Non-Conceptual Content: putting meaning before truth

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Discussions of meaning are tied up with discussions of truth. For Frege, sense was a way of determining a truth value and thoughts were defined as that for which the question of truth arises. McGinn, amongst others, has argued that reference, and thus truth conditions, are essential for meaning: if a representation does not make a truth claim - and thus open itself up to the possibility of *mis*representation - it cannot be meaningful. In addition, the fashionable doctrine of externalism relies on the principle that how things really and truly are, outside in the external world, makes an essential contribution to meaning.

Meaning has been connected with truth, but there is another side to meaning: understanding. When I hear you speak I understand something about what you have said. My understanding is limited by the concepts I possess, altered and interpreted by my personal obsessions and world views; and eventually used to generate and inform further thoughts and actions. This aspect of meaning is subjective and dependent on the details of my cognitive system.

So the concept of meaning serves two apparently separable theoretical purposes: 1) that of determining reference and bearing truth conditions; and 2) that of encapsulating the cognitive role of an individual's psychological state as it contributes to understanding and behaviour. How can these two different functions - one concerned with objective, eternal truths, independent of human cognition; the other concerned with subjective understanding and the guidance of human action - be reconciled and connected within a single concept of meaning?

Can Truth and Understanding be Reconciled?

One way to reconcile truth and understanding is by modifying the nature of one so as to make it compatible with the other. The two concepts can be merged in one of three

directions: As an example of the first, McGinn[1] has suggested that we give an externalist reading of 'understanding' so that understanding is not exhausted by psychology and behaviour but includes the world itself courtesy of the mysterious and unexplained reference relation. People on twin worlds *understand* 'water' differently even though their brain states are identical and they can not discriminate between the two kinds of substance.

McGinn's approach accredits understanding with a grasp of the world which exceeds psychology, perception, and the rationale which motivates action and connects thoughts - thus it fails to address the problem. The perspectival and limited processes which guide concrete thought and action still require explanation and integration with the truth-conditional / referential component.

A second method of reconciling the disparate aims of meaning is to explain understanding through the concept of truth on the basis that our subjective meanings do, to some modest extent, partake in the objective nature of truth. Truth remains objective, our psychological machinations remain subjective; yet there is still a connection which binds both in a two-factor notion of meaning. Here, understanding is endowed with meaning in virtue of the fact that a psychological state embodies a truth claim. But important questions are left unanswered: what does the appeal to truth do for meaning? Might there not be meanings which do not take the form of truth claims? What is Truth that representations can partake of its nature? Indeed, what is Truth that it might form part of our world at all?

I believe that there are representational contents which do *not* make truth claims, and whose meanings are *not* given by truth conditions. The appeal to truth is redundant in relation to these contents. Further, the concept of Truth as an absolute - eternal, objective and independent from the psychological properties of intentional agents - has no place in the natural world and must be revised. I want to suggest that our concept of truth should be naturalised and explained *by representation* (and *not* the other way about as is often supposed); for meaning (and understanding) precedes truth and is *independent* of it. Thus I am adopting a third view of the relationship between understanding and truth, where truth is reduced to, or at least conceived in terms of, primitive representational processes which

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[1] McGinn 'The Structure of Content' in *Thought and Object* ed Andrew Woodfield 1982 (Clarendon)

already contain the germs of understanding.

Other projects, different from mine, also abandon a commitment to truth-beyond-our-understanding. Talk of truth can be replaced with talk of norms - where norms are unconcealed and apparent on the surface of a community's practice. For example, communal ratification can be taken as that which determines the meaning of representational behaviour. But ratification accounts are depressingly similar to truth-conditional accounts:

Truth and Ratification

According to Frege, truth is objective and eternal, and thoughts are independent of their bearers - transcending any one way of representing the world. Yet our psychological states have meaning *in virtue of* the truth conditions attached to them. No clear truth-conditions - no meaning. If you don't like the idea of transcendent truths, this schema can remain intact: you simply replace truth with public ratification. So the meaning of any piece of behaviour will depend on the conditions under which a community *ratify* that behaviour as according with a given concept. Either way the meaning of the representation lies *outside* the representor, and is determined by something which is publicly available. Individual psychology and the non-conceptual are ignored.

I contest this schema. I do not believe that representational states are endowed with meaning *because* of truth-conditions or public ratification. Meaning exists where it would be inappropriate for us to talk of truth-conditions; and meaning occurs before the development of standardized practices which are intended to obey, or which can be seen to obey, societal norms. Many meanings are as they are *independently of* norms present within a community, and independently of a community finding *reason to judge* certain activities as meaningful.

Truth conditional and ratification accounts alike, are prejudiced in favour of the rational subject, possessed of a language, engaging in thought at a conceptual level. It is assumed that where-ever there is a meaning, a human community will be able to ascertain that meaning. We require *proof* that meaning is present - we demand that it be *manifest*, open to public view and comprehensible to us; we insist that it be epistemically well behaved - fitting tidily into a series of non-contradictory definitional conditions in accordance with our logic. We claim that meanings must be communicable, making sense at a *conceptual* level, and being

impervious to subject-specific facts about individual's psychological states.

Yet meanings *can* reside within a *single individual*; can be *incommunicable* to other people; and can be *independent of conceptualised reasons* for positing those meanings. Meanings do *not* depend on our being able to give determinate specifications of the conditions under which they would be true *or* under which they would be *ratified as* true. And meanings may be fuzzy, muddled, and *not* amenable to conceptual specification.

What I urge is that we forgo the logocentric obsession with truth, evidence and conceptual rationalisation; and allow meaning ontological existence and a place in the natural world. A theory of meaning should be able to show how conceptual thought has evolved from the wealth of more basic meaningful activities which underpin our ability to interact with, and survive in, the world.

An Alternative View of Meaning:

Adrian Cussins has been developing a theory of non-conceptual content[2]. Non-conceptual contents are contents which can only be described using concepts which the subject (who has the content) does not possess. For example, a subject who is ignorant of neuroscience might have a non-conceptual content which is best defined in terms of neuronal activity.

Non-conceptual contents are not specified in terms of truth-conditions holding in the *Fregean realm of reference* (i.e. the domain of objects objectively and independently existing in the external world). Instead, non-conceptual contents are explained in terms of the *realm of embodiment* - which is an amalgam of a subject *and* its environment *and* the subject's *abilities to act within the environment*.

This approach to content reflects the idea that: when I am aware of an object, part of what I am aware of is its position *relative to myself* and my *ability to interact with it* - to coordinate my perceptual responses with appropriate motor responses. My experiential content concerns not just the object, but also *myself*. I may not be aware of my abilities *at*

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[2]   (1990) 'The Connectionist Construction of Concepts', in The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence ed Boden (OUP); and also (1992) 'Content, Embodiment & Objectivity', Mind 101

a conceptual level - I may not have the words to describe the physiological process through which I can reach out to touch an object, or track it's movements. But I embody non-conceptual knowledge of my skills.

Because non-conceptual contents concern not just external objects, but also internal abilities; these contents can not be disentangled from their physical *embodiment*. The *vehicle* of content is inseparable from the content itself. Instead of looking at *what* is represented; we now need to ask *how* a content represents.

Some contents have a conceptual as well as a non-conceptual element; but other contents - perhaps animal contents - are purely non-conceptual. An important point to note is that purely non-conceptual contents need not make *truth claims*, or make *reference to* an object in the world. The cognitive significance of a non-conceptual content is *not a claim* made about a reality beyond the subject's current state of awareness:

It is sometimes said that representation necessarily takes the form: 'there is a state of affairs in the world, *o*, and *o* is P' (and it is this form which leads to the claim that representation always involves *mis*representation, since it is possible that *o* is not P). But non-conceptual contents do not conform to this pattern. This is because non-conceptual contents do not first identify an external object and *then* go on to form propositions about it. *Experiential representation does not distinguish between the act of experiencing, and the object which is experienced, and the way in which the object is experienced.*

A subject may fail to comprehend that there is a *object* which is experienced at this time, and in this place, and is this way; but that the very same object could be experienced at a different time, or in a different place, or in a different way. There may be no awareness that the object is separate from the subject and the subject's ability to act; and there may be no recognition that the object could ever be experienced by another subject. *A primitive representor need have no awareness of the subject / object relation; or of what 'an object' is.*

Representation need not be a case of identifying an independent object in the world *and then* forming a proposition about it. The content may be entirely context dependent; failing to

distinguish between *what* is experienced and *how* it is experienced and reacted to. A non-conceptual content does not separate the subject from the object, and so does not make what Frege called a reference.

If there is *any* sense in which the content has a referent, the referent would be an undifferentiated combination of organism, environment and skills. Such a referent would not be *repeatable* or *sharable*; it would be bound up in a particular moment. There is certainly no referent in the traditional Fregean sense - something *external* and *re-identifiable* and understood in familiar conceptual terms. Moreover, the subject of the content *intends* no truth claim or reference - having no awareness that the experience *might* be false; or that the reference *might* fail.

A *truth-conditional* representation presents the subject with an understanding of the world *as other* - as something external and independent; and of the representation itself as something which is incomplete and fallible. Conceptualist theories of content offer no explanation of how this divide arises within experience. Cussins' theory is meant to fill this deficit by showing *how* we can come to think of ourselves as subjects, and think of objects as external to, and independent of, perception. He hopes to explain how we begin to refer by stabilizing and integrating our various non-conceptual contents. There is no time to discuss Cussins' theory of the development of conceptual content from non-conceptual content; but an important point to note is that the development of conceptual content is not linear.

Two competing factors drive the development of representation. Firstly a need for stable general and abstract multi-purpose re-usable concepts, and secondly a need for accuracy which calls for context sensitivity and flexibility. As learning takes place we make new connections between old and developing contents - this changes the topology of our representational landscapes, and thus previously stabilised concepts become inadequate and subside. Learning undercuts stability, concepts are at best provisional.

Our stabilised concepts are composites which can be taken apart and restructured in more promising ways. Because we *can* categorise the world in various ways *and at different semantic levels* - some of which do not even recognise the subject/object distinction; our contents can not be captured simply by looking at what we would normally (conceptually)

think of them as referring to. The matter is more complex. A semantics is as much a representation *of* the internal connectivity of the organism as it is *of* the environment. I now want to explore some possible consequences of a theory of non-conceptual content:

Naturalism and Psychologism

First, the plan is one which fits in well with the project of Naturalism. Non-conceptual contents begin with very primitive activities carried out by organisms in response to environmental pressures; as behaviour becomes more complicated, conceptual contents develop. Conceptual contents are built out of non-conceptual contents. There is an explanatory continuity here which is missing from conceptualist accounts of meaning. The post-Fregean semantic tradition has been hysterically opposed to psychologism, keeping philosophy separate from psychology and the rest of science. Cussins avoids this divisive stance, by taking content to be dependent upon the subject of cognition he embraces both psychologism and naturalism.

Frege's objection to psychologism was that it tainted the eternal and objective realm of truth with that which was mortal, subjective and fallible. But if truth is to be naturalised, this is a fair price to pay. Truth is a concept humans use to measure the worth of their representations; thus truth must be truth *relative to* a way (or set of ways) of representing the world; and relative to a goal (or set of goals) which those representations are supposed to assist. The idea of a 'perfectly true' representation, independent of subjective purpose, is nonsensical: it is akin to the mistake of asking what the world *looks* like independently of being seen.

Thus it is a mistake to avoid psychologism on the grounds that it relativises truth, for truth is *necessarily* relative. Thus we should not take *absolute* truth as a goal for / criterion by which to judge, representations. Truth cannot exist independently of representations; but if Cussins is right about non-conceptual content, representations can exist independently of truth.

Rather than explaining representational activity through the concept of truth, we should explain our use of the concept of truth (which is itself a *representational practice*) in terms of primitive representational contents. Truth depends on thought which depends on non-

linguistic action. There are no explanatory gaps to be countenanced on *a priori* grounds. By removing the barricade which separates philosophy from psychology, we become free to explore the development of language from non-linguistic activity. If the psychological is allowed to make its proper contribution to the theory of meaning, we will be in a position to reconsider the role of subjective understanding in guiding our language and action.

Individualism

By moving away from a referential semantics which is more concerned with specifying *what* is 'truly' in the world, than with asking the more relevant question of *how* the world is *for us* - looking at how we each, by our own particular nature, contribute to our experience of the world; we can shed new light on the individualism versus externalism debate. There *may* be public meanings outside the head; but there are also meanings *in the head* and in parts of the head. Meaning occurs at different levels, only *some* of which are constrained by conceptual status; and *none* of which have contents which can be exhausted by pointing to referents in the world.

Our meanings dimly aim at 'what is truly out there'. We do not see the-world-as-it-is but only the world-as-we-perceive-it. So how are we to mean the-world-as-it-is rather than the world-as-we-conceive-it? What resources have we to move beyond our own cognitive constraints? We can only acknowledge our limitations and hope for new discoveries which will further (though not perfect) our understanding. We cannot explain subjective human meaning by (*what we take to be*) objective states of affairs in the world. We can only explain meaning by looking at *how* meaning takes place - how it is constituted through life in the world.

When there was little hope of understanding anything of how the brain might work; the best strategy for categorising meaning may have been in terms of the concepts with which we are familiar - in terms of our ideas of objects in the world which we can see and touch and agree or disagree about within the framework of a shared language and cognition. But as we learn more of how people process information *internally*; about how the structure of a brain determines the way in which the world is understood: the old conceptual analytic picture is showing itself to be overly simplistic. Meaning is not a matter of external objects, objective propositions and eternal truths; but of internal cognitive function made in response to a body,

desires, abilities and an environment.

Letting Go of the Representational Object?

Cussins suggests we pay more attention to *how* representation takes place; but I think that this point can be pushed further than Cussins wants to take it. It is possible to argue that talk of the same 'object' being represented in different ways amounts to an inexact process of abstraction. The extreme version of this thesis is to say that the *what* of representation is figurative, the *how* being all important. The represented object, as we understand it, is not basic to representational activity - in some cases it may not even exist and even if it does we can never be 'fully' aware of it. The Referent is a construct hypothesised in highly sophisticated semantic practices and thus representation is not, primarily, representation *of* something.

Note that I am **not** claiming that representations are always *of* ideas. In 'The Thought' Frege warned against the doctrine that we can only be aware of our own ideas - a view which leads to solipsism. But we need not, like Frege, think that must choose between saying that we are aware of an external objective realm; and saying that we are aware *of* ideas. I agree that if we use the 'representation of' schema then we must do so within the framework of our language *as ordinarily understood* where what we refer to are indeed 'objects in the world'. But there are limitations on our representational capacities and it may be that the function we perform when we 'refer to an object' is different from, and perhaps incompatible with our theoretical understanding of it. Maybe the 'representation of schema' is misguided.

On the model I am exploring, there *are* ways of reconstructing our notions of reference, truth and representation. But reference is no longer a magic relation which extends meaning beyond our understanding, and our perceptual and discriminatory capacities. Our concepts break down as our needs and abilities change. What once seemed to be 'an object' later appears as a composite or a confusion. Yet 'failure' in reference does not imply an absence of meaning -for representation is not, primarily, representation *of* ... or the positing of *truths*.

This model may appear contradictory. It moves away from the realm of reference and from an externalist semantics. It takes away the guarantee that our words perfectly refer to worldly entities. Yet it makes much of the notion of embodiment. The explanation is that even an

internalist semantics must be understood as having arisen in response to the world. Representations which control action in the world must be sensitive to both body and world. Thus, where an externalist semantics is thrown into the world and out of the body in order to demonstrate its intentionality; an internalist semantics works in the world and through the world but never forgets the body or the practicalities of life.

Conclusion

We should abandon the ideal of 'perfectly true' representations, and the overly simplistic classification of contents by their 'objective referents'. We must admit that evolved representations may *not* map tidily onto a world of discreet objects - 'natural kinds' which fortuitously exist in the categories we happen to have chosen for them. Our contents may resist the format of propositions, universally graspable by all; instead our thoughts may be subjective in nature.

It is time to rid ourselves of the myth that human thought is always rational *in one rigid way*; and realise that our strength lies in the ability to pragmatically switch between perspectives and adopt new strategies - none of which are the perfect approach to the world, but all of which may help us to further our aims. By losing our devotion to the abstract ideal of truth, we can gain in the more practical riches of wisdom.

I reject the concept of truth which has been used to shape, restrict and over-reach theories of meaning. Yet I am a realist, believing that existence is as it is independent of human categorisations and judgement. So I still have use for a concept which closely resembles truth. Thus I am not so much eliminating truth as altering its theoretical role. Truth does not explain and define meaning; naturally, meaning pre-exists and explains the thought of truth.