A Review of Neil Feit's "Belief about the Self"

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Neil Feit. *Belief about the Self.* Oxford GB: Oxford University Press 2008. 216 pages.

Belief about the Self is a clearly written, engaging book that contains many persuasive arguments and insightful discussions of central topics in the philosophy of mental content. Neil Feit defends an internalist theory of mental content according to which psychological properties are determined by intrinsic physical properties of the subject. The brand of internalism that Feit argues for and defends is the property theory of content according to which the contents of mental states are characterized by properties rather than traditional propositions. This view, proposed independently by Roderick Chisholm and David Lewis, maintains that what I believe when I believe that my shirt is too big is the property of *wearing a shirt that is too big* rather than a traditional proposition, such as the proposition that ST is wearing a shirt that is too big. To have a property, F, as the content of one's belief is to self-ascribe F.

Why should properties rather than traditional propositions serve as the content of my psychological attitudes? One of the main reasons is that it allows for an elegant account of *de se* content. Thinking that I am looking through a window rather than into a mirror, I come to have a belief that I would express by saying "That guy's shirt is too big". Once I realize I am looking into a mirror, I come to have the belief that I would express by saying "My shirt is too big". Only then would I look for a properly fitting shirt. What explains the difference in my belief in the two cases and the resulting difference in behavior? Taking the content of my belief in both cases to be the proposition that ST is wearing a shirt that is too big arguably fails to provide a satisfactory answer to this question. Taking properties as the content of belief allows for a more fine-grained account. According to Feit's account, when I think I am looking through a window, I self-ascribe the property of *standing in a unique acquaintance relation to someone who is wearing a shirt that is too big*, whereas after I realize I am looking into a mirror, I self-ascribe the property of *wearing a shirt that is too big*.

In the first chapter, Feit introduces various conceptions of propositions and the problem of *de se* belief. Feit sets out the Doctrine of Propositions which

states that, "Necessarily, all the contents of one's beliefs, desires, and other cognitive attitudes are propositions, i.e. entities with truth values that do not vary from object to object, place to place, or time to time" (8). In the second chapter, Feit provides a number of arguments in favor of the property theory: an argument from explanation in cases involving *de se* belief, David Lewis's Two Gods argument, an argument from internalism, an argument from physicalism, and an argument from inference to the best explanation. The third chapter presents two main rivals to the property theory: the triadic view of belief and dyadic propositionalism and distinguishes these two alternatives from the property theory. Chapter four provides responses to what Feit considers to be the best objections to the property theory: that it requires an implausibly robust sense of self-awareness, that it cannot accommodate the desire not to exist and attitudes with impossible contents, that it provides an implausible account of communication, and that it cannot license intuitively valid inferences. The fifth chapter addresses how to best formulate a theory of *de re* belief given the property theory. Feit considers Lewis's property theoretic account of the *de re* and proposes a counterexample. He then claims that this counterexample can be accommodated by putting forth a modified account. In chapter six Feit shows how the property theory can provide a plausible resolution of Kripke's puzzle about belief. In the final chapter, Feit considers Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment and argues that the thought experiment does not threaten the property theoretic, internalist conception of content defended throughout the book.

I am sympathetic to much of what Feit argues in his book. I agree with Feit that the property theory has not received its proper place within contemporary philosophy of mind and that many of the objections that have been directly leveled against it can be successfully met by the property theorist. Many of the responses that Feit provides to such objections in chapter 4 are persuasive. In what follows, I take issue with two of the many substantive claims made in the book: the first is that physicalism provides a reason to favor the property theory of content and the second is that the semantic content of 'that'-clauses in statements involving belief ascriptions (such as 'S believes that x is F') fails to count as a content of belief.

In chapter 2, section 3, Feit argues that the doctrine of propositions is incompatible with physicalism. As Feit himself notes, this would be a surprising consequence. Feit considers a formulation of physicalism in terms of global supervenience:

> **Global Supervenience:** For any pair of possible worlds, if the worlds have exactly the same pattern of distribution of physical properties, then they also have exactly the same pattern of distribution of psychological properties (49).

Feit then considers the following case:

> **Tim's World, Tom's World:** Imagine two possible worlds that are exactly alike with respect to their worldwide distributions of physical properties. Tim inhabits one of these worlds, and believes himself to be wise. Tom, a duplicate of Tim, takes Tim's place in the other world. Tom also believes himself to be wise (49).

Feit claims that the doctrine of propositions entails that Tim and Tom have different beliefs since the contents of their beliefs have different truth-conditions: Tim's belief is true just in case Tim is wise and Tom's belief is true just in case Tom is wise. Feit then presents the following argument:

1. Physicalism is true.
2. If (1), then psychological properties globally supervene on physical properties.
3. If psychological properties globally supervene on physical properties, then the doctrine of propositions is false.
4. If the doctrine of propositions is false, then the property theory is true.
5. Therefore, the property theory is true.

Feit claims that the case of Tim and Tom shows that premise 3 is true. However, the case of Tim and Tom fails to show this. There are two plausible ways to respond on behalf of the physicalist who endorses the doctrine of propositions. Feit notes that his application of the Tim and Tom example "implies a certain form of haecceitism" (50). I take him to mean that by claiming that the truth-conditions of Tom's belief and the truth-conditions of Tim's belief differ, Feit is committed to maintaining that there are haecceitistic differences between the two physically indiscernible worlds: one world contains Tom and the other world contains Tim. But why must the physicalist under consideration grant that there are haecceitistic differences between the two worlds under description? A natural response on behalf of the physicalist who accepts the doctrine of propositions is to claim that in describing Tim's world and Tom's world, Feit has described the same world twice over. Since Feit has described the

same world twice over, the case of Tim and Tom provides no threat to Global Supervenience.

Feit notes that the Tim and Tom example implies haecceitism, however he claims that haecceitism need not be assumed in order to show the incompatibility of the doctrine of propositions and physicalism. He states, "we need imagine only a single 'mirror-image world' containing both Tim and Tom, where things on Tom's side of the mirror are exactly like their analogues on Tim's side" (50). He claims that in such a world, there is an isomorphism (or mapping) that preserves the physical properties but not the psychological ones and that the existence of such an isomorphism shows that psychological properties do not strongly globally supervene on physical ones.

In considering purported objections to physicalism, one must take care in exactly how physicalism is stated. Consider the following formulation:

(P1)　Physicalism is true if and only if, for any worlds, w1 and w2, every physical property preserving isomorphism between w1 and w2 is an isomorphism that preserves all properties whatsoever.

(P1) would be a bad way to formulate physicalism since any mirror symmetrical world would violate (P1). Consider the mirror image world containing Tim and Tom. A function from this world onto itself which maps each thing to its mirror image would be an isomorphism that preserves physical properties, but fails to preserve properties like *is identical to Tim* and *is two feet from Tom*. But this violation of (P1) suggests not that physicalism is false, but rather that (P1) is a bad way to formulate physicalism.

The natural way to improve upon (P1) is to state the strong global supervenience claim not in terms of any properties whatsoever but to restrict it to qualitative properties:

(P2)　Physicalism is true if and only if, for any worlds, w1 and w2, every physical property preserving isomorphism between w1 and w2 is an isomorphism that preserves all qualitative properties.

Qualitative properties, roughly, are those properties corresponding to the qualitative predicates of a complete descriptive language that contains no proper names. Properties corresponding to predicates containing proper names like is 'identical to Tim' or 'is two feet from Tom' are non-qualitative. The physicalist who accepts the doctrine of propositions can maintain that there is no isomorphism that preserves physical properties but fails to pre-

serve qualitative, psychological properties. Since any viable version of physicalism will be one that does not require that any physical property preserving isomorphism also preserves non-qualitative properties, the mirror image world fails to show the incompatibility of the doctrine of propositions with physicalism.

In the final chapter, Feit considers whether Putnam-style Twin Earth thought-experiments provide any threat to the kind of psychological internalism he defends throughout the book. Feit states psychological internalism as the view that "our psychological properties supervene locally on our intrinsic, physical properties, in the sense that any two individuals who share all of their intrinsic, physical properties must share all of their psychological properties as well" (21). He points out that Putnam's original thought-experiment aims to show that a different type of internalism, namely semantic internalism, is false: linguistic meanings are not entirely determined by what is in the head. Feit considers whether Putnam's argument against semantic internalism can be extended to provide an argument against psychological internalism. He considers a Twin-Earth-style thought-experiment put forth by Gabriel Segal involving two gemstones that are indistinguishable to the unaided senses: topaz and citrine. English speakers who live on Earth, including Oscar, use the word 'topaz' as a natural kind term to talk about samples of topaz. Oscar has a belief that he would express by saying "Topaz is yellow". Twin Oscar lives on Twin Earth and is a molecule for molecule duplicate of Oscar. He has never interacted with topaz in any way. Twin Earth is a qualitative duplicate of Earth except that it has citrine where there is topaz on Earth. Twin Oscar has a belief that he would express by saying "Topaz is yellow". Feit considers the following argument against psychological externalism:

1. (a) Oscar believes that topaz is yellow, but (b) Twin Oscar does not believe that topaz is yellow.
2. If (1), then Oscar and Twin Oscar do not share all of their beliefs.
3. If Oscar and Twin Oscar do not share all of their beliefs, then internalism is false.
4. Therefore, internalism is false.

Feit notes that the common internalist strategy for responding to this argument is to reject premise (1), to deny either one of the belief ascriptions. Feit interestingly adopts a different tack: he grants premise (1), and rejects premise (2). He claims it does not follow from the fact that Oscar believes that topaz is yellow and Twin Oscar does not believe that topaz is yellow that Oscar and

Twin Oscar do not share all of their beliefs. Feit rejects premise (2) by rejecting the following assumption:

> An utterance of 'S believes that P' is true only if the semantic value of P is the content of one of the beliefs held by the referent of S.

To claim that two subjects share all their beliefs is to claim that they have all the same belief contents. So, while it is true that Oscar believes that topaz is yellow and it is true that Twin Oscar does not believe that topaz is yellow, it does not follow that there is a difference in their belief contents.

This kind of response to the Twin Earth argument against psychological internalism leads to some consequences that are difficult to swallow. As Feit notes, it means denying the validity of the following argument:

Argument A
  (1) Oscar believes that topaz is yellow.
  (2) Twin Oscar believes everything that Oscar believes.
  (3) Therefore, Twin Oscar believes that topaz is yellow.

Feit admits that denying the validity of such intuitively valid inferences is a cost of his view, however, he attempts to mitigate this cost by granting that there is a sense in which the inference is valid. He claims that there is a valid reading of the argument according to which premise (2) is false. This reading involves taking into account Oscar's and Twin Oscar's *de re* beliefs. He suggests the following *de re* reading of S and S* share all their beliefs:

> For every x and for every F, S believes of x that x has F if and only if S* believes of x that x has F (177).

Given this sense of what it is for Oscar and Twin Oscar to share all their beliefs, it is false that Twin Oscar believes everything that Oscar believes since Oscar believes of topaz that it is yellow and Twin Oscar believes of citrine that it is yellow. According to Feit, this reading of the argument fails to undermine the thesis of psychological internalism since it does not follow from the fact that Oscar and Twin Oscar fail to share all their *de re* beliefs that psychological internalism is false. Feit claims that *de re* attitudes are "are in fact complex states of affairs with a nonpsychological, relational component in addition to a psychological one" and so "such differences do not threaten internalism about the mind" (180).

In the introduction to the book, Feit outlines the various roles that a theory of content is supposed to play: to account for the truth and falsehood of certain types of attitudes, to account for the logical relations between various attitudes, and to provide an explanation for action and behavior. Saliently absent from this list is a fourth role: to account for what is attributed by belief ascriptions. Feit denies that a theory of belief content should play this role. Feit's justification is that what is required for the truth of belief ascriptions is a combination of the subject's system of belief and external factors. However this presupposes that our concept of belief already excludes an appeal to external factors. The ubiquity of belief ascriptions in natural language seems like a natural place to turn to try to ascertain what our pre-theoretic notion of belief includes and, as the Twin Earth case and its many variants show, the truth of belief ascriptions often involve an externalist component. Furthermore, the fact that Argument A and similar arguments such as

Argument B
(1) Oscar believes that topaz is yellow
(2) Twin Oscar does not believe that topaz is yellow,
(3) Therefore, Oscar and Twin Oscar do not share all their beliefs

are intuitively valid also suggests that there is no divide between what a subject believes and what is required for the truth of belief ascriptions. Given this close conceptual link between what a subject believes and what is required for the truth of belief ascriptions, Feit needs to do more to demonstrate that our concept of belief excludes any appeal to externalist components.

Part of the case that Feit makes for driving a wedge between what is required for the truth of belief ascriptions and the content of a subject's belief involves appeal to various puzzles about belief. Pierre believes that London is pretty and Pierre believes that London is not pretty, but Pierre cannot be accused of inconsistency. Such cases, Feit claims, provide evidence that the semantic content of 'that'-clauses in belief ascriptions are not to be identified with the content of the subject's belief. However, a different, and I think more plausible, conclusion to draw is that no single notion of content can satisfy all the desiderata placed on a theory of belief. The intuitive validity of Arguments A and B suggest a component of content that involves external factors. Puzzles about belief such as Kripke's puzzle involving Pierre suggest a component of content that excludes external factors. Rather than denying that the truth of (1) entails that Oscar has a belief whose content is that topaz is yellow, a more plausible conclusion is to admit that there are two components to belief content: one

that is relevant for rationality and explanations of actions, and another that is attributed by belief ascriptions and explains the intuitive validity of arguments like Argument A and B.

Belief about the Self contains a wealth of rigorously evaluated arguments and careful discussions. With the ever-growing popularity of externalist theories of content, Feit's clearly written and well-argued defense of an internalist theory deserves close attention. Furthermore, Feit succeeds in providing a convincing case for the plausibility and attractiveness of the property theory of content. Anyone interested in central questions in the philosophy of mind will benefit greatly from reading this book.

Acknowledgment

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