Where After All Are the Meanings?
A Defense of Internalism. Searle Versus Putnam

Christian Helmut Wenzel, Munich, Germany - Nantou Hsien, Taiwan

According to Putnam, although Oscar and Twin Oscar are in the same physical mental states (i.e., mental states interpreted in a physicalist way), Oscar points at and therefore means H2O, whereas Twin Oscar points at and therefore means XYZ. Nothing in their heads would "tell" us the difference, that is, allow us to distinguish between these two different meanings. Therefore meanings are not in the head. Instead, we rely and depend on the world to give and assign meanings. As Putnam puts it, the world "takes over". Searle by contrast argues that, although Oscar and his twin are in the same physical mental state, they grasp different abstract entities and their mental states have different Intentional contents. (Following Searle, "Intentionality" with capital "I" means directedness of the mind, encompassing perception, fear, desire, hope, and belief, together with what is usually meant by "intentionality"). When pointing at the water he sees in front of him, Oscar implicitly also points at himself (pointing at the water) and sets up conditions of satisfaction that refer to tokens and not mere types. It is part of his very act of perceiving the water that his mind sets up the condition of satisfaction that what he sees must be the stuff that causes him to have that very - here is the reflexivity! - perception. The "binding", if I may say so, between him and the water is part of the Intentional content that we create by pointing and calling that stuff "water". In this way, reality seems to be caught up into our minds. Now, is this "magic", as Michael Devitt (1990, p. 90) claims it is?

I think there is much to be said in favor of Searle's intuitions here. It seems to me that, on the one hand, there is more to meaning than the opponents of meanings being in the head seem to see or would be willing to accept, and on the other hand, that we should not expect too much from meanings so that they do not appear to have magical powers. To bring this out, let me begin by giving an example. Suppose you are in love with your girlfriend S (or your boyfriend P, if you wish). Now suppose someone replaces S by a copy S* and you do not notice the difference. In fact, the copy is so good that you would never find out by yourself that it is a copy. S* looks exactly like S and seems to have all the memories and habits of S. Being with S feels the same to you as being with S*. But as soon as someone told you that this is just a copy and not the real S, you would feel very odd indeed. You would ask: But where is S, my S? What happened to her? Told that she was sick, you would try to find and help her and you would turn away from S*. Told that she suddenly died you might be so sad as to turn away from S* as well. Told that she died and had wished that this copy of herself be created (or even that she created it herself) so that you can go on living with "her", you might accept the situation because it was her gift and wish. Told that she was enjoying herself in another universe with a copy of yourself and that she knew all about this, you might accept that situation as well, whereas if she were not informed about all this you might want to get back to her and you would be very frustrated if you couldn't.

The point of this example is that it brings out how Intentional content and conditions of satisfaction as Searle describes them are real and do very much matter to us. We are very sensitive to differences in Intentional contents once we find out about them. Because of this it seems to me we can say we (or our acts or states of minds) have them, even before - and this is the point - we know whether they and their conditions are satisfied, met, and fulfilled. In our daily lives we tacitly assume that such conditions of satisfaction are met, that S and all our other friends and the things we are surrounded by are the same as they were yesterday. Even if we do not know for certain - there is always room for doubt - whether this is "really" S or not, we assume she is, and we become irritated if we find out that she isn't. The fact that we would get very irritated if we were to find out that things are not as we take it for granted has the effect that we have that Intentional content (i.e., are in a mental state that has that content). When talking with S, we always mean the real one, the one we were together with yesterday and the days before that. (If we have been living with S* for several years already, things get complicated, and we have to rethink the whole situation.) The intention that this is the real S is always in our heads. Of course we also assume that the world cooperates and that we are not being tricked or make mistakes. On the spot we might not have any means to see (and be certain beyond any possible doubt) that this is S and not some substitute S*. It is in this sense that meanings are not in the head. But it seems to me that this is counter-intuitive, that this is not what we usually mean (and expect) when we use the word "to mean". We mean and intend the real S, the good old S, the S where the causal chains are unbroken, even if it goes beyond our means to actually make sure and find out. We simply make this demand. We expect the conditions of satisfaction to be satisfied. This expectation is part of our meaning something, part of what we mean when we say: "Look! There is S". It is based on this demand and these expectations that we can say meanings are in the head, and it seems to me that this is what counts.

Let us look at one more example. Searle writes: "The expression, 'The murderer of Brown', has an intension which determines as its extension the murderer of Brown... For someone who does not know who murdered Brown the extension of the expression, 'The murderer of Brown', is still the murderer of Brown even though he does not know who he is" (205). Suppose that the murderer was never found, that nobody knew who the murderer actually was (even the murderer himself might not know), still, there is a general tendency for us to say that of have that Intentional content (i.e., are in a mental state that has that content).
there and we have what it takes to search for him, to begin
a search and to evaluate and possibly add all kinds of new
pieces of information in the process of investigation. It is
based on this knowledge and these expectations that we
mean what we say or think. Meaning is always related to
the past (memories of past experiences and analogous
cases) and the future (expectations and demands based
on past experiences and background knowledge).
Fulfillment is never guaranteed (even in cases of suppos-
edly "direct" reference! - at least if it is to be meaningful
reference). There is always room for doubt, discoveries,
and revisions, for new theories of chemistry, new facts
about S, or the actual murderer of Mr. Brown. (What a
surprise, it was him!) Sometimes the discoveries will make
us rethink what we mean, but that does not effect the
general idea that meanings can be said to be in the head
(especially if we focus on their Intentional aspects).

There is another aspect that might show that starting out
with names, natural kinds, and reference-fixing will be
going out of bed with the wrong foot first if we want to
theorize about meaning. Just think of such things as
justice or love instead of water and murderers. We say,
"What do you mean, she doesn't love you?", or, "Fair?
What do you mean by 'fair' here?" Well, there are of
course factors of socialization involved, and we do not
mean these things independently of social and cultural
contexts, but still, there are always conditions of satisfac-
tion that we go by and that we can be said to have and to
have set in our minds, even if we have to reflect about
them (even if such reflection needs to be prompted) to
become aware of them.

Now at the beginning I raised the question whether
Putnam might agree that we "mean more than we know".
I believe that, in some sense, he might. If we do not know
about H2O (as different from XYZ) and if it is by means of
the external world that this is what we happen to refer to
and therefore can be said to "mean" (especially if, when
pointing at water, we say "that stuff, whatever science will
discover its inner structure to be"), then we mean more
than we know. What about Searle? It seems to me that he
too might subscribe to the thesis that we mean more than
we know. But the difference is that for him we mean
something because we ourselves have set certain
conditions of satisfaction, and if we have set the condition
that what we are pointing at is a sample of some liquid with
an internal structure that science will discover, then that
meaning, including the whole network of assumptions,
memories, and expectations, is in our heads. The idea that
nature cooperates is in our heads, too. Nature cannot
literally "take over", because nature does not act. Yes, we
say that we listen to nature, but we also say that we ask
questions. And whatever answers we get make sense only
within a framework of interpretation that we have set in
advance. When pointing at some stuff, what we expect
and would be ready to accept (as satisfying our conditions
of satisfaction) in the end depends on us. And it is those
structures of expectation and acceptance that are at the
heart of meaning, that is, "meaning" in the intuitive
everyday sense with emphasis on its Intentional aspects.
This actually comes close to what Putnam now says. He
does not believe any more in Kripkean "metaphysical
necessity" (as he tended to do in his paper on meaning
from 1975), but has turned to "physical necessity" instead
(see Putnam 1990). He now says that it is physical
necessity that we can discover. But here, so it seems to
me, the difference between Putnam and Searle comes out
again. Putnam takes it that as long as we have not made
this discovery about the watery stuff in front of us, nature
must "take over" and "fix" the reference for us. Only later
might we come round and agree to what nature has fixed
for us. Searle, on the other hand, takes it that if we already
now have what it takes to come round, the later discovery
will meet our Intentional content and can be integrated into
our knowledge.

If we might (have to) modify or enlarge our knowledge,
eventualists would take this as counting in favor of their
point of view. But it is not that modified knowledge that is
part of our actual meaning, so it seems to me, but at best
only our readiness for such modifications.

For Searle the background and the potential future
discovery suffice. Not so for Putnam. For him the reference
has to be actually fixed, and if we cannot spell this out
now, nature will have to do it for us. But it seems to me
that it is part of our everyday understanding of meaning
that we implicitly, and more or less vaguely, simply count
on potential future satisfactions and that this is enough -
even more, that this is the essence of meaning. Thus we
should think of meaning from the perspective of the act of
meaning. This comes out more clearly if we look at
dialogue, speech acts, and the Intentional aspects of
meaning such as expectation and desire.

In setting up conditions of satisfaction we naturally count
on nature to guarantee that things go as we expect. This is
a result of evolution and our learning process. Our
intentions are usually not frustrated. Should we then say
that nature "takes over"? But what nature? Outer nature or
our inner nature? Or both? I think it makes good sense to
say that meaning (seen from the perspective of the act of
meaning) has been absorbed into our Intentional abilities.

Bibliography


