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The Search for the Semantic Grail

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Introduction

Consider Alphonse's explanation for thinking Sacramento is beautiful:

Elwood saw a picture of Sacramento, which showed it to be quite beautiful, and so came to believe that it is a beautiful city. He told me that it was. I understood him, I trusted him, and that's how I came to believe that Sacramento is a beautiful city.

Here a familiar course of events is described. One person comes to believe something. He tells someone else what he has come to believe. That is, *what he says* is just *what he believes*. This person understands him, so he knows what he has been told. And, trusting the speaker, he comes to believe the very thing he has been told—that is, what the speaker said and believed. Thus what the first speaker believes, that starts the episode, is what the hearer believes, by the end of the episode.

Some philosophers, including me, find it useful to think of this sort of episode in terms of the concept of *content*. Some states and events are *contentful*; they can be assigned truth-conditions, or some other sort of success conditions, and be evaluated as true or false, accurate or inaccurate, successful or unsuccessful in virtue of whether those conditions are met. Locutions such as “what Elwood believes” and “what Elwood told Alphonse” identify such contents.

Contents are common to different kinds of meaningful states. A picture can *show* that Sacramento is beautiful; a person can believe that it is, a traveler can wonder whether it is, and hope that it is, a travel-agent can say that it is, and so forth.

Contents seem to be rather amazing things, for several reasons:

- They are elements that are somehow in common to different properties, of different kinds of things—properties like *showing that Sacramento is beautiful*, or *believing that Sacramento is beautiful*, or *hoping that Sacramento is beautiful*.
- They typically involve objects that are not a part of the things the properties of which they are used to characterize. Sacramento, for example, isn't part of the picture, which has the property of showing Sacramento to be beautiful, nor is it part of Elwood or Alphonse, who have the property of believing it to be beautiful.
- In spite of this, contents are used to characterize states that we think of being local to, or even inside of, individuals. We think of Elwood's belief as in his head, his utterance as an act of his. Alphonse's hearing, understanding, and the belief he acquires are similarly involved with his head. What can

Sacramento, a distant city, have to do with these internal events?

- We think of contents as having logical relations among themselves, which we use in explanations and inferences about these mental states. Thus in the paragraph with which we began, we explain Elwood's saying something in terms of a belief with the same content. We would expect him to deny that Sacramento was unattractive, to believe that some California city was attractive, and so on.

The *Philosophy of Content* is a subject that cuts across the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, logic, and other parts of philosophy. In the twentieth century the philosophy of content has been an important part of "analytical philosophy," although not until recently under that name. This stream of thinking began with currents from central Europe, especially Meinong and Frege. Russell was influenced by both of them, and issues we now can see as very much about content were in at the birth of analytical philosophy. Much of the work on the theory of content has been more or less skeptical: Quine, Davidson, Stich and Shiffer, for example. Others important figures have been, in various ways and in line with various paradigms, enthusiastic: Castañeda, Fodor, Kaplan, Lewis, Loar, Montague, and Searle for example.

I believe that one factor that engendered skepticism about content, and interfered in other ways with a properly positive theory of content, is the idea that for content to make sense, there must be a certain kind of content, that I call *the Semantic Grail* of the philosophy of content. The Semantic Grail of content is just the content that examples like the one above lead us to expect: a *single* content that:

- A. Is the content of Elwood's belief, his utterance, Alphonse's understanding, and Alphonse's belief.
- B. By being the content of each of these mental states and linguistic acts, explains its connections with the cause and effect of that state or act.

In this paper, I claim there is no such content; there is rather a structure of related contents. One content fills role A. A family of other contents fills role B. Instead of a single grail, we have sort of a semantic tea service.

Referential Content and Cognitive Content

The natural place to begin our search is with the report of Elwood's utterance.

- (1) Elwood said that Sacramento is a beautiful city.

There is considerable (if far from universal) agreement among philosophers of language that this report says that the content of Elwood's utterance is a proposition about Sacramento. The proposition might be modeled as a set of possible worlds in all of which Sacramento was beautiful; it wouldn't be required that it be *called* "Sacramento" in all of the worlds, or be the capital of California,

or be a town to which Elwood referred. Nothing would be required of the city except whatever is required to make it the very same city we in our world call "Sacramento, California". Another way of modeling it, which might bring up fewer metaphysical problems, is simply as a pair consisting of the city, Sacramento, and the property of being beautiful. We have what David Kaplan calls a *singular proposition*; that is, a proposition individuated by an individual and something asserted of it.

I call this the "referential content" of the statement, because it incorporates the object referred to, and I call the thesis that such referential contents are "what is said," *referentialism*.

Referentialism and its singular propositions strikes some people as rather mysterious; how can we express a proposition with a city as a constituent; propositions should be made of things we can have a more intimate mental connection with than cities. But there is a simple and non-mysterious interpretation of referentialism. We can think of the singular proposition as giving the truth-conditions of an utterance *given* the facts about reference. *Given* that Elwood was referring to Sacramento, California with his use of the name "Sacramento", what *else* has to be the case for his utterance to be true? It has to be a beautiful city. Contents characterize an utterance by what the world must be like for it to be true. More or less can be taken as given; the proposition assigned as content gets at *what else* the world must be like. The fact that "what is said" is typically referential content, simply reflects our typical interest in certain kinds of facts about utterances: what the world has to be like for them to be true, given the language, the meaning and the reference of the words in them.

Here is our first candidate for the Semantic Grail of Content, then, the singular proposition that Sacramento is a beautiful city. The referentialist will think that this proposition is *what Elwood believed, what Elwood said, what Alphonse took himself to have been told, and what Alphonse came to believe*. This is the content that fills role A. Whether or not referential content is the Semantic Grail, it is at least an important part of the tea service.

Referential content does not handle the explanatory burden that we were looking for with B. Elwood might have made many different statements that would have expressed this singular proposition, but that would not have been cognitively equivalent; that is, they would not be motivated by the same beliefs, and would not lead to the same beliefs on the part of a credulous speaker. If Elwood had been in Sacramento and said,

(2) This city is beautiful

he would have expressed the proposition that Sacramento is a beautiful city — at least according to Kaplan's classic account of the content of statements using indexicals and demonstratives (Kaplan, 1989). But notice that he might have said this before he realized that he was in Sacramento. If so, there will clearly be an important change in his belief states when he realizes he is in Sacramento.

The earlier belief state would be expressed by (2), the one he is in after the realization, he could express with,

(3) Sacramento is a beautiful city.

Consider these pairs:

- (B2) The belief Elwood acquires as he drives into Sacramento, not knowing where he is;
- (U2) Elwood's utterance, "This city is beautiful".
- (B3) The belief Elwood acquires when he realizes the city into which he has driven is Sacramento;
- (U3) Elwood's utterance, "Sacramento is beautiful".

The utterance (U2) is the natural expression of the belief (B2); the utterance (U3) is the expression of the belief (B3). But we cannot distinguish between the content of (B2) and (B3) on the basis of their standard semantics, for they are assigned the same singular proposition.

The hypothesis that the singular proposition expressed by Elwood is the one we are searching for does not explain the explanatory links between the steps. There are a number of states Elwood could have been in, that would have constituted his believing the singular proposition in question. There are a number of things he could have said, that would have constituted saying this. The singular proposition doesn't distinguish between these different beliefs and different utterances, and so doesn't really explain the links between them. This is, of course, just a version of Frege's problem with modes of presentation, a problem now into its third century (Frege, 1960).

Reflexive Content

The underlying problem with referential contents is that quite different things are required to be the reference of "this city" in (U2), on the one hand, and to be the reference of "Sacramento" in (U3), on the other. To be the reference of the first, a city must be the one Elwood is in and is demonstrating when he uses the words. To be the reference of the second, a city needs to be the reference of Elwood's use of "Sacramento". Elwood uses the term "Sacramento" to refer to the capital of California in a variety of situations; its reference does not depend on his being in or demonstrating Sacramento, even when he is in a position to do so.

The knowledge or beliefs that motivate the use of "this city" are then different than the ones that motivate the use of "Sacramento". As Elwood enters the city, he acquires a belief about a certain city that it is beautiful. The city he is acquiring the belief about is the one he perceives. All he needs to know, in order to refer to the city he perceives with the words "this city," are the rules for the use of demonstratives in English. Even though Elwood is lost, he can manage this. But to express the thought that the city one is perceiving

is beautiful by saying “Sacramento is beautiful,” one needs to know or at least believe that the city one is perceiving is called “Sacramento.”

It seems then that in order to get at the more fine-grained content of Elwood’s belief that he conveys in his utterances, we need a way of looking at content that does not incorporate the referents of the names, but rather the conditions for being the referents of the names.

I provide such a level of content for utterances in my book *Reference and Reflexivity* (Perry, 2001). I call it *reflexive content*. The idea is very simple; one looks at the truth conditions of an utterance without fixing the referent. Suppose I say,

(4) Today is cold

on July 1, 2000. Taking “Today” to be a term that refers to the day it is used, and taking into account when I used it, it seems I have expressed the singular proposition that July 1, 2000 is cold. What *additional* has to be the case for my utterance to be true, *given* that it is in English and uttered on July 1, 2000, is that July 1, 2000 be cold.

But suppose we don’t take the contextual fact, about when (4) was uttered, into account? Then it seems like we can say the following:

(5) (4) is true iff the day on which (4) is uttered is cold.

This gives us as a truth-condition of (4) a proposition about (4) itself:

(6) That the day on which (4) is uttered is cold

(6) is what I call the *reflexive content* of (4). “Reflexive” means simply that the truth-conditions of (4) are given in terms of conditions on (4) *itself*.

The reflexive content corresponds to what someone understands who hears an utterance like (4) without knowing on what day it occurs. Also, since we take utterances to be intentional acts of writing as well as speaking, we can think of someone who finds (4) written in a diary, without any indication of when it was written. Such a person can be said to understand the utterance, in that they understand the language in which it was written, and know the conditions under which it would be true. But they don’t really know what proposition was expressed.

Notice that someone who heard Elwood make this statement, but had no idea what day it was, could nevertheless verify whether it was true or not. We have ways of finding out if it is cold on a given day, namely, stepping outside and seeing, or looking at a thermometer through the window.

This point about days and temperatures is similar to the one made above about cities and being beautiful. Elwood could tell that Sacramento was beautiful, just by looking around him, even if he had no idea what city it was, or thought it was Stockton or Chico (see Perry, 1990, 2003).

We can also imagine cases that go the other way around. Elwood might know that Sacramento beautiful, because he read this in an authoritative travel guide that he paid good money for. And he might be in Sacramento. But he might not know that the city he was in was beautiful, for he might not have gotten to the parts of Sacramento that make it beautiful. Constructing a similar case about the weather is left as an exercise for the reader.

If we look back at (U2) and (U3), we see that their reflexive contents are quite different:

Reflexive Content of (U2): The city the speaker of (U2) demonstrates is beautiful.

Reflexive Content of (U3): The referent of the speaker's use of "Sacramento" in (U3) is beautiful.

These differences correspond to the differences we saw in the cognitive content of (U2) and (U3). Elwood, the speaker of (U2), needs to be able to demonstrate the city of which he speaks, but does not need to know its name. With (U3) Elwood needs to know the name of the city he asserts to be beautiful, but does not need to be able to demonstrate it.

The reflexive content is *not* what Elwood *said* in either case. The subject matter of his utterance was a city, Sacramento, not the utterance itself, in both cases. If we reconstruct the implicit plans the speaker might have, the role the reflexive content plays becomes clearer. Suppose Elwood merely wants his companion to look up from the map for a moment and notice the pretty city they have entered. He wants his companion to think something like, "if I look out the window, I'll see a beautiful city". He plans as follows:

I will utter "This city is beautiful," producing a token — a disturbance of the air waves — that will impinge on my companion's ears. My companion will perceive the disturbance as a token of an English sentence, the meaning of which he knows. At this point, he will think "The city the speaker of this token demonstrates is beautiful." It will be obvious to him that I am the speaker. He will look at me to see if I am demonstrating the city we are in, or perhaps pointing to one on the map, or perhaps to a sign, or whatever. Once he sees I am merely directing my eyes out the window of the car to the city we are in, he will realize, "If I look out the window, I'll see a beautiful city". And so, if he has any desire to see a beautiful city, he will take his eyes off the map for a second and look outside.

I have, of course, represented as a conscious plan that which would be quite below the level of consciousness in most cases. The premises reflect the steps that would be involved in the bit of know-how exhibited by speaker were they made explicit. In fact, most adults are pretty good at producing utterances that fit plans suited to the context they are in. Those who are not skilled, or who

don't bother to exercise their skill, can be irritating. Such people expect you to see where they are pointing when you can't see them (perhaps they are in the back seat of a car you are driving), to know who they are when they call on the phone, without telling you their name, to know which person has just popped into their mind, even though they refer to them with a "he" or "she", and so forth.

Uttering (3) would not have worked to get the result Elwood wanted. The companion might not realize that Sacramento is the town around them. He might just agree, saying, "Yes, I'm sure it is; I can't wait until we get there."

On the other hand, Elwood might plan to use (3) as a way of transmitting the information that they were in Sacramento. Suppose it was not common knowledge between Elwood and his passenger that Sacramento was beautiful, and Elwood had in fact expressed some skepticism on the point earlier. Elwood figures that when he utters (3) his companion will wonder what motivated the change of mind, and look at Elwood; seeing that Elwood was looking out the window and appreciating the town they were in, he will figure out the simplest explanation, that they are in Sacramento and Elwood has revised his opinion based on seeing it.

Our descriptions of the contents of utterances focus on their referential contents, rather than their reflexive content. This is natural, since our conversational goal is usually to transmit information about the things to which we refer, not about the utterances we make. Elwood doesn't want the companion to remember that a particular utterance was made about a beautiful city, but that a particular city was beautiful. The belief about the utterance was a stepping-stone to this belief, which can quickly be forgotten. Nevertheless, we clearly are adept at planning our utterances in ways that exploit their reflexive contents, and provide appropriate stepping stones for the hearer to get to the belief we are aiming for her to have.

Does the reflexive content of an utterance then provide what we need for aspect B of the Semantic Grail? It cannot, for the reflexive content of Elwood's utterance is not the same as the reflexive content of the belief that motivated it and that it expressed, nor of the belief that Alphonse acquired.

The belief was present in Elwood's mind before he made the utterance, and would remain there even if he had decided not to say anything. If a content is to be the reflexive content of the belief, it must be reflexive, that is, place a truth condition on the belief itself, not on an utterance, particularly one that might not exist yet. The reflexive content of the utterance is another piece of our tea service, but not everything we need.

Doxastic Content

We can make good sense of the idea of the reflexive content of a belief: the proposition that gets at the conditions truth puts on the belief itself, although to do so we need to have a model of what beliefs are like. I'll assume simple beliefs like those expressed by (U2) and (U3) consist of ideas being connected together in the mind. Ideas of properties and relations I'll just call ideas; ideas

of individuals I'll call notions. I'll further assume that notions can be attached to perceptions or detached. The notion of Sacramento involved in the belief that led to (U2) was attached to the speaker's perception of Sacramento. If we imagine (U2) being uttered by someone far away from Sacramento, perhaps planning a trip, the notion would be detached.

Let n_{B2} be the notion that is part of the belief B2 that motivates U2 and is attached to Elwood's perception. It is associated with the idea of being beautiful. Stating the truth-condition of B2 in terms of its own constituent, the notion n_{B2} , we have:

Reflexive Content of (B2): That the city that the perception attached to n_{B2} is of, is beautiful.

Let n_{B3} be the notion that is part of the belief B3 that motivates U3 and is associated with the idea of being named "Sacramento". This notion is also associated with the idea of being beautiful. Stating the truth-condition of B3 in terms of its own constituent, the notion n_{B3} , we have:

Reflexive Content of (B3): That the city that the notion attached to n_{B3} is of, is beautiful.

Note that n_{B2} and n_{B3} might be the same notion, or might be different notions that are linked so information passes between them, or might be different and unlinked. They will be the same or linked if the speaker realizes that the city he is demonstrating is Sacramento.

The speaker will know how to refer to a city his notion of which is attached to a perception, for that is just my theoretical jargon for knowing how to refer to the city he sees. He will know how to refer to a city his notion of which is associated with the name "Sacramento," for that just requires knowing that you can refer to a thing with its name.

A reconstruction of the process that leads from belief to utterance thus needs to bring in auxiliary semantic beliefs. In the case of (U3), the speaker believes not only that a certain city is beautiful, but also that the same city is named "Sacramento." In the case of (U2), he believes not only that a certain city is beautiful, but also that the city he will refer to with "this city" is that very one. When the auxiliary beliefs are wrong, the speaker does not say what he intended to. For example, the speaker of (U3) might have been thinking of Stockton, a city he has visited many times; he finds the way the canals and rivers of the Delta terminate around the downtown quite striking and beautiful. But he has always had trouble keeping the names "Stockton" and "Sacramento" straight in his mind.

In the case of (U2), if the speaker is merely picking up the information that Sacramento is beautiful perceptually, and then passing it on demonstratively, it's hard to imagine him making this sort of mistake. But another scenario is that he believes Sacramento to be beautiful quite independently of his current

perceptions. He intends to express this belief. He thinks he can refer to the city he takes to be beautiful by saying, "this city," for he thinks he is in Sacramento. But in fact he is in Chico. When he says "This city is beautiful," he does not say what he planned to say. Or, more accurately, his plan involved saying one thing by saying another; the first part succeeded but not the second. Elwood thought that by expressing the proposition, about the city he was looking at, that it was beautiful, he could express the proposition that Sacramento was beautiful. He successfully carried out the first part of the plan; he expressed the proposition about the city he is looking at, that it was beautiful. But he doesn't get to the goal. He doesn't *thereby* express the proposition that Sacramento is beautiful.

The motivating belief, the one which one intends to express, and the motivated utterance do not then have the same reflexive content. It will be handy, however, to have the concept of the *doxastic content* of an utterance. Where *b* is a belief that *u* is intended to express, the reflexive content of *b* is the doxastic content of *u*.

The explanations that are implicit in the opening story about Elwood and Alphonse are based on a common situation. We suppose that Elwood's utterance was intended to express his belief. We assume that there is a correspondence between notions in the belief and terms in the utterance (See Crimmins & Perry, 1989). For an utterance to express a belief, each notion must be of the same thing as the corresponding term *refers to*, and the predicate must predicate the property the corresponding idea is of. If these conditions are met, the reflexive content of the utterance and the doxastic content of the utterance will be referentially equivalent. That is, the referential content that we get by adding the referential facts about the utterance to what is given, is the same as the referential content that we get by adding the facts about what things the notions in the motivating belief are about. What is believed is what is said.

The hearer will typically not rest content with grasping the reflexive content of the utterance, but will make an identification between the object spoken about and some object of which he has his own notion, if he can. So in the case of (U2) the hearer takes the city referred to by the speaker's use of "this city" to refer to the city that the hearer sees, since it is the same one that the speaker is demonstrating via eye gaze through the car window. The hearer will then acquire a belief whose reflexive content will be referentially equivalent with the reflexive content of the utterance. If the auxiliary semantic assumptions are wrong, this will not be so.

A story of four contents

There is no single Semantic Grail of Content, no Fregean sense that characterizes the cognitive content of each of the parties to an instance of communication, and is also what is believed by the speaker, understood by the hearer, and expressed by the utterance. In a successful act of communication, there will be a single proposition expressed by the utterance, and believed by both participants, the referential proposition. But it won't get at the cognitive content.

The reflexive contents of the two beliefs and the utterance are more closely connected with cognitive content. But the situation is not as simple as having a single reflexive content for all three. The reflexive contents have architectural and explanatory connections

The sincere speaker plans to utter something that will express the proposition he believes. This means that the truth-conditions of the utterance, given the facts that determine the meaning and reference of the words in it, should be the same as the truth-conditions of the motivating belief, given the facts that determine what the ideas and notions in it are about. There are a number of ways to do this. There are ways of expressing exactly what's on your mind, without taking a chance of depending on any further facts one might get wrong. But the risk-averse strategies may not advance one's conversational goals.

Let's go back to Elwood and his passenger. Elwood has trouble keeping the names of Stockton, Sacramento and other central valley cities straight. Thinking of Stockton, but fearful of getting the name wrong, Elwood could simply say, "It's beautiful." The "It" inherits its reference from the thought, so the utterance has the same referential content as the motivating belief. And this is what we sometimes do, when we can't remember the name of the object about which we are thinking—or perhaps we know, but we want the hearer to guess what we are talking about. This cautious strategy would not be very helpful to the passenger; he will know that Elwood is talking about the thing he is thinking about, but won't have any idea which object that is.

Think now of Elwood in the car, seeing Sacramento, but not knowing which city he sees. Elwood knows that in English one can use "this" and "that" to refer to the object to which one is attending. So he says, "That city is beautiful" to his passenger which correctly expresses his thought. Not too much can go wrong here. That is because the way he is referring is directly related to his perceptual mode of belief.

When things go right, a person's linguistic competence, plus other relevant auxiliary beliefs, should guarantee the sameness of the referential contents of motivating belief and utterance. The sameness of referential contents of utterance and acquired belief should similarly be guaranteed by linguistic competence and auxiliary beliefs.

Although there is no single content to serve as our Semantic Grail, there is a structure of contents in a communicative interchange whose contents are systematically connected when things work correctly. If there are no misunderstandings, the reflexive content of the motivating belief plus auxiliary beliefs will explain the reflexive content of the utterance, which will in turn, together with auxiliary beliefs of the hearer, explain the reflexive content of the acquired belief. And both beliefs and the utterance will have the same referential content.

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