

# FINDING A NEW "MEANING OF MEANING"

Benjamin K. Herrington  
Denison University

## *I. Introduction*

In Putnam's seminal article "The Meaning of Meaning" (TMM), several central issues to the philosophy of mind are critiqued using an extended thought experiment. For this paper, at least, the issues relevant to my arguments will be those that deal with mental content. My interest in this essay is not the validity of most of Putnam's views; these ideas have been widely accepted as correct. Instead, I want to focus on the expansion of these ideas, specifically, the ones advanced in the work of Tyler Burge. For Putnam, mental content is separable into two parts, 'wide' and 'narrow'.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while we can imagine that we share the identical mental states, brain constitution, etc., with our Twin Earth doppelganger, the external substance to which we refer when we say "water," is different. For me, here, now, water is H<sub>2</sub>O; for me on Twin Earth water is XYZ.

It is certainly the case that for Putnam my doppelganger and I share the same 'narrow' content, in that we are similar in all relevant respects internally. However, the externalities that we find ourselves surrounded by are different in one important enough respect, (H<sub>2</sub>O v. XYZ), thus our 'wide' content is different. I use 'narrow' to refer to individual mental states that do not presuppose or depend in anyway on the external world, and 'wide' to designate those states that do. In part II of my paper I will argue that Burge's articles "Individualism and the Mental" (IM), and "Other Bodies" (OB), show the impossibility of narrow mental contents. In section III I shall explain why Burge views Putnam as being unable to see this problem. On Burge's reading, Putnam's claim that natural kind terms are indexical obscures this error. Finally, I will address Burge's concerns about the inexorably referential nature of all mental contents. Putnam seems to believe that not all mental contents 'fix' [refer to, designate, pick out, depend on] external objects. For Burge, "all of an agent's intentional states involving natural kinds do presup-

---

*Herrington is a 1999 graduate of Denison University. He will be pursuing a J.D. at Washington University in the fall.*

pose entities other than the agent" (TMM 118). Thus, we should rightfully conclude that there could not be narrow mental content and acknowledge that the Twin Earth examples take us further away from any sort of individualism, (e.g. meanings are to be found in the mental contents of an isolated individual), than Putnam originally thought. The remainder of this essay will deal, then, with two related problems. The first will be how the Twin Earth examples exclude the possibility of narrow content. The second will be the confusion that occurs in Putnam's "The Meaning of Meaning" with respect to the idea of narrow contents and his discussion of indexicality. I shall conclude with a brief Twin Earth example that is intended to show the impossibility of narrow content, and the necessary role of both the external world and the social universe.

## II. *"The Meaning of Meaning"*

Putnam is eager to show that the traditional conception of meaning rests on two fundamentally false principles. These are:

A. That knowing the meaning of a term is just a matter of being in a certain psychological state;

B. That the meaning of a term (intension) determines its extension; E.g. sameness of intension entails sameness of extension.

Through his Twin Earth examples, Putnam shows that it is not the case that being in a certain psychological state determines a term's meaning for an individual. I will very briefly rehash the gist of Putnam's arguments against principle A. We can plausibly imagine a world that is qualitatively and quantitatively identical to ours, excepting the simple fact that on this other Earth the molecular structure of water is not H<sub>2</sub>O, it is XYZ. We can also imagine that we have a duplicate on this other Earth who has the same thought processes, feelings, and mental contents as we do. However, it is the case that on Twin Earth when our duplicate talks about water, she is talking about XYZ, and here on Earth we are talking about H<sub>2</sub>O. So, while this is indeed a thin sketch of Putnam's article, we can see that for Putnam, principle A is admittedly false. One cannot determine the meaning of a term by examining the psychological state of the individual using the term.

For this paper, the interesting difference between Putnam and Burge will be shown to rest on their different revisions of principle B. To make this clearer, I will differentiate between the conclusions that Putnam reaches and those that Burge accepts. Burge is not going

to accept Putnam's revision of B. That is, Burge will not agree with Putnam that Glenn on Earth and Glenn on Twin Earth merely refer to whichever extended body ( $H_2O$ , XYZ respectively) is present when they talk about water. That is, while Putnam thinks intension can be the same and extension different, Burge argues that if extension differs intension must be different as well. Burge goes on to say that Glenn<sub>Earth</sub> and Glenn<sub>Twin Earth</sub> must have different mental content even though their respective physical constitutions are identical. It is not the case, for Burge, that there can be sameness of intension but a difference in extension. Thus, while Putnam believes he can allow for Glenn<sub>E</sub> and Glenn<sub>TE</sub> to have identical mental contents, but refer to different external objects, Burge will show this to presuppose the existence of narrow mental contents. The real crux issue in this paper will be how Burge brings Putnam's arguments to fruition. It is to this set of issues that I now turn.

### III. "Individualism and the Mental"

The structures and results of "Individualism and the Mental" parallel closely Putnam's seminal essay. Individualism, as Burge construes it, is the belief that by examining an agent's mental structures, thoughts, beliefs, etc. independently of her external/social environment we can come to know the content of the agent's thought. The very existence of this concept is the target of Burge's arguments, and after some explanatory notes we can sketch out the thought example and its effect on the status of mental content.

To begin Burge makes a series of specifications to eliminate confusion with regard to the sort of mental states he wants to discuss. What immediately becomes crucial is the notion of obliquely occurring content clauses. These are sentential expressions that contain a non-interchangeable referent. That is, to use the example Burge gives "[F]rom the facts that water is  $H_2O$  and Bertrand thought that water is not fit to drink, it does not follow that Bertrand thought that  $H_2O$  is not fit to drink" (IM 538). Bertrand's expression contains an obliquely occurring content clause because one cannot substitute the notion of 'water' with the notion of ' $H_2O$ ' and preserve the meaning of the original sentence. Burge continues with this idea by stating that "Mentalistic discourse containing obliquely occurring expressions has traditionally been called *intentional discourse*" (*ibid.*). Burge goes on to say "obliquely occurring expressions in content-clauses are a primary means of identifying a person's intentional mental

states or events" (*ibid.*). I will continue by explaining why, in talking about mental content this way, Burge opens the way to discrediting, at least, principle A from before.

To discredit mental content in a narrow sense, Burge first makes a number of important distinctions. He defines a 'narrow' content psychological state as one in which being in said state "does not presuppose a proposition P if it does not logically entail P" (OB 150). Further, he says "being in a psychological state in the narrow sense is to be in a state correctly ascribable in terms of a content-clause which contains no expressions in a position which admits of existential generalization and which is not in any sense *de re*. *De dicto* non-relational propositional attitudes would thus be psychological states in the narrow sense" (*ibid.*). I take this to mean that, on Burge's reading, Putnam thinks these narrow content states do not relate in anyway to objects outside the agent. It is with this understanding of narrow content that Burge goes on to question Putnam's claim that these attitudes fail to 'fix' anything outside of the subject. Here again we need to qualify a term, and I am using 'fix' in the sense of refer to, or pick out.

To see why these 'narrow' content states cannot be narrow, as we have defined them above, let us return to the H<sub>2</sub>O/XYZ example from before. Glenn<sub>TE</sub>, when he wonders if there is any water around, is obviously not talking about H<sub>2</sub>O. The content of his mental state, regardless of whether he knows what the molecular structure of 'twater' is, does not contain H<sub>2</sub>O. Nor does it seem possible that it ever could. Both Glenn<sub>E</sub> and Glenn<sub>TE</sub> "will have numerous propositional attitudes correctly attributable with the relevant natural kind terms in oblique position" (*ibid.*). If Glenn on Twin Earth expresses the desire for a glass of 'water' [H<sub>2</sub>O], as opposed to 'twater' [XYZ], or any other attitude containing the concept of 'water,' e.g. that this stream contains 'water,' he seems to have a number of false beliefs.

Why would we want to attribute largely false beliefs to our Twin Earth duplicate and largely true ones to ourselves? This appears immediately counterintuitive. The best response to this dilemma seems to be to rule out narrow content. Putnam understates the role that the environment and social context seem to play in determining the propositional attitudes of both Glenns. If the original Twin Earth account is correct then it appears that we have to assume a number of unreasonable premises. We have to account for how Glenn<sub>TE</sub> could ever obtain the concept of 'water', (not 'twater') without

having been exposed to it. We have to account for why we would want to violate the principle of charity<sup>2</sup> by attributing largely false belief to Glenn<sub>TE</sub> if we took him to hold beliefs about 'water.'

Hopefully, Burge's revision of mental content and propositional attitudes will also lead us to a refutation, notably different from Putnam's, of principle B as well. I shall go on to discuss the arthritis thought experiment that Burge uses, and show how this will pave the way for Burge's strengthening of the force of Putnam's Twin Earth arguments.

Burge begins his thought experiment by talking about counterfactual situations. We can imagine that "A given person has a large number of attitudes commonly attributed with content-clauses containing 'arthritis' in oblique occurrence" (*ibid.*). This person would have many ideas about what arthritis was, what it caused, how it felt, etc. And Burge supposes that this person, let's call him Hank, thinks he has developed arthritis in the thigh. Actually, Hank's physician tells him that one cannot develop arthritis in the thigh. Hank is sort of surprised, distraught, and "goes on to ask what might be wrong with his thigh" (IM 539). The counterfactual involves Hank<sub>2</sub> who while being identical physically, qualitatively, and historically, goes to his doctor to express his concern that he has developed arthritis in the thigh, and is answered by the counterfactual doctor in the affirmative. What does this imply? Burge thinks that it means that "arthritis," for Hank<sub>2</sub>'s world, is used to signify not only the conventional cases of rheumatoid joint-inflammation, but other pain producing rheumatoid ills as well.

Thus, "In the counterfactual situation, the patient lacks some--probably all--of the attitudes commonly associated with content-clauses containing 'arthritis' in oblique occurrence. He lacks the occurrent thoughts or beliefs that he has had arthritis in the thigh, that he has had arthritis for years, ... and so on" (*ibid.*). The difference in the counterfactual world is not only that the theoretical definition of 'arthritis' is different, but that the social praxis involving the term is as well. Hank<sub>2</sub> comes to his (correct?!) conception concerning the usage of arthritis, not under his own steam, but rather through experience involving a social environment in which arthritis is used as a blanket term to apply to all sorts of rheumatoid ailments. Hank in our world learns to apply arthritis correctly not only through his actual encounter with joint pain, or being in the psychological state of having arthritis, but also through his myriad encounters with

others, especially those who can correctly use 'arthritis,' e.g. physicians. This example of Burge's should be seen to undermine individualism [principle A from before]. Meanings are not in the hands of an isolated individual, or, as Putnam himself would put it "Meanings just ain't in the head."

What I have hoped to show in the elucidation of Burge's thought experiment is that while being similar to Putnam's in its dismissal of principle A, the implications go beyond natural kinds and demonstrate the problems with the Twin Earth example. For Burge, we do not have to construe concepts like "arthritis" as natural kinds to get the medicinal effects of the thought experiment. As I said before, for Glenn<sub>E</sub> and Glenn<sub>TE</sub>, having identical mental contents and yet referring to different external objects is not a valid option. If it is the case that Glenn<sub>E</sub> and Glenn<sub>TE</sub> refer to different extended objects, then they cannot have identical mental contents. "Social content infects even the distinctively mental features of mentalistic attributions. [Nobody's] intentional mental phenomena are insular. Every [one] is a piece of the social continent, a part of the social main" (IM 545).

#### *IV. Another trip to Twin Earth, and those "Other Bodies"*

I said at the beginning of this paper that I would show how Putnam's Twin Earth examples are not compatible with the idea of narrow mental content. It is to this task that I now turn. I will permit Burge to speak for himself in explaining the main problem with Putnam's thought experiment. "What I reject is the view that mental states and processes individuated by such obliquely occurring expressions can be understood purely in terms of non-intentional characterizations of the individual subject's acts, skills, dispositions, physical states, functional states, and effects of environmental stimuli on him... or the activities of his fellows" (OB 143). Further, to clarify how this differs from our characterization of Putnam, in changing the external environment of the subject we modify the contents of his thoughts. While Putnam has argued that sameness in intension does not entail sameness in extension, cf. principle B, according to Burge, sameness in intension is impossible if there is difference in extension. The confusion that Putnam's claims about the indexicality of natural kind terms creates will dissipate once we see that Burge denies that there is indexicality in terms like 'water.'

We all know about the Twin Earth example. Glenn<sub>E</sub> and Glenn<sub>TE</sub> are identical in all respects. Their respective worlds are as well,

except that 'water' on Earth is  $H_2O$  and 'twater,' as Burge refers to the water on Twin Earth is XYZ. However, to paraphrase Burge, when Glenn<sub>E</sub> thinks or says 'There is some water within twenty miles, I hope,' Glenn<sub>TE</sub> must reciprocally think the same sentence. Yet, for Putnam this entails that Glenn<sub>E</sub> is thinking about 'water' [ $H_2O$ ] and Glenn<sub>TE</sub> is thinking about 'twater' [XYZ]. "And, as Putnam does not note, the differences [in the actual physical constitutions of 'water' and 'twater'] affect oblique occurrences in that-clauses that provide the contents of their mental states and events" (OB 145). What Burge is getting at is that on Earth, Glenn is hoping that he can discover some  $H_2O$  ['water']. Counterfactually, on Twin Earth, Glenn is hoping he can discover some XYZ ['twater']. "That is, even as we suppose that 'water' and 'twater' are not logically exchangeable with coextensive expressions *salva veritate*, we have a difference between their thought (contents)" (OB 145). So while Putnam thinks that the different extensions of 'water' on Earth and Twin Earth do not imply the existence of different intensions, Burge has shown this supposition to be mistaken. "The difference in their mental states and events seems to be a product primarily of differences in their physical environments – in the mental states of their fellows and conventional meanings of words they and their fellows employ" (OB 146).

Now we can directly address the problem of indexicality, and why Burge thinks that this is a major reason for Putnam to leave the force of his own arguments out to dry. While Putnam thinks that natural kind terms like 'water' have an indexical component, Burge does not want to allow this conclusion. In fact, Burge states, "that 'water' interpreted as it is in English, or as we English speakers standardly interpret it, does not shift extension from context to context . . . The extension of 'water' as interpreted in English in all non-oblique contexts, is (roughly) the set of all aggregates of  $H_2O$  molecules. There is nothing at all indexical about 'water' in the customary sense of 'indexical'" (OB 146). Burge continues by criticizing some of the grounds that Putnam uses to claim that 'water' is indexical. One of these is:

1. 'Water' is stuff that bears a certain similarity relation to the water around here. Water at another time or in another place or even in another possible world has to bear the relation [same-liquid] to our 'water' in order to be water. (TMM 19)

The main criticism that Burge has with this conception of the indexicality of 'water' is a simple one. If Glenn<sub>e</sub> was to visit Twin Earth and ostensibly indicate the XYZ in the stream, that is, call that stuff there 'water,' for Putnam this would be a true declaration. However, by Putnam's previous account of Twin Earth, there is no 'water' [H<sub>2</sub>O] there. "And there is no reason why an English speaker should not be held to this account when he visits Twin Earth. The problem is that although 'here' shifts its extension with context, 'water' does not. Water lacks the indexicality of 'here'" (OB 147).

I continually have been referring to the confusion that results when we allow Putnam to claim that natural kind terms have an indexical component. For Burge, allowing this claim to stand "has large implications for our understanding of mentalistic notions" (OB 149). It is the case, for Burge, that "the identity of one's mental contents, states, and events is not independent of the nature of one's physical and social environment" (*ibid.*). It seems hard to accept that 'water' is indexical. Suppose you or I were to be instantaneously switched with our Twin Earth doppelganger. When we, on Twin Earth, asked for a glass of 'water,' we would not be making any reference to 'twater.' The two are different substances, and our unwitting indication of 'twater' when we mean 'water,' even if it goes unnoticed, points out the non-indexicality of natural kind terms.

### V. Conclusions

The last relevant section of the Burge piece, "Other Bodies," can be viewed as showing how propositional attitudes do indeed 'fix' the extensions of the relevant terms. To radically oversimplify this point before I end, I shall quote Burge once more, "[Glenn's] attitude contents involving relevant natural kind notions-- and thus, all his relevant attitudes--are individuated by reference to other entities. His having these attitudes in the relevant circumstances entails the existence of other entities" (OB 155). This quotation makes more sense once I tell you that Burge previously noted that even in presupposing counterfactual situations we must make use of the actual existence of things. This seems to me somewhat like a rigid designator conception. We can imagine, at least momentarily, a world where Monica Lewinsky did not exist, or had blond hair, or a small nose, etc. However, for us to be able to do so hinges on our knowledge that Monica Lewinsky did in fact exist here and now. To return to section II, Burge does not find Putnam's notion of narrow



content states acceptable. It is unrealistic to suppose that one can hold a belief *P*, where *P* is a belief about *x* and *x* has no existent counterpart in the world that we are part of. That is, there could be no *x* that the holder of belief *P* has heard spoken of in the world, experienced, etc.

The twofold thesis of this paper is that Putnam was incorrect to accept the existence of narrow content mental states and that Burge, in exposing this error, can explain why mental content is not in the hands of the individual. For Burge, there cannot be a difference in extension without a correspondent difference in propositional content-clause beliefs. Burge is correct to see that Putnam's false beliefs, that there can be narrow content states and that natural kind terms have an indexical component, obscure the true force of the Twin Earth thought experiment. Putnam radically underestimates the importance of having the sort of social environment like Hank, in our arthritis example does, to obtain correct knowledge of the meaning of a term and the correspondent mental content. The conceivability of Hank<sub>2</sub> to refer to "arthritis" as Hank does in our world, or to have the sort of mental content that we do regarding arthritis is nil. For Burge, the intricate social interplay between speakers helps account for mental content. It is because Burge wants to prove this that he discounts the possibility of narrow mental content. All mental content for Burge is broad, in the sense that it is inextricably related to both the physical and social environments. To end, I hope that this paper has explicated the differences to be found in Putnam's revision of the traditional principles of meaning [A and B] that comes out of the Twin Earth examples, and Burge's reinterpretation of these. For Burge, mental content just ain't determined by the things in our head. It is also determined, to a larger degree than Putnam admits, by the actual things in the external world and our social networks.

#### NOTES

1. This view is not really held by Putnam anymore, but for the sake of the arguments in my paper I needed these arguments as foils for Burge.
2. The 'principle of charity' was the label used by Daniel Dennett in his article "True Believers as Intentional Systems" in *The Nature of Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). D. Rosenthal, ed., to explain why we must attribute largely true beliefs to other persons in order to make rational sense of their actions.

## WORKS CITED

- Burge, Tyler "Individualism and the Mental" in *The Nature of Mind* (New York: OxfordUniversity Press, 1991). D. Rosenthal, ed.
- . "Other Bodies" in *The Twin Earth Chronicles* (New York: M.E. Sharpe & Co., 1996). A. Pessin and S. Goldberg, eds.
- Putnam, Hilary "The Meaning of Meaning" in *The Twin Earth Chronicles* (New York: M.E. Sharpe & Co., 1996). A. Pessin, and S. Goldberg, eds.