

Stalnaker 1984, *Inquiry*, Chapter 1

KEVIN DORST

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The Goal

Defend a possible worlds account of the structure of inquiry. Crucially, this is *not* motivated by its technical merits:

"It seems to me that the possible worlds framework has a compelling philosophical motivation. The problems it faces are problems not just for a piece of semantic machinery, but for an intuitively plausible conception of informational content and for a persuasive philosophical account of mental representation." (ix)

Three motivations ("prejudices"): Pragmatist; Realist; Naturalist.

Avoid parochiality?

Chapter 1: Argue for a particular solution to the problem of intentionality; show how this picture is tied to the possible worlds analysis.

Chapter 2: argue that this is the only/best (naturalistic) solution to the problem.

The Definition

"A proposition is a function from possible worlds into truth-values" (2).

Q: Would he allow *partial* functions?

Distinctive features:

- Lack semantic structure. *Objection: too coarse-grained!*
- Independent of linguistic behavior. *Objection: ontological extravagance!*

"There is only one true thing that can be said in mathematics, although it can be said in many different ways." (3)

But these features are also essential to the analysis's philosophical strengths.

*Two Pictures***Pragmatic Picture:**

Representational states understood in terms of their role in the explanation of action.

Confronted with a range of alternative possible outcomes of some alternative possible actions.

Agent has pro/con attitudes toward these outcomes, and beliefs about them.

"This picture suggests that the primary objects of attitude are not propositions but the alternative possible outcomes of agents' actions, or more generally, alternative possible states of the world... Propositions, the picture suggests, are simply ways of distinguishing between the elements of the relevant range of alternative possibilities..." (4)

Linguistic Picture:

Foil: Hartry Field.

Thinkers are essentially speakers; thought is internalized assertion.

Alternative routes: language of thought vs. social activities.

The Problem of Intentionality

“Some things in the world – for example, pictures, names, maps, utterances, certain mental states – *represent*, or *stand for*, or are *about* other things – for example, people, towns, states of affairs.” (6)

Issues: Directed towards non-existents? Directed toward no *particular* thing? Essentially tied to thinking creatures?

Queerness worry?

Worry 1: Sometimes assumed that only three available strategies:

- (i) Fusion.
- (ii) “Hypothesize some kind of mysterious non-natural connection.”
- (iii) Relation to a sentence token that expresses the proposition.

‘John believes it’s raining’ = ‘John believes-it’s-raining.’

Analogy with numbers: ‘George weighs 200 pounds.’ None of (i)-(iii) are attractive in this case. Further, the relation to this abstract object is not mysterious – there just has to be the right sort of isomorphism between the real numbers and weights.

Worry 2: Functionalist theories reduce mental relations to physical relations, so they can’t show how it is possible to be physically related to a proposition – which is the very problem of intentionality! (14)

Respond to this with toy examples that build up to solution:

- (1) Needs: An organism *needs it to be the case that P* iff it would survive only if *P*.

Naturalistic, but has some of the features that were supposed to be puzzling: can need things that don’t exist, and can need food without needing any *particular* food.

- (2) Equilibrium states \rightarrow *tendency-to-bring-about that P*
- (3) Indication relations: take an object whose internal states tend, in normal conditions, to correlate with the environment, and do so *because* of changes in the environment.

E.g. Thermostats; gas in a closed container.

Such an object *indicates that P* iff: the object is in state α , and $f(\alpha)$ entails *P*.

We need: a variable α ranging over alternatives, a one-one function $f(\alpha)$ from states to its correlative environment, and a specification of the normal/optimal conditions.

Plausibly such a state counts as representational: it *carries the information that P*.

The upshot: contra Field, we *can* understand physical relations to propositions without much trouble, including ones that begin to look recognizably intentional. Can we fill out this strategy?

The Strategy

Suggested by the pragmatic picture:

"Belief and desire... are correlative dispositional states of a potentially rational agent. To desire that P is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to bring it about that P ¹ in a world in which one's beliefs, whatever they are, were true. To believe that P is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to satisfy one's desire, whatever they are, in a world in which P (together with one's other beliefs) were true." (15)

¹ Recall our naturalistic explanation from above.

Circularity worries:

Verificationist? → Machine example.

Reduce intentional to non-intentional, not unobservable to observable.

Problem of relativity

Mary, Fred, and Albert (17).

Problem: the same mechanisms are posited, not merely the same behaviors. And this will happen for *any* substitution.

The content of beliefs and desires "cancels out." (18)

Response: use *causal dependence* to supplement the pragmatic picture.

Belief is indication plus the pragmatic account, in order to explain why beliefs differ from other representational states.

"If belief is a dispositional state of the kind postulated by the pragmatic analysis, and also a kind of indication, then we have a fixed point with which to break into the circle that is responsible for the relativity of content. Beliefs have determinate content because of their presumed causal connections with the world. Beliefs are *beliefs* rather than some other representational state, because of their connection, through desire, with action. Desires have determinate content because of their dual connection with belief and action." (19)

Some questions:

Q1: Is causation the relevant condition to add? Make a duplicate of me who is the same, except that quantum events constantly disrupt the inputs/outputs, and then (by chance) duplicate them on the other side. Would we really be representationally different?

Q2.1: Can we account for systematically false beliefs on this picture?

Witches. God?

Q2.2: Maybe we could fiddle with the "optimal conditions" to deal with this? But then is there a way to specify them without relying on the content of the belief?

Lessons

On the resulting relationship between thought and language:

Although *some* internal representation is essential, it need not be linguistic. The analysis is *neutral* on what sort of internal nuts and bolts are required for intentionality.

Humans *could* use linguistic representation. More likely, "a diversity of redundant forms, none of which are very much like any of the forms which our public representations take." (22)

Support from Cognitive Psychology: our brains seem to use a mix of analog (e.g. mental maps) and digital storage.

Analog: Mental rotation tasks (letters/shapes), memorize a picture and ask questions about it.

Digital ("propositional"): Describe same situation with more propositions (maintaining number of words and content), and people read it slower.

Not even essential that people represent it as a space of possibilities; it's just that however they do so, they have to use their representations to distinguish among those possibilities.

"It is essential to rational activities such as deliberation and investigation that the participants represent alternative possibilities, and it is essential to the roles of beliefs and desires in the explanation of action that the contents of those attitudes distinguish between the alternative possibilities. The particular ways in which alternative possibilities are represented, or the particular means by which distinctions between them are made, are not essential to such activities and explanations, even if it is essential that the possibilities be represented, and the distinctions be made, in some way or other." (23)

General response to worries about logical omniscience:

They are general problems: we lack an understanding of what it would be to believe P and disbelieve Q when $\Box(P \leftrightarrow Q)$.

The issue "really derives not from any substantive assumption about the source of knowledge, but from the abstract concept of content or information. The difficulty is, I think, that any way of conceiving of necessary truths as having content is at the same time a way of conceiving of them as contingent – as one way things could have been among others. This is, I think, because we do think of content and information in terms of alternative possibilities. Whether the source of my information is my senses,

Aliens who don't have anything like our language structures could still agree/disagree with us. Dogs, chimps, and humans aren't so different.

Now we can see that the fineness-of-grain is precisely a consequence of the causal-pragmatic picture of intentionality, not simply a technically fruitful apparatus. It is because what rational agents care about is distinguishing among possibilities that "distinctions" that don't so distinguish aren't distinctions at all.

We know what it is to *assent* to such sentences, but belief can't be explained in terms of assent.

authority, or a faculty of intellectual intuition with access to a Platonic realm of abstract entities, its deliverances are not news unless they might have been different." (25)