How Narrow is Narrow Content?
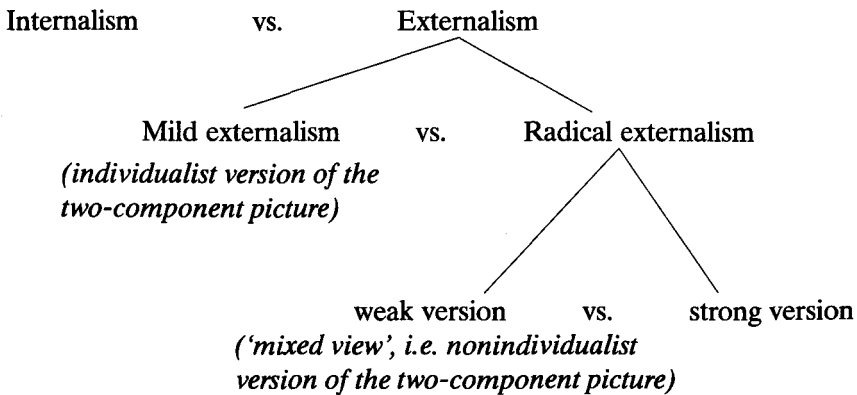
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Summary

In this paper I discuss two influential views in the philosophy of mind: the *two-component picture* draws a distinction between 'narrow content' and 'broad content', while *radical externalism* denies that there is such a thing as narrow content. I argue that 'narrow content' is ambiguous, and that the two views can be reconciled. Instead of considering that there is only one question ('Are mental contents internal to the individual?') and three possible answers ('Yes', 'Yes and No', and 'No') corresponding to Cartesian internalism, the two-component picture, and radical externalism respectively, I show that there are two distinct questions: 'Are mental contents internal to the individual?' and, 'Are mental contents analysable in two-components?' Both questions can be given a positive or a negative answer, in such a way that there are four, rather than three, possible views to be distinguished. The extra view whose possibility emerges in this framework is that which mixes radical externalism with the two-component picture. It agrees with radical externalism that there cannot be 'solipsistic' contents: content is not an intrinsic property of the states of an individual organism, but a relational property. It also agrees with the two-component picture, on a certain interpretation: the broad content of a psychological state depends upon what actually causes that state, but the narrow content depends only on what normally causes this type of state to occur. In the last section of the paper, I deal with internal representation which *seem* to be independent even of the normal environment. I show that such contents are themselves independent of the normal environment only in a relative sense: they are *locally* independent of the normal environment, yet still depend on it via the concepts to which they are connected in the concept system.

In this paper I want to present a new picture of the relation between two influential views in the philosophy of mind: I shall refer to these two views as *the two-component picture* and *radical externalism* respectively. These two views

are commonly assumed to stand in direct conflict to each other; in fact, radical externalism was originally offered as a critique of the two-component picture, understood as a *mild* form of externalism[1]. As against this I will try to show that there is an interpretation of the two-component picture which is consistent with radical externalism.

That the two-component picture can be understood in various ways is one of the main points of this paper. I shall distinguish an individualist and a non-individualist version of the two-component picture; the latter, contrary to the former, is consistent with radical externalism. [2] The issue of individualism will thus be divorced from that concerning the suitability of a two-component analysis. Instead of considering that there is only one question ('Are mental contents internal to the individual?') and three possible answers ('Yes', 'Yes and No', and 'No') corresponding to Cartesian internalism, the two-component picture, and radical externalism respectively, I will show that there are two distinct questions: 'Are mental contents internal to the individual?' and, 'Are mental contents analysable in two components?' Both questions can be given a positive or a negative answer, in such a way that there are four, rather than three, possible views to be distinguished *(Figure 1)*. The extra view whose possibility emerges in this framework is that which mixes radical externalism with the two-component picture. I find the view in question especially attractive, since there are good arguments both in favour of radical externalism and in favour of the two-component picture.

Internalism   vs.   Externalism

Mild externalism   vs.   Radical externalism
*(individualist version of the
two-component picture)*

weak version   vs.   strong version
*('mixed view', i.e. nonindividualist
version of the two-component picture)*

Figure 1

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[1] See e.g. Burge (1982) or Pettit and McDowell (1986).
[2] A similar distinction will be made between two versions of radical externalism: a weak version, which rejects only the individualist interpretation of the two component picture, and a strong version, which rejects also the other interpretation.

In the first section of this paper, I sketch the arguments that support the two-component picture and radical externalism respectively. In the second section I present the mixed view based on a distinction between two forms of environment-dependence. In section 3 I introduce, and in section 4 I dispose of, an argument to the effect that the mixed view is unacceptable from a radically externalist perspective.

1. Radical externalism and the two-component picture

Cartesianism (or internalism) is the view that thoughts are subjective and 'internal', that is, world-independent. On Descartes' view, we might enjoy the same thoughts as we actually entertain if the objective world was utterly different from what (we think) it is − even if the external world did not exist. Contemporary philosophers reject Cartesianism, for various reasons. One common reason for rejecting Cartesianism is the prominence of materialism: If one takes the mind to be somehow material, it is no longer possible for something mental to exist unless something like a material world exists. This line of argument I shall not discuss here. Another reason for rejecting Cartesian internalism is provided by the discovery that there are indexical thoughts in much the same sense in which there are indexical sentences. The truth-conditions of an utterance of an indexical sentence depend not only on the intrinsic meaning of the sentence but also on objective properties of the context of utterance. In the same way, as Putnam, Perry and others rightly insisted, the truth-condition of the thought 'It's cold in here' depends not only on the intrinsic content of the thought but also on the context of the thought-episode: my *Doppelgänger* and I may think of two different places as 'here', and think of those places in exactly the same way (i.e. we may entertain the same representations of the places in question − what goes on in our heads when we think 'It's cold in here' may be exactly the same thing) yet there is a difference between our thoughts at the level of reference and truth-conditions − my thought is about the place where *I* am, my *Doppelgänger's* about the place where *he* is. So there is at least one aspect of content − the referential aspect − which is not internal to the individual but depends upon the external environment. As Putnam was able to show, the same thing holds of thoughts about natural kinds. A thought whose referential (truth-conditional) content depends upon the context I will henceforth call a *'de re* thought'.

There are two senses in which philosophers like Putnam who insisted on the existence of thoughts whose referential contents depend on the external environment were only mildly externalists. On the one hand, they did not claim that all thoughts were *de re* thoughts; they seemed prepared to admit the

existence of another class of thoughts, purely descriptive thoughts, which are 'Cartesian', that is, wholly internal and world-independent. On the other hand, and more importantly, they seemed to accept the Cartesian position with respect to one aspect of the content of *de re* thoughts: they posited an internal, subjective ingredient of such thoughts which is not affected by changes in the external environment (i.e. by changes of the environment which do not induce corresponding changes in the neurophysiological states of the thinker). On their view, a *de re* thought is decomposed into a subjective, internal component and an objective, truth-conditional component.

Prima facie evidence in favour of the two-component analysis is provided by examples like the following. If I perceive a certain apple and think that it is green, while my *Doppelgänger* perceives a qualitatively indistinguishable apple and thinks that it is green, our thoughts differ in truth-conditions (one is true iff apple A is green, the other iff apple B is green) but there is a sense in which they are 'the same thought', as shown by the fact that they are prompted by the same sensory stimulations and prompt the same cognitive or behavioural reactions (Perry 1977 : 494). What is common to our thoughts in this case is called their 'narrow' content: the subjective, internal aspect of the thought. Together with a context, the narrow content yields a complete thought (a 'wide' content), with both a subjective component and an objective component (the truth-conditions, as jointly determined by the narrow content and the context).[3] In certain cases, as when my *Doppelgänger* hallucinates an apple qualitatively indistinguishable from that which I perceive, the narrow content fails to determine truth-conditions. In this particular case, no complete thought is entertained, but only a narrow content.

As I said above, radical externalism was originally offered as a critique of the picture which has just been presented. The latter is externalist only with respect to wide content; but it is still Cartesian as far as narrow content is concerned. Radical externalists such as Tyler Burge, Gareth Evans, John McDowell, or Putnam himself in his recent work (Putnam 1988), claim that even such a restricted form of internalism is unacceptable. They hold that the external world is constitutive of our thoughts in such a way that it is not even possible to isolate an ingredient of thought which is internal and world-independent. In support of this position, they offer a variety of arguments, some of which are fairly indirect. But there is one particular argument which is simple, direct, and appealing. It runs as follows:

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[3] A good statement of the two-component picture can be found in McGinn (1982).

The alleged 'narrow' content is, by definition, independent of the external environment; the external world 'is relevant to ‹narrow› content only to the extent that it impinges on sensory surface' (Baker 1987: 198). Thus a person who perceives an apple and a *Doppelgänger* who perceives (or merely hallucinates) a qualitatively indistinguishable apple are said to entertain the same narrow content. But *what makes (or gives) an internal state of the subject a content precisely is the relation between that state and something in the world.* If the relation is severed or abstracted from, what remains can no longer be called a content: it is at best a putative *bearer* of content, that is, a syntactic object. Narrow contents are not contents, on this view: at best they are (mental or neural) *sentences*. These sentences get interpreted – they acquire a content – only through their relations with objects and states of affairs in the external world. The relations in question are constitutive of the contents of thoughts, and there is no content, however narrow, which is not constituted by these relations.

This argument – the 'master argument', as I will call it – rests on two premisses:

P1: The narrow content of thought is (by definition) internal to the individual and independent of the external environment.

P2: Content essentially involves relations to objects in the external world; hence there can be no 'content' which is independent of the external environment.

Given these two premisses, it seems to follow that the very idea of 'narrow content' is incoherent. What about the premisses themselves? The first one, *P1*, seems hardly controversial, since narrow content is actually defined as context-independent. The second premiss is slightly more controversial. Some defenders of narrow contents would reject *P2* on the grounds that the only relations which content irreducibly involves are relations between the content-bearing state and *proximal* (not *distal*) objects of experience. The proximal stimulations which cause the state to occur (rather than the distal objects which are responsible for those stimulations), together with the *behaviour* which the state gives rise to (rather than the object-involving *actions* of the subject), are what gives the state its intrinsic (narrow) content. The distal objects only play a role in fixing the wide content of the state (its truth-conditions). So the reply would go.

I think the radical externalist is right to hold *P2*, however. If there were no distal objects but only superficial stimulations of the organism, or only behaviour falling short of constituting genuine action, there would be no content at all, however narrow. Thus I concur with those who believe that content necessarily involves relations to the external world. I shall not argue this point in this paper; in what follows I shall take *P2* for granted.

Even though I accept *P2*, I think the two-component picture must be defended. For it rests on a very strong intuition, which supports the notion of narrow content. Let us call it the 'Cartesian intuition':

Cartesian intuition:
    Different causes can produce the same effects on our sense organs and, via these effects, can induce the same subjective *experiences* in us. From the subject's point of view, the way the world is experienced is the same when she perceives an apple in front of her (and thinks that it is green) and when she merely hallucinates a qualitatively identical apple in front of her (and thinks that it is green): in both situations it seems to the subject that she is perceiving a certain apple.

   Note that the state of the subject talked about here represents the world as being a certain way. Thus it is a representational state, not merely a syntactic object. Yet it is invariant under changes of the environment: the subjective state is the same, whether the subject perceives apple A or apple B or a pear mistakenly identified as an apple or nothing at all (the hallucinatory case).

   Not only do we have strong intuitions supporting the notion of narrow content; there is also a powerful argument in favour of the two-component analysis (McGinn 1982: 212-3). According to this argument, mental contents (and representations in general, whether mental or not) are essentially *fallible*: there is no representation without a possibility of misrepresentation. This implies that a fundamental distinction has to be made between two independent aspects of representations: *what* is represented and what it is represented *as*.[4] The latter aspect is an intrinsic property of the representation, while the former aspect is a relational, extrinsic property of the representation. *What* is represented – apple A or apple B, say – depends upon the external environment (it depends on which apple is actually being perceived), but what it is represented *as* is a feature of the narrow content understood as 'the action-guiding intra-individual role' of the representation (McGinn 1982: 214).

   McGinn's argument, which derives the two-component analysis of content from the essential fallibility of representations, is no less simple, direct and appealing than the argument in favour of radical externalism, whose conclusion it directly contradicts. So we have a problem. One way of solving the problem consists in showing that the contradiction is merely apparent. This is what I will do in the next section of this paper. I will argue that 'narrow content' is ambiguous, and that the sense in which 'there is no such thing as narrow content' (as the radical externalist rightly concludes) is not the sense in which it is legitimate to maintain, with the two-component theorist, that there is such a thing as 'narrow content'.

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    [4] This is reminiscent of Goodman's famous distinction between a picture of a horse and a horse-picture. See e.g. Goodman (1949: 70-1).

2. Two forms of environment-dependence: the relative notion of narrowness

At first sight it seems obvious that radical externalism is inconsistent with the two-component picture. The latter is based on a distinction between the narrow content, which is independent of the environment, and the wide content, which depends on the environment. Now 'independent of the environment' means 'in the head' or 'individualistic'. Hence it seems that the two-component theorist is committed to individualism with respect to at least a certain type of content; and this is inconsistent with radical externalism, according to which contents are essentially nonindividualistic.

In what follows I shall deny the crucial premiss that 'independent of the environment' means 'individualistic'. Or rather, I'll show that the phrase 'independent of the environment' (like, perhaps, the phrase 'individualistic' – or 'intra-individual', as McGinn says) is ambiguous; there is a sense in which a content may be independent of the environment of the thinker – hence 'narrow' – even though it is not individualistic in the sense which is unacceptable to the radical externalist. The distinction between these two senses follows from a corresponding distinction between two ways in which contents may be said to depend on the environment.

Mental contents are clearly environment-dependent in the sense that the existence of a certain type of content depends on there being systematic causal relations between states of the mind/brain and types of objects in the external world. Thus a (type of) configuration in the brain is a concept of water only if it is normally tokened in the presence of water. It follows that there would be no water-concept if there were no water.[5] This sort of environment-dependence is what radical externalism is concerned with. It affects mental states considered as types: the content of a mental state-*type* depends on the environment – namely, on what normally causes a tokening of the type. But there is another form of environment-dependence which affects *tokens* rather than types. The 'wide' content of a particular token of the thought 'This man looks happy' is environment-dependent in the (stronger) sense that it depends on the context of occurrence of this token: it depends on the particular man who happens to cause *this tokening* of the thought. These two sorts of environment-dependence must be distinguished because, for a particular state

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[5] This is actually too strong. It can be argued that our concept-system *holistically* depends upon the environment, without every particular concept locally depending on the environment. Thus we might have a concept of water even if we had no water around, provided we had concepts of 'hydrogen' and 'oxygen' and the ability to construct the concept 'H$_2$0'. In such a situation, it would be possible to entertain a concept of water which would be environmentally grounded via the neighbouring concepts, but not directly through relations to actual water. More on this in § 4.

token to have a content of type T (e.g. for a particular thought to be a thought *about water*) it is not necessary that *it* be caused by the type of object (viz. water) on whose existence the very existence of T depends. [6] Thus a state token may have the same content T as two other state tokens even though one is caused by the type of object in question, the next by another type of object, and the third one by no object at all (the hallucinatory case).

The possibility I have just alluded to, namely, that of maintaining the content T of a state constant through changes in the external environment, is one of the main implications of the notion of 'narrow content', as we have seen. What changes from one occurrence of the thought 'This man looks happy' to the next is the 'wide' content of the thought; its 'narrow' content remains constant. We may say that narrow content is the content of the thought-type – the content which is common to all tokens of the type – whereas the wide content is the content which contextually attaches to a particular token of the thought. This distinction, inspired by Kaplan's analysis of indexical utterances, is the gist of the two-component picture as I understand it and as it has been criticized by radical externalists. But if, as I claim, *that* is what the two-component theorist has in mind, then the two-component picture cannot be criticized on the grounds that content is inherently relational and environment-dependent. For the two-component theorist need not deny that this is so. Since there are two senses in which a content may be said to depend (or not to depend) on the environment, it is possible to conciliate the two-component theorist's claim that the narrow content of a state-token does not depend on the environment *of the token* with the radical externalist's claim that the content of a state-type always depends upon the *type* of context in which the state is *normally* tokened.

The distinction I have just made shows up in an interesting thought-experiment devised by Tyler Burge (1986). Suppose a thinker who perceives a pear but misidentifies it as an apple: for some reason, the pear activates not the perceptual type corresponding to pears, PTp, but the perceptual type corresponding to apples, PTa. This is a case of misperception. Now suppose a world w in which there is no apple and the perceptual type PTa is normally activated by the perception of pears. Suppose that the same episode occurs in w as in the actual world: the thinker perceives the same pear and it activates the same perceptual type PTa. Even though the thinker is in the same internal state in w as in the actual world, there is a difference in the content of her thought: in the actual world the thinker perceives the pear as an apple, while she correctly perceives it as a pear in the possible world w. For the perceptual

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[6] For an elaboration of this point, see Dretske (1988, chapter 3).

type PT_a is that by means of which the thinker (or more generally the species to which she belongs) discriminates pears from other objects, in w. When an object is perceived under that type, it is perceived as a pear in w, in exactly the same way and for the same reason as it is perceived as an apple in the actual world.

By this example Burge purports to show that contents cannot be individualistic: even if the internal (neurophysiological) states of the individual are fixed, including the perceptual type (e.g. PT_a) which happens to be activated in a certain episode of thought, the content of the thought may vary if the environment is made to vary. The internal states of the subject do not change as we pass from the actual word to w, in Burge's example; yet the thought 'This apple is F' has been transformed into the thought 'This pear is F'. This change in the content of thought is due merely to a change in the external environment of the thinker. And it cannot be argued that the change in question affects only the 'wide' content of the thought, while leaving its 'narrow' content intact; for the content that has been transformed bears all the hallmarks of a narrow type of content. What the person who perceives the pear as an apple thinks – namely 'This apple is F' – is the same thing as she would think if the object she perceives really was an apple (or if she was hallucinating an apple and there was nothing in front of her). The content Burge is talking about is the subjective ingredient of the thought, what runs through the mind of the thinker. As Burge says in terms which McGinn might have used, it is what the perceived object (if any) is perceived *as* which is affected by changes of the external environment, not merely the object which happens to be so perceived.

Burge's example cuts both ways, however. It certainly shows that mild externalism is untenable: there is no dimension of content which is not affected by the external environment. But it also shows that the anti-Cartesian premiss *P2* does not undermine the wide/narrow distinction understood in a certain way. Burge distinguishes two sorts of variation in the environment, and this entails a corresponding distinction between two sorts of 'independence from' the environment,[7] hence between two different notions of 'narrow content' – a weak one and a strong one. As Burge points out, we may vary either what normally causes (i.e. activates) a given perceptual type, or what happens to cause a particular token of the type. 'Narrow content' in the weak sense is what is invariant through changes of the latter sort (the narrow content of a psychological state is independent of what causes the state, in the sense that

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[7] To say that a content is independent from the environment is to say that it is not affected by changes in the environment; hence the notion of environment-independence is derivative upon that of a change (a variation) in the environment. The ambiguity of the latter notion therefore entails an ambiguity in the former one.

the state's having this content is consistent with the cause's being of this or that sort), but it need not be 'narrow' in the strong sense, that is, invariant through changes of the *former* sort (as Burge points out, the state would not have this content if it were not normally caused by an object of such and such a type). Contrary to narrow contents in the strong sense – whose existence the radical externalist denies – the narrow content in the weak sense depends on which relations normally hold between the content-bearing state (e.g. the perceptual type, in Burge's example) and the external world; but, once fixed by the normal relations, it is constant and common to e.g. the veridical case, the case of misperception and the hallucinatory case.[8]

Corresponding to the two notions of narrow content, there are two versions of the two-component picture. One version uses the strong, individualistic notion of narrow content, and is inconsistent with radical externalism. Another one – that which I am defending in this paper – uses the weak notion and is consistent with radical externalism. One may thus take content to be inherently relational, in accordance with radical externalism, while maintaining that there are two types of content, a type of content which does, and one which does not, depend upon the *actual* environment of the thought-episode. The 'narrow' type of content, which does not depend upon the actual environment (but only upon the normal environment), constitutes what McGinn calls 'the action-guiding intra-individual role' of the representation as opposed to 'its referential aspect' (McGinn 1982: 114). That narrow content in this sense can no more be construed individualistically than wide content can is a major finding, but it should not be overstated. In particular, it does not show that it was a mistake to distinguish between the two types of content. What must be rejected is not the two-component picture *per se*, but only that particular version of the two-component picture which is associated with individualism with respect to narrow content. This individualist version of the two-component picture is what I called mild externalism, a view held by Putnam and Fodor in their early work. Contrary to this view, the version of the two-component view I am concerned with rejects individualism, hence it is a form of radical externalism. But it is a weak form, since it maintains the two-component analysis. The strong version of radical externalism is that which rejects the two-component analysis altogether *(Figure 1)*.

Some of my readers may find it hard to see the difference between the mixed view I have been advocating, i.e. that which conjoins the two-compo-

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[8] Although the narrow content is common to the veridical case, the case of misperception and the hallucinatory case, nevertheless the veridical case has an obvious primacy over the other cases since it is the 'normal' case and the normal case is constitutive of narrow content. This primacy given to the veridical case is sufficient to undermine Cartesian internalism.

nent picture with radical externalism, and that defended by radical external-
ists themselves. Burge, for example, apparently endorses the two component
analysis of demonstrative thoughts. Thus, he says, 'we can imagine Alfred's
believing of apple 1 that it is wholesome, and holding a true belief. Without al-
tering Alfred's dispositions, subjective experiences, and so forth, we can im-
agine having substituted an identically appearing but internally rotten apple
2. In such a case, Alfred's belief differs while his behavioural dispositions,
inner causal states and qualitative experiences remain constant' (Burge 1982:
97). Alfred's belief differs as far as its *wide* content is concerned, but, as Burge
immediately acknowledges, we may also 'say that Alfred has the *same* belief-
content in both situations' *(id.)* So there are two notions of content at play
here, and the only thing Burge seems to reject in the two-component picture is
the idea that the content which remains constant despite the substitution of
one apple for another – the 'narrow' type of content – can be understood in
purely individualistic terms. Hence it seems that the 'strong radical externalist'
who rejects the two-component picture altogether is a straw man, and that the
position whose very possibility I have undertaken to make out is already well
entrenched.

But this is not so. For one thing, radical externalists such as Evans and
McDowell explicitly reject the two-component analysis of demonstrative
thoughts; I shall return to this shortly. For another, Burge's acceptance of the
two-component analysis is not as straightforward as it seems. The contents
Burge considers amenable to the two-component analysis, *e.g.* the thought
that apple 1 is wholesome, are not genuine thought-contents, in his frame-
work, but consist of a thought-content together with an object to which that
content is contextually applied. This is why 'we may say that Alfred has the
same belief-content in both situations':

> It is just that he would be making contextually different applications of that content
> to different entities. His belief is true of apple 1 and false of apple 2. . . We do say in ordi-
> nary language that one belief is true and the other is false. But this is just another way of
> saying that what he believes is true of the first apple and false of the second. We may call
> these relational beliefs different beliefs if we want. But differences among such relational
> beliefs do not entail differences among mental states or contents. [Burge 1982: 97]

Genuine thought-contents, e.g. the content which is applied to apple 1 in
one case and to apple 2 in another, *cannot* be analysed along the lines of the
two-component picture, according to Burge; this is what his article 'Other
Bodies' is meant to establish. So Burge does not really accept the two-compo-
nent analysis of demonstrative thoughts. From his point of view, either some-
thing is not a thought (but a mixture consisting of a thought together with vari-
ous contextual factors), or it does not fit the two-component picture.

Burge's restricted notion of thought-content has been criticised as, ironically, still in the grip of a broadly Cartesian picture of the mental as 'inner' (McDowell 1984; Pettit and McDowell 1986: 6n.). For Burge (1977), a genuine thought-content is something like a mental sentence; it cannot involve contextual factors. *De re* thoughts are mental sentences which are evaluable only in context, that is, only when they are applied to some object in the actual environment of the thought-episode, but they themselves are not *res*-involving: they depend on the actual environment only for their evaluation. As against this, McDowell (1984) takes 'content' to be what *is expressed* by a mental sentence, or by a mental sentence in context — 'what is expressed' rather than 'what does the expressing' (McDowell 1984: 101). It is only if we equate content with 'what does the expressing' that we are led to separate content from context. Now this (typically Cartesian) 'separation of content from context' is what prevents Burge from treating the 'wide contents' of demonstrative thoughts as genuine contents, for such contents are *res*-involving. As McDowell rightly points out, a true externalist must reject the separation of content from context and, with it, Burge's restricted notion of thought-content.

From this point of view, Evans and McDowell are the true radical externalists. They, contrary to Burge, admit that demonstrative thoughts have *res*-involving *contents* (and not merely *res*-involving truth-conditions). Now, as I mentioned in passing, Evans and McDowell explicitly reject the two-component analysis of such contents — an analysis which they take to 'protect' the Cartesian, internalist position that has come under pressure (Pettit and McDowell 1986: 3). Accordingly, they say that there is no 'content' common to the case in which Alfred perceives apple 1, the case in which he perceives apple 2 and the case in which he merely hallucinates.[9] What is common may be some vehicle of content (a mental sentence) but not a genuine ingredient of content, they argue.[10]

In the light of these remarks concerning Burge, Evans and McDowell, I maintain that there is a tension between radical externalism and the two-component picture — a tension which I have tried to relax by giving a weak, nonindividualistic interpretation of 'narrow content'. On this interpretation, one may take content to be inherently relational, in accordance with radical externalism, while maintaining that there are two types of content, a type of con-

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[9] See Evans (1982: 200-4), McDowell (1984: 107-9) and McDowell (1986: 156ff).

[10] I am not concerned with assessing Evans' and McDowell's specific arguments for the strong version of radical externalism in this paper; my aim is only to show that radical externalism *per se* is consistent with the two-component picture: the latter is *not* undermined by the 'master argument' for radical externalism, contrary to what is often assumed.

tent which does, and one which does not, depend upon the *actual* environment of the thought-episode.

3. Putnam's thought-experiment

Let me take stock. I have shown that the two-component picture, based on the wide/narrow distinction, may be interpreted in such a way that it does not conflict with radical externalism. On this interpretation 'narrow' is understood in a *relative* rather than an *absolute* sense. In the absolute sense 'narrow content' means 'solipsistic', that is, wholly independent of the environment. I agree with radical externalism that there is no such thing. Yet I hold that there is room for a relative notion of narrowness. Let me define a content as narrow in a relative sense iff there is an aspect m under which it does not depend on the environment; this is perfectly consistent with its depending on the environment under some other aspect n. Thus a content may be said to be narrow in a relative sense if it does not depend upon the actual environment of the thought-episode, even though it depends upon the normal environment. A content would be narrow in the absolute sense if there were no aspect under which it depended on the environment. (From now on I shall always use 'narrow' in the weak, relative sense and reserve the phrase 'solipsistic' for contents that are narrow in the strong, absolute sense). [11]

If narrowness is a relative notion, it seems that there must be *degrees* of width and narrowness. Some contents are narrower (or wider) than other contents. The (relative) narrow content of the thought that this apple is green is *less* environment-dependent, hence narrower, than its wide content, even though it also depends on the environment and cannot be said to be narrow in the absolute sense. Going further, we may imagine a content that would be still narrower. Consider, for example, Putnam's famous Twin Earth thought-experiment (Putnam 1975). Putnam claims that there is something common to my concept of water and to that of my twin on Twin Earth, even though our concepts denote different substances. This common content is supposed to be independent even of the *normal* environment: for it is the normal (not the actual) environment which varies from Earth to Twin Earth. Hence the narrow content Putnam is talking of is *narrower* than the 'narrow content' which depends on the normal environment (though not of the actual environment). Whether or not we follow Putnam in construing this 'supernarrow' content as solipsistic content, it turns out that we have three levels to distinguish rather than merely two.

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[11] In introducing this new sense for the wide/narrow distinction, I take advantage of the fact that 'narrow' and 'wide' are relative terms, like 'tall' and 'thin'.

To see that it is so, let us complicate Putnam's example a bit. Suppose that, while looking at a fountain on Earth, I think: 'This water has a strange colour' while my *Doppelgänger* thinks the same thing on Twin Earth. My thought and that of my twin clearly differ in wide content: my thought refers to what flows from the fountain on Earth, while his thought refers to the different substance which flows from the fountain on Twin Earth. But, as Burge correctly points out (Burge 1982), there is more than merely this difference between the two thoughts. Whatever it is that we are actually looking at and referring to in thought, I am thinking of it *as water* on Earth and my twin thinks of its counterpart *as twater.* In other words, not only *what* is represented, but *how* this is represented is different on Earth and Twin Earth. Our thoughts have different *narrow contents in the relative sense,* since narrow contents in the relative sense depend upon the normal environment, and the normal environment precisely differs on Earth and on Twin Earth. Yet Putnam claims that our respective concepts of water and twater are identical at the level of what *he* calls 'narrow content'. Putnam, in effect, provides a two-component analysis of a type of content which is *already narrow in the relative sense I have characterised (Figure 2).*
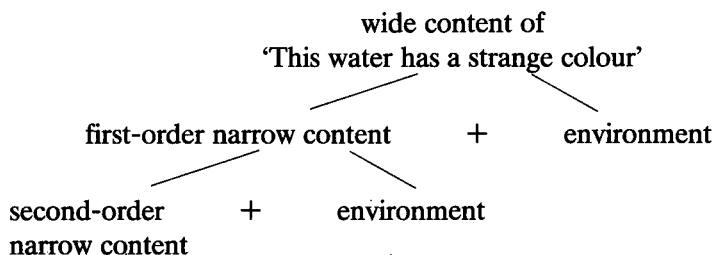
wide content of
'This water has a strange colour'

first-order narrow content   +   environment

second-order   +   environment
narrow content

Figure 2

Do we really need second-order narrow contents? I think we do. For the intuition in favour of second-order narrow contents is as strong as, and actually very close to, that in favour of first-order narrow contents: both notions of narrow content are supported by what I called the 'Cartesian intuition' (§ 1). From the subject's point of view, the way the world is experienced is the same whether the apple she actually perceives is apple A or a qualitatively indistinguishable apple B or a hallucinatory apple or a pear misidentified as an apple. Quite similarly, the way the world is experienced is supposed to be the same for an Earthling and for her *Doppelgänger* on Twin Earth, since Earth and Twin Earth are characterised by their subjective indistinguishability. The concepts of water and twater are certainly different, but this difference makes

sense only for an external observer. Subjectively there is no difference be-
tween thinking of something as water and thinking of it as twater: this is some-
thing which Putnam stipulates in devising his thought-experiment. Putnam's
stipulation in no way seems counter-intuitive; we have no trouble imagining
the situation which Putnam wants us to imagine. So it seems that we cannot
avoid making at least a threefold distinction between: [i] wide contents, which
depend on the actual environment, [ii] (first-order) narrow contents, which
depend on the normal environment, and [iii] the contents involved in Put-
nam's Twin Earth thought-experiment, which do not even depend on the nor-
mal environment. I shall call the latter 'PASCs', an abbreviation for 'Putnam's
alleged supernarrow contents'.

The problem is that PASCs, contrary to (first-order) narrow contents,
raise an apparently insuperable dilemma for the radical externalist. A radi-
cal externalist cannot accept Putnam's claim that PASCs are solipsistic con-
tents. Given that a 'solipsistic content' is a *contradictio in adjecto,* if PASCs
are contents, they cannot be solipsistic but must be environment-dependent,
and if they are *not* environment-dependent, they must be conceived of as
content-bearers rather than as genuine contents. The problem is that *neither
alternative sounds acceptable,* as we shall see. This dilemma must be taken
very seriously, because it threatens to undermine the attempt I have made to
accommodate the Cartesian intuition within a radically externalist frame-
work.

Let me spell out the radical externalist's dilemma with respect to PASCs. If
we say that PASCs are contents, we must admit that they are environment-de-
pendent (since there is no solipsistic content, from a radically externalist
point of view). But this seems hardly to make sense. By stipulation, PASCs are
'in the head' – they are what runs through the mind of the thinker. Being in the
head, they are independent of the environment: whatever runs through the
mind of someone in one environment (e.g. on Earth) also runs through the
mind of her *Doppelgänger* in another environment (e.g. on Twin Earth). Thus
when the Earthling thinks of water, her *Doppelgänger* entertains the same in-
ternal representation, even though what the representation denotes is water
on Earth and twater on Twin Earth. The representations differ 'objectively' or
'referentially', but subjectively everything is the same for the Earthling and her
Doppelgänger. This solipsistic character is part and parcel of the very notion
of a PASC, which corresponds to our intuitive notion of an 'internal', 'subjec-
tive' dimension of thought as opposed to its external or objective dimension.
Now, in a radically externalist framework, this solipsistic or internal character
entails that the PASC is not itself a content, nor even an ingredient of content,
but merely a syntactic object, a *bearer* of content. However, *this conclusion*

cannot be accepted either, for it is inconsistent with another aspect of our intuitive notion of the internal or subjective dimension of thought.

As McDowell rightly emphasized, we conceive of our subjective experiences as essentially representational and directed towards some external reality. Experience is experience *of* the world as being thus and so. This is the well-known feature of intentionality which, Brentano argued, is intrinsic to our mental life. Owing to that feature, we cannot make sense of a notion of subjective experience wich would deprive it of its representational properties. There is no subjective experience without a *content* for that experience, no internal representation which is not a *representation*. It is therefore inconsistent to equate PASCs with our subjective experiences and internal representations while at the same time construing them as opaque, 'syntactic' objects deprived of representational properties. McDowell's complaint is thus perfectly legitimate:

> How can we be expected to acknowledge that our subjective way of being in the world is properly captured by this picture, when it portrays the domain of our subjectivity – our cognitive world – in such a way that, considered from its own point of view, that world has to be conceived of as letting in no light from outside? [McDowell 1986: 160]

The solipsistic character of what runs through our mind, equated with our subjective experiences, obliges the radical externalist to construe it as purely syntactic, i.e. as devoid of representational properties. Content enters the picture 'only when we widen our field of view so as to take in more than simply the layout of the interior' (McDowell 1986: 159). But this is unacceptable, because our subjective experiences are inherently contentful, and cannot be conceived of as intrinsically 'dark' and 'blind'. As McDowell says on the same page, 'the representational content apparently present in the composite story [i.e. that which comes in with the environmental component] comes too late to meet the point', for the internal component must already possess a content if it is to be equated with the subjective dimension of our thought. 'Experience, conceived from its own point of view, is not blank or blind, but purports to be revelatory of the world we live in' (McDowell 1986: 152): this, McDowell says, is 'the most perspicuous phenomenological fact there is' *(id.)*.

McDowell's critique, as I said, is perfectly legitimate. But what exactly does it show? McDowell thinks that it exposes the essential weakness of the two-component picture. I do not follow him here. Without the radical externalist's claim that content cannot be solipsistic, there would be no problem. The problem would also be avoided if PASCs were not equated with our subjective experiences and internal representations but with e.g. configurations in the brain; we might thus straightforwardly acknowledge the purely syntac-

tic character of PASCs. However, it is constitutive of Putnam's thought-experiment that the Earthling and her *Doppelgänger* share not only their brain states but also their subjective experiences and internal representations. In other words, Putnam construes PASCs as *contents*. This is inconsistent with radical externalism, given the solipsistic character of PASCs. Hence it seems that the radical externalist must reject Putnam's thought-experiment as incoherent insofar as it involves the stipulation that the Earthling and her *Doppelgänger* share not only their brain states, but also their subjective experiences and internal representations. Now this stipulation rests on the Cartesian intuition, on which the two-component picture is based: the intuition that different worldly causes can induce the same subjective experiences in us. Putnam's thought-experiment is nothing other than an elaboration of this basic intuition. So McDowell seems to be right in the sense that *if* one accepts radical externalism, then the dilemma we face shows that something is wrong with the Cartesian intuition on which both Putnam's Twin Earth thought-experiment and the two-component picture are based.

This is not really so, however. As I made clear in § 2, I take the Cartesian intuition, and the two-component picture which rests on it, to be consistent with radical externalism. The trouble arises only when the 'internal' or 'subjective' component posited by the two-component picture is assumed to be solipsistic. For 'solipsistic' entails 'nonsemantic', and this is inconsistent with the very notions of narrow *contents*, subjective *experiences* or internal *representations*. My strategy, as far as the analysis of demonstrative thoughts is concerned, has been to devise a relative notion of narrow content which is 'internal' in some sense without also being 'solipsistic'; and I think this strategy should work also in the present case. In other words, it ought to be possible to maintain both the Cartesian intuition and radical externalism, provided one drops the solipsism assumption about PASCs. My suggestion, then, is that we get out of the dilemma not by rejecting Putnam's thought-experiment as incoherent, but by denying that the internal representations and subjective experiences involved in this thought-experiment are solipsistic. To this solution I now turn.

4. Out of the dilemma

Why does it seem so obvious that PASCs are solipsistic and do not depend even on the normal environment? Because they are common to the Earthling and her *Doppelgänger*. Since the difference between Earth and Twin Earth is a difference in the normal environment, PASCs are naturally taken to be independent of the normal environment. But this, I shall argue, is a mistake. Even

though the PASC [[water]] is what we get when we *unground* the concept of water, that is, when we abstract from the environment in which it is grounded (viz. Earth, as opposed to e.g. Twin Earth), still it is part of a concept system which is *globally* grounded and environment-dependent. It thus remains grounded to some extent, via the concept system to which it belongs, and this, I shall argue, is sufficient to endow the PASC with some content, in a radically externalist framework.

To construct a PASC is for the thought-experimenter to abstract from the relevant aspects of the normal environment by considering only what is common to that concept and to similar concepts grounded in different environments. Now in this very process of 'ungrounding' a given concept we rely on the neighbouring concepts. Consider the way Putnam and others spell out the narrow content of 'water'. The 'narrow' concept of water (or, for that matter, of twater) is supposed to be that of a colorless and tasteless liquid which descends from the sky as rain, which can be found in lakes and rivers, which quenches thirst, and so forth. This typical characterisation of the narrow content of 'water' involves other concepts – that of a liquid, that of rain, that of a river, that of thirst, etc. This is not surprising, for concepts, in general, can be characterised along two different dimensions: the vertical dimension (that of the reference, i.e. what things in the environment the concept denotes) and the horizontal dimension (the relations between this concept and other concepts in the concept system). When we unground a concept, that is, when we sever the link between a concept and its reference, what remains are the interconceptual connections – what may be called the 'role' of the concept or (to use a different metaphor) its place in the concept system. The role thus understood is what the concepts of water and twater, which denote different substances, have in common.

From a radically externalist point of view, the role is not enough to constitute content. The (formal) relations between one concept and other concepts in the concept system may be fixed even though the interpretation of the concepts (or the global interpretation of the concept system) remains indeterminate. To get an interpretation – to know what the concepts are concepts of – we need to know what those concepts denote. However, knowing the role of a concept F provides one with some knowledge of its content *if the concepts to which F is related by virtue of its role are themselves interpreted, that is, grounded in some environment.* This is precisely what happens in the case of water: in the ungrounding process we abstract from the reference and consider only the relations between that concept and other concepts in the system, *but the concepts in question are themselves interpreted.* This is why the PASC [[water]] is more than simply the formal 'role' of the concept 'water': it

can itself be called a (narrow) 'concept' because it is not totally ungrounded, since it benefits form the environmental grounding of the other concepts to which it is related.

At this point it may be objected that the neighbouring concepts themselves are affected by the ungrounding process. Take for example the concept of rain, which is connected to the concept of water as well as to that of sky, of cloud, and so forth. If we unground the concept of water, that is, if we substitute the PASC [[water]] for the concept of water everywhere in the concept system, the concept of rain is thereby transformed and made 'narrower' (less dependent of the environment). Instead of the ordinary concept of rain (i.e. water descending from the sky, or something like that), what results from the ungrounding process applied to the concept of water is a 'narrow' concept of rain, namely: [[water]] descending from the sky, or something like that. Ordinary rain falls under this narrow concept, but Twin Earthian 'rain' (which is not really rain, but XYZ falling from the sky) also does. It follows that the concept of rain is ungrounded to some extent when we unground the concept of water, to which it is related. But what counts for my purposes is that the narrow concept of 'rain' remains substantially grounded, by virtue of e.g. its connections to the concept of sky which is not (or so it seems to me) significantly affected by the substitution of [[water]] for water. The concept of sky is clearly grounded: what makes it the concept of sky is its association with something in the external world, namely, the sky. Being closely related to the concept of sky, the narrow concept of rain itself is grounded to some extent, even though it is less grounded than the ordinary concept of rain.

When we unground a concept F, this has effects on various concepts: F itself is ungrounded, its close neighbours are ungrounded to a lesser extent, and so forth. All these ungroundings are nevertheless relative rather than absolute. For the concepts in question remain part of a concept system which is *globally* environment-dependent in the sense that a significant number of the concepts of the system are environmentally grounded. It follows that F itself, the concept that was ungrounded in the first place, is still grounded to some extent, albeit indirectly.

I conclude that the radical externalist's alleged argument against construing PASCs as contents in accordance with the Cartesian intuition must be rejected. The PASC [[water]] need not be construed as something purely formal and syntactic, even though it is independent of the normal environment. This is so because, although independent of the normal environment to some extent, it is not solipsistic, i.e. *absolutely* independent of the normal environment. Even the PASC [[water]] depends upon the environment via its relations to environment-dependent concepts such as 'liquid', 'lake', 'river', 'rain',

and so forth. We construct PASCs by abstracting from certain aspects of the normal environment, namely, those that make the difference between Earth and Twin Earth, but there are many aspects of the normal environment which we take for granted when we indulge in this abstraction process, and they are what gives the PASC its content. If we were to abstract from *all* aspects of the normal environment, that is, if we were to unground all concepts at the same time, *then* we would be left with a network of uninterpreted symbols related to each other in various ways. But this is not what happens in the Twin Earth thought-experiment. In the Twin Earth thought-experiment, a single concept is locally ungrounded. As I hope I have shown, such a concept remains grounded to some extent via the other concepts in the system, and this is enough to make it a (narrow) 'concept' endowed with 'content', in a radically externalist framework.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show that the two-component picture is consistent with radical externalism, at least to some extent. There are versions of the two-component picture which *are* inconsistent with radical externalism, but there are also weaker, more reasonable versions which are not. The version I have put forward is anti-individualist. It agrees with radical externalism that there cannot be 'solipsistic' contents: content is not an instrinsic property of the states of an individual organism, but a relational property of the pair constituted by the organism and its environment. This, however, does not show that the notion of 'narrow content' or 'internal representation' is self-contradictory. There are two ways in which a content may be said to depend on the environment, and the distinction between wide and narrow contents precisely corresponds to these two ways, on my interpretation of the two-component picture. The wide content of a psychological state depends upon what actually causes that state, but the narrow content of the state is independent of what actually causes the state; it depends only on what normally causes this type of state to occur.

Narrow contents in this sense are not solipsistic; they are independent of the environment only in a relative sense. In the last section of the paper, I dealt with internal representations which *seem* to be independent even of the normal environment and therefore constitute the best condidates for the status of solipsistic contents. I pointed out that such contents, whose existence need not be denied, are themselves independent of the normal environment only in a relative sense: they are *locally* independent of the normal environment, yet still depend on it via the concepts to which they are connected in the concept system.

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