Expressivism about belief

The basic puzzle: intrinsic, but relational representation

Suppose I produce the following shape:

> Zed is dead.

By fixing your gaze on it, you learn that Zed is dead. How is this possible? How is it that by fixing our gaze on some marks of chalk we learn something about people and things in no (obvious) connection to us? This, I take it, is the primordial philosophical question about representation.

It is ordinarily assumed that the representation question divides into two sub-questions:

  (i) how is it possible that the marks of chalk mean what they do?
  (ii) how is it possible that by understanding what they mean, we learn something about the distant past?

It is only if you accept this sub-division, that the notion of a proposition starts playing an (apparently) explanatory role:

  (i*) the marks of chalk express the proposition that p;
  (ii*) the proposition that p is true iff (or: in virtue of the fact that) Zed is dead.

The notion of a proposition is a means to divide our initial question into these two two sub-question. Deflationism about truth then becomes an attractive position: it becomes almost irresistibly plausible to say that (ii*) holds just because the proposition in question is what it is – saying that it is true that Zed is dead is just saying that Zed is dead. (i*), though it encodes a contingent fact about language, seems utterly trivial – all you need to see its truth is some competence of English. Our initial puzzlement thus evaporates into two trivialities and we wonder what made us think our question was interesting in the first place.

Just a little below the surface of the two trivialities lie two deep mysteries, which seem completely intractable if approached in these terms:

  (i) How is it possible that our activities as language-using intentional agents bestow mind-independent and abstract entities with powers of representation?
  (ii) How is it possible that relations of aboutness and of truthmaking hold between these abstract entities and things in the world?

I think the sub-division of our original question was a mistake and that we should cut the middle-man out: propositions, understood as abstract objects of belief, do not serve a useful explanatory function. We should not construe belief in terms of content, but rather explain content in terms of belief.

Many things may be said to have content, but most of them do so indirectly: they have content in virtue, for example, of having been produced in a certain way or with certain intentions, or of standing in some relation to other things that have content. The most important such relation is that of some things expressing other things. It is in virtue of expressing my beliefs that my utterances have content, and – subject to certain constraints – the beliefs expressed determine what content they have.

Most contentful things thus have their content extrinsically: they mean what they do in virtue of other things having a certain content. At some point, however, the bucket must stop: if there are any representational properties at all, some things must have them intrinsically. Because they are representational, however, they are relational even when exemplified intrinsically: they represent

something other than themselves, creating a relation between their bearer and the things they make their bearer be about.

According to what Chisholm (1952: 56) calls "Brentano's Thesis" – that intentionality is the mark of the mental – representational properties are extrinsic, but non-relational. They are extrinsic, because they are signs, but non-relational, because they are characterised by "intentional inexistence": psychological states may exist even in the absence of what they are about. Perhaps surprisingly, intrinsic but relational representation and extrinsic but non-relational intentionality are compatible.

Representational properties like *meaning that Fa*, *representing a to be F* or *thinking of a as F* are intrinsically exemplified by some thing x iff x exemplifies the property independently of how matters stand with respect to other things than x – no further properties have to be exemplified for other things for my thought, e.g., to represent a to be F. That some representational properties are exemplified intrinsically by some things follows from the following argument:

 (i) Some things have representational properties.
 (ii) If something exemplifies a representational property extrinsically, it does so in virtue of a relation that bestows it with this representational property.
 (iii) In order for something to bestow something else with a representational property, the first thing needs to exemplify this representational property itself.
 (iv) The transmission of representational powers can neither go on forever, nor go in circle: it must be started by something.
 (v) A thing that has a representational property that is not bestowed upon it by something else exemplifies it intrinsically.

Even when they are exemplified intrinsically, however, representational properties are still relational: they connect their bearers to the things they are about. If my thought, for example, represents a to be F, it stands in the relation of aboutness to a and in the predication relation to the universal F. It is in virtue of these relations that my thought can stand in for a's being F, and be in some sense further to be specified a substitute of this external fact.[1]

The representationality of some properties has to be sharply distinguished from their intentionality. A property of something is intentional iff it is *taken to be* about something else than itself. It is so taken to be if we attribute to it conditions under which it may be said to be correct. Correctness conditions specify the intentional content, but – being conditions – do not themselves require this content to be satisfied. If I am looking for the Holy Grail, for example, my activity is directed towards, and rationalisable only with respect to the Holy Grail, which, or so let's assume, does not exist. I am intentionally directed towards the Holy Grail, without standing in a relation to it: there is nothing, after all, for me to stand in a relation to.[2]

Because they are outward-directed, and cannot be accounted for without reference to their intentional objects, intentional states are extrinsic: they are what they are in virtue of participating in a complex process, which not only involves their objects, their bearer, but also a process of interpretation or understanding.

In my talk, I will try to substantiate these claims and provide them with enough detail to make them evaluable for their truth or falsity.

References

Roderick M. Chisholm, 1952, "Intentionality and the theory of signs", *Philosophical Studies* 3, p. ?? 2

Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Charles W. Morris (eds.) 1955, *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, volume I, 1–5, Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

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[1] Different accounts of this relation of standing-in have been proposed, from Aristotle's 'being-a-token-of' – "It is not possible to converse by bringing in the objects themselves, but instead of the objects we use words as tokens", *Sophistici Elenchi* 1, 165a6-8 – to the scholastic modes of objective existence.

[2] It is only as an analysis of intentionality, not of representationality, I think, that Aristotle's theory of thoughts being likenesses of objects has any plausibility .