Theories of Content: Interpretivism
Next Week

- Monday meeting 5-6pm: NYU grad students (Zoom link coming by email)
- Tuesday meeting 3-5:30pm with Nick Shea.
This Week

- Interpretivist approaches to intentionality
Interpretivism

- Interpretivism: A system’s mental states are those it is *interpretable* as having, given certain constraints.
Interpreter-ism

- S’s mental states are those an ideal interpreter would interpret S as having.
- Q: Can’t even an ideal interpreter make misattributions, unless fully informed?
- Q: How does a fully informed ideal interpreter interpret? That’s doing the work!
Standard Interpretivism

• A system’s intentional states are those it is interpretable as having given the *behavioral* (and functional?) facts about it, and given certain constraints of *rationality*.

• What sorts of intentional states would a system need to have to (somewhat) rationally generate these behavioral dispositions? Those are what it has.
Language-First vs Mind-First Interpretivism

- Language-first interpretivism (Quine, Davidson): given behavior, first interpret a creature’s language, and thereby interpret its mind.

- Mind-first interpretivism (Ramsey, Lewis, Dennett): given behavior, first interpret a system’s mental states, and thereby interpret its language.
Quine and Davidson

- Radical translation (Quine): given only the behavioral facts about a creature’s utterances, translate those sentences into our language.

- Radical interpretation (Davidson): given these behavioral facts and others, interpret a creature’s language and thereby interpret its mental states.
Rationalization

- Mind-first interpretivism always gives a central role to rationalization.
- Dream: Find a unique assignment of beliefs and desires that makes behavioral dispositions (near-) rational.
Belief-Desire-Action Rationality

• Central belief-desire-action rationality principle: people act in a way that, if their beliefs are correct, is likely to produce what they want.

• Ramsey: “we seek things which we want, and our actions are such as we think most likely to realize these goods”
Expected Utility Interpretivism

- Formal version: people act in a way to maximize expected utility (expected utility of outcomes given their credences).

- Representation theorems (Ramsey, Savage, etc): under certain conditions/constraints there exists a (unique?) assignment of credences and utilities to a system so they are maximizing expected utility.
Naive Interpretivism

- Preferences: S prefers outcome A to B iff S is disposed to choose A over B when offered.
- Desires/Utilities: Determined by preference structure.
- Credences: Subject has credence phi in p when they’re indifferent about a bet at (1-\(\phi\)):\(\phi\) odds on the truth of P.
- Beliefs: Determined by credences.
Limits of Naive Interpretivism

• 1. Does S believe the options are available?
• 2. S might be anti-betting or risk-averse.
• 3. Normative idealization.
• 4. Presupposes content in the language describing scenarios in preferences/bets.
Ramsey: “Truth and Probability” (1926)

- Project: Understand probability, truth, and degrees of belief.
- Section 3: How can we measure degrees of belief?
- Need to understand: What is to have degree of belief \( \phi \) in \( p \)?
Options

1. Degree of belief as strength of feeling.

2. Degree of belief in p as extent to which we’ll act on p

- Betting odds

“We act in the way we think most likely to realize the objects of our desires, so that a person's actions are completely determined by his desires and opinions”
Shakespeare on Degrees of Belief

- “We all that are engaged to this loss
  Knew that we ventured on such dangerous seas
  That if we wrought out life ’twas ten to one.
  And yet we ventured, for the gain proposed
  Choked the respect of likely peril feared.”

- *Henry IV, Part II*
Action and Degrees of Belief

• “Suppose his degree of belief in p is m/n; then his action is such as he would choose it to be if he had to repeat it exactly n times, in m of which p was true, and in the others false. [Here it may be necessary to suppose that in each of the n times he had no memory of the previous ones.]”
Ramsey’s Choices

• “We could test his degree of belief in different propositions by making him offers of the following kind: Would you rather have world \( \alpha \) in any event; or world \( \beta \) if \( p \) is true, and world \( \gamma \) if \( p \) is false?”

• Call these \( \alpha \beta \gamma / p \) choices.
• Given eight idealizing assumptions about $\alpha\beta\gamma/p$ choices, Ramsey says that the $\alpha\beta\gamma/p$ choices of S determine preferences and values among outcomes, and degrees of belief in propositions.
Defining Degrees of Belief

• “If the option of $\alpha$ for certain is indifferent with that of $\beta$ if $p$ is true and $\gamma$ if $p$ is false, we can define the subject's degree of belief in $p$ as the ratio of the difference between $\alpha$ and $\gamma$ to that between $\beta$ and $\gamma$; which we must suppose the same for all $\alpha$'s, $\beta$'s and $\gamma$'s that satisfy the conditions. This amounts roughly [p.180] to defining the degree of belief in $p$ by the odds at which the subject would bet on $p$, the bet being conducted in terms of differences of value as defined.”
Constructing Probability

• From here Ramsey defines conditional probabilities and shows that degrees of belief obey the laws of probability.
Ramsey and Naive Interpretivism

Q: In what respects is Ramsey an improvement over naive interpretivism?
Ramsey and Intentionality

- Ramsey wasn’t trying to naturalize intentionality.
- His framework assumes subjects evaluating outcomes and contemplating propositions.
- Q: Can an interpretivist do better?
Basic Problem

• Basic Problem: The interpretivist needs to assume some contents to define (attitudes to) content.

• Every representation theorem in decision theory has this feature.

• Without this, there is massive underdetermination.
Permutation Problem

- Permutation problem: Given belief/desire contents that satisfy constraints, many permutated contents will also satisfy the constraints.

- Even if we hold fixed logical relations and belief/desires about experiences and actions.

- Cf. Quine’s ‘Gavagai’ (rabbit or undetected rabbit parts) and Putnam’s model-theoretic argument
Example

• E.g. Permute beliefs/desires involving Ned to beliefs/desires involving Lady Gaga and vice versa.

• The permuted belief/desires will satisfy the action-belief-desire constraints just as well (at least if experience and action are individuated narrowly).
Solutions?

• To solve the underdetermination problem, we need to add more constraints
  • Charity?
  • Other principles of rationality?
  • Causal/teleological constraints?
  • Naturalness?
  • Primitive/source intentionality?
• Robbie Williams, *The Metaphysics of Representation*

• Based on Lewis’s radical interpretation, with three main departures/innovations.
Williams’ Departures

• 1. Williams has a two-stage story: with a prior level of source intentionality (non-interpretivist) in perception and action.

• 2. Williams invokes substantive rather than merely structural rationality constraints (e.g. induction and abduction).

• 3. Williams assumes a language of thought with symbols to interpret.
Source Intentionality

- Williams’ non-interpretivist source intentionality:
  - the intentionality of perception and of action-representations
  - explained via Neander-style teleosemantics
- Pautz’s interpretivism also invokes perceptual source intentionality, grounded in primitive phenomenal intentionality.
Affect and Desire

- In his paper for M&L (coming soon), Williams explores whether affect can play a similar role in grounding desire content as perception plays in grounding belief content.
Permutation Problems?

- Appealing to a level of source intentionality can remove permutation problems.
- Williams: fixing perception and action contents don’t remove all permutation problems.
The Bubble Puzzle

- Bubble Puzzle: As long as perception and action contents just concern one’s local environment (the bubble), one can always permute contents outside the bubble.

- If so, perception/action contents plus structural rationality don’t fix intentional contents.
Williams’ Conclusion

- Williams draws the conclusion: in addition to perception/action source intentionality and structural rationality, we also need to add constraints of substantive rationality.
Question

• Question: Do we really need both source intentionality and substantive rationality?

• Seems like overkill — can’t just one of these avoid the problem?
Alternatives: Source Intentionality

• 1. Why not source intentionality that goes beyond perception and action (e.g. universal quantifiers, causation, etc)?

• 2. Why not structured perceptual contents, e.g. spatial representations representing spatial properties and spatial concepts/beliefs that inherit spatial contents from these. These can’t be permuted!
Alternatives: Substantive Rationality

• Also: Why can’t substantive rationality avoid permutation on its own?

• Given experience and abductive rationality, won’t this exclude most permutations?
Worry for Substantive Rationality

• Worry: we can make sense of people who are substantively irrational with the same contents.
• E.g. an external-world or inductive-skeptic.
• Not so clear for structural rationality.
• Undermines substantive rationality as a means of interpretation?
A Simpler View?

• 1. Source intentionality from perception/experience: involving space, time, perceived qualities, actions (via causation or acquaintance)

• 2. Structural constraints so concepts/beliefs can inherit these contents.

• 3. Structural rationality fixes the rest.
Next Week

- Monday meeting 5-6pm: NYU grad students (Zoom link coming by email)
- Tuesday meeting 3-5:30pm with Nick Shea.