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Ignorance of Meaning

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Abstract

An argument that the cognitive content a subject associates with a term differs from the term's Burgean social content, is presented and defended. It is shown that the same argumentative strategy can be used to argue that cognitive content is holistic. The ramifications of this holistic conclusion for both first-personal knowledge and scientific knowledge of meaning are discussed.

1. *An argument for individualism*

Tyler Burge's individual, Alf, appears to have a fairly typical collection of propositional attitudes concerning arthritis (Burge 1979). He appears to believe that arthritis is a painful condition, that his grandfather had arthritis in his wrists and ankles and that he himself has arthritis in the knees. One day, he wakes up with a pain in his thigh and fears the condition may have spread. He goes to the doctor and says "I fear my arthritis has spread to my thigh". The doctor informs him that this is impossible, since, by definition, arthritis is an inflammation of the joints. Alf accepts the expert's correction and goes on to ask what is wrong with his thigh.

The way in which Alf accepts correction is important. He might express himself by saying: "I thought I had arthritis in my thigh, but I was wrong". In his newly informed state, he appears to attribute the concept of arthritis to his previous, somewhat ignorant self. He appears to take it that when he said "arthritis" he used the term with the same meaning as the experts, in spite of the fact that he was ignorant of a crucial definitional truth about "arthritis". (Here I will assume that the meaning of a subject's term is the concept he expresses by or associates with that term). Alf treats his past self in the same way as most of the rest of us do: we, also, are content to say of the ignorant subject that he believed he had arthritis in his thigh.

Burge argues that the concept we attribute to the ignorant Alf is partly individuated by external, social factors. Had Alf been part of a linguistic community in which the term "arthritis" had a meaning consistent with Alf's original beliefs, i.e. had it applied to certain conditions outside the joints, perhaps including the one in Alf's thigh, then Alf would have had a different concept and would have meant something different by his term.

I think that Burge's argument is unsound, and that it is possible to account for our intuitions about propositional attitude reporting in a way that is consistent with individualism (Segal 2000, 76-82). However, I do not propose to go into those matters here. Rather, I want to argue that whatever one thinks about social content, content individuated partly by external, social factors, we must recognize a kind of cognitive content the individuation of which is independent of such factors. (The argument is due to Loar (1987). The formulation is mine).

We begin with an alternative biography for Alf. Alf goes to live in France for a while and there he learns the word "arthritis". He becomes expert in the use of this term. He knows that, by definition, it extends over all and only inflammations of the joints. But he fails to make the right connection between "arthritis" and "arthritis". He does not think that the terms are synonymous and he continues to believe that "arthritis" might in principle apply to a condition in one's thigh.

It seems clear that, in some sense, Alf means different things by "arthritis" and "arthritis" and that, in some sense, he expresses different concepts by the two terms. He might, for example, think to himself: *evidently not all arthritis is arthritis, but perhaps all arthritis is arthritis*. Normal, roughly Fregean, criteria for the individuation of meaning dictate that attitudes of this sort show that he means different things by the two terms. Here is a rough formulation of the criterion ('FD' for 'Fregean principle of difference'):

(FD) If a subject, *s*, rationally assents to $P(t_1)$ and dissents from or abstains on the truth value of $P(t_2)$ ($P(\xi)$ an extensional context), then t_1 and t_2 have different meanings in *s*'s idiolect and *s* associates different concepts with them.

It seems clear also that if either of Alf's terms has the same meaning as the experts' term "arthritis", then it is "arthritis". Since the meaning of Alf's "arthritis" differs from that of his "arthritis", it must also differ from the expert's. Hence, contrary to Burge, when ignorant Alf says "arthritis", he does not mean *arthritis*.

Note that I am claiming only there is an important sense of "mean" which renders that true. One might accept that on one perfectly good way of individuating meaning, Alf's "arthritis" does mean the same as the experts' and, indeed, as Alf's own "arthritis". But that mode of individuation offers us nothing to say about Alf's linguistic behaviour when he says things like "Not all arthritis is arthritis". To account for that, it seems best to recognise a different kind of content, one that is independent of social factors and one that accounts for the term's role in Alf's cognitive economy. Let us call this "cognitive content".

The cognitive contents of Alf's "arthritis" and "arthritis" differ. Cognitive content is what individuates

concepts and meaning under (FD). So cognitive content resembles Fregean sense: differences in cognitive content are what rationalise Alf's belief that not all arthritis is arthrite. And we may assume that cognitive contents are, in some manner or other, attributed by opaque propositional attitude attributions. If two terms are associated with different cognitive contents, then they cannot be freely intersubstituted in opaque attributions.

Cognitive contents are certainly not individuated in the way Burgean social content would be. The "arthrite" argument can easily be generalized to the words of any Burgean partially ignorant subject. Hence we should conclude that all terms have a cognitive content that is individuated independently of Burgean social factors.

2. *An argument for holism*

Loar's argument for individualistically individuated cognitive content deploys a particular strategy. It uses an intrasubjective difference of content among concepts to argue for an intersubjective one. Thus it moves from the premise that Alf's "arthrite" and "arthritis" concepts differ in content to the conclusion that Alf's "arthritis" and the expert's "arthritis" concepts differ in content. The same strategy can be used to generate an argument for a certain kind of holism about cognitive content. The argument is designed to show that cognitive content is holistic, in roughly the following sense: any (intra- or interpersonal) conflict between the beliefs associated with terms t_1 and t_2 entails a difference in the cognitive contents with which they are associated. For example, if Thelma believes that tigers are indigenous to India, while Louise thinks they are indigenous to Africa, (and they would express these beliefs using the word "tiger"), then it follows that their "tiger" concepts differ in cognitive content.

I will introduce the argumentative strategy in relation to an example, then discuss how to generalise it.

Thelma and Louise have pretty standard concepts of tigers. However, Thelma believes they are indigenous to India, and Louise thinks they are indigenous to Africa. Fred also has a fairly typical concept of tigers, and, like Louise, believes they are indigenous to Africa. In conversation with Thelma, he learns of a large cat called "panthera tigris" that is indigenous to India. Curious about these panthers, he asks Thelma about them, and learns that they are yellow-black striped etc.. In fact, "panthera tigris" is just the Latin name for tigers, as both Thelma and Louise happen to know. But Fred fails to make the connection. He comes to believe that there are two similar-looking but different species of large cats, one indigenous to Africa, the other to India. He asserts "Pantheras tigris are indigenous to India" and he denies "Tigers are indigenous to India".

(FD) dictates that Fred associates different concepts with "panthera tigris" and "tiger" and means different things by them. Since (FD) individuates concepts by cognitive contents, the conclusion is that Fred associates different cognitive contents with the two terms.

Thus far we have an intrasubjective difference in content. We now use this to force some intersubjective differences in content.

If Fred's "panthera tigris" concept has the same cognitive content as Thelma's "panthera tigris" concept, and Fred's "tiger" concept has the same cognitive content as Louise's "tiger" concept, then Thelma's "panthera tigris" concept differs in cognitive content from Louise's "tiger" concept. And this is already a pretty holistic result: for the only relevant difference between Thelma and Louise is that one of them thinks that the things called "tigers" or "pantheras tigris" are Indian and the other thinks that they are African.

On a non-holistic conception of "same cognitive content", it would seem that Fred's and Thelma's "panthera tigris" concepts do have the same cognitive content, and likewise for him and Louise in respect of their "tiger" concepts. For the only relevant difference between, e.g., Fred and Thelma is that Fred thinks that "tiger" differs in extension from "panthera tigris" and applies to similar-looking but distinct animals that come from Africa. We wouldn't normally take that sort of difference to indicate a difference in cognitive content. For example, when I learned the term "ocelot", I came to believe that it has a different extension from "domestic cat" and applies to similar-looking but biologically distinct animals. Non-holistic standards of individuating cognitive contents would not suggest that my learning about ocelots entailed a change in the cognitive content of my "cat" concept.

These sorts of differences - the difference between Fred and Louise with respect to "tiger" and between Fred and Thelma in respect of "panthera tigris" - only indicate differences of content if holism is true.

Fred's relations to Thelma and Louise are of the same ilk as Thelma's and Louise's relations to one another. There is no principled reason to allow that Thelma and Louise have the same "tiger" concepts as each other while denying that Fred and Louise share a "tiger" concept or that he and Thelma share a "panthera tigris" concept. We have to distinguish Fred's "tiger" concept from his "panthera tigris" concept. This forces us to make a further distinction: we must either distinguish Fred's "tiger" from Louise's, or his "panthera tigris" from Thelma's, or make a distinction between Thelma's "tiger"/"panthera tigris" concept and Louise's. All of these options are on a par. None of them seem to sit very happily with non-holistic modes of individuating concepts. All of them invite holism. The conclusion that suggests itself is therefore that we should individuate cognitive content holistically and distinguish all three subject's "tiger" concepts.

The argument appears to generalise easily enough. Here is the structure: take two subjects a and b , and terms t_1 and t_2 such that t_1 is in a 's vocabulary and t_2 in b 's. (It doesn't matter whether t_1 and t_2 have the same surface form or are, in some sense, the same word.) Suppose that there is a small doxastic difference between the subjects in respect of the words: there is some extensional sentential context $P(\xi)$ such that a assents to $P(t_1)$ and b dissents from or abstains on $P(t_2)$. Otherwise a 's cognitive relations to t_1 and b 's to t_2 are alike as can be. There exists a possible third subject, c who has terms t_3 and t_4 in his vocabulary. By non-holistic standards of individuating cognitive contents, a 's t_1 would appear to have the same cognitive content as c 's t_3 , and b 's t_2 would appear to have the same cognitive content as c 's t_4 . A 's cognitive relations to t_1 and c 's cognitive relations to t_3 are alike as can be, compatibly with the stipulations of the scenario (mutatis mutandis for b 's t_2 and c 's t_4). C assents to $P(t_3)$ and dissents from or abstains on $P(t_4)$.

By (FD), t_3 and t_4 have different cognitive contents for c . So at least one of the following must be false:

2 a's t_1 shares a cognitive content with b's t_2 ,

2 a's t_1 shares a cognitive content with c's t_3 ,

2 b's t_2 shares a cognitive content with c's t_4 .

But fairness dictates that if one of them is false, then they all are. So they are all false. So holism is true: any small conflict between the beliefs associated with t_1 and t_2 indicates a difference between their cognitive contents.

The argument schema might well not apply across the board to all terms and sentential contexts. For example, it is not easy to imagine running the argument successfully for "two", "a pair of" and the context "Frege had ξ uncles". It is difficult to describe a subject, c , who would rationally adopt the required attitudes to the sentences. And if one could concoct such a subject, the argument would likely falter at the fairness step. We could probably motivate identifying one of c 's concepts with those of both a and b , and distinguishing c 's other concept from that one.

The existence of these exceptional cases may or may not be highly significant. It could be that the concepts involved are just as subject to holism as "tiger" and "panthera tigris", but that the argumentative strategy fails to show that they are. Or it could be that the concepts are not subject to the same sort of holism. Maybe (only) a specific range of $P(\xi)$ s are relevant to the concepts' cognitive content; perhaps mathematical ones, in the case of "two" and "a pair of".

I will briefly consider two ways of blocking the argument. One way to block the argument would be to deny (FD). As Jessica Brown, (Brown, this volume) makes clear, an externalist might well want to deny (FD). I will not here attempt to argue for the principle in any detail. But an argument I would endorse goes along the following lines. The use of opaque propositional attitude attributions is essential to standard psychological explanation. Such attributions attribute cognitive content. Cognitive content must respect (FD), if it is to bear its explanatory burden. All of these claims, or course, require detailed defence, which I postpone for another occasion.

I will take the time, however, to discuss a specific objection to (FD) that was suggested by Tim Williamson (pc). Williamson offered an apparent counterexample of the following sort. Suppose I use "begin" and "commence" as synonyms. Then Noam Chomsky tells me (falsely) that he has discovered a case that I will judge to be a counterexample to (1):

(1) For all x, y , x begins y iff x commences y

While I am waiting for Chomsky to email me the example, I have time to ponder. I wrack my brains,

trying to figure out what kind of example he has in mind. I fail to come up with anything. Nevertheless, since I have great faith in Chomsky's judgement, I believe him. And so, without any failure of rationality, I come to believe that (1) is false. Now it seems that I can rationally dissent from (1), while assenting to (2):

(2) For all x, y , x begins y iff x begins y

Yet it doesn't seem as though "commences" and "begins" have different cognitive contents in my idiolect.

What is going on here? (1), even in my idiolect, expresses a simple conceptual truth. And indeed, it seems to me to do so, even as I contemplate the thought it expresses. It is just that Chomsky has given me a reason to believe that, in this particular case, things are not as they seem. So I reject the deliverances of my normally authoritative modes of access to features of my own concepts and favour Chomsky's judgement over my own.

The result is that I behave in a way that would be typical of someone who had two concepts associated with "commence" and "begin" and for whom (1) was not a conceptual truth. Such a person's attitude to (1) would be an accurate reflection of their concepts. But my behaviour and my attitude to (1) do not similarly reflect the structure of my conceptual repertoire.

My tentative reaction to all this is simply to add a *ceteris paribus* clause to (FD). The idea is that, in typical cases, people's judgements about possible or actual divergences among the truth values of sentences are partly based on mechanisms that do reliably reflect the structure of their conceptual economy. (FD) is correct for those cases. There are, though, further factors that can intervene, such as Noam Chomsky. When there is such interference, *cetera non sunt paria*.

Another way out of the argument for holism would be to

give up on using a univocal notion of sameness of cognitive content inter- and intra-subjectively. Thus e.g. Fred has "tiger"/"panthera tigris" concepts with different intrasubjective cognitive content, but the same intersubjective content. Hence he and his two friends can all have the same concepts in spite of their minor cognitive differences.

But that in effect would just mean that there is no useful notion of cognitive content that applies across subjects. And that would be disastrous for psychology. Psychology works with opaque attitude attributions, and generalises over subjects. If there's no notion of intersubjectively shared cognitive content, then either we can't use opaque generalisations in psychology, or we need some other account of how opaque generalisations might work. But we have no satisfactory way of doing psychology without opaque attributions and no satisfactory alternative account of opacity. So giving up on intersubjective similarity of cognitive content would be a bad move.

I will return to the matter of psychological generalisations in section 4. First, I will briefly discuss

knowledge of meaning in the light of holism.

3. Knowledge of Meaning

As I mentioned above, the enlightened Alf seems to believe that his present "arthritis" concept is the same as the one he had before his enlightenment. This suggests that he has undergone a conceptual and linguistic change without noticing it. It would appear to indicate there was a change in what he, himself, meant by "arthritis" that he failed to detect. If the argument for holism is correct, then it looks as though this sort of thing happens all the time. Every time you change your mind about something, you undergo an undetected conceptual and linguistic change. And this might seem to constitute some sort of threat to the authority of our knowledge of our own meanings.

That would be interesting. For the apparent threat looks rather like the apparent threat to first person authority posed to externalists by the possibility (or actuality) of slow-switching. But the present threat applies to cognitive content, content that is, or at least might be, individuated by purely individualistic factors. It would mean that we are not in a particularly healthy epistemic position even with respect to that. Further reflection, however, suggests that holism poses no serious threat to first-personal knowledge of meaning.

Suppose that I assert (3):

(3) It is a theorem of a correct semantic theory for my language that for all x, x satisfies "tiger" iff x is a tiger.

Suppose also that even a small change in my "tiger" beliefs would lead to a change of meaning. After such a change, I might again assert (3). But it would have a different meaning on this second occasion of utterance. Suppose I believe, falsely, that my two utterances of (3) said the same thing. Is my knowledge of the truth of (3) threatened?

Apparently not. After all, in saying (3) I am deploying my "tiger" concept to express the meaning of "tiger" in my idiolect. There is nothing wrong with my "tiger" concept. I have a perfectly good grasp of what I am saying when I utter (3). And I have reliable mechanisms that link the concept to the word, these being the mechanisms that allow us to find the right words to express ourselves and to understand our own language. We don't know much about how these mechanisms work, but they seem to be extremely reliable. So I am in a fine position correctly to judge the truth of (3). I know that it is true. (Of course, the mechanisms can break down in cases of aphasia, or even parapraxis: "by 'worm' I mean a cluster of phonological, syntactic and semantic features", I might incorrectly assert).

If my two utterances of (3) were relatively close together, say only 3 minutes apart, then it might seem worrying that I think that they meant the same thing when in fact they did not. How can I really claim to know what I mean, if I can't tell when two of my own utterances, separated by just 3 minutes, mean the same?

I think that if large and sudden shifts of meaning passed unnoticed, then that might be worrying. But this is only a very small one. The sorts of meaning shifts that are, according to holism, induced by small doxastic changes, are very slight indeed. (I will say more about the measurement of the semantic distances below). The fact that I can't distinguish very similar meanings is not a matter of grave concern.

Here is a rough analogy. I am in a paint shop with an extensive supply of colour samples. I am looking at a particular sample, called "Just Yellow" and enjoying the colour experience. I know what colour Just Yellow is: it's that one. I look away. I am then presented with the same sample along with other nearby shades. I am unable to re-identify Just Yellow. That doesn't reflect badly on my initial knowledge of the colour. I had and still have a good grasp of which colour Just Yellow is.

There is also a sense in which I don't know exactly which colour it is. That's the sense that comes into play when, as I am presented with the samples and asked to pick out Just Yellow, I say: "No, I don't know which one of those colours is Just Yellow". But I do know which colour Just Yellow is, up to a reasonably high degree of specificity. I could certainly distinguish it from shades of yellow that are not so close to it. In the context of that easier trial, I might say "Yes, I know which colour Just Yellow is. It's that one there".

If I were hopeless at discriminating it from other colours, that would indicate that I don't know so much about Just Yellow. I look away from the sample, and then I am presented with it again, along with green, blue and red. Suppose I can't pick it out. Suppose also that this failure is not due to a memory lapse or anything like that, but rather has to be put down to my initial cognitive contact with the sample. Then it looks as though that initial contact did not endow me with a decent grasp of Just Yellow. I was colour-blind.

The same seems to apply to knowledge of meaning. The fact that I may be unable to distinguish slightly different meanings when these are presented to me at different times - even if the times are only 3 minutes apart - doesn't seem threatening. Of course, if I actually thought that I meant the same thing - rather than not having a view on the matter - then I would have overestimated my cognitive skills. But so what? That just shows that not having a view on the matter is the best policy, prior to serious theorising. (Obviously, if one becomes convinced of the truth of holism, then one should take a view on these cases for theoretical reasons).

Let us continue the parallel with the paint shop example. If there were a sudden large shift in the meaning of a word of mine and I failed to notice that - again, supposing there is no memory lapse - that would seem to show that I had a relatively poor grasp on what I meant. But we do tend to notice such shifts: I used to think "hiatus" meant *commotion*, now I think it means *interruption* or *gap*. This constituted a substantial and sudden shift in the cognitive content of "hiatus" in my idiolect. But I noticed it, so everything is fine.

The "hiatus" case differs in an important respect from the "tiger" case. It is reasonable to classify the former as a purely linguistic change. Before the change I had the concepts of a commotion and of a gap

(more or less, small shifts aside), and I still do. Only my opinion about the semantics of "hiatus" changed. By contrast, the "tiger" case involves a conceptual change: an ancestor "tiger" concept evolves into a descendent "tiger" concept with a different cognitive content.

It is not particularly easy to find conceptual changes that are both large and rapid. Perhaps they occur when someone - a child, say or an academic - experiences an epiphany. My feeling is that such changes are indeed noticeable by the subject: "My whole concept of the physical has changed!" a philosopher might declare, having suddenly come to believe that the brain is a thinking thing.

Burge (1988) offers a defence of the authority of first-personal knowledge of one's own concepts that seems to be insensitive to the distinction I am discussing here. He points out that certain kinds of second-order judgements, like "I think (with this very thought) that p" are self-referential and self-verifying. In making the second-order judgement that one thinks that p, one thereby thinks that p, and thus renders the judgement correct. That seems right. But the sort of knowledge delivered by such judgements ("basic cases" of self-knowledge, in Burge's terminology) may still be rather limited.

Compare a judgement of the form: "I am now looking at this colour". Such a judgement is not self-verifying. The act of making it does not make it true. Nevertheless, a colour-blind man observing a colour sample in an ordinary sort of context could still make the judgement truly and knowledgeably. For whatever colour it is that he is looking at, he is in a position to refer to it as "this colour." But this knowledge is still compatible with considerable ignorance about which colour he is observing. Basic cases of self-knowledge may be compatible with a similar sort of ignorance in respect of the content of their embedded first-order thoughts.

Consider a radical externalist position about singular concepts, the so-called "neo-Fregean" view inspired by John McDowell (McDowell 1977) and Gareth Evans (Evans 1982). This position allows that in certain cases of delusion, where a subject apparently has an attitude to a non-existent individual, the subject may believe that he is having a thought when in fact he is not. Thus someone, call him "Norbert", in the grip of a hallucination, saying (4) would actually be uttering something false or non-sensical:

(4) I think (with this very thought) that that little green man is staring at me.

Suppose that the hallucination is quickly replaced by a veridical perception: a real little green man is surreptitiously put in place, just as the causes of hallucination wear off. Norbert repeats (4). According to the externalist position I envisage, what he says this time is true. So the second utterance of (4) expresses a basic case of self-knowledge. But surely, on the position I am envisaging, there is a good sense in which Norbert's knowledge of the contents of his own thought is limited. For he can't distinguish a state of mind that consists in a failed attempt to think a thought, from an immediately subsequent state of mind that consists in the actual thinking of a thought. This may not be a problem for externalism. But it does support the unsurprising conclusion that individualism is consistent with a greater degree of first-personal self-knowledge than externalism. It need not allow that there could be any cases of sudden, large conceptual shifts that would pass unnoticed by an attentive and functioning subject.

4 Ignorance of Meaning

The problem posed by holism, as Jerry Fodor has pointed out (e.g. Fodor 1987), is to explain how, if it's true, psychological generalisations can generalise. Thelma, Louise and Fred all believe that enraged tigers are extremely dangerous. If any of them were trapped in a cage with a tiger, they would take great pains not to enrage it, precisely because of this belief that they all share.

On the face of it, holism suggests that they don't all believe the same thing: the cognitive content of their "tiger" concepts are all different. So how can the same generalisation, one expressed by a referentially opaque propositional attitude report, apply to all three of them?

The natural answer is that concepts with slightly different cognitive contents can all qualify as *tiger* concepts: that is, they can all be correctly specified by use of the term "tiger" in opaque propositional attitude attributions.

The problem then is to explain how this can be. Presumably - and pace Fodor and LePore (1992) - it has to do with similarity. I use the term "tiger" in (5):

(5) Thelma believes that enraged tigers are extremely dangerous

My report is true because the cognitive content of "tiger" in my idiolect is similar enough to that of Thelma's concept. A Davidson-inspired (Davidson 1968) account of propositional attitude reporting explains this. To a first approximation, we might say, for example, (P) (borrowed from Segal 2000):

(P) A report of the form "a believes that s" as uttered by b, in conversational context c, is true iff the content of s in b's mouth is similar enough, by the standards of c, to some belief of a's.

The standards of similarity vary considerably from context to context: sometimes even approximate identity of extensions is enough, other times considerable closeness of cognitive content is required.

We ordinary folk psychologists appear to be reasonably adept both at judging what standard of similarity is appropriate in a given context and at judging when two concepts meet the required standard. We tend to agree on how to evaluate the truth of propositional attitude reports, and so we must be agreeing in our judgements of similarity of cognitive content.

That is all fine. But the problem is that we don't know what it is that we are doing when we make these judgements. That is to say, we don't have a good theoretical account of the metric of similarity. It is very hard to believe that any formal account in terms of extensions, intensions, situations, characters, functions from possible worlds to intensions etc. is going to help much here. Firstly, these accounts never seem to be fine-grained enough to capture all the differences of cognitive content that we want. Secondly, it's difficult to know how we could develop a reasonable metric of similarity for them. E.g. at how many possible worlds would the intensions of Thelma's and Louise's "tiger" concepts have to coincide for them

to be similar enough to count as a concept of tigers in a typical conversational context? 147 billion? 92%?

I am also somewhat sceptical about the prospects of so-called "functional role" accounts. We have been offered no workable way of saying what the functional role of a concept is, let alone one that promises to allow us to measure how similar the roles of two concepts are.

We are, indeed, nowhere close to having a proper theoretical account of cognitive content. In that sense, our ignorance of meaning remains profound.

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