

Content Essentialism

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The paper offers some preliminary and rather unsystematic reflections about the question: Do Beliefs Have Their Contents Essentially? The question looks like it ought to be important, yet it is rarely discussed. Maybe that's because content essentialism, i.e., the view that beliefs do have their contents essentially, is simply too obviously and trivially true to deserve much discussion. I sketch a common-sense argument that might be taken to show that content essentialism is indeed utterly obvious and/or trivial. Somewhat against this, I then point out that a "sexy" conclusion that is sometimes drawn from Putnam-Burge-style externalist arguments, namely that our mental states are not in our heads, presupposes content essentialism—which suggests that the view is not entirely trivial. Moreover, it seems intuitively that physicalists should reject the view: If beliefs are physical states, how could they have their propositional contents essentially? I distinguish three readings of the title question. Content essentialism does seem fairly obvious on the first two, but not so on the third. I argue that the common-sense argument mentioned earlier presupposes one of the first two readings but fails to apply to the third, on which 'belief' refers to belief-state tokens. That's because ordinary belief individuation is silent about belief-state tokens. Tolerant physicalists, I suggest, should indeed reject content essentialism about belief-state tokens. What about token dualists? One might think they ought to embrace content essentialism about belief-state tokens. I end with puzzling why this should be so.

In this paper I offer some preliminary and, I am afraid, somewhat unsystematic reflections about a question concerning the metaphysics of belief. The question is this:

Do beliefs have their contents essentially?

The question feels sort of deep—like it ought to be important. Yet it is rarely discussed. Maybe that's because its importance is widely overlooked. Or maybe it's because the question is not really that important after all.

1

Let me begin with two lines of thought. Here is the first one.

I believe that flies are insects. This belief of mine has the content that flies are insects. Now, if beliefs do *not* have their contents essentially, then this belief of mine, the belief that flies are insects, could have been the very same belief it is, even if it hadn't had the content that flies are insects, that is, even if it hadn't been

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the belief that flies are insects. That means, it might have been the very same belief it is, even if it had been the belief that flies are mammals, say, or the belief that apples are nice to eat.

This sounds rather odd, which might suggest that my question is indeed not very deep, simply because it's too obvious what the answer must be: beliefs do have their contents essentially.

Here is a very different line of thought.

Remember Putnam-Burge style *externalist* arguments.¹ According to these arguments, what we believe depends (at least in part) on our extra-cranial environment, it depends on factors outside our heads. Whether I believe that water is potable or believe that twater is potable depends on whether I've been living on Earth or on Twin-Earth. Whether I believe that I have arthritis in my thigh or believe that I have tarthritis in my thigh depends on the linguistic conventions prevalent in my society. The (alleged) upshot of these arguments is sometimes encapsulated in the following slogan: "Our mental states are not in our heads—or at least, many of our mental states, namely our beliefs and thoughts and desires, are not in our heads". (Colin McGinn, in his book *Mental Content*, tends to summarize externalism with this slogan.² It is also done quite frequently in philosophical conversations.)

Now, the slogan that (many of) our mental states are not in our heads sounds vaguely exciting. Moreover, it suggests that various forms of physicalism ought to be wrong—roughly: since my brain is in my head, my mind, if it's not in my head, can't be my brain. But the slogan that our mental states are not in our heads doesn't really follow from the externalist arguments—even under a relatively modest interpretation. Externalist arguments, assuming they are successful, establish

Content externalism: Which contents my mental states have depends on factors outside my head.

The slogan that our mental states are not in our heads is, of course, metaphorical. A relatively modest claim that can responsibly be taken to underwrite the metaphor is

¹ See Hilary Putnam: "The Meaning of Meaning", in *Mind, Language, and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975), 215-71; Tyler Burge: "Individualism and the Mental", in P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, and H. K. Wettstein, eds., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 4: *Studies in Metaphysics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1979), 73-121; Tyler Burge: "Other Bodies", in A. Woodfield, ed., *Thought and Object: Essays on Intentionality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1982), 97-120.

² See, for example, p. 1 of McGinn's *Mental Content* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989).

Mental-state externalism: Which mental states I am in depends on factors outside my head.³

To get from content externalism to mental-state externalism, we need the thesis that my mental states have the contents they do have essentially. For, if my belief states don't have their contents essentially, then which belief states I am in might still depend solely on factors inside my head, even if factors outside my head (help) determine which contents my belief states have.

In case you have difficulties seeing why this is, it's probably because you have difficulties bending your mind around the idea that your mental states don't have their contents essentially. So let me simply give you the picture that I use when thinking about this. Pretend, for a moment, that you're going along with Plato, and Aristotle, and Ockham, and Fodor and agree that thinking and believing is sort of like talking or writing only it's done "inwardly"—it's a process involving the production of inner sentences. Such a view construes believing in terms of an underlying belief-generating relation, call it B*, so that, roughly:

S believes that snow is white iff S stands in B* to 'Snow is white' and 'Snow is white' means that snow is white.

Your state of believing that snow is white would then be the state of being B*-related to the inner sentence 'Snow is white' which means that snow is white. But now remember that sentences do not have their contents/meanings essentially.⁴ Instead of meaning that snow is white, the sentence could have meant, say, that flies are mammals. I hope you can see now why a belief state would not have its content essentially on this view. You could be in the exact same B*-state, relating you to the exact same sentence, even if that sentence meant that flies are mammals.

Consequently, it might be that content externalism holds—i.e., which content the inner sentence 'Snow is white' actually has depends in part on factors outside your head—while at the same time mental state *internalism* holds—i.e., whether you're in the state of being B*-related to the sentence 'Snow is white' is determined by factors inside your head that are quite insensitive to what the sentence 'Snow is white' happens to mean. To insure mental-state *externalism*, on this picture, we would need the thesis that B*-states have their contents essentially

³ For convenience I'm restricting 'mental state' to refer only to propositional-attitudes, and only to those that are relevant to the discussion: beliefs, thoughts, desires, and their kin.

⁴ Plato and Aristotle might not go along with this in the case of *inner* sentences. What about Ockham? What about Fodor?

(i.e., that inner sentences have their contents essentially after all), so that we are able to move from “the sentence has its content determined by external factors” to “which B*-state I am in is determined by external factors”. So, if our mental states are a bit like they are on the above picture, content externalism yields mental-state externalism only *modulo* the thesis that mental states have their contents essentially.

By my lights this suggests that there is at least something to my question. Without the thesis that beliefs have their contents essentially Putnam-Burge-style arguments do not yield the view that our mental states are not in our heads. As soon as I notice this, I find myself at least somewhat tempted to deny the view that beliefs have their contents essentially. After all, this might put my mental states (back) into my head (where they belong?).

Here is related but more general consideration. Take the view known as token physicalism—a weakly physicalist view which many find very attractive. On one version it holds that every mental state (token) is some brain state (token) or other. Brain states are assumed to be physical (electro-chemical) configurations of the brain. Isn't this sort of view pretty much committed to rejecting the idea that belief states have their contents essentially? After all: How could an electro-chemical configuration of the brain, or any physical state for that matter, have propositional content essentially? It's already difficult enough to see how such a thing could have propositional content at all, but *essentially*?

If token physicalism is committed to rejecting the view that beliefs have their contents essentially, then my question is definitely of some importance. Of course, this raises the additional question whether token physicalism is indeed committed to rejecting the view that beliefs have their contents essentially.

So much for the second line of thought.

2

Now I want to remind you of some distinctions pertaining to the standard analysis of belief.

When you believe that flies are insects, then you have a mental *property*, namely the property of believing that flies are insects. This property is often referred to alternatively as a *mental state* you're in, the state of believing that flies are insects. On the standard analysis of belief, this state (property) is a relational state (property); it involves a relation, namely the belief relation, to an object, which is the proposition *that flies are insects*. Since this proposition is also what you believe when you believe that flies are insects, the proposition is a content-object: it is the *object* of the belief relation and the *content* of the belief state.

This is the first distinction I wanted to remind you of, the distinction between a belief state and the proposition that is its content-object. It's good to remember this distinction, because the noun 'belief' is ambiguous: it can be used to refer to a state of believing a proposition, and it can be used to refer to a proposition that is, or might be, believed by someone. Note also that it looks like we're often using 'belief' in the second way, i.e., to refer to propositions—especially when we attribute logical properties (truth, entailment) to beliefs, or when we use the impersonal form '*The* belief that p'. A phrase of the form 'The belief that p is true', for example, seems best understood as saying something like 'The proposition that p is true and, by the way, someone believes it (or may well believe it)'.

The second distinction I want to remind you of is the one between belief-state *types* and belief-state *tokens*. When I believe that flies are insects, then I am in *the* state of believing that flies are insects—this is the type of state I'm in. But something else follows when I believe that flies are insects (though this is not uncontentious), namely that there is a particular (concrete, dateable, etc.) state or event *x* such that I am in *x* and *x* is *a* belief that flies are insects, or maybe better, *x* is *a* believing that flies are insects—this is the token state I'm in. (Note the 'a' and the 'the': the 'a' tends to be a mark of tokens while the 'the' tends to be a mark of types.) When we all believe that flies are insects, as I assume we do, then there are different token states, one for each one of us, but every one of these states is *a* belief that flies are insects. They are different tokens of the same state type. The noun 'belief' is ambiguous even when applied to states; it can refer to types or to tokens.

In sum, the noun 'belief' can be used in three different ways: to refer to propositions, to refer to belief-state types, and to refer to belief-state tokens.

Three remarks:

First, the second distinction is more contentious than the first one. There are those who maintain that it really doesn't make much sense to talk about *token* belief states—that it doesn't make much sense to say that, when you believe that p, then there is something *x* such that *x* is *a* belief that p. This strikes me as a respectable view. But I'll set it aside anyway, in part because I want to leave room for token physicalism as this view is typically understood.

Second, token physicalism, the weakly physicalist view one version of which was mentioned above, is of course meant to apply to state *tokens*. It says that every mental-state token is some physical/brain-state token or other. If talk of mental-state tokens doesn't make sense, then token physicalism doesn't make sense either. Here I'll assume that it does make sense. Token physicalism is *weakly*

physicalist in comparison to type physicalism, which holds that every mental-state type (property) is identical with a physical/brain-state type (property). Token physicalism is supposed to be entailed by type physicalism, but not the other way round. That is, one can be a token physicalist even if one rejects type physicalism and embraces type dualism instead.

Third, but for this to work, state tokens have to be understood à la Donald Davidson and not à la Jaegwon Kim.⁵ On Kim's view, events and states are *logically* structured; they are property instantiations at times or time periods. So, for example, the token state of my believing that p is something like an ordered triple containing me, the property of believing that p, and a time period. If state tokens are like this, then token identity entails property/type identity, which means that token physicalism (with token states understood in Kim's way) would be committed to type physicalism, hence it would not really be weaker than type physicalism after all. So, to allow for token physicalism to be significantly distinct from (and weaker than) type physicalism, I'll assume that state tokens are as Davidson says they are: concrete through and through, without logical structure; in particular, they don't contain properties, and their identity conditions are roughly as obscure as the identity conditions of any concrete things.⁶

3

It should be apparent by now that my original question was three way ambiguous, for I didn't specify what was meant by "belief". It seems to me that what I must have meant, or what I ought to have meant, when I asked whether "beliefs" have their contents essentially were *belief-state tokens*—understood in the way the token

⁵ Cf. for example: Donald Davidson, "The Individuation of Events" (1969), reprinted in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1982), 163-80; and Jaegwon Kim, "Events as Property Exemplifications" (1976), reprinted in *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), 33-52.

⁶ Terry Horgan has pointed out to me that a Kim-token physicalist is not automatically committed to type identity. To see what Horgan has in mind, we need to distinguish between the property that is *constitutive* of a Kim-event and the properties that *characterize* a Kim-event from the outside as it were. The property of *believing that flies are insects* is the constitutive property of the Kim-event [Horgan, believing that flies are insects, t]; properties that characterize this event would be, e.g., *being an event*, and *occurring in Slovenia*. It would now seem natural to interpret token physicalism as the thesis that every event whose *constitutive* property is mental is identical with an event whose constitutive property is physical. So interpreted, token physicalism (plus Kim-events) *does* entail type physicalism. However—and this seems to be Horgan's point—one might alternatively interpret token physicalism as the thesis that every event that is *characterized* by a mental property is identical with some event whose constitutive property is physical. On this interpretation, token physicalism (plus Kim-events) does not entail type physicalism. But note, for this to actually make a difference, one would have to hold that an event may have the *characterizing* property of *being a belief that flies are insects* even though it is not the case that someone, say Horgan, has the property of *believing that flies are insects*. This seems a hard line to take. See Horgan, "Humean Causation and Kim's Theory of Events", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 10 (1980), 663-79; cf. also Kim, *op. cit.*, 43f.

physicalist usually understands them, namely à la Davidson. What I meant to ask was: Do belief-state tokens have their contents essentially?

I offer this as the intended reading of my question for it seems to me (at least at the moment) that the answers to the other two readings of the question are relatively obviously “yes” and “yes”. Do propositions have their contents essentially? Well, propositions *are* contents; so they ought to “have” their contents essentially—whatever that exactly means. Do belief-state types have their contents essentially? A belief-state type is a complex (relational) property composed of the belief relation and a proposition which is the content of the belief state. Belief-state types ought to have their contents essentially on the principle that complex properties have their constituents essentially (whatever that precisely means).

Let me try to put a little bit more meat on the difference that the ambiguity of ‘belief’ makes for my question. It’s been suggested to me (by Chris Hill) that talk about content should be “anchored” in talk about *truth-conditions*; that is, when one says that a belief has the content that p, that commits one (at least) to the claim that the belief is true if and only if p. On this truth-conditional approach, the question whether the belief that p has its content essentially is best approached by considering the instances of the truth-conditional principle:

1. The belief that p is true \leftrightarrow p,

and this does look like a necessary truth to many. Not quite to me though—however, this doesn’t really matter, for all we need in the present context is that (2) is true, as indeed it appears to be:

2. The belief that p is necessarily such that it is true \leftrightarrow p.

And doesn’t this show that beliefs do have their contents essentially? Well, I’d say it does not—not in the relevant sense. For the most obvious interpretation of (2) is to take it as talking about the proposition that p, i.e., as saying something like: “The proposition that p, which by the way is believed by someone, is necessarily such that it is true iff p”. Maybe we could also take (2) to be talking about belief-state types—although this seems considerably less plausible.⁷ In any case, (2) does reflect that “beliefs” in the sense of propositions (and maybe belief-state types) have their contents essentially. But this doesn’t tell us about belief-state tokens. To get a truth-conditional clause for belief-state tokens, we need a genuine generalization over such tokens—something like (3), which should be compared to (4):

⁷ This would seem to require making sense of: “The state of believing that p is necessarily such that it is true \leftrightarrow p”. Talk of the state of believing that p *being true* strikes me as rather borderline.

3. $\forall x: x$ is a belief that $p \rightarrow (x \text{ is true} \leftrightarrow p)$;
4. $\forall x: x$ is a sentence that means that $p \rightarrow (x \text{ is true} \leftrightarrow p)$.

Here the truth-conditional clauses show up as consequents of conditionals, otherwise they wouldn't make much sense. Look at conditional (4) first. Taken as a *whole*, it is necessary. But its truth-conditional consequent is contingent because the antecedent is contingent: sentences don't have their meanings essentially, so they don't have their truth conditions essentially. The comparison of (3) with (4) shows that the truth-conditional approach to the question whether belief-tokens have their contents essentially is of little use. Of course, the conditional (3), taken as a whole, is necessary. The truth-conditional approach would ask us to check the consequent of (3). The consequent is necessary if the antecedent is necessary, which is what we wanted to know in the first place. If belief-tokens are sort of like sentence-tokens, then the antecedent of (3) is not necessary. Then again, if they are importantly different, then the antecedent may well be necessary.

In connection with the antecedent of (3), it might be helpful to compare two more principles:

5. $\Box(\forall x: x \text{ is a belief that } p \rightarrow x \text{ has the content that } p)$
6. $\forall x: x \text{ is a belief that } p \rightarrow \Box(x \text{ has the content that } p)$.

Note that no one would deny (5). It's like saying that it's necessary that any husband of Mary's is married to Mary. What is at issue is (6); and if belief-tokens are a bit like husbands, then (6) is false, for no husband of Mary's is necessarily married to Mary. (They can't be quite like husbands though, because they won't have their spouses/contents *by convention*, at least not all of them; rather, they would have their contents *by nature*, i.e., as a matter of natural law.)

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So: Do belief-state tokens have their contents essentially? And what about token physicalism: Is it committed to the view that they don't? I have some not very organized reflections about this.

Tyler Burge is one of the few authors I know of who explicitly mentions the view that belief-state tokens have their contents essentially. He is, of course, a content externalist. Towards the end of his paper "Individualism and the Mental", he argues that his content externalism refutes the token-physicalist view that belief-state tokens are brain-state tokens.⁸ The argument goes roughly like this: we can

⁸ Cf. Burge, *op. cit.*, 109-13.

counterfactually vary the contents of my beliefs, namely by varying my social-linguistic environment, while keeping my brain states constant; therefore, my belief-states can't be brain states. He points out that his argument requires the additional premise that belief-state tokens have their contents essentially, and he adopts this premise. He does not, by the way, point out, that this premise is also needed to get from content externalism to the idea that our mental states are not in our heads.

Burge thinks the premise that belief states have their contents essentially is sufficiently supported by our ordinary practices of individuating beliefs. I have two objections.

First, that we ordinarily individuate beliefs in terms of their contents doesn't show that beliefs are, metaphysically speaking, individuated in terms of their contents. Things can be typed in various ways; that we tend to type certain things in a certain way, doesn't show that we type them according to their essential types.

Secondly, and more importantly, as far as I can see, our ordinary practices of individuating "beliefs" don't indicate that we are individuating belief-state *tokens*; in fact, they don't even indicate in any obvious way that we are individuating any belief-*states* at all. When we do what might be called "individuating beliefs"—i.e., using idioms of "sameness" and "difference" as applied to beliefs—we mostly seem to be talking about *propositions* anyway. Say, I believe that p, and you too believe that p. It's then natural to say that you and I have, or hold, the same belief. But this use of 'belief'—especially in the context of "*holding* the same belief" or "*having* the same belief"—is most naturally interpreted as referring to propositions believed rather than states of believing. Other formulations suggest this too: "We believe the same thing"; "What do you believe about flies?"...Yes, that's what I believe too"; etc. It looks like we (implicitly) refer mostly to propositions, rather than belief states, when we "individuate beliefs". And belief-state tokens, it seems, are virtually never referred to at all. It is very difficult to think of a context in which it might be natural to say something like this: "We all believe that flies are insects, but our beliefs that flies are insects differ." In short, I'd say our ordinary ways of individuating "beliefs" don't support the view that belief-state tokens have their contents essentially. In fact, they don't seem to support any view about belief-state tokens.

The point I just made relates back to the beginning of the paper where I tried to show how one can make fun of the idea that beliefs don't have their contents essentially. There I used the noun "belief" in a fairly ordinary way. Since it's naturally taken to refer to things believed, i.e., to propositions when used in this way, it's easy to make fun of the idea that beliefs don't have their contents

essentially. Of course, this merely underlines that propositions have their contents essentially. It doesn't show that belief-state tokens have their contents essentially.

Burge's argument against token physicalism does point to a *conditional* relation between token physicalism and the question whether belief-state tokens have their contents essentially: assuming content externalism, token physicalism is committed to denying that belief tokens have their contents essentially. However, this only applies to the version of token physicalism I mentioned above, namely the version according to which mental-state tokens are *brain-state* tokens. There is a more broad-minded version of token physicalism, according to which mental-state tokens are physical-state tokens, but these physical-state tokens don't have to be brain states. So on this view, a belief-state token might be said to be identical with some *brain-cum-physical-environment-state* token. Of course, this kind of token physicalist has already given up on the view that beliefs are in the head, because the relevant physical states are not in the head to begin with. But what about the question whether belief-state tokens have their contents essentially? Is this sort of physicalist committed to giving a negative answer too? I find it hard to tell. But it still seems to me that it would be very natural for any token physicalist to give a negative answer.

One might bring up *strong supervenience* to suggest that, on the contrary, the token physicalist *must* hold that belief-state tokens do have their contents essentially. How does that go? If one holds that believing that *p* strongly supervenes on some physical state, then one is committed to the following view: if *x* is a state of believing that *p*, then there is some physical property ϕ such that *x* is a ϕ and, necessarily, if *x* is a ϕ then *x* is a belief that *p*. From "necessarily, if *x* is a ϕ then *x* is a belief that *p*" one could get that *x* is essentially a belief that *p*, provided one has that *x* is essentially a ϕ . And the latter view, roughly, the view that physical states are essentially the physical states they are, may strike any physicalist as something she might want to adopt. But I am not sure how much this shows about the relation between broad-minded token physicalism and essentialism about contents of token-beliefs. The relation is of course only indirect, via supervenience. Moreover, the relevant modalities might be off. Say *x* is indeed essentially a ϕ . It might still be only *nomologically* necessary that, if *x* is a ϕ , then *x* is a belief that *p*. If so, then one doesn't get that *x* is essentially a belief that *p*. I gather from recent literature that token physicalists nowadays seem inclined to go only for this weaker, nomological, version of supervenience (maybe because a stronger version is more obviously vulnerable to the objection that it results in some form of type identity after all).

A final point concerning the question whether belief-state tokens have their

contents essentially. It seems to me that, from a physicalist point of view, it's tempting to think like this: "Well, belief-state tokens are physical states, and physical states are essentially physical. But why in the world should anything that's essentially physical have propositional content essentially? So belief-state tokens don't have their contents essentially." Now look at the question from the point of view of a *dualist* about mental-state tokens, i.e., someone who holds that belief-state tokens are *immaterial*. Does this view support the idea that belief-state tokens have their contents essentially? If you have the impression that it does, I offer you the following skeptical consideration.

Your impression might be created by the fact that the dualist hasn't told us anything at all about what immaterial belief-state tokens are. In other words, on dualism, it might look like a belief that *p* is essentially a belief that *p*, merely because we haven't been told about, as it were, *anything else* that it might be other than a belief that *p*. So let's provide something: let's say immaterial states are made from immaterial soul stuff. So token belief-states are soul-stuff states, and soul-stuff states are essentially soul-stuff states. Couldn't the dualist then ask, analogously to the physicalist: Why in the world should anything that's essentially soul stuff have propositional content essentially? Consider an example. According to Descartes, when you believe that there is a cow grazing in the meadow, you are inwardly saying "yes" to an immaterial idea that represents a cow grazing in the meadow. Why, one might ask, would any idea, be it as immaterial as you want, essentially represent what it represents? Why couldn't that very same immaterial idea have represented flies sitting on the wall?⁹

⁹ This is a slightly revised version of my talk given at the Bled 2001 Conference on Metaphysics in Bled, Slovenia. I thank all the participants for a very lively discussion.