realism are incompatible. It would be taken

by intentional realists to mark the failure of intentional naturalism (and thus of naturalism in general), and by naturalists to mark the failure of intentional realism. (For me, this failure is one step in a more complex reasoning against intentional realism.) But due to the fact that the above-mentioned consideration for this failure is not concerned with the extensional adequacy of a reductive naturalistic theory, it is compatible with the view that the conditions for the application of content ascriptions are naturalistic. In other words, this consideration allows for reductive-naturalistic theories to be true when abstracted from realist aspirations – from accounting for how thought or language hooks up to the world. Such theories can be taken to systemize the regularities governing our usage of semantic idioms such as "refers to", "think of", etc., that is, to specify circumstances under which we ascribe specific contents, and one (or some) of them may do it correctly. Thus considered, such theories could be described as theories of the practice of ascriptions of intentionality, rather than as theories of intentionality itself.

I will argue (by eliminating the alternatives of primitivism and intrinsic reductions) that as far as third-person content ascriptions are concerned, their application conditions are indeed naturalistic, and so some such possible theory is true. ("Naturalistic" will be construed broadly in this context, so as to allow practices of content ascription to make content ascriptions depend upon each other in a holistic manner, for example.) I will not attempt to specify what the naturalistic conditions in question are. Since the practice of content ascription is a varied and complex human practice, I doubt that the correct conclusive naturalistic theory of third-person content ascriptions will ever be arrived at. I will point out, though, two essential constraints for such a theory. First, the naturalistic relation that it takes to underlie the ascriptions of intentionality must be, or involve, an external relation that relates the state to which intentionality is ascribed to an (actual or merely possible) object. This is dictated by the concept of intentionality as a relation, and, specifically, a relation to a standard (typically physical) object (and not, for example, to a Meinongian one or a mental one). But the concept of intentionality does not require that all such states be *directly* related to objects by means of external relations. It allows that an indirect function relates the state to which the content that p is ascribed to p, that is, that it relates such a state to another state that is connected to p, where the former state is connected to the latter by means of some (internal) naturalistic relation. Since thoughts that are ascribed the same contents by a predictively and explanatorily successful scheme of content ascription have, in most cases, the same psychological causal powers, there is reason to believe that many content ascriptions are indeed responsive to such an indirect naturalistic condition. So the second constraint for the theories in question is that they specify a psychological causal role component. (A theory of content ascription that obeys

those constraints is neither a short-armed nor a long-armed functional role theory of content ascription, for the causal constraint in question need not apply to all mental states or to all concepts, and it is not concerned with total causal role.)

Now surely, when theories of intentionality are construed as merely theories of content ascriptions, they are doomed to involve the same indeterminacies that their intentional realist counterparts are doomed to involve. Does this mean that indeterminacy objections to naturalistic intentional realism undermine the idea of naturalistic theories of content ascriptions as well? I will argue that it does not. While metaphysical indeterminacy is intolerable, indeterminacy of the application conditions of our ascriptions is legitimate. It is not a philosophical puzzle that a human practice of ascriptions gives rise to puzzles, and this is especially true with respect to varied and complex human practices such as that of content ascription. It is only to be expected that such human practices would not be perfect, and would involve various lacunas, incoherencies, and puzzles. These puzzles are puzzles for nothing else than the practices themselves. (Kripke's puzzle about beliefs (Kripke 1979) is an example of such a puzzle.)

One might object that taking mind-world correlations to underlie content ascriptions implies that such correlations constitute content. In response, I will show that taking the conditions for the application of content ascriptions to also be the conditions for the instantiation of intentional properties and for the *truth* of content ascriptions erases the distinction between intentional anti-realism and intentional realism. Intentional realism does not also have any advantage in explaining the fact that naturalistic relations underlie content ascriptions. This fact is simply a human practice, probably rooted in human needs and interests, and so its explanation need not appeal to any metaphysical ideas.

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