

Putnam: The Meaning of 'Meaning'

Putnam's article "Meaning and Reference" (1973) was subsequently expanded into a much longer paper called "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" (1975). The longer paper contains a number of things that help to make clear what he is getting at in the shorter version. Those include the following.

Psychological states: Narrow vs. Wide

Narrow

All there is to know about an individual's psychological state in the **narrow sense** can be learned from studying the contents of that individual's mind; what other people think, believe, etc., is entirely irrelevant to finding out what's going on in this individual's mind.

The general idea: ψ is a psychological state in the narrow sense of a subject, S , iff you don't need to consider anything that's going on "outside of the head" of S in order to figure out whether S is in ψ .

Wide

A psychological state in the **wide sense** is one whose attribution to a subject has entailments that go beyond what's going on "in the head" of the subject. Many "garden variety" mental states are, according to Putnam, psychological states in the wide sense. E.g., when we say that x is jealous of y , we are attributing a state to x that entails, at least, that y exists. So *being jealous* is a wide (but not a narrow) psychological state.

Methodological Solipsism

This is Putnam's term for the traditional philosophical view that **all psychological states are narrow**.

When methodological solipsism is combined with the thesis that knowing the meaning of something is a psychological state, it yields the result that **meanings are in the head**. That is, whether a given individual knows the meaning of a given term can be completely determined by examining the contents of his mind — it is not necessary to bring any extra-mental considerations to bear.

This is the idea that Putnam attacks. His claim is that "it is possible for two speakers to be in exactly the same psychological state (in the narrow sense), even though the extension of the term A in the idiolect of the one is different from the extension of the term A in the idiolect of the other" ("The Meaning of 'Meaning'", p. 228.)

Twin Earth

The Twin Earth hypothesis is an illustration of the claim quoted just above. You and your Twin Earth counterpart Oscar are in exactly the same (narrow) psychological state when you have thoughts that each of you would describe as being “about water.” (You would of course be using the English word ‘water’ and Oscar would be using the Twin Earthian word ‘water’.)

Yet your term ‘water’ applies to H₂O (and not to XYZ), while Oscar’s term ‘water’ applies to XYZ (and not to H₂O). So the extension of your ‘water’ is different from the extension of Oscar’s ‘water’. Since intension determines extension, your ‘water’ must have a different intension from Oscar’s ‘water’. But your narrow psychological states are identical. So (as Putnam puts it) “meanings aren’t in the head.”

The Thesis Extended: General Terms

Putnam goes on to argue that the thesis of the rigidity of kind terms can be extended to cover the names of **artifacts** as well as natural kinds. ‘Pencil’, ‘chair’, ‘bottle’, etc., are all rigid designators. Presumably, such terms rigidly designate **kinds of artifacts**.

One might object as follows: couldn’t we discover that pencils are not artifacts after all? That they are, instead, organisms? This is certainly **epistemically** possible. That is, we could discover that the things *we have been calling* pencils are organisms. But that would not be the same thing.

Putnam uses a Twin Earth example to show this. If we were to discover that the “pencils” of Twin Earth are superficially indistinguishable from our pencils, but on closer examination turn out to have a different microstructure—they’re organisms—we would not have discovered that there are pencils on Twin Earth, but they are organisms. Rather, we would discovered that there are no pencils on Twin Earth; instead, they use (pencil-like) organisms (not pencils) to write with.

Stereotypes

What **is** in the head, if meanings are not? Putnam calls them **stereotypes**. A stereotype is “a standardized description of **features** of the kind that are **typical** or normal” for a thing of a given kind. A stereotype is “a conventional idea of what an *X* looks like or acts like or is,” but it is **not analytically tied** to its associated term. It is a stereotype that gold is yellow, but it is not analytic that gold is yellow; tigers are stereotypically striped, but it is not analytic that tigers are striped.

Putnam’s stereotypes function semantically the way a proper name’s associated descriptions function according to Kripke: they provide a way of picking out an object, a way of **fixing the extension** of a term. They don’t provide logically necessary and sufficient conditions for falling under the extension of the term.