A Proper Understanding of Millikan¹

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Ruth Millikan’s teleological theory of mental content is complex and often misunderstood. This paper motivates and clarifies some of the complexities of the theory, and shows that paying careful attention to its details yields answers to a number of common objections to teleological theories, in particular, the problem of novel mental states, the problem of functionally false beliefs, and problems about indeterminacy or multiplicity of function.

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1. Introduction

Teleosemantic theories provide an account of the content of mental states in terms of the proper functions of either mental states themselves or the mechanisms that produce them. The proper function of something is (roughly) what that thing is supposed to do. The function of my heart is to pump blood: the function of my can-opener is to open cans. Something may have a proper function that it fails to perform—my can-opener continues to have the function of opening cans even if it is so badly damaged that it cannot do so. The thought that lies behind teleosemantics is that misrepresenting involves the failure of something, perhaps a representation or perhaps a representation-producing mechanism, to perform its proper function.²

If teleological theories of content are to be naturalistic, as they are intended to be, they need to come with a naturalistic account of what it is for something to have a function. Most teleosemanticists adopt an etiological account of functions, according to which the function of something is (roughly) what earlier things of its type have done which has contributed to their survival and reproduction, the doing of which thus explains the current presence of the thing.³ The function of my heart is to pump blood because pumping blood is what the hearts of my ancestors did which contributed to the survival and reproduction of my ancestors, and thus contributed to the persistence of hearts of that type in the population, and which thus explains my possession of such a heart.
Teleological theories of content face a number of challenges which other theories of content do not. They must explain how novel beliefs and desires can have content, when content is determined by function and function is determined by the history of other things of the same type. They must explain how functions can determine content when a single thing can have multiple functions and when there can be multiple descriptions of the same function. And they must explain how, if proper function determines content, there can be beliefs that appear to function properly even when false (for example, unrealistically positive beliefs about the believer's popularity and competence).

In this paper I will show that simple teleological theories fail to meet these challenges, and explain how Ruth Millikan's more sophisticated teleological theory succeeds in meeting them.\(^4\) My aim is to motivate and clarify some of the often misunderstood complexities of Millikan's theory, and to show that paying careful attention to the details of the theory yields answers to a number of common objections to teleological theories.\(^5\)

### 2. Simple Teleological Theories

According to the simplest teleological theory of content for desires, the content of a desire is the state of affairs it has the function of bringing about. My desire to eat chocolate is that desire rather than some other one because the state of affairs it is supposed to bring about is my eating chocolate.

There are three candidate simple teleological theories of content for beliefs. One is that the content of a belief is the state of affairs it has the function of covarying with. Another is that the content of a belief is the state of affairs that must obtain if the belief is to perform the function of participating in processes which lead to the fulfilment of desires. And the third is that its content is the state of affairs that is not a necessary but a sufficient condition for its performing that function. Consider, for example, my belief that it is going to start raining soon. On the first view, the function of that belief-type is to be tokened when and only when rain is imminent, so imminence of rain is what it is about. On the second and third views, the function of my belief is to participate in inferences that lead to behaviour which leads to the satisfaction of my desires, such as taking an umbrella when I go out so as to satisfy my desire to stay dry. On the second view, the claim is that the imminence of rain is a necessary condition for the belief's doing this, whereas on the third view, the claim is that the imminence of rain guarantees that the belief will do this.\(^6\)

Each of these simple theories of belief content has obvious flaws. The function of a belief cannot be to be tokened when and only when a certain state of affairs obtains. On an etiological account of functions, the function of a thing is what earlier things of its type have done which has contributed to the persistence of the type. Covariance with a certain state of affairs is not an effect that a belief has; thus it is not the right kind of thing to be a function.\(^7\) So much for the first view.