



A Study and Explanation of the Teleological Theory of Mental Content with Emphasis on the Views of Dretske and Millikan

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Abstract

One of the issues of Philosophy of Mind is the intentionality of the mind. The topic of this article is the study of the two related aspects of this issue, i.e. the possibility of intentionality and how mind content is determined in the Teleological Theory of Mental Content. According to this theory, the natural evolution of a living organism and the teleological functions based on this determines mental content and one can present a natural and physical explanation of intentionality and mental content with help from that. In this article, after explaining the foundations of this theory, i.e. realism in regards to intentionality, naturalism and the principle of natural evolution of species, we will first address two main versions of this theory, i.e. Dretske's Indicator Semantics and Millikan Consumer Semantics and then evaluate them. The most important problem of this theory is that it cannot explain the content and meaning of philosophical and logical concepts nor non-existence concepts and therefore, it faces issues concerning the above concepts.



Keywords

Intentionality; mental content; teleological theory; Ruth Garrett Millikan; Fred Dretske.

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Introduction

The issue of intentionality is that how is it possible that the matter in the skull can refer to something or can be about something in the world outside of itself. Intentionality of consciousness is the reason why we can have representations of the world and why our thoughts possess content and depict the real world. Content is what our mental representation represents. There are various philosophical issues regarding content. For example, is content physically explainable or not? Another issue is how is a particular content of a mental state determined? It seems that these two questions are related to each other because any explanation regarding content is also an explanation of how content is determined.

The Teleological Theory in trying to explain the possibility of intentionality always employs a physicalistic framework. This theory claims that the natural evolution of a living organism and the teleological functions based on that determines content and provides a natural and physical understanding of intentionality and meaning.

Indicator Semantics

Dretske first suggested a causal theory of mental concept and meaning; however, in his later works he also added a functional approach to it and thus, his viewpoint is a type of functional-informational viewpoint, i.e. it is an informational version of teleological semantics.

According to him, as a result of contact with the environment, the inner structures of the brain produce perceptive representations which possess an indicative function. This function has emerged in the process of evolution through the natural selection mechanism to be in accordance with the natural environment of the animal. Therefore, in short, inner indicator systems are denotative because they result in external conduct suitable to the animal for it to survive. This theory ranks among the producer teleological semantic theories which believe that representative content is determined in consideration of the function of the producer of the representation.

Consumer Semantics

According to Millikan, the functions of the consumers of representation, i.e., the systems that use representations specify its content. She focuses on the consumptions of the representations, i.e. the consumptions that natural organisms use to execute suitable functions to represent specific contents.

She claims that the production of mental representations is not related to its content; rather, it is necessary to focus on its consumption to solve the problem of functional determination.

She believes that intentionality is a real, biological and nonlinguistic property which has formed in human beings through a process of evolution, in the same that arms, hands and the heart have formed in an evolution process to provide suitable functions. The intentional categories must be considered as the actions of biological systems; the effects and consequences of which define their suitable functions.

A Study of the Problems

The meaning of logical and philosophical concepts as well as non-existence concepts is an issue that all theories of language must be able to explain. The problem of theories of meaning in encountering this category of concepts is that at first glance they are empty of references and therefore, any theory that considers meaning to be one with references to or dependent on them will face problems in explaining these concepts. Frege's theory of meaning provides a solution for the explanation of the meanings of these concepts by separating meaning from reference. However, the problem of the teleological theory is that it makes meaning completely dependent on reference. In this theory, meaning is equal to the conditions of teleological proper function. This meaning is nothing more than the external reference of words and therefore, encounters the problem of the absence of reference in concepts like non-existence concepts.

Conclusion

One of the unresolved problems of this theory is the possibility of supposing creatures possessing a mind and intentionality but don't have a biological body and thus, one cannot explain intentionality in them based on the theory of evolution and natural history. However, the main problem of this theory is that it cannot explain the content and meaning of philosophical and logical and also non- existence concepts and therefore, even if it can specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for content determination in concepts which have a close relationship with biological matters, it faces problems concerning the above mentioned concepts and is thus considered incomplete.

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