Language, reference and representation

First of four seminars at CUHK on some issues arising from the Kripke-Putnam revolution in the philosophy of mind and language

March 2006

Special thanks to: Philosophy at CUHK, Professor Kwan Tze Wan and Professor Cheung Chan Fai, and to Wong Kai Yee.

Background

- Saul Kripke's attack on the description theory of reference (DTR) for names, in *Naming and Necessity*.
- Hilary Putnam's argument that names for natural kinds don't go by superficial properties and that meanings are not in the head, in 'The Meaning of "Meaning"'.

Kripke's three main arguments

- The view Kripke was attacking: a name *'N'* refers to x, as a matter of the name's meaning, to that which has the descriptions or properties associated with *'N'*.
  - Modal argument against the description theory of reference (DTR)
  - Epistemic argument against the DTR
  - Error and ignorance argument against the DTR.

Modal argument

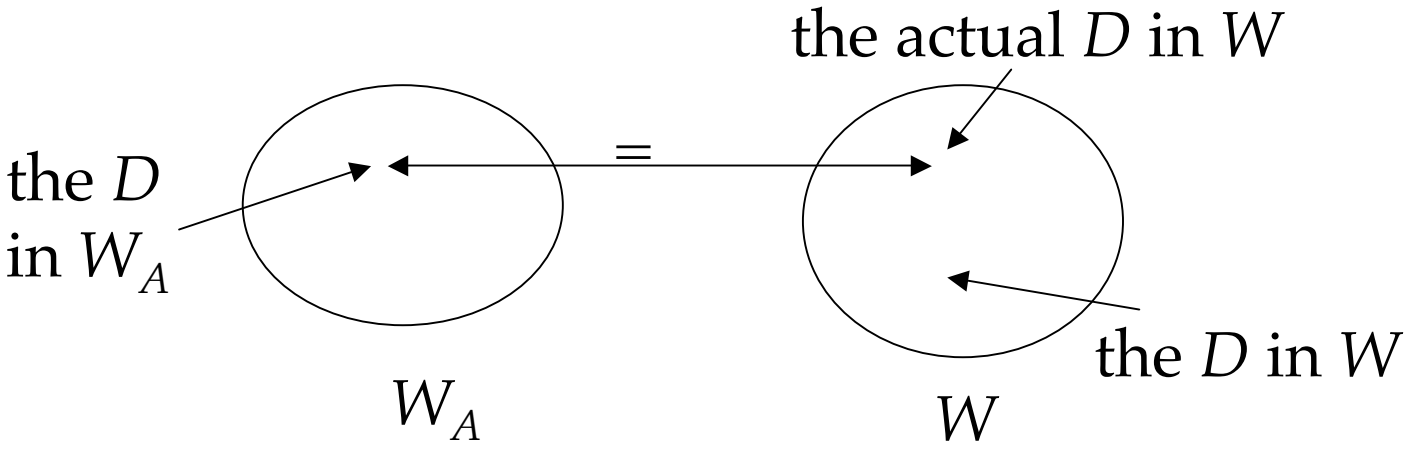
- If '*N*' means 'the *D*', then '*N* might not have been the *D*' would be a nonsense, and it manifestly isn't for more or less any choice of *D*.
- The are two standard replies, one in terms of scope and one in terms of rigidification.
- The scope reply points out that 'The *D* might not have been the *D*' makes perfect sense – indeed it is often true ('The tallest woman might not have been the tallest') – but 'the *D*' *does* mean the same as 'the *D*'.

Scope for DDs

- 'The *D* might have been *F'* can be read as affirming that
  - the proposition that the *D* is *F* is possible, i.e. that there is a possible world where 'The *D* is *F* ' is true, or as affirming that
  - the *D* is such that it might have been *F*
- The second gives the DD wide scope with respect to the possibility operator.
- Some defenders of the DTR for names hold that names are DDs that take wide scope with respect to possibility operators and handle Kripke's modal argument that way.

Rigidified definite descriptions

- 'The *D*' refers to the unique *D* at every possible world *W* if such there be. 'The actual *D'* refers at every world W to the unique *D* at the actual world if such there be and if it appears in *W*.
- The reply to Kripke is then that i) names are rigidified descriptions, and ii) 'The actual *D* is not (the) *D'* is in general true at some worlds.



Scope versus rigidity as replies to Kripke

- Scope sticks with the claim that names are DDs but adds the proviso that they are DDs that take wide scope in certain modal contexts.
- Rigifidification concedes that names are not ordinary DDs but holds that they are rigidified DDs instead – or descriptive names.
- I favour the second reply as we'll see.

Kripke's epistemic argument against the DTR for names

- For every candidate to be 'the *D'* in some account of name *N,* we might discover (it might turn out) that *N* is not *D*. It might e.g. turn out that Gödel did not prove Gödel's theorem.
- Scope doesn't help here: it is false that it might turn out that the *D* is not the *D*.
- Equally rigidity doesn't help: the actual *D* could not have turned out not to be the *D*.
- Defenders of DTR must deny Kripke's datum. They must insist that for each *N,* there is a D such that it could *not* have turned out that *N* is not *D*.

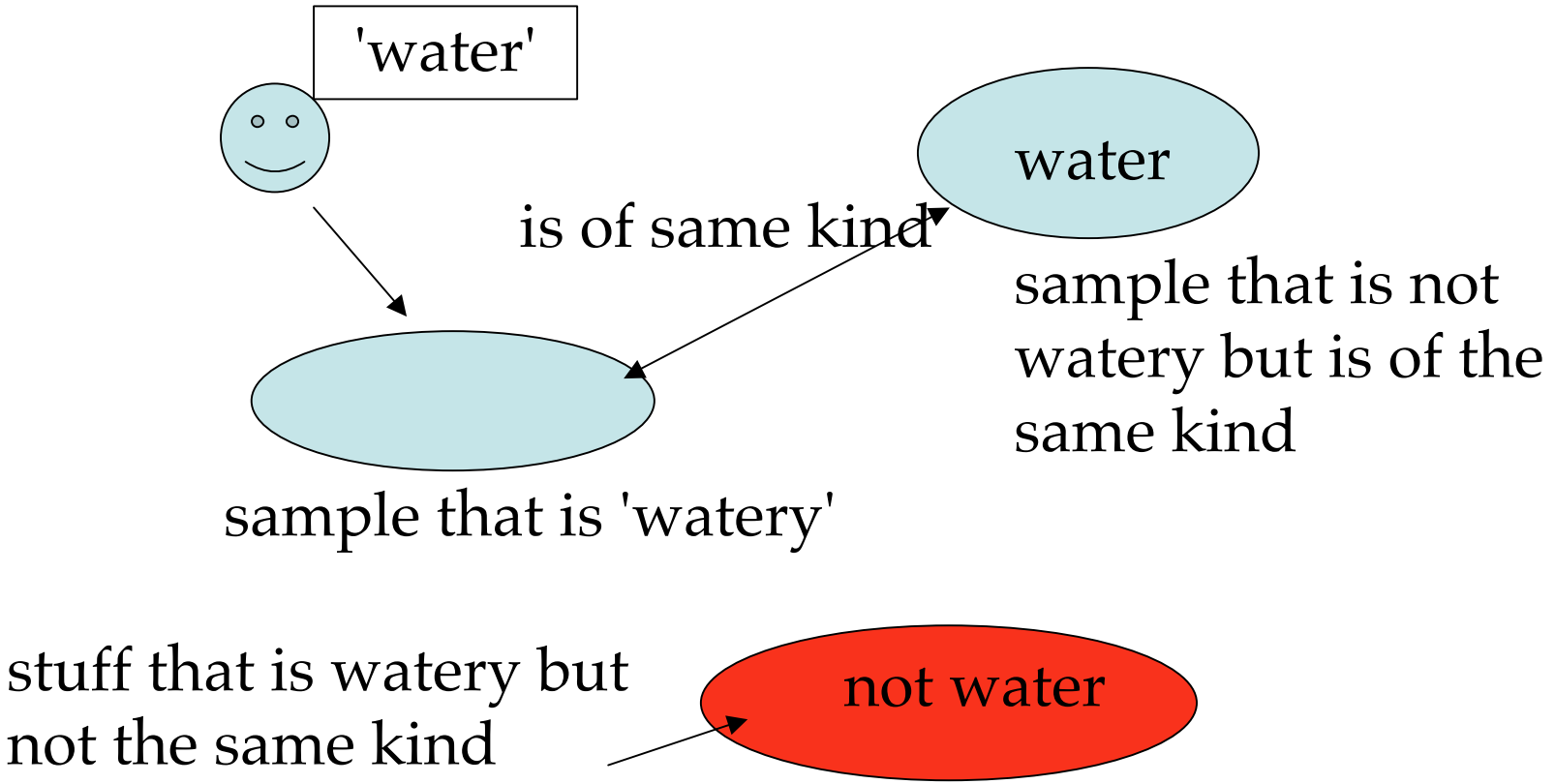
The argument from error and ignorance

- There are clear cases where '*N*' refers in someone's mouth or from their pen and yet they do not know a distinguishing feature of that which is being referred to.
- Putnam e.g. claimed that he didn't know the difference between elms and beeches; all the same, 'elm' and 'beech' referred (to different things) in his mouth and from his pen.
- Standard reply. Putnam did know the difference. He knew that beeches are called 'beeches' by experts whereas elms are called 'elms'. *Mutatis mutandis* for all alleged examples.

Putnam and natural kind terms

- Putnam argues that although natural kind terms like 'water' and 'gold' are introduced via 'folk markers' (not Putnam's term), they name the kind that the items mainly belong to (especially on the occasions when we name the kind) rather than *whatever* falls under the markers.
- This means that a sample of water i) need not satisfy any of the usual markers as long as it is of the right kind, and ii) that 'fools' water and fools gold is possible– stuff that has the markers but isn't water or gold.
- This is widely agreed.

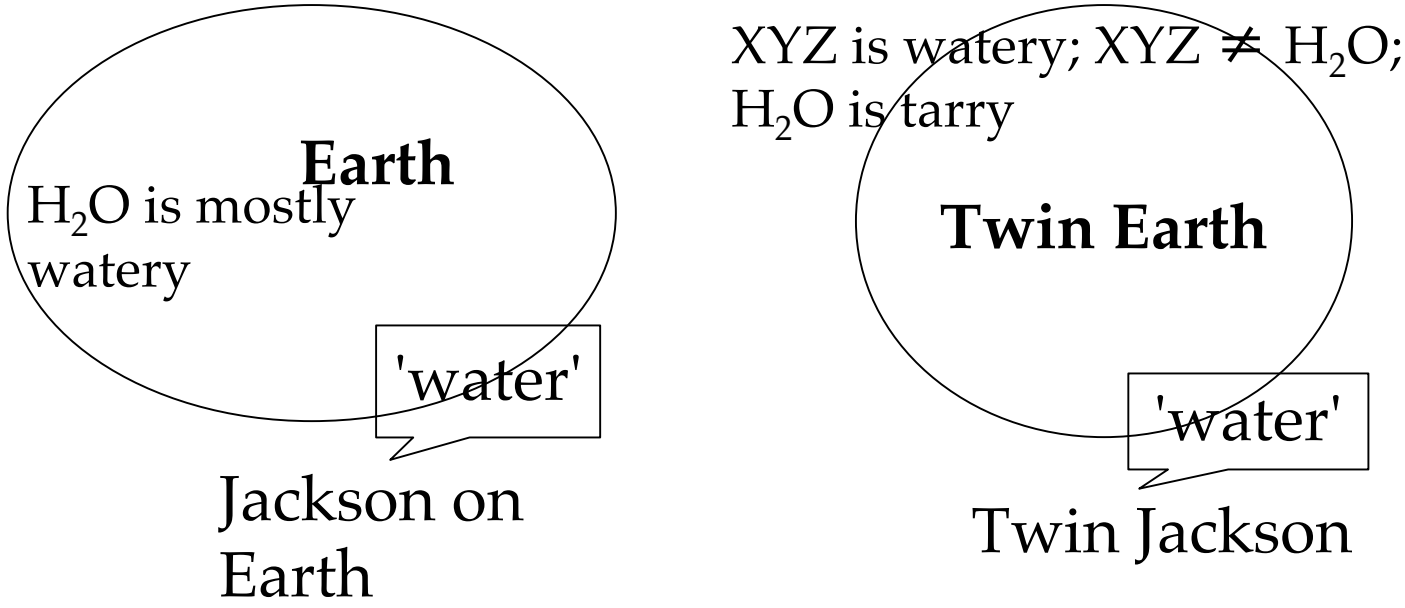
Putnam's point in a diagram



Putnam's Twin Earth

- It also implies, argued Putnam, that meanings aren't in the head, using his Twin Earth example.
- This claim was originally one about linguistic meaning but was extended by Tyler Burge and others (in ways Putnam broadly endorsed) to a conclusion about mental content to the effect that what subjects' believe is a function of their environment as well as how their heads are. Doppelgangers can believe differently if their environments differ in certain ways.
- This – both the part about meaning and the part about mental content – is the more controversial claim (although it is widely accepted nowadays).
- We'll (I'll) be denying it though.

Putnam's remote place version of Twin Earth



Prime intuition: 'water' in Jackson's mouth names H_2O whereas in Twin Jackson's it names XYZ. Putnam's conclusion is that the reference of 'water' doesn't go by what's in their heads. The environment plays a role.

End of background!

The recalcitrants' charter

- The reference of proper names does go by associated descriptions and what we learn from Kripke and Putnam are important facts about the associated descriptions, about centering, and about rigidity.
- When these lessons are digested we see that some arguments for externalism fail, including Twin Earth.
- Actually we (I) doubt that any arguments for externalism succeed but that's another story.

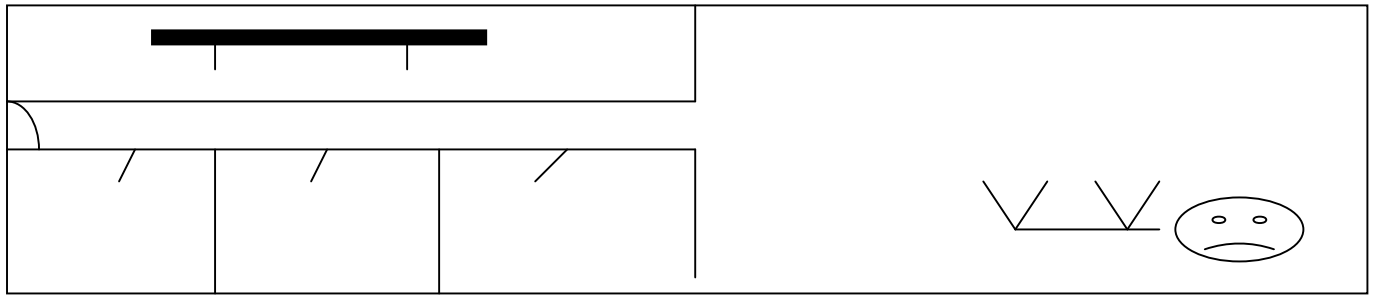
What's to come

- Search and destroy versus starting from basics
- A guiding idea and how it impacts on much current theorising about mind and language
- The representationalist approach to language
- Finding the right representation relation
- The connection with truth
- Three issues about reference distinguished
- The core claim of the description theory for names

Ramsey's Idea

- belief is 'a map of neighbouring space by which we steer' (F.P. Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics*, London: Kegan Paul, 1931)
- better: a sentence is a map by which we steer
  - sentences and maps differ from beliefs in being shared public structures that are given one or another interpretation.

Labouring the obvious – two ways to find the body



'The body is in the lounge, past three studies on the right and the seminar room on the left'.

What's needed for good steering using sentences?

- sentences need to provide information about how things are
- this requires a known function from sentences to ways things might be, just as there are known functions from photos to ways things might be

'Boy at computer'

How should we think about the provision of putative information about how things are

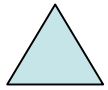
- We shouldn't get bluffed by H.P. Grice's troubles into denying what must be the case.
- What kind of thing is the value of the relevant function from sentences?

Representation and possibility I

- The value of the function from sentences to ways things might be is the putative information provided by the sentence, and in representing that we need to capture
  - the fact that the information is about the world, not concepts or words
  - the fact that the information is silent about a lot.
- The possible worlds treatment of (representational) content of sentences delivers both to us.

Representation and possibility II

- representational content ≠ meaning. The shape below is the shape 'is an equiangular triangle' and 'is an equilateral triangle' alike represent something as having; hence there's one content but the predicates differ in meaning.

- 

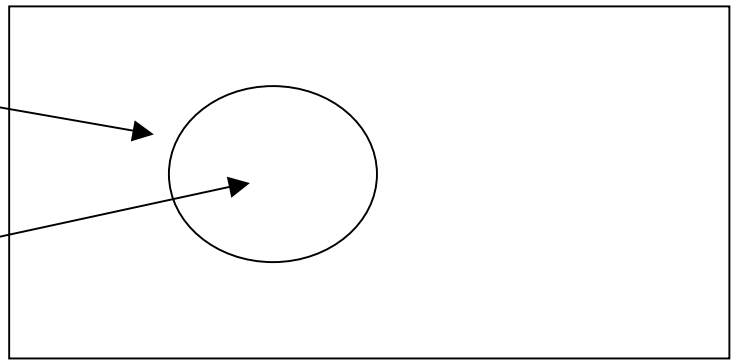
  Similar point applies to *x's* being taller than *y* versus *y*'s being shorter than *x*, and being half empty versus being half full.

Representation and possibility III – the 'God' way of thinking about content.

- Sometimes express materialism about the mind by saying that all God has to do to make a conscious minded creature is to assemble aright purely physical ingredients.
- God way of thinking of content is in terms of what God would have to do to make some sentence (or thought) true.
- God would not have to do two things to make something half empty and half full.

The possible worlds scheme

- *S*

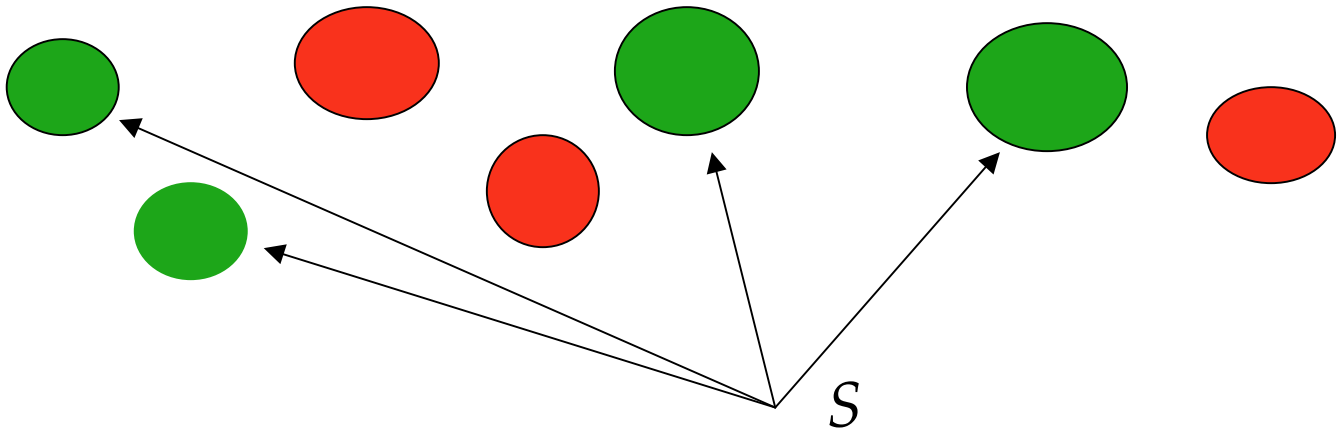


ways things might be that are as S represents them to be

If S is an egocentric sentence (or thought), the circle is the set of centred worlds whose centres in those worlds are as S represents them to be

Representing representation

- Slogan: represent representational content by pretending to be Lewisian modal realists. This is externalist in one good sense.



Finding the right representation relation for language I

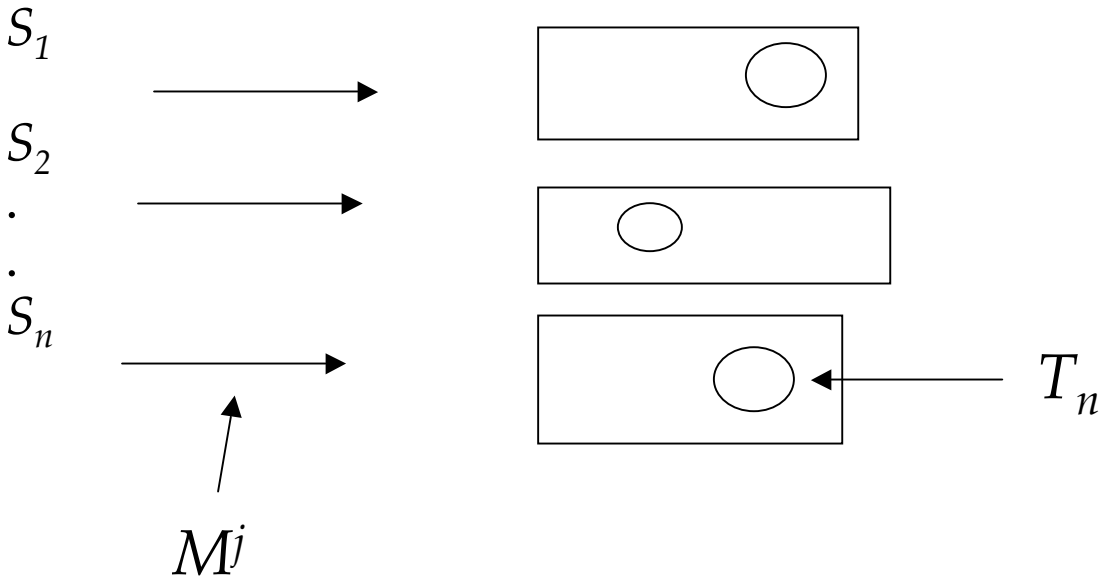
- We sometimes speak as if there was one answer as to what some structure represents: the number of tree rings represents age of a tree; a petrol gauge represents how much fuel is in the tank; photos represent what they are photos of; etc. But in fact there is no *one* answer. Rather, there are indefinitely many representation relations and we need to think in terms of what some structure represents relative to so and so a relation.

Finding the right representation relation for language II

- A gauge can equally be thought of as representing how much fuel is left, the state of wire from the tank to the gauge, how far the car can travel without a refill, etc. Just we learnt years ago when discussing how to count objects, that the number of objects is relative to a count sortal (one book but 300 hundred pages; one table, five table parts, etc) so representation is relative – to a mapping.
- Of course we don't always need to make the relativity explicit – in either case.

Basic framework

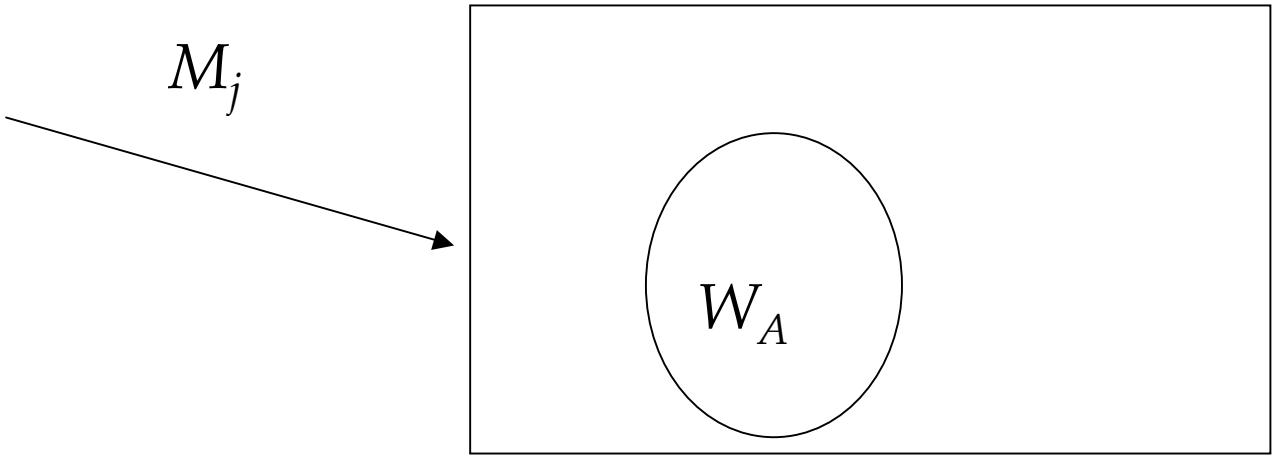
- The pattern our simple examples exemplify: mappings from ways things might be to ways things might be: $\{S_i\}\ M^j$—>$\{T_k\}$
- Easy-going in the sense that any function from ways to ways counts as a case of representation; we then divide cases we wish to discuss from junk. Analogy with Quine's easy-going attitude to objects.
-



Correctness

- Correctness relative to a mapping
  - S_i represents correctly relative to M^j iff *a)* M^j maps S_i into T_k, and *b)*T_k obtains.

- S_i



T_k obtains iff the circle contains the actual world W_A

How it looks for belief, desire and perception

- Belief, desire and perception are all representational states: they represent how a subject takes, wants, perceives things to be, respectively.
- What it takes for a belief to be true
  - The (neural) state belief-maps onto a state of affairs that obtains
- What it takes for a desire to be satisfied
  - The (neural) state desire-maps onto a state of affairs that obtains
- What it takes for a perception to be veridical
  - The (neural) state perception-maps onto a state of affairs that obtains