Right Here, Right Now

Comments on Hellie's There it is

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It's a great opportunity to comment on Benj's rich and stimulating paper. There's a lot going on in the paper. I'll focus my comments on one central issue, namely the notion of sameness of content. The following passage sums up the role that the notion plays in Benj's view:

> In the good case, when one is looking at the red color of a widget, this state of one also constitutes one's acceptance of a sentence of a certain kind 'R': a kind which is true just if one is looking at the red color of a widget. This kind of sentence is not 'articulate', in the sense that no state of acceptance of a sentence of this kind could be a belief. If perception is to impact the remainder of one's cognitive system, say by indirectly rationalizing an update of one's credence function and thereby also indirectly rationalizing an alteration in one's course of actions, perception needs to rationalize belief. Our view is that it does so via the sentential attitude of regard-as-equivalent: one regards the inarticulate sentence 'R' as equivalent to the articulate sentence 'I am looking at the red color of a widget'. Since when one regards S and T as equivalent, they express the same content, one would be incoherent in accepting 'R' but failing to accept 'I am looking at the red color of a widget'. So in order to preserve coherence in light of one's acceptance of 'R', one responds by forming the belief that one is looking at the red color of a widget. (Hellie, p. 52)

I'll raise some problems for Benj's criterion of sameness of content and will consider a number of alternative criteria of sameness of content (§1). I will then make a suggestion that would serve Benj's purposes well (§2) and will show how it has right consequences for Benj's view, for instance his short sketch of the particularity of perceptual experience (§3). I'll end by raising a general worry for Benj's view of perceptual justification (§4).

1. Sameness of Content

Benj provides us with a criterion for sameness of content in the following passage:

> one regards 'S' and 'T ' as equivalent just if one does all of the following:
> 1. One regards 'S ≡ T' as trivial, as requiring nothing of the world in order to be true;
> 2. One regards '¬(S ≡ T)' as incoherent, as not describing a comprehensible scenario;
> 3. One regards 'S ≡ T ' as why-closed, finding the question 'I know that S ≡ T ; what I want to know is why' to be unintelligible;
> 4. One regards 'S ≡ T ' (as one understands it) as true by metaphysical necessity: for every simple sentence 'U' in one's language, one accepts 'even had it been the case that U, it still would have been the case that S ≡ T '. (Hellie, p. 40f.)

Now, my worry is that this criterion individuates contents to coarsely. A few example will help to show why.

(a) By the lights of conditions 1, 2, and 4, the sentences "2+2=4" and "3+5=7" will express the same content. So this yields a very coarse grained way of individuating contents. My

first question for Benj is if condition 3 suffices to yield a difference between the contents that the sentences "2+2=4" and "3+5=7" express. If not, then arguably a criterion of sameness of content is required that individuates contents in a more fine-grained way.

(b) Consider the case of two tautologies: one tautology is easily recognizable as a tautology; the other is highly complex and it takes considerable work to see that it is a tautology. The tautologies arguably express different contents. Conditions 1-4 yield that tautologies express the same content. Benj might deny that they express different contents, but if so it would be good to know on what grounds.

Benj needs a notion of sameness of content that connects to rational coherence. But the criterion of sameness of content he is working is too coarse to support claims about preserving rational coherence. I'll consider a few alternative conditions for sameness of content to add to Benj's four conditions (listed on p. 40f) and then in the next section develop one that is suitable for Benj's purposes.

Intensional isomorphism. One possible additional 5th condition might be that two sentences have the same content only if they are intensionally isomorphic in Carnap's sense. In short the idea is that

> if two expressions are built in the same way out of corresponding designators with the same intensions, then we shall say that they have the same intensional structure. (1956/1988, p. 56)

The idea is that two expressions are intensionally isomorphic iff the following two conditions are met:

i. The components of the two expressions have the same intension.
ii. The expressions have the same intensional structure, that is, each expression is constructed from its components in the same way.

So in order to be intensionally isomorphic, the components of an expression must not only have the same intension, the connections relating the components and the order of application of the components must be the same as well.

Intensional isomorphism in conjunction with Benj's four conditions would yield a criterion that individuates contents significantly more finely than Benj's criterion. But it may

individuate them too finely for his purposes: sentences that arguably have the same cognitive significance can turn out to have different contents according to the condition of intensional isomorphism. Consider the sentences

(A) There is a vixen in the garden.

(B) There is a female fox in the garden.

The two sentences do not have the same intensional structure since they are constructed in different ways. This difference is enough for the two sentences to differ in content given the condition of intensional isomorphism. This would be bad for Benj since the unarticulable perceptual content and the articulable belief content are potentially not constructed in the very same way. Now it may be that there is a deeper level of semantic structure on which "vixen" and "female fox" are intensionally isomorphic. But if this is the case, then an additional criterion is needed to determine at what semantic level the condition of intensional isomorphism ought to be applied.

It should be noted that intensional isomorphism does not individuate sentences as finely as the syntactic structure of two sentences would. While the sequence of single signs is crucial for the syntactic structure of a sentence, it is the sequence of the construction-steps of the expression that is crucial for the intensional structure. As Carnap puts it "[f]or the intensional structure, in contrast to the merely syntactical structure, only the order of *application* is essential, not the order and manner of spelling" (1956/1988, p. 59, emphasis added).

Now Benj argues that the non 'articulable' sentence of an experience and the articulable sentence of a belief can have the same content. Possibly such contents will have components with the same intensions and will thus satisfy the first condition of intensional isomorphism. But presumably the contents will not be constructed from their components in the same way. If this is right, then intensional isomorphism will not be not a suitable criterion for Benj's purposes: we need something more permissible. It would be helpful to hear more from Benj here on what kind of criterion of sameness of content he has in mind when he says that the non 'articulable' sentence of an experience and the articulable sentence of a belief can have the same content.

Epistemic Equipollence. I will now move on to considering a second criterion for sameness of content: the criterion of epistemic equipollence. I will argue that a particular version of this criterion is particularly suitable for Benj's purposes. Frege articulates the criterion in a famous passage of his 1906 manuscript *Kurze Übersicht meiner logischen Lehren*.[1] The central idea is that possible differences in what can be taken to be true (or false) account for differences in content. Reformulated as a thesis about sameness of content rather than differences in contents, the idea is:

(CogEquiv) Two sentences A and B are cognitively equivalent iff anyone who understands both A and B and takes A to have a certain truth-value must recognize that B has the same truth-value and vice versa.

There are at least three problems with the criterion (CogEquiv) as a criterion for sameness of content: One problem is that if sentences are sufficiently complex, they may be understood, but not be recognized to be true: someone might understand both A and B but due to the complexity of A and B fail to recognize that A expresses a truth despite recognizing that B expresses a truth. Presumably two complex sentences can have the same content. If that is right, then (CogEquiv) cannot be necessary for sameness of content.

A second problem is that (CogEquiv) cannot be sufficient for sameness of content, since anyone who understands two simple tautologies C and D will recognize both C and D to express a truth. To give an example, consider:

(C) An apple is an apple.
(D) p⊃p

[1] "two sentences A and B can stand in such a relation that anyone who recognizes the content of A as true must thereby also recognize the content of B as true and, conversely, that anyone who accepts the content of B must straight away [ohne weiteres] accept that of A. (Equipollence). It is here being assumed that there is no difficulty in grasping the content of A and B. (…)There is nothing in the content of either of the two equipollent sentences A and B that would have to be at once immediately recognized as true by anyone who had grasped it properly" (1969/1979, p. 197-8). I discuss the idea articulated in this passage in detail in my "Sameness of Fregean Sense" forthcoming. Frege expresses the same epistemic criterion in a number of passages. In a letter to P.E.B. Jourdain, he says of two sentences containing the two expressions with different contents: "Someone who takes the latter to be true need not therefore take the former to be true. An object can be determined in different ways, and every one of these ways of determining it can give rise to a special name, and these different names then have different contents; for it is not self-evident that it is the same object which is being determined in different ways" (28 Jan. 1914, in 1976/1980, p. 80). In a letter to Russell from 20 Oct. 1902, Frege writes: "The thought that all thoughts belonging to Class M are true is different from the thought that all thoughts belonging to Class N are true; for someone who did not know that M coincided with N could hold one of these thoughts to be true and the other to be false." (1976/1980, p. 153)

Presumably, we do not want to say that C and D have the same content. So (CogEquiv), can at best be a necessary condition for sameness of content. As the first problem brought ought, it is not even a necessary condition. This is an analogous problem to the first problem raised for Benj's criterion of sameness of sense. So accepting this criterion would not make much progress on Benj's criterion.

A third problem is that someone might understand both A and B but be deeply confused and as a consequence not recognize that B expresses a truth (or falsehood) despite recognizing that A expresses a truth (or falsehood). In order to deal with these problems, the criterion of epistemic equipollence needs to be qualified and adjusted in various ways.

One way of dealing with these problems is to adjust the criterion for cognitive equivalence in the following way:

(CogEquiv)* Two sentences A and B are cognitively equivalent iff anyone who understands both A and B and takes A to have a certain truth-value is *rationally committed* to recognize that B has the same truth-value and vice versa.

Now (CogEquiv)* still only yields a necessary condition. In order to get a necessary and sufficient condition, we can combine (CogEquiv)* with Benj's four conditions. An alternative would be to adding the clause that the understanding of A must be constitutively connected to the understanding of B and vice versa. Adding this clause allows for a way of circumventing the second problem, that is, the problem of accounting for differences in the contents of tautologies and contradictions. Jointly with the criterion of (CogEquiv)* it provides for the following necessary and sufficient condition for sameness of content:

(Same-Content) Two sentences A and B have the same content iff
(i) they are cognitively equivalent, that is, anyone who understands both A and B and takes A to have a certain truth-value is *rationally committed* to recognize that B has the same truth-value and vice versa.
(ii) the understanding of A is constitutively connected to the understanding of B and vice versa.

The idea is not just that any *rational being* who understands both A and B and takes A to express a truth (or falsehood) must recognize that B expresses a truth (or falsehood) and vice versa. By

articulating the same-content criterion in terms of *rational commitments* a number of problems are avoided. Someone might recognize A to express a truth, but for any number of reasons may never get around or not be able to recognize B to be true. He may not get around to recognizing B to be true, because he gets distracted or dies. He may not be able to recognize B to be true, because he does not have a sufficient grasp of the language. Since he is not a competent speaker of his language, he may not recognize that the sentence "That is the horse ridden by the Queen" expresses the same thought as the sentence "That is the steed ridden by the Queen" when pointing at the same animal.[2] He is nonetheless rationally committed to believing "That is the steed ridden by the Queen", if he believes "That is the horse ridden by the Queen". Since (Same-Content) is a matter of what a person is rationally committed to, the fact that someone may be distracted or may not be a competent speaker of the language is neither here nor there. One is nonetheless rationally committed to recognizing B be to be true, once one has recognized A to be true.

(Same-Content) individuates contents significantly more finely than Benj's criterion. There's of course the question of what notion of rationality is in play. But this is ultimately a question for Benj's view. As he writes:

> rationality is a very permissive condition: more permissive than operation within the limits of behavior acceptable to this or that culture; more permissive than operation within the limits of human psychology. Rationality is a condition within which agents, whether human or animal (or robotic), typically operate. Still, it is less permissive than the notions of normality employed in biological explanation (if all agents are animals), or at least in chemical explanation. (Hellie, p. 12)

It would be helpful to have a bit more detail on what exactly is meant.

2. Sameness of Content and Particularity of Perceptual Experience

Benj writes: "when one regards S and T as equivalent, they express the same content" (p. 52). Presumably one can wrongly regard two sentences as equivalent. Indeed, given what Benj says elsewhere this seems important for his account. Towards the end of the paper, he considers the difficult case of perceiving two qualitatively indistinguishable but numerically distinct objects: the identical twins Tweedledee and Tweedledum. As Benj writes:

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[2] The example stems from Frege's paper "The Thought" (1918/1984, p. 23).

> in light of the fact that Tweedledee and Tweedledum are twins, we habitually treat perceptual sentences concerning them alike; accordingly, if Tina were to see Tweedledum, she would affirm as evidence that she is looking at Tweedledee. According to our theory, this affirmation is exculpable but not rationalizable. (Hellie, p. 63)

There's a question here about whether the standard for coherence is internal or external. Arguably one can be wrong about whether two sentences are equivalent. One can regard S and T as equivalent, despite the fact that they do not express the same content. In the case of numerically distinct but qualitatively indistinguishable objects one regards sentences as equivalent, despite the fact that they are of different objects and despite the fact that they arguably have distinct content.

The criterion of sameness of content that I've offered Benj can account for this: The criterion articulated is a matter of what one is rationally committed to. It is not up to one what one is rationally committed to. Indeed, one can be rationally committed to take two sentences as having the same truth-value, even if they do not *seem* to have the same content. Similarly, one may not be rationally committed to take one sentence to be true once one has taken the other to be true, even if they *seem* to have the same content. In the example about the two coffee cups, one is not rationally committed to taking the sentence that expresses your thought after the switch as having the same truth-value as the sentence that expresses your thought before the switch, even though introspectively nothing seems to have changed before and after the switch.

Does the suggested criterion (Same-Content) apply even if one holds that contents are (in part) externally individuated? Consider the situation in which you see a white coffee cup and you have a thought about that particular coffee cup. There are powerful reasons to think that the content of your thought is at least in part dependent on the particular cup that you are perceiving. Now, let's assume that unbeknownst to you someone replaces the cup with a numerically distinct but qualitatively indistinguishable white coffee cup. Let's assume also that the lighting conditions, your spatial relation to the cup, and everything else in your environment is exactly the same before and after the switch. If one accepts that the content of thought is at least in part dependent on the particular cup perceived, then the content of your thought about the cup will be

different after the switch. However, since everything looks exactly the same before and after the switch and since you did not notice and were not informed about the switch, you are not aware that you are related to a distinct cup. So if one accepts that the content is environment-dependent, the content of your thoughts is different before and after the switch, despite this fact not being introspectively accessible to you. Does (Same-Content) yield this result? Since the criterion individuates contents in terms of what we are rationally committed to, it applies to environment-dependent contents: even if we cannot introspectively tell two mental states apart, they may nonetheless have distinct contents due to the fact that they are of different objects in the world. So mental states in different environments can have different contents, even though the environments may seem the very same to one.

Benj doesn't say much about the precise differences between the experiences of numerically distinct but qualitatively indistinguishable objects. One option would be to think of the differences in terms of differences in externally individuated content. If this is a way he wants to go, then the suggested criterion for sameness of content may serve his purposes well.

Perceptual Justification

I'll end by raising a general worry for Benj's view of perceptual justification. Benj argues that in the case of hallucination the picture encoded within one's background presuppositions about one's condition is inconsistent with the picture one accepts in one's perceptual state. Now, consider Halle who suffers a hallucination that is subjectively indistinguishable from a possible perception. A problem with Benj's view is that Halle cannot tell whether she is hallucinating and thus whether her background presuppositions are inconsistent with the picture she accepts in her hallucinatory state. It's not clear why things that the hallucinating subject does not have access to should matter for whether the subject is justified. In order to accept Benj's view of justification one needs to accept a crucial shift from the first person to a third person point of view: the first person perspective is in this case Halle's perspective (Halle doesn't know that she is hallucinating); the third person perspective is the perspective of the theoretician who knows that Halle is hallucinating. It's only from the third person point of view that the incoherence between

Halle's background presuppositions and the picture she accepts in her hallucinatory state comes to light.