Functions for Representation

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Abstract

Teleosemantics offers a naturalistic account of content determination, applicable to some representation-using systems, in which content is fixed partly in terms of the system's biological functions, which are in turn determined by the system's evolutionary history. One can accept the standard view that biological function depends on evolutionary history, and also accept the insight from teleosemantics that representational content in some systems is partly determined by the system's functions, without subscribing to the view that the functions involved in determining content need all be biological, i.e. historical, functions. Causal role functions are also candidates. Of course, any reasonably complex system has very many causal role functions. This paper will explore, by reference to example cases, some suggestions for cutting down that class. However, it may be that considerable liberality in the assignment of causal role functions is unproblematic in the special case where functions are being relied upon to ground representational content, because in such cases there is a second source of constraint: that the system must have the right kind of internal organisation, such its functions are achieved in virtue of the interaction of the right kinds of internal components. The paper explores the extent to which that constraint makes problems about the liberality of causal role functions less acute, when they are relied upon as component of a theory of content.

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