

Unity, Locality and Agency: Bilgrami on Belief and Meaning

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It has been a philosophical commonplace to take propositional attitudes as having a central role to play in the explanation of intentional behaviour. As Akeel Bilgrami points out, however, orthodox accounts of the nature of propositional content that treat content as externally constituted seem to require a separation between content as it plays a role in explaining or determining the behaviour of agents from content as it is determined by the objects and events in agents' environments.ⁱ As a consequence, such 'bifurcationist' accounts threaten the very concept of content as action-explanatory. Moreover, since orthodox externalist accounts treat the content of attitudes as determined by external objects and events of which agents may well be ignorant, so those accounts raise the possibility that agents may lack knowledge of the contents of their attitudes. And in this respect such accounts may be taken to cast in doubt the very concept of agency, since, if behaviour can be the product of attitudes the contents of which may be unknown to the individual whose behaviour it is, it is surely questionable in what sense that behaviour can be regarded as action or the individual who exhibits that behaviour can be regarded as an agent. Agency seems to presuppose certain epistemic and other relations between the agent, the action, and the attitudes that give rise to and define the action, and yet those relations also appear to be threatened by orthodox externalist approaches to content.ⁱⁱ

In Belief and Meaning Akeel Bilgrami argues for a 'constrained' externalism that preserves self-knowledge and the explanatory role of content and that can be seen to be motivated by the need to retain a proper sense of the relation between action and content. The defence of the concept of agency that is implicit here is at one with Bilgrami's defence and development of what he terms the 'unity' of content. This latter idea can be seen as consisting, in part, in a denial of bifurcationist accounts of content, but, more fundamentally, it involves a view of content as holistically constrained in so far as it requires that attributions of content to an agent always be consistent with other attributions of content to that agent.ⁱⁱⁱ Externalist concerns are not abandoned, but are tempered by holistic considerations so as to enable an approach that both acknowledges the role of agents' environments in fixing content and allows content its action-explanatory role, without undermining agents' self-knowledge. I find much with which to agree in Bilgrami's position, and have said so

elsewhere,^{iv} but I also believe that there is more that could be done to strengthen that position precisely in relation to its treatment of content and agency.

A concern with the idea of agency would seem an important motive for the development of Bilgrami's account, but it must be more than just a motive. Indeed, it appears to be a notion absolutely central to that account. This is perhaps clearest in relation to the idea of the 'locality' of content that runs parallel to the idea of unity as Bilgrami develops it. Although Bilgrami treats attributions of content as constrained by a requirement of consistency, he acknowledges that this constraint cannot be applied with respect to the entirety of an agent's concepts (what Bilgrami terms the aggregative or 'meaning-theoretic' level), since this would make any attribution of concepts impossible in so far as it would seem to require, amongst other things, the fixing of all of an agent's beliefs at once.^v Consequently Bilgrami insists that the attribution of concepts must be constrained both by a principle of unity and of locality. The notion of locality is itself understood, however, only by reference to particular actions as a focus for explanation and so for concept attribution.^{vi} So if we wish to attribute beliefs that will explain Beth's grabbing the umbrella as she goes out the door, we do not need to look to Beth's beliefs about European geography or human anatomy and disease. Instead we look to ensure that whatever beliefs we ascribe are consistent with, for instance, her beliefs about the likelihood of rain and the usefulness of the object she has grabbed in protecting her against the weather. It is precisely because we can focus on particular actions here, and so on particular contexts for action (and are indeed required to do so if we are to explain or to understand Beth's behaviour) that we are able to focus on a certain range of beliefs rather than on the agent's beliefs in their entirety.^{vii}

At this point one might nevertheless be tempted to ask why one should focus specifically on action-explanation. Is not the problem of the attribution of concepts and of content more general than just the problem of explaining action? And is not the focus on action here indicative of an unargued assumption on Bilgrami's part that the significance of intentional content is indeed to be found in its role in explaining action? In fact it is only overt behaviour – both linguistic and non-linguistic, successful and unsuccessful – that provides the evidence on the basis of which we can attribute particular mental states to others, while it is, of course, largely in order to explain such behaviour that we are moved to make such attributions in the first place.^{viii} In fact, more generally, one might say it is only in relation to action that our mental lives are organised and defined – our actions are thus not merely indicative of the attitudes we hold, but it is in and through our actions that our attitudes are defined, moulded, shaped and the interconnection between attitudes is made apparent. Particular

actions establish a context within which specific features of the world, and specific features of the agent's own conceptual repertoire, come into play, thereby providing a focus, not only by means of which we can understand and orient ourselves, but by means of which specific attributions of content can be made.

Bilgrami's implicit focus on action explanation is thus by no means arbitrary or trivial, nor does it represent the introduction of an unwarranted assumption into the discussion. Our mental lives can indeed be understood as structured around, as well as expressed through, our worldly activity, and this is so even when we fail to achieve the goals to which our activity is directed. Consequently, as soon as one begins to think about the nature of content, one is already caught up with questions concerning the nature of action and the interconnection between intentional states and behaviour within the life of the agent. The action-explanatory role of content is not, therefore, an independent motive for maintaining the unity of content, but is itself merely an expression of the idea of the 'unity of agency' – the overall integration of action with other actions, capacities and attitudes – that can itself be taken as identical with the notion of the unity of content. And much the same can be said of the commitment to the possibility of self-knowledge. So if one has a concept of agency — and without such a concept one has no place even to begin to make attributions of content, let alone to provide an account of the nature of content — then one also has a conception of content as unified and as local.^{ix}

Yet although the concept of agency does indeed appear to be central to Bilgrami's account — his criticisms of bifurcationist accounts of content focus on problems in action explanation, it is to action-explanation that he looks for constraints on externalist attributions of concepts, and it is to the realm of moral agency that he finally appeals to provide what seems the overarching framework within which his account is located — Bilgrami does not himself directly address the concept as such nor does he elaborate on the relation between agency and intentionality. Moreover, Bilgrami seems not to recognise (at least not explicitly) the way in which his emphasis on the action-explanatory role of content, and on the consequent need for a unified conception of content, is dependent on a commitment to a certain form of holism intimately bound up with the concept of agency. In fact, although Bilgrami recognises that he is committed to holism, he does not take his emphasis on the unity of content to be itself derived from other holistic considerations.^x

So, although I am sympathetic to Bilgrami's account, it seems to me that it would be improved by closer attention to the way in which holist, localist and externalist considerations are connected. These connections are nowhere more evident than in the explanation and understanding of action. Being able to identify an action that requires explanation presupposes an ability to identify the action under a description that

itself coheres with other attitudes of the agent. Thus being able to attribute concepts to an agent on the basis of the agent's behaviour presupposes that one is sensitive both to the need to maintain a certain unity in the agent's mental life and to the need to attend to the particular behaviour and the concepts and beliefs that are pertinent to it. In this respect neither unity nor locality can be treated as completely separate constraints on concept attribution, nor can they be treated independently of externalism itself. Indeed, these concepts are brought together in the idea of agency from which they can also be derived. Consequently, grasping an agent as engaged in a certain activity, and so as having a certain unitary, local content ascribable to her, requires that one understand the agent as standing in an appropriate relation to certain objects and events in her environment. It is only through being able to understand a creature as situated in the world in a certain way and as capable of operating in the world in an integrated and responsive fashion, that one can even understand the creature as an agent.^{xi} The concept of agency already brings with it, therefore, a bias towards a local, unitary and externalist conception of content. And these three features of content, brought into their proper interconnection through the notion of agency, cannot be deployed as separate, independent principles (at least not without problematic consequences) since each implicates the other. Unity, locality and externality are, indeed, inter-connected concepts, although their inter-connection is perhaps only made evident in relation to action.

The approach that I have been advancing here has, of course, been one that takes content to be constituted through the active involvement of an agent in the world. And I have taken the concepts at stake here — concepts of agency, intentionality, meaning, belief and action — to be very closely related, so that each concept can be understood only in relation to the others. Such a strongly 'constitutive' view of the relation between these concepts, and of the role of unity, locality and externality in relation to intentional content, while it may be rather stronger than anything to which Bilgrami clearly commits himself, allows a much more direct defence of his constrained externalism than he himself provides.

Certainly this approach allows one to deal very quickly with the claim that Bilgrami's position promotes an unacceptably instrumentalist view of intentional states. Bilgrami's own language and presentation sometimes tends, however, to encourage just such an objection. Thus, while he emphasises the explanatory role of intentional states, he gives little or no explanation or justification of this role. Yet if the explanatory role that intentional states play in relation to behaviour is a function of the constitutive interdependence of intentional behaviour and intentional states, of actions and attitudes, then it hardly seems that the charge of instrumentalism can even get off the ground.

The main positive argument Bilgrami himself offers in favour of externalism relies on the claim that only if intentional content is externally determined can such content be publically available and only if such content is publically available are we in a position to know the intentional states of others.^{xii} Such an argument is not without plausibility, yet it seems to leave itself vulnerable to the charge, commonly made against externalist positions in recent years, that it is open to question whether we do indeed have access to any ‘publically available’ world or whether we do indeed know the thoughts of others, and that, in so far as externalism assumes either of these, it begs the question in its favour.^{xiii} At this point the appeal to publicness and its role in the understanding of others connects with the much larger discussion of externalism in relation to epistemology in general and the problem of scepticism in particular. The problem of scepticism is, of course, of special interest in relation to externalism, since in so far as epistemological scepticism seems to consist in the possibility that our beliefs might be just as they are and yet the world be quite different than we believe, so it seems to be a special case of that Cartesian possibility that Bilgrami takes to define internalism, namely that: “an agent’s intentional contents would be just what they are even if it turned out that there was no external world.”^{xiv} Bilgrami’s response to scepticism is not to claim that such scepticism is incoherent or can be shown to be false, but, more modestly, to argue only that such scepticism is implausible. In this respect Bilgrami’s defense of externalism must be seen as operating in the same, modest, fashion: it aims to portray externalism merely as the more plausible approach, rather than trying to demonstrate its necessity.

If one adopts, however, a more strongly constitutive approach to the concept of agency — one that takes notions of externality, locality and unity to be necessary elements in that concept — then this would seem to open the way to a more ambitious argument against scepticism (although it would likely be a more ‘transcendental’ style of argument of just the sort that Bilgrami explicitly repudiates^{xv}). The fact that Bilgrami’s response to scepticism remains quite ‘modest’ and that he seems unwilling to commit himself to a more constitutive view of the relations between the basic concepts he employs, suggests that Bilgrami is not inclined to ground his position in the sort of holistic conception of agency and intentionality that I have suggested here. Indeed, although Bilgrami’s approach is avowedly holist, it espouses a holism whose real foundations are never fully explored. In this respect, Bilgrami’s account may actually be weakened through, on the one hand, being committed to the centrality of agency in the understanding of content, while, on the other hand, seeming to retreat from any account of the nature of agency that would provide any more detailed explication of the conceptual interconnections between belief and meaning, content and action, agent and world.^{xvi}

Bilgrami presents his position as an externalist one, albeit a constrained or modified externalism. And in discussing Bilgrami's work I have also made use of terms such as 'external' and 'externalist.' But if one takes seriously the connection between agency and content, then perhaps the metaphors (for they are indeed metaphors) of both inside and outside, internal and external, should be looked at afresh. It is not at all clear, assuming that agency is indeed the place from which content must be understood, that one need view content as either external or internal to such agency or to the agent. Indeed, it may be that the notions of 'internalism' and 'externalism' serve only to encourage ways of thinking about the mind, and about ourselves, that tend inevitably to lead to a separation of mind from world or to a fragmentation of the mind and of mental content, and that they do this precisely because, in different ways, they disrupt the 'unity' of agency. If we turn our attention to the concrete unity of the agent acting in the world, however, we have no need to oppose the 'external' determinants of content, the objects and events in the world, to those 'internal' constraints on content that would have us take account of the other beliefs and conceptions of agents. Instead we can view content as necessarily implicating the world in virtue of its local and unitary character; we can in turn view content as necessarily local and unitary in virtue of its implication of the world.

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Notes and references

ⁱSee, for instance, Bilgrami, Belief and Meaning (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1992), pp.17-18.

ⁱⁱBilgrami does not put matters in quite this way, but see the discussion on pp.246-252 Belief and Meaning where Bilgrami argues that moral evaluation presupposes self-knowledge. That argument depends, roughly, on the claim, first, that we are committed to engaging in the moral evaluation of agents and their actions; second, that such evaluations depend on holding agents responsible for their actions; and, third, that if agents lack knowledge of their own mental states, then they cannot be held responsible for their actions. What is implicit here is, I think, the idea that moral evaluation presupposes agency of which responsibility is a necessary component.

ⁱⁱⁱSee Bilgrami's Constraint (C): "When fixing an externally determined concept of an agent, one must do so by looking to indexically formulated utterances of the agent which express indexical contents containing that concept and then picking that external determinant for the concept which is in consonance with other contents that have been fixed for the agent" (Belief and Meaning, p.5).

^{iv} See my review in the Australasian Journal of Philosophy 73 (1995), pp.473-475.

^vBilgrami canvasses these problems on pp.10-12 of Belief and Meaning, and again, specifically in relation to Fodor, on pp.141-150.

^{vi}See, for instance, Belief and Meaning, p.11.

^{vii}Elsewhere I have tried to develop this idea of the localised character of belief (and of the propositional attitudes in general) through the idea of a 'project', see Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

^{viii} And notice that the focus on overt behaviour does not exclude a concern with behaviour that agents fail to exhibit. Behaviour can be characterised both positively and negatively so that the performance of any act can be understood as the non-performance of some other act.

^{ix} Clearly there are questions that might be raised at this point about the extent to which the concept of agency can be applied to non-human animals or to humans whose functioning in some significant respect and then the question also be raised, assuming the connection between agency and content, about the attribution of content in such cases. Although I see no need to deny that the concept of agency or the notion of content need be restricted just to the 'paradigmatically human', it may well be that I am implicitly committed to the denial of any notion of non-conceptual content that might sever the connection with agency. This is somewhat by-the-way, however, since my discussion here can be taken to be restricted just to the notion of propositional content that is the focus of Bilgrami's account.

^xSee Belief and Meaning, p.142. That his imposition of the unity constraint does not follow from holism is something Bilgrami takes to be illustrated by the fact that Davidson, though he espouses a holistic approach to content, is not led to the same position as Bilgrami. Although Bilgrami emphasises the differences between his position and that of Davidson (see pp.177-186) I am not entirely convinced that the differences between them are as great as Bilgrami claims.

^{xi}For an interesting approach to action that gives special emphasis to this point see Jacob Meløe, 'The Agent in his World', in Gunnar Skirbekk (ed.), Praxeology: An Anthology (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1983), pp.13-29.

^{xii} Belief and Meaning, pp.200ff.

^{xiii}See, for instance, William Craig's objection, along these lines, to Davidson's anti-sceptical strategy in Craig, 'Davidson and the Sceptic: the Thumbnail version', Analysis 50 (1990), pp.213-214.

^{xiv}Belief and Meaning, p.2.

^{xv}See Belief and Meaning p.2, p.177, p.219, p.243. Transcendental arguments are perhaps best characterised as arguments that do indeed attempt to exhibit certain necessary interconnections between concepts as necessary to the possibility of those concepts. Davidson is a good example of one who has advanced anti-sceptical arguments of this kind. See my own discussion of these arguments in 'Self-knowledge and Scepticism', Erkenntnis 40 (1994), pp.165-184.

^{xvi} In this regard the work of John Campbell, and others, on the connections between concepts of agency, self and objectivity, and the way these are in turn tied to specific skills and capacities, is particularly interesting. See, for instance, Campbell's Past, Space and Self (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994) and also some of the papers produced as part of the Spatial Representation project at the King's College Research Centre, Cambridge, contained in the two volumes Spatial Representation, edited by Naomi Eilan, Roasaleen McCarthy and Bill Brewer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993) and The Body and the Self, edited by Jorge Luis Bermudez, Anthony Marcel and Naomi Eilan (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996). There is an enormous debt in much of this work to the ideas of Gareth Evans and also to Strawson's Individuals (London: Methuen, 1959).