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The External Content of Emotions

Externalism as the kind proposed by teleosemanticists has some attractive features. It fixes content by appeals to natural selection, and it allows for one to provide a seemingly plausible naturalistic account of mental content. One of the problems teleosemantics has is that it proposes that all content is external. If that is true, then one can be lead to the paradoxical conclusion that we do not know our own thoughts, which seems absurd (Boghossian 11). This paper proposes that externalism is misdirected towards the contents of thoughts, when its appropriate target ought to be the contents of emotions.

Teleosemantics as proposed by Ruth Millikan in “Biosemantics” uses natural selection to fix the content of an organism’s thought to that which is has been selectively advantageous to that organism’s ancestors in the past. It can provide a good description of a creature’s behavior and a plausible sketch of the content of its thoughts. However, our insight into a creature’s thoughts or perceptions of the world are not necessarily trustworthy. So let us consider an example of how Millikan might evaluate a scenario pertaining to humans and see how that accords with our intuitions.

Consider a prehistoric man and woman living in close proximity. The man observes the woman naked and becomes aroused. Why would a man become aroused? In Millikan’s language, the consumer is the man who witnesses the woman. The producer is the woman’s body. What is the proper function of a man becoming aroused? Is it to lead to sex? Arousal may certainly lead to

sex, but sex by itself is not selectively advantageous. It is the replication of his genes that is advantageous; a baby is selectively advantageous—that is the proper function of arousal. The normal conditions are when he is fertile and she is ovulating.

Unlike the animal scenarios, this is a scenario with which we have better honed intuitions. Is this caveman's content the replication of his genes, a baby, or sex? Millikan's theory would arguably pick out replication of his genes or a baby as the content of the caveman's thoughts. One's intuitions might say that the caveman is interested in sex. Why would Millikan presumably say the content of his thoughts are not sex? Because the sex act by itself is not selectively advantageous. In terms of the marine bacteria, sex is akin to pointing in the direction of magnetic north, and reproducing is akin to being in oxygen-free water. Also, consider that the caveman does not know what genes are, and it is easy to conceive that the caveman does not know that sex and babies are related in any fashion. In fact, scientists have found primitive human cultures that did not know that sex leads to pregnancy (Bloom ?).

Why doesn't Millikan's theory work for humans when it provided such seemingly plausible answers for other creatures? One reason is that we do not have good intuitions about what it is like to be another creature, but we do have good intuitions about what it is like to be human. Another reason requires a some new terms. Allow me to take terminology from Victor Johnson, a biopsychologist, who wrote Why We Feel. Johnson proposes two kinds of learning: phylogenetic learning and ontogenetic learning. Phylogenetic learning is "achieved through natural selection over generations" (Johnson 33). Ontogenetic learning arises "from an individual's unique experiences" (Johnson 33). But the learning mechanism has a genetic basis (*e.g.*, the genes for one's brain). Ontogenetic learning is the learning we are all comfortable with. It is the learning we do throughout our lives. Phylogenetic learning is a somewhat novel view of

evolution as a learning process. Some organisms learn exclusively phylogenetically, such as organisms with short life spans and rapid generations like bacteria. Many multicellular organisms with comparatively long life spans learn ontogenetically while its species learns phylogenetically.

Paul Pietroski in “Intentionality and Teleological Error” makes a similar distinction to Johnson’s. Pietroski writes, ethological explanations “show how a certain behavior plays a useful role in the life of a system (or more generally, the members of a species)” and intentional explanations “show how a certain behavior is the product of how the system *takes the world to be*” (184). Pietroski identifies Millikan’s theory as providing ethological explanations, not intentional ones. I would add that Millikan’s theory provides an explanation of what drives phylogenetic learning but not ontogenetic learning, and I would argue that ontogenetic learning is probably more important to naturalizing intentionality. So Millikan’s theory is suitable to explicate content for organisms that learn phylogenetically but not ontogenetically, which means that it does not provide an answer for the content of thoughts which are ontogenetic in nature.

What does it mean for Millikan’s theory to provide explanations for phylogenetic learning only? Consider the example of the caveman. It would provide the same explanation, and the explanation would be correct with respect to the unapprehended reasons that evolution baked into the caveman’s emotions. These reasons are that Daniel Dennett calls free-floating rationale (133). They are reasons perhaps never apprehended by the agents that use them; perhaps even only ever apprehended by humans in hindsight. But Millikan’s explanation could not say much of anything about the content of the caveman’s thoughts, which are based on ontogenetic learning. Indeed, the only reason one has intuitions about what the caveman’s thoughts or feelings actually are is because one has had a subjective experience of such emotions him or herself. (Note: I will use ‘feelings’ and ‘emotions’ interchangeably.) If one had not had those experiences, one would be in

the position of a blind man asked what red looks like to the caveman, which is probably where we are with respect to our intuitions when it comes to evaluating other animals' subjective experiences. Millikan's theory then looks like an instrumental theory that provides an answer to the contents of evolution's imaginary mind.

What about the paradox that one cannot know the content of their own thoughts if externalism is true as proposed by Boghossian? If the externalism Millikan proposes only applies to phylogenetic learning and our thoughts are based on ontogenetic learning, then the paradox would seem to vanish, at least in its present form. However, the idea that one cannot know the content of their own thoughts actually has explanatory purchase when twisted slightly. Perhaps the paradox is misdirected and one cannot know the content of their own feelings.

Feeling is an amorphous term. How would we discriminate thoughts from feelings in this case? Firstly, feelings are not learned as thoughts typically are. One can teach another new ideas. One cannot teach another new feelings. Johnson writes to support this idea: "Imagine trying to teach a child that it should feel anger when spanked. The child asks, 'Exactly what should I feel when you spank me?' There doesn't appear to be any way to explain what anger feels like if it is not among the repertoire of feelings that the child already possesses" (64). Feelings are like the sensations of color. It is nearly impossible to describe what they are to someone who has not experienced them. Secondly, feelings are genetically fixed elements unlike thoughts which are acquired through experience. Feelings are fixed in the same way that the colors we perceive are fixed. Even though we see many different compositions of color, as when we view two different paintings, so too we experience many different compositions of a fixed set of feelings.

If feelings are fixed genetically, then it makes sense that our feelings would be fixed by natural selection, *i.e.* feelings are learned phylogenetically. The only way to acquire a truly new

feeling is for a mutant to arise in the population. There is no way to learn a new feeling. If that is the case then Millikan's theory ought to provide explanations for these phylogenetic feelings. And indeed, with the caveman scenario, it would seem fair to say that the caveman is aroused and wants to have sex, not because he wants a baby or wants to replicate his genes but simply because he is aroused and sex will satisfy his desire. However, his feelings have been selected for specifically on the basis of whether they are selectively advantageous, whether they will replicate his genes. In this sense, evolution has done the caveman's thinking for him and vested that knowledge in his feelings. Johnson echoes this idea by proposing that emotions are "a reliable 'omen' that foreshadows reproductive consequences" (Johnson 86). So the content of the caveman's feeling is the explanation that Millikan gives, but it is not the content of the caveman's thought or an adequate description of how the caveman actually experiences that feeling.

Do we not know the contents of our own feelings? Johnson seems to argue that we do not. "Most of us have no immediate awareness of the relationship between our feelings and our future reproductive success—we don't know why we feel" (Johnson 191). The reproductive success Johnson cites ties directly to natural selection which Millikan exploits to determine proper functions. In this sense, the strange consequences of externalism can be seen differently. The notion that we do not know our own thoughts verges on the absurd, but the notion that we do not know our own feelings is not nearly as unnerving. Perhaps Millikan's theory could even be credited as a precursor to evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychologist Robert Wright has essentially used Millikan's method to explicate the reasons humans have the emotions they do; emotions which sometimes seem terribly irrational but when viewed from an evolutionary lens become quite comprehensible.

With phylogenetic learning, an organism behaves *as though* it had content, but the

organism does not have access to that content, and I would say that the content does not actually exist. With ontogenetic learning, however, an organism can acquire content throughout its life, and that content can and does play a causal role in its behavior. The content of emotions that Millikan's theory can explicate I consider to be merely instrumental, a kind of quasi-content. But quasi-content makes a great stepping stone to genuine mental content, just as a quasi-living replicating molecular may have provided a stepping stone for genuine life (Dawkins 15).

In conclusion, I have shown how teleosemantics does not provide a good explanation when given a human example where our intuitions are more trustworthy. I have shown how Millikan's theory seemingly applies to only a limited set of learning within organisms, *i.e.* phylogenetic learning, which is appropriate for feelings. And I have presented a case that suggests externalism with respect to the contents of thoughts is misplaced, but that externalism may be appropriate with respect to emotions, if only instrumentally. Even if the thesis of this paper still seems dubious, imagining emotions as entities with inaccessible external content at least provides an intelligible way to understand how external content might work within an organism. One thing to consider for where to go next is that it might be worthwhile to examine feelings in more detail before trying to philosophically pin down thoughts and their content. Emotions appear to be simpler than thoughts. It is easy enough to imagine a creature surviving by feelings alone without complex thoughts, and indeed many do. However, imagining the converse is not so easy. Emotions may be the foundation of our thinking and action rather than merely being evolution's first attempt at the mental.

Works Cited

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