

## EQUAL RIGHTS FOR SWAMPERSONS

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I believe in democracy. I believe that it's not important where you came from or who your parents are--as Quine once said, albeit in a slightly different context, "to an enlightened mind, illegitimacy of origin is no disgrace"--and I think it's appalling the kind of narrow-minded (or should I say wide-minded?) prejudice swampersons face today, just because they were cradled in a bog instead of a bassinet. Stop stigmatizing spontaneous coalescence, that's what I say.

There are those who say that swampersons have no minds, no thoughts, no intentional states, and that their words, no matter how piteous or eloquent in form, have no meaning. I say, let me converse with any swamperson rather than with the likes of such bigots! Why should one's background be relevant to the question whether one has thoughts or speaks with meaning?

Donald Davidson appears to believe that the mindlessness of swampersons follows from the philosophical doctrine of externalism.\*1\*1 This is an error. Externalism is the doctrine that mental states are individuated (at least partly) by reference to things outside the thinker's head, and is motivated by the intuition that two individuals in two different environments could be identical in all intrinsic respects, and yet think thoughts with different contents. But the swampersons share our environment, so externalism per se gives no reason to believe that their thoughts differ in content from ours. We need to know exactly how environments determine contents before we can draw any conclusions. It could be that what's important is simply what happens to be on the other side of a disposition -- what's actually out there when I'm disposed to think to myself "there's some water." This is what's called the "partial function" view of narrow content, and it's at least suggested by Hilary Putnam's claim that terms like "water" and "gold" are "indexical."\*2\*2

Davidson and others have apparently conflated the doctrine of externalism with the doctrine that the meanings of one's words depend on the history of one's acquisition of those words, and then further conflated that view with the view that the contents of one's thoughts are determined by the meanings of one's words. There's ample reason to resist this latter conflation, and to hold instead that the intentionality of thought is independent of and prior to the intentionality of language. For one thing, many non-linguistic creatures (dogs, babies, "wild" children) appear to have contentful mental states. For another, every semantic theory that I know of explains semantic relations in terms of some kind of intention or intentional activity (excepting perhaps some extreme forms of deconstructionism, where I concede there may be no minds at work at all). Finally, it's prima facie desirable to be able to distinguish, as Saul Kripke does, semantic meaning from speaker's meaning -- what my words actually convey vs. what I mean for my words to convey. (The same point militates against tying the semantics of language too tightly to any particular speaker's particular communicative intentions.)

Tyler Burge has explicitly argued that, where we have linguistic creatures, we ought to taxonomize thoughts by reference to words, but not everyone has been convinced.\*3\*3 If thoughts are not given content by their connection to learned words, then even if there is an argument that the intentionality of a word depends on a proper history of acquisition, that argument would entail nothing about the intentionality of thought. Arguably, we are born with a degree of intentionality, a degree that makes possible subsequent cognitive interaction with the environment; swampcreatures could be born with thoughts, then, too.

Causal histories get brought into the externalist story, I think, in two ways: one, via the intuition that I can keep my water-thoughts with me when I change environments, and thus that my representation of water is precisely not indexical (a point Burge has emphasized); and two, through the supposition that only a de facto causal chain could make determinate a connection between a particular mental state and something in the world. In response to the first point, I suggest that, Putnam's and Burge's confidence notwithstanding, it's an open question whether

the semantics of the word “water” determines my thoughts to be about H<sub>2</sub>O exclusively or whether my thoughts may encompass XYZ, and thus an open question whether my and my twin’s non-metalinguistic beliefs differ in content. With respect to the second point, I say, first, the whole of the problem of naturalizing intentionality cannot be solved by referring it to the causal history of word acquisition because of the existence of thinking non-verbal creatures. Anyway, causal contact with the flow of English verbiage is cheap: I, in concert with other members of the Swamperson Liberation Front have bestowed upon every swampcreature an unabridged Oxford English Dictionary mere moments after coalescence, which we urge them to use before speaking any new word, so as to ensure the semantic content of their native vocabularies.

There’s a whole other line of apologetics rationalizing the oppression of swampersons, due to Ruth Millikan and Karen Neander.\*4\*4 Their argument depends on two independent, and independently questionable, steps. They maintain, first of all, that to fall within the domain of psychology (and thus to be a thinker) is to instantiate (in Millikan’s words) “a biological function category.” Second, they claim that biological function categories are diachronic rather than synchronic, historical rather than dispositional or structural. Hence it follows that to be a thinker, one must have had a particular kind of history. Let’s go backwards, and consider the latter claim first.

In partial support of the claim that functional categories are based on history, Millikan and Neander appeal to the practice of biologists, who organize living things and their parts into groups according to the presumed phylogenetic facts. Now I have no doubt that some biological categories, like species categories, are de facto historical, and I therefore concede that swampersons are not, strictu dictu, human beings. But I also doubt that any biologist other than a natural historian would much care. Although there are some doctors who refuse to treat swampersons, on the grounds that existing biological theories don’t cover them (not to mention existing insurance policies), we know from the ministrations of other, nobler practitioners that

existing biological theories provide exactly the same degree of predictive and explanatory power when applied to swampersons “as if” they were human, as they do when applied to humans themselves. The “milk” of swampcows has nourished many a human child; anyone interested in nutrition will do well to find some way -- in case biology doesn't provide one -- of generalizing over milk and swampmilk, as well as over the creatures who produce them.

The question is, which way of taxonomizing gives you more explanatory power: keeping causal dispositions and history separate, or agglomerating them? I see no conceivable advantage to insist on keeping them together. There was, in the past, a stable and reliable (or so we thought) contingency that kept history and causal dispositions in phase in the case of plants and animals -- it used to be that the complexes of causal powers characteristic of the larger mammals each corresponded to only one kind of origin. This permitted the statement of a variety of de facto lawlike regularities that efficiently encoded both causally significant intrinsic features of organisms and stable (ha, ha) features of their environments. But the astonishing increase in spontaneous coalescence teaches us that this coincidence of history and disposition was a mere accident, one that could be explained, and exploited, but an accident nonetheless. It's precisely analogous to the discovery that tanning booths, as well as the sun, produce the skin damage we rashly named “sunburn,” and that the dreaded 20th-century plague AIDS was caused both by the naturally occurring HIV and the artificially produced war agent UVW. History may be, in certain circumstances, causally relevant, and thus potentially useful in scientific taxonomy, but it is not causally potent.<sup>\*5\*5</sup>

Speaking of biology, it dawns on me that if biological function categories are really historical, and if biology really depends on functional categories, then biology is subject to an epistemological problem perfectly analogous to the one externalism has seemed to pose for self-knowledge -- only worse. Biologists do not, in general, have access to the evolutionary history of every structure of every organism that they study; their assignments of function are thus, of necessity, based on morphology, discernible causal role, and (where possible) local

history.\*6\*6 It is possible in principle, then, that a structure that produces effects that are of doubtless benefit to the organism, and that is assigned a function on that basis, could turn out not to have been selected for the production of those effects. The structure might not even have been selected at all -- it might have been a spandrel, as is the case with the ridged shell striations on the bottom-dwelling ???? clam.\*7\*7 In such cases, biologists would be obliged to discard their taxonomies, no matter how empirically useful they've been, or else to invent a new taxonomic parameter, "pseudo-function," that plays the same role in explaining organisms' current interactions with their environment that a genuine function would, just without the right background.

Back to Millikan's and Neander's first step: the claim that to fall within the domain of psychology is to instantiate a biological kind. I have already suggested that interest in causal structure should (pardon the expression) swamp curiosity about pedigree when we're doing science, and thus that the fact (in the past) that all persons were homo sapiens should not have influenced the drawing of psychological boundaries. Let me remind us all that the original arguments for an expansive conception of psychology anticipated the discovery of not only non-human persons, but non-biological ones as well. Ironically, Millikan's own theory honors the intuition that there could be artificial persons, made from non-biological materials. Intentionality -- the power to represent -- can, on her view, be passed on by deliberate acts of reproduction, even if such acts are not biological. Hence, her own view permits psychology to encompass beings that are not in any ordinary sense biological. I suggest that she explain to SwampDonald why R2D2 instantiates a biological function category and he doesn't.

Neander, known to be tender-hearted, is willing to allow that swamppersons might have "narrow content," as for example when a swampperson "thinks" it is thinking, or "thinks" that it is in pain. But these, if they are anything, are thoughts with wide content, in my book. There is a persistent tendency in the literature to view "narrow contents" as thoughts whose references are internal items. I think this unfortunate tendency may be the result of Putnam's early suggestion

that stereotypes were “in the head,” even though references weren’t. Putnam’s idea seemed to be that the contents of stereotypes were scrutable, even if the “real definitions” of terms were not; but of course if stereotypes are composed of things like “animal,” “roars,” “tail,” and “striped,” then stereotypes are subject to the same sorts of misapprehension as “tiger.” To have a serviceable stereotype of tigers, we need our internal representation of “animal” to mean animals, and whatever fixes that semantic relation could jolly well fix the “tiger”-tigers one, too. What Putnam called a stereotype is actually a cluster of beliefs, and the doctrine he refuted with the arguments about lemons and tigers was the doctrine that the reference of a term is fixed by what a speaker believes about its referent. )

Psychology has been exclusively about human minds throughout most of history; arguably, psychology’s greatest achievements to date have focussed on understanding the way a specific evolved structure has solved baffling computational problems. But for philosophers, the imputation of a mind has -- or should have -- moral resonance. We need a psychology that underwrites a rationalist criterion of moral agency, one that warrants the extension of moral concern to any creature with cognitive capacities identical to our own, no matter how formed.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Davidson, “Knowing One’s Own Mind,” APA Proceedings and Addresses, ???? 1987, pp. 441-458.

<sup>2</sup> Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’”. Reprinted in Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers, Vol. II. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Burge, “Individualism and the Mental.” Reprinted in P. French et al. (eds.), Midwest Studies in Philosophy Vol. IV. Studies in Epistemology. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979). For the dissent, see Antony, “Semantic Anorexia: the Notion of ‘Content’ in Cognitive Science,” and Jerry Fodor, “Substitution Arguments and the Individuation of Beliefs”. Both in George Boolos (ed.) Meaning and Method: Essays in Honor of Hilary Putnam. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); also Brian Loar, “Social Content and Psychological Content,” in contents of thought, ed. R. Grimm

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and D. Merrill (Tucson, Ariz.: The University of Arizona Press, 1988), 99-110, and Sarah Patterson, "The Explanatory Role of Belief Ascriptions," **59**:3, July 1990, 313-332.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Millikan, "Explanation in Biopsychology," in Mental Causation, ed. J. Heil and A. Mele (Oxford University Press, 1993); Karen Neander, "[paper in this volume]"

<sup>5</sup> For discussion, see Antony, "Law and Order in Psychology," Philosophical Perspectives, vol. 9, 1995, ed. J. Tomberlin.

<sup>6</sup> See Ron Amundsen & George V. Lauder, "Function Without Purpose: The Uses of Causal Role Function in Evolutionary Biology" Unpublished MS, available from the authors at ronald@uhunix.uhcc.hawaii.edu

<sup>7</sup> See Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin, "The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm: A Critique of the Adaptationist Programme," Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B 205, 581-598.