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Wittgensteinian content-externalism

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Abstract

Content-externalism is the view that a subject's relations to a context can play a role in individuating the content of her mental states. According to social content-externalists, relations to a socio-linguistic context can play a fundamental individuating role. Åsa Wikforss has suggested that "social externalism *depends* on the assumption that individuals have an incomplete grasp of their own concepts". In this paper, I show that this isn't so. I develop and defend an argument for social content-externalism which does not depend on this assumption. The argument is animated by strands of thought in the later work of Wittgenstein. In addition to demonstrating that social externalists are not necessarily committed to thinking that a subject can have thoughts involving concepts which she incompletely understands, this argument is important insofar as it (a) supports a form of content-externalism with extended scope, (b) avoids the controversy surrounding the claim that subjects can think with concepts which they incompletely understand, and (c) situates Wittgenstein's later work with respect to contemporary debates about content-externalism.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The debate between content-internalists and content-externalists in the philosophy of mind is a debate about whether a subject's relations to a context play a role in individuating the content of her intentional mental states. Internalism, as I shall understand it, is the view that the contents of a subject's mental states either are individuated in such a way that if the subject's non-intentionally described intrinsic properties are the same, then the contents are the same or are themselves metaphysically primitive intrinsic properties of a subject.[1] A proponent of a view of this kind denies that a subject's relations to a context play a role in individuating her mental content, either because she

denies that contents are individuated by more basic properties or because she insists that only more basic *intrinsic* properties of a subject can play an individuating role.

Externalists take the opposing view. They deny, on the one hand, that mental contents are metaphysically primitive intrinsic properties of a speaker and, on the other, that the only things that play a role in individuating mental content are a subject's more basic intrinsic properties. The basic externalist thought is that the contents of at least some types of mental states are at least partly individuated by the relations in which a speaker stands to a context. I shall refer to this basic thought hereafter as *externalism's driving intuition*.

Those relations which externalists commonly identify as playing an individuating role fall into two broad types. Relations of the first type hold between a subject and a socio-linguistic context. Relations of the second type hold between a subject and a physical context. Externalists need not identify only one type of relations as playing an individuating role; they can acknowledge that individuation depends on the complex interaction of relations of both types. But we can describe a particular externalist view as either *social* or *physical content-externalism* depending on whether it takes relations to a socio-linguistic or a physical context, respectively, to be fundamental in individuating mental content. My concern in this paper is exclusively with social content-externalism (hereafter simply *social externalism*), the view that those relations which play a fundamental individuating role with respect to mental content are relations to a social context.

Prominent arguments for social externalism (e.g., Burge, 1979) rely on the idea that a subject can have thoughts involving concepts which she misunderstands. Indeed, some philosophers have claimed that "social externalism *depends* on the assumption that individuals have an incomplete grasp of their own concepts" (Wikforss, 2004, p. 287, emphasis added. See also Heal, 2013; Silva-Filho & Virginia Dazzani, 2015). In fact, as I argue in this paper, social externalism does not depend on the possibility of thinking with concepts which one misunderstands. Certainly, the claim that the content of a subject's mental states constitutively depends on her relationship to a social context does not depend *logically* on the claim that a subject can have thoughts involving concepts which she misunderstands. And the notion that there might be some weaker sort of dependence between these claims is not well founded. It's true that prominent arguments for social externalism take it for granted that a subject can have thoughts involving concepts which she misunderstands. But there is no in-principle reason why we should not hope for arguments for the view which do not do so.

Indeed, in this paper, I propose a Wittgensteinian argument for social externalism which does not rely on its being possible to think with concepts which one misunderstands. In addition to demonstrating that social externalists are not necessarily committed to thinking that this is a genuine possibility, this proposal is important for at least three further reasons. The first reason is that such an argument promises to broaden the scope of social externalism; arguments for social externalism which rely on the possibility of thinking with concepts which one misunderstands have tended only to apply to those subjects whose grasp of their concepts is compromised in some way. (Burge's, 1979 argument, for instance, does not apply to fully competent speakers.) The second reason is that many philosophers treat with scepticism the claim that one can have thoughts involving concepts which one misunderstands. (See, for instance, Glock and Preston, 1995; Davidson, 2001. I discuss their scepticism further on.) The fate of an argument for social externalism which did not rely on this claim would not turn on the question of whether such scepticism is well founded. The third reason the proposal is important is that it situates Wittgenstein's later work with respect to the debate about content-externalism.[2]

This paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I summarise Tyler Burge's pre-eminent argument for social externalism. In Section 3, I sketch strands of thought about the individuation of mental content which are prominent in Wittgenstein's later work. In Section 4.1, I outline an argument for social externalism which draws on these strands of thought and which is structurally similar to Burge's argument. In the rest of Section 4, I defend the Wittgensteinian argument against possible objections.

2 | MISUNDERSTANDING AND SOCIAL EXTERNALISM

Perhaps the pre-eminent argument for social externalism is Tyler Burge's thought experiment involving Alf, a subject with a set of beliefs which he expresses using the term "arthritis." Interpreted as expressing beliefs about *arthritis*, many of these utterances are true. During a visit to his doctor, however, Alf sincerely reports "My arthritis has spread to my thigh." Now, interpreted as expressing a belief about arthritis, this utterance is clearly false. Since arthritis is an illness which only afflicts the joints, it cannot have spread to Alf's thigh. When Alf reports "My arthritis has spread to my thigh," is he expressing a false belief about arthritis, or is he expressing a belief about some other ailment altogether? Burge's view is that the content of the belief which Alf expresses when he utters "My arthritis has spread to my thigh" is *that my arthritis has spread to my thigh*, that Alf uses the term "arthritis" in the context of this utterance to express the concept arthritis.

In the second phase of the thought experiment, we are to imagine a physical duplicate of Alf who inhabits a Twin Earth. Twin Alf, as we will call him, is indiscernible from Alf in every non-intentional intrinsic respect. Moreover, Alf and Twin Alf have indiscernible histories, again, non-intentionally characterised (Burge, 1979, pp. 77–78).[3] Like Alf, Twin Alf is disposed to express a set of beliefs using the term "arthritis." And like Alf, he reports to his doctor that "My arthritis has spread to my thigh." On Twin Earth, however, the term "arthritis" refers not to an ailment that only afflicts the joints but to any rheumatoid ailment whatsoever.

Burge's (1979) view is that we would not attribute to Twin Alf a belief about arthritis: "The word 'arthritis' [on Twin Earth] does not mean arthritis …. However we describe the patient's attitudes [on Twin Earth], it will not be with a term or phrase extensionally equivalent with 'arthritis' " (p. 79). Instead, Burge thinks, we would attribute to Twin Alf a belief about *tharthritis*, where "tharthritis" is a term which refers to any rheumatoid ailment whatsoever. We should conclude that the content of the belief which Twin Alf expresses when he says "My arthritis has spread to my thigh" is not *that my arthritis has spread to my thigh* but *that my tharthritis has spread to my thigh*, that Twin Alf uses the term "arthritis" to express, not the concept arthritis, but the concept tharthritis.

The conclusion of the thought experiment, then, is that Alf and Twin Alf express beliefs with different contents when they report "My arthritis has spread to my thigh." Crucially though, this difference cannot be attributed to any non-intentional intrinsic difference between Alf and Twin Alf, for ex hypothesi they are exactly similar in this respect. The only relevant difference, it seems, is a difference in the practices of the socio-linguistic communities to which Alf and Twin Alf are respectively related, and it is this, Burge thinks, to which we ought to attribute the difference in mental states. In this way, the thought experiment supports social externalism's driving intuition.

Hereafter, I shall refer to this thought experiment as the *arthritis case*. One salient feature of the arthritis case is that it relies on the following claim:

> Misunderstanding*: A subject can have thoughts involving concepts which she misunderstands.*[4]

Misunderstanding makes a claim about the degree of understanding which is consistent with exercising a particular concept in thought and reasoning. Specifically, it claims that misunderstanding some concept C is consistent with having thoughts involving C. It does not, however, tell us anything about *how it is* that subjects who misunderstand C are able to have thoughts involving C. This task falls to a further claim—*Deference*—on which the arthritis case relies:

> Deference*: If the concept* C *is standardly associated with the term "*C*" by the experts, then a subject who incompletely understands* C *can, by deferring to those experts, use "*C*" to express* C*.*

Alf defers to the experts when he uses the term "arthritis." This is borne out by the way in which he responds to correction: "In examples like ours, [the subject] typically admits his mistake, changes his views, and leaves it at that"

(Burge, 1979, p. 95). The fact that Alf defers to the experts explains how it is that he is able to use the term "arthritis" to express the concept arthritis.[5]

The conclusion Burge draws with respect to the arthritis case has not been universally accepted, although I will not consider here the full set of reasons people have had for finding the conclusion unacceptable.[6] Instead, I wish to focus on two reasons for general dissatisfaction with the thought experiment. The first reason is that the scope of the thought experiment is limited because it relies on the subject in question misunderstanding the relevant concept and deferring to the experts. Specifically, it does not give us a reason to accept social externalism with respect to subjects who do not both misunderstand the relevant concept and defer to the relevant experts. The second reason is that *Misunderstanding* is a contested principle.[7]

Burge maintains that standard practice regarding belief attribution is instructive with respect to a person's actual mental content. This is what legitimates the move from claims about what we find it natural to say about the content of Alf and Twin Alf's respective beliefs to claims about what the contents of those beliefs actually are. The fact that we routinely ascribe beliefs involving misunderstood concepts to subjects (like Alf) is good evidence, on Burge's view, that subjects can *have* thoughts involving concepts which they misunderstand. One could dispute *Misunderstanding* by challenging the claim that standard practice is instructive with respect to actual mental content. But several philosophers have disputed the principle even though they accept that claim. For example, Glock and Preston acknowledge that we routinely ascribe beliefs involving concepts to subjects who clearly misunderstand them. They acknowledge, for example, that it would not be unusual to ascribe to Alf the belief that he has arthritis in his thigh. But, they insist, there is a question about exactly what such an ascription amounts to. Glock and Preston think that if asked to say precisely what it is that Alf believes, "we would answer … by saying something like 'He believes that he has some rheumatoid inflammation in his thigh' " (Glock and Preston, 1995) Donald Davidson agrees. He writes:

> *Suppose that I, who thinks the word "arthritis" applies to inflammation of the joints only if caused by calcium deposits, and my friend Arthur, who knows better, both sincerely utter to Smith the words "Carl has arthritis" …. If Smith (unspoiled by philosophy) reports to still another party (perhaps a distant doctor attempting a diagnosis on the basis of a telephone report) that Arthur and I both have said, and believe, that Carl has arthritis, he may actively mislead* his *hearer. If this danger were to arise, Smith, alert to the facts, would not simply say "Arthur and Davidson both believe Carl has arthritis"; he would add something like "But Davidson thinks arthritis must be caused by calcium deposits." The need to make this addition I take to show that the simple attribution was not quite right; there was a relevant difference in the thoughts Arthur and I expressed when we said "Carl has arthritis." (Davidson, 2001, pp. 27–28)*

Glock, Preston, and Davidson accept (at least for argument's sake) that standard practice is instructive when thinking in a philosophical context about a subject's actual mental content. But all three maintain that Burge gives a less than complete characterisation of that practice. On their view, in cases where it is clear that *S* misunderstands *C* but we nevertheless find it natural to ascribe beliefs involving *C* to *S*, we are usually prepared to revise our original ascriptions when asked to specify the content of *S*'s beliefs exactly. This is a feature of standard practice which, on their view, Burge overlooks.

In summary, we have at least two reasons to hope for an argument for social externalism which does not rely on *Misunderstanding*. The first is that such an argument might extend the scope of the view beyond those speakers whose understanding of the relevant concept is compromised in some way. The second reason is that its legitimacy would not be tied to the legitimacy of the claim that speakers can have thoughts involving concepts which they misunderstand—a claim which, as we have seen, is disputed.

The arthritis case is not the only thought experiment which Burge offers in support of externalism. In his 1982 and 1986, respectively, he offers two further thought experiments, structurally similar to the arthritis case, which extend the scope of his externalism beyond speakers who misunderstand the relevant concepts. Neither thought

experiment, however, supports *social* externalism. In his 1982, Burge imagines two individuals, Carl and Twin Carl, exactly similar in every non-intentional intrinsic respect, who belong to earth and Twin Earth, respectively. The thought experiment is designed to elicit the intuition that differences in their respective physical environments—on earth, there is water but no twater, while on Twin Earth, there is twater but no water—are responsible for differences in the concepts which Carl and Twin Carl use the term "water," respectively, to express. Burge (1982) summarises the import of this thought experiment as follows:

> *The difference in [Carl and Twin Carl's] mental states and events seems to be a product primarily of differences in their physical environments, mediated by differences in their social environments—in the mental states of their fellows and conventional meanings of words they and their fellows employ.*

The differences in mental content are mediated by differences in their respective social environments because both Carl and Twin Carl defer to expert speakers when they use the term "water." Nevertheless, the thought experiment is an argument for physical externalism; as Burge makes clear, the difference which is fundamental to explaining the difference in Carl and Twin Carl's mental content concerns their respective physical environments: On earth, there is water but no twater, while on Twin Earth, there is twater but no water.

In his 1986, Burge asks us to consider Tom, an inhabitant of earth and expert speaker with regard to the term "sofa," who at some point comes to question whether sofas really are items of furniture. Tom believes that those objects which most people call "sofas" are in fact religious artefacts. Tom does not misunderstand the concept sofa. Rather, he has a non-standard theory about sofas. As it turns out, that theory is incorrect—on earth, sofas are indeed items of furniture. On Twin Earth, however, "sofa" refers to objects which actually are, and are widely acknowledged to be, religious artefacts. There are no sofas on Twin Earth. Let us call the objects to which "sofa" refers on Twin Earth *safos*. Twin Tom is an inhabitant of Twin Earth and is identical to Tom in every non-intentional intrinsic respect. Yet he uses the term "sofa" to express the concept safo, while Tom uses the term to express the concept sofa. But again, this difference is ultimately to be explained, Burge thinks, in terms of differences in Tom and Twin Tom's natural environments. He takes the thought experiment to show that "even where social practices are deeply involved in individuating mental states, they are often not the final arbiter. This is because the sort of agreement that fixes a communal meaning and norms for understanding is itself, in principle, open to challenge" (p. 707). There are differences between the social practices on earth and Twin Earth. But what ultimately accounts for the difference in mental content is a difference in the physical environments on earth and Twin Earth, respectively—the fact that on earth, there are sofas and not safos, while on Twin Earth, there are safos but not sofas. Consequently, here again, we have an argument for physical externalism, not social externalism.

3 | WITTGENSTEIN, INTENTIONAL CONTENT AND CONTEXT

The driving social externalist intuition is that the relations which a subject bears to a social context can play an individuating role with respect to the content of her mental states. Clearly, there is no logical relation between this thought and *Misunderstanding*. The claim that social context can play an individuating role with respect to mental content certainly does not *entail* that subjects can have thoughts involving concepts which they misunderstand. My aim in this section is to show that there is no weaker form of dependence between them either. I want to do this by showing that the social externalist intuition finds strong support in a cluster of views about the content of intentional states expressed in the later work of Wittgenstein. Whether or not Wittgenstein himself would have endorsed *Misunderstanding*, the views in question do not incorporate, or depend on, that principle. In the following section, I'll set out a thought experiment structurally similar to the water case based on these views, which does not depend on *Misunderstanding*.

Throughout Wittgenstein's later work, there is a concerted attempt to displace a particular picture of what understanding (believing, intending, etc.) that *p* consists in. According to the picture Wittgenstein wishes to displace, what make it the case that a person understands that *p*, say, (as opposed to that *q* or that *r*) are mental events or processes which go on in the mind of the person when they understand (PI §152). Suppose I understand your words "Smith is coming tonight" to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight (as opposed to Smith *B*). In virtue of what is that the content of my understanding? According to the proponent of the picture Wittgenstein disputes, the answer is "Solely in virtue of events and processes which went on within you when you understood. Perhaps you had a sensation of a particular kind, or perhaps a particular image or picture came before your mind when you understood."

Wittgenstein explicitly rejects this picture. His main line of objection consists of two moves. The first move is to reject the idea that whenever one understands, there is always *some* event or process going on within one that accompanies the understanding and which could be identified as the thing in virtue of which my understanding has the content it does. When I understood your words to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight, perhaps an image did come before my mind. But, Wittgenstein rightly insists, it need not have. I could just as easily have understood your words in the way that I did, even if it had not. Wittgenstein's point is not merely that for any particular image, it is possible that I may have understood your words in the way that I did had that particular image not come before my mind. It is that I could have understood your words in the way that I did even if there was not *any* image that came before my mind when I understood. And what holds true for understanding also holds true, Wittgenstein thinks, for meaning, intending, and so on.

The second move is to insist that even if some event or process is going on within me when I understand, it cannot be that in virtue of which my understanding has the content which it does. Suppose, for example, that upon hearing the words "right-pointing arrow," the following image comes before my mind:

Can it be in virtue of this that I understand the words "right-pointing arrow" to mean right-pointing arrow? Wittgenstein's response is "No." A recurring theme throughout *Investigations*, and Wittgenstein's later work more generally, is that considered in isolation—that is, apart from its application—any image is variously interpretable.[8] The vast majority of us find it natural to interpret the image above as an image of an arrow pointing to the right. However, according to Wittgenstein, there is nothing about the image considered in isolation in virtue of which it is correct to interpret it this way. Suppose someone found it natural to interpret the image as an "arrow" pointing to the left. On Wittgenstein's view, there is no feature of the image considered in isolation, and described in terms which do not already presuppose that it is an image of an arrow pointing to the right, to which we can appeal to show that our way of interpreting the image is correct and their way incorrect.

Someone might object that this line of reasoning overlooks a crucial difference between mental images and images depicted in some non-mental medium. They might agree that nothing about an image drawn on a piece of paper and considered in isolation suffices to determine which of the various ways of interpreting the image are correct and which incorrect. But, they might insist, this is not true of mental images for mental images are *self-interpreting*. To support their claim, they might appeal to the fact that it makes no sense for a person to ask whether the image that comes before their mind is an image of an arrow pointing to the right or an image of an "arrow" pointing to the left.

Wittgenstein would certainly agree that it makes no sense for a person to ask these sorts of questions. But he would reject the idea that it makes no sense because mental images are self-interpreting. For Wittgenstein, the idea of a self-interpreting image is a piece of philosophical fiction, a corollary of a misleading picture of mental phenomena:

> *"A mental image must be more like its object than any picture. For however similar I make the picture to what it is supposed to represent, it may still be the picture of something else. But it is an intrinsic feature*

> *of a mental image that it is the image of* this *and of nothing else." That is how one might come to regard a mental image as a super-likeness. (PI §389)*

The line of reasoning I have just sketched purports to show that it cannot be in virtue of a mental image coming before my mind that my understanding has the content which it does. To be clear, however, the reasoning is an example of a more general argument which is intended to apply to *any* mental event or process.

If the picture according to which mental states like meaning, intending, and understanding have the content which they do solely in virtue of events or processes which go on in the mind of the subject is a bad picture, then what is the picture with which Wittgenstein thinks it should be replaced? Consider the following passage:

> *What happens is not that this symbol cannot be further interpreted, but: I do no interpreting.*
> *I imagine N. No interpretation accompanies this image; what gives the image its interpretation is the path on which it lies. (PG 23)*

Here, Wittgenstein is talking specifically about the individuation of a mental image. But his point generalises to understanding, meaning, intending, and so on. What makes it the case that I understand that *p* (as opposed to that *q* or that *r*) is, Wittgenstein thinks, the path on which my understanding lies. But what might it mean to talk about the "path on which one's understanding lies"? Wittgenstein's idea is that what makes it the case that I understand the words "Smith is coming tonight" to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight are not (or are not exclusively) facts about my non-intentionally described intrinsic state at the time—facts about what came before my mind or about my verbal or non-verbal behaviour, non-intentionally described—but, rather, facts about the broader context:

> *… we refer by the phrase "understanding a word" not necessarily to that which happens while we are saying or hearing it, but to the whole environment of the event of saying it. (BB p. 157)*[9]

What does Wittgenstein mean exactly when he talks about the "whole environment of the event of saying it"? On Wittgenstein's view, questions like "What makes it the case that *S* understands that *p*?" ought to be answered by calling to mind the *criteria* for *S*'s understanding that *p*, that is, those things which warrant someone else's saying of *S* that she understands that *p*. This is because on Wittgenstein's view, there is a constitutive relation between the sorts of things which count as criteria for *S*'s understanding that *p* and *S*'s understanding that *p* (PI §353). So what *are* the criteria for *S*'s understanding the words "Smith is coming tonight" to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight (as opposed to Smith *B*)?

Wittgenstein refrains from answering questions of this kind by giving a systematic account of the sorts of contextual features which constitute criteria for the relevant state. The main reason is that he does not think that such an account can be given. What counts as a criterion for *S*'s understanding that *p*, meaning that *q*, intending to ϕ, is, Wittgenstein thinks, going to vary from case to case. But we can say something about the sorts of contextual features which may, in any particular case, constitute criteria for *S*'s understanding the words "Smith is coming tonight" to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight. These may include facts about the immediate context (for instance, the fact that we were having a conversation about Smith *A*) or facts about an earlier context (e.g., the fact that earlier we had been talking about whether Smith *A* would come tonight). They will almost certainly include facts about *S* herself, facts about her abilities, for instance (e.g., the fact that *S* can speak English and the fact that she is able to identify Smith *A*). They may include facts about the things that *S* said or did at the time (for instance, the fact that *S* said that she looked forward to seeing Smith *A*) or facts about what *S* had said or done earlier (for instance, the fact that she had asked whether Smith *A* was coming). Wittgenstein is clear that they may also include facts about *S*'s *dispositions*, facts about what *S would* have said and done had the circumstances been different:

> *"What makes this sentence a sentence that has to do with* him*"? "The fact that we were speaking about him."—"And what makes our conversation a conversation about* him*?"—Certain transitions we made or* would make. *(LWPP, Vol. 1 §308. My emphasis in final line. See also PI §§684, 187)*

What sorts of facts about *S*'s dispositions does Wittgenstein think may constitute criteria for *S*'s understanding the words "Smith is coming tonight" to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight? As Budd makes clear:

> *A special significance is assigned [by Wittgenstein] to how someone would express his psychological state in words: a criterion for which person my picture, image, sentence, or thought is of, or for what I intended to say, or for what I meant by what I said, is the answer I would have given to a question about my meaning. (Budd, 1984, p. 140)*

On Wittgenstein's view, the fact that *S* is disposed to respond to questioning about the content of her understanding by saying that she understands the words "Smith is coming tonight" to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight is a criterion for her having understood those words in that way.

In some cases, the content of the subject's state remains unclear despite her already having expressed her state in words. In cases of this sort, the special importance lies with facts about how the subject is disposed to respond to questioning about what she means by their words (Budd, 1989; Glock and Preston, 1995). Suppose that *S* remarks "I hope it will stop soon," but it is unclear from her remark whether she means the music coming from the other room or the pain in her leg. The fact that were we to ask her which she means, *S* would say that she means the music coming from the other room is a criterion for her having meant that she hoped the music coming from the other room will stop soon. Wittgenstein makes the analogous point about meaning one person as opposed to another when he writes:

> *What makes this utterance into an utterance about* him*?—Nothing in it or simultaneous with it ("behind it"). If you want to know whom he meant, ask him! (PPF ii, §17)*

On Wittgenstein's view, facts about *S*'s dispositions may constitute criteria for *S*'s understanding the words "Smith is coming tonight" to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight. One might wonder whether this component of Wittgenstein's view is distinctly externalist. One might think that *S*'s dispositions to respond in particular ways to questions about the content of her understanding are intrinsic properties of *S*. But if they are intrinsic properties of *S*, then there does not appear to be anything distinctly externalist about the thought that *S*'s understanding is individuated in part by the fact that she is disposed to respond to questioning about the content of her understanding by saying that she understands the words "Smith is coming tonight" to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight. If the relevant disposition is an intrinsic property of *S*, then this is a thought with which the internalist can readily agree.

In fact, the relevant disposition is not an intrinsic property of *S*, on Wittgenstein's view. On that view, the facts about the broader context which play a role in individuating the content of a subject's mental states play that role under an intentional characterisation. For example, what makes it the case that *S* understands the words "Smith is coming tonight" to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight is the fact that we were *talking about* Smith *A*, the fact that she can *identify* Smith *A*, and so on. The same is true, on Wittgenstein's view, of facts about how *S* is disposed to respond to questioning about the content of her understanding. It is the fact that *S* is disposed to respond to questioning by *saying* that she understood the words to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight—and not the fact that she is disposed to respond by speaking the sentence "I understood the words to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight"—that has a role in individuating her understanding, according to Wittgenstein. Crucially though, whether or not *S*'s disposition is correctly intentionally characterised as a disposition to say that she understood the words to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight will itself depend on facts about the broader context, on Wittgenstein's view

(on the fact that we were having a conversation about Smith *A*, on the fact that *S* is able to identify Smith *A*, etc.). To the extent that the relevant disposition itself depends on facts about the broader context, it is not an intrinsic property of *S*. (I shall return to the topic of dispositions—and expand on the line of reasoning outlined here—in Section 4.2.)

Several philosophers have offered interpretations of Wittgenstein's views on rule-following which emphasise the constitutive role of one's relations to a social context.[10] Many of these interpretations extend naturally to the case of intentionality. How does the reading of Wittgenstein which I've offered in this section connect with these interpretations? The reading has a clear connection with those interpretations—see, for instance, McDowell (1992, 1984) and Stroud (2002)—which emphasise that for Wittgenstein, the relations in question are to a social context *intentionally characterised*. On these interpretations, Wittgenstein regards it as futile to try to locate the answer to "In virtue of what …" questions about meaning and intentionality—for instance, "In virtue of what does S understand the words 'Smith is coming tonight' to mean that Smith *A* is coming tonight?"—within a conception of our social practices which does not already take for granted their intentional character—take for granted, for instance, that ours is a practice of following the rule *add 2* or of using "red" to mean *red*. (See, for instance, McDowell, 1992, p. 50, 1984, pp. 340–341; Stroud, 2002, pp. 184 ff.) Moreover, the view that there is *no* fact in virtue of which, say, S understands "Smith is coming tonight" in one way and not the other (the view which, for instance, Kripke, 1982 ascribes to Wittgenstein) is, in part, a misguided response to this futility.

The reading I have sketched sits naturally alongside non-reductionist readings like McDowell's and Stroud's. It too stresses the significance of an intentionally characterised social context. But it goes beyond those readings by detailing the positive aspects of Wittgenstein's views about intentionality.[11] Some philosophers—including some impressed by non-reductionist readings—take Wittgenstein to eschew *any* kind of positive project in relation to meaning, rule-following, or intentionality. According to these philosophers, Wittgenstein's view is that the correct response to the sorts of "In virtue of what …" questions we've been considering is simply to work towards their dissolution by treating the philosophical confusion(s) which give rise to them. Once this has been achieved, the philosopher's work is done; it does not remain for her to provide a substantive account of the target phenomena.

I accept that there are prominent deflationary or anti-explanatory motifs in Wittgenstein's later work. But there are undeniably passages—including those cited above—in which we do find Wittgenstein expressing substantive views. Granted, these views might not amount to a *theory* of intentionality; indeed, they may be decidedly anti-theoretical in both spirit and scope. But they are nevertheless constructive, and they can—and to my mind should—inform our contemporary thinking about intentionality.

4 | SOCIAL EXTERNALISM WITHOUT *MISUNDERSTANDING*

4.1 | A thought experiment

Twin earth-style thought experiments do appear in Wittgenstein's later work. Consider, for instance, the following two passages:

> *Let us imagine a god creating a country instantaneously in the middle of the wilderness, which exists for two minutes and is an exact reproduction of a part of England, with everything that is going on there in two minutes. Just like those in England, the people are pursuing a variety of occupations. Children are in school. Some people are doing mathematics. Now let us contemplate the activity of some human being during these two minutes. One of these people is doing exactly what a mathematician in England is doing, who is just doing a calculation.—Ought we to say that this two-minute-man is calculating? Could we for example not imagine a past and a continuation of these two minutes, which would make us call the processes something quite different? (RFM VI, §35)*

> *Now suppose I sit in my room and hope that N.N. will come and bring me some money, and suppose one minute of this state could be isolated, cut out of its context; would what happened in it then not be hoping?—Think, for example, of the words which you may utter in this time. They are no longer part of this language. And in different surroundings the institution of money doesn't exist either. (PI §584)*[12]

There are obvious similarities between the thought experiments which are set out in these passages and the arthritis case. Like the arthritis case, Wittgenstein's thought experiments encourage the thought that two subjects who are in certain important respects indiscernible, but who happen to be situated in contexts which are relevantly different, could differ with respect to their mental states. However, there are also important differences. For instance, as noted above, Burge is explicit that we are to imagine individuals who have indiscernible histories, non-intentionally described. In comparison, neither of Wittgenstein's thought experiments involve us imagining subjects who are indiscernible in this respect. Rather, we are to imagine subjects who are in certain respects indiscernible for a specified period of time—2 min in the case of the first thought experiment, 1 min in the case of the second. A further difference is that neither of Wittgenstein's thought experiments is addressed primarily to the content of the speaker's mental states. The first thought experiment is addressed primarily to the activity of calculating, the second to the propositional attitude of hoping.[13] But given our discussion in the previous section, we can see that there is no principled reason why Wittgenstein does not give arguments structurally identical to the arguments put forward in these passages, but which are addressed primarily to mental content instead of mental attitudes and activities. Indeed, the following thought experiment—modelled on the thought experiment which he actually puts forward in *Investigations* §584—seems congenial to Wittgenstein's view.

Suppose that Ed belongs to a community in which there is an extant practice of using the word "money" to express the concept money. Imagine that Ed is a competent participant in this practice: He has undergone the appropriate training and uses the term "money" regularly, confidently, and more than often correctly. Suppose that Twin Ed belongs to a Twin Earth community in which there is no extant practice of using the word "money" to express the concept money. Further, suppose that in Twin Ed's community, there is no institution of money.[14] People simply trade goods and services. On Twin Earth, the word "money" refers to works of art which are indiscernible in appearance, feel, weight, and so on, from bank notes and coins in Ed's community. Suppose that these works of art are among the things which are traded for goods and services on Twin Earth. I take it that these considerations give us good reason to think that in Twin Ed's community, the term "money" does not express the concept money, but some other concept—the concept twin money, say. Let us suppose that Twin Ed is a competent participant within his community's practice. He has undergone the appropriate training and uses the term "money" regularly, confidently, and more than often correctly.

Let us suppose that for a period of 2 min, Ed and Twin Ed are engaged in the same behaviour and have the same things come before their mind, where these things are non-intentionally characterised. Suppose that during this period, both Ed and Twin Ed utter the words "N.N. will come and bring me some money today." We can readily imagine a broader context which would prompt us to say that Ed uses these words to express the belief that N.N. will come and bring him some *money* today. We know that Ed is a competent speaker with respect to the term "money." Let us suppose that he uttered these words in the context of a conversation about money, perhaps in response to a question about the state of his finances, and that he was searching through his wallet as he answered the question. Suppose further that Ed is disposed to explicate his meaning in a particular way: Were we to ask Ed what he means by "money," he would reply that he means currency. Given this broader context, it seems right to say that Ed uses the words "N.N. will come and bring me some money today" to express the belief that N.N. will come and bring him some *money* today.

In comparison, we can readily imagine a broader context which would prompt us to say that Twin Ed uses these words to express the belief that N.N. will come and bring him some *twin money* today. We know that Twin Ed is a

competent speaker with respect to the term "money." Perhaps Twin Ed uttered these words in the context of a conversation about tradeable goods, in response to a question about whether he had any such goods, and that he was searching through the pouch in which he keeps such goods as he answered the question. Suppose further that Twin Ed is disposed to explicate his meaning in a particular way: Were we to ask Twin Ed what he means by "money," he would reply that he means works of art. Given this context, it seems right to say that Twin Ed uses the words "I have no money" to express the belief that he has no twin money.

The conclusion of the thought experiment, then, is that: first, two subjects, who for a period of time are in important intrinsic respects indiscernible, can nevertheless differ with respect to the content of their mental states; and second, that in at least some such cases this difference is attributable to differences in the practices of the socio-linguistic communities within which the individuals are respectively situated. In this way, the thought experiment supports social externalism's driving intuition. Unlike the arthritis case, however, this thought experiment (hereafter the *money case*) supports this intuition without relying on *Misunderstanding*.[15] In setting up the thought experiment, we did not assume that either Ed or Twin Ed misunderstand the concepts which they use the term "money" to express.

4.2 | Defending the thought experiment

Although the money case does not rely on *Misunderstanding*, there are claims on which it does rely. These claims are as follows:

> First claim: *The difference in Ed and Twin Ed's mental content is not ultimately attributable to differences in their non-intentionally characterised dispositions.*
>
> Second claim: *Whether Ed and Twin Ed's non-intentionally characterised dispositions are appropriately intentionally characterised in one way rather than another depends on facts about the broader context.*
>
> Third claim: *The difference in Ed and Twin Ed's mental content is not ultimately attributable to differences in their non-intentionally characterised intrinsic histories.*

In this section, I shall briefly defend these claims. First, however, let me say a little more about why the money case relies on them.

We assumed that Ed and Twin Ed differ with respect to the way in which they are disposed to explicate their meaning, where these dispositions are intentionally characterised. Let us suppose that they are also differently disposed to explicate their meaning, where these dispositions are *non-intentionally* characterised. For instance, suppose that Ed is disposed to respond to questioning about what he means by "money" by uttering the sentence "I mean currency." Suppose, meanwhile, that Twin Ed is disposed to respond by uttering the sentence "I mean works of art." If the difference in content is ultimately attributable to this difference (or to differences like it), and if we grant that non-intentionally characterised dispositions are intrinsic properties of speakers, then the thought experiment does not show that differences in socio-linguistic practices can bear constitutively on differences in mental content. Thus, the thought experiment relies on the claim that the difference in content is *not* ultimately attributable to differences in the non-intentionally characterised dispositions of Ed and Twin Ed (*First claim* above).

The thought experiment also relies on the thought that whether Ed and Twin Ed's non-intentionally characterised dispositions are appropriately intentionally characterised in one way rather than another depends on facts about the broader context (*Second claim* above). The broader contexts within which it seems right to attribute to Ed and Twin Ed beliefs about money and twin money, respectively, include facts about the way in which they are disposed to explicate their meaning, where these dispositions are intentionally characterised. One might agree that these facts play an individuating role with respect to the content of Ed and Twin Ed's beliefs—indeed, one might think that the

difference in the content of their beliefs is to be explained *wholly* in terms of the difference between these intentionally characterised dispositions (or partly in terms of this difference and partly in terms of differences between certain other of their intrinsic properties). But one might be convinced that intentionally characterised dispositions are intrinsic properties of subjects. Again, to someone so minded, the thought experiment does not show that differences in socio-linguistic practices can bear constitutively on differences in mental content. The most promising way for the defender of the thought experiment to block this line of reasoning is, in my view, to defend the view that intentionally characterised dispositions are (at least in part) externally individuated.

The third claim on which the thought experiment relies concerns the relevance (or irrelevance) of non-intentionally characterised differences between Ed and Twin Ed's respective pasts for the individuation of their present mental contents (*Third claim* above). The thought experiment does not involve us imagining that Ed and Twin Ed have lived lives which are indiscernible in every non-intentionally characterised intrinsic respect in the period leading up to the 2 min. One might think: first, that there must be *some* such differences between these lives, if Ed and Twin Ed are indeed as I've described them (fully competent participants within their respective community's practices); and second, that for all the thought experiment shows, it might be these differences which explain the difference in the content of their present mental states. If these claims are well founded, then the money case is not really an argument for social externalism. After all, it's perfectly consistent with internalism that past intrinsic properties of a speaker might play an individuating role with respect to the content of their present mental states. The most promising strategy for defending the thought experiment against this line of reasoning is, I maintain, to defend the claim that the difference in content is *not* ultimately attributable to differences in the non-intentionally characterised intrinsic histories of Ed and Twin Ed (if indeed there are such differences).

I turn now to the defence of the three claims identified above.

4.2.1 | Defence of *First claim*

There are two separate, broadly Wittgensteinian reasons for thinking that the difference in content cannot ultimately be attributable to differences in Ed and Twin Ed's non-intentionally characterised dispositions. The first is that Ed and Twin Ed's non-intentionally characterised dispositions are not criteria of the relevant sort; they are not considerations which warrant us in ascribing to Ed and Twin Ed beliefs about money and twin money, respectively. The fact that if you were to ask me what I mean by "blue" I would utter the words "I mean the colour of the sky" is not typically good grounds for ascribing to me beliefs involving the concept *blue*. Compare the fact that if you were to ask me, I would respond by saying *that I mean the colour of the sky*. Facts about how individuals would respond to questioning about what they mean are sometimes criteria for their believing that p as opposed to that q, but only under an intentional characterisation.

The second reason is that it cannot be solely in virtue of my being disposed to respond to a question about my meaning by uttering, say, "I mean currency" in virtue of which I have beliefs involving the concept money. After all, this disposition is neither necessary nor sufficient for my having beliefs involving the concept money. It is not necessary because I could have beliefs involving that concept even if I'm not disposed to respond to questioning in this way. (Suppose, for instance, that I don't know what "currency" means or that I have erroneous beliefs about what it means or about what my listeners understand it to mean.) The disposition is not sufficient because I could be disposed to respond in this way and yet *not* have beliefs involving the concept money. (Suppose, for example, that I mean by "money" twin money and believe "currency" to be synonymous.) Clearly, the situation will not be improved by compounding non-intentionally characterised dispositions, for the point applies generally. For any set of non-intentionally characterised dispositions, it's possible: first, to possess that set and yet not to have beliefs involving the relevant concept; and second, to have beliefs involving the relevant concept and yet to fail to possess the set.[16]

4.2.2 | Defence of *Second claim*

The thought experiment relies on the claim that whether a non-intentionally characterised disposition is appropriately intentionally characterised in just this way depends on facts about the broader context; intentionally characterised dispositions are not intrinsic properties of a speaker. One way to defend this claim is by way of a thought experiment analogous to the money case.[17] Suppose that two subjects, who for a period of 2 min are engaged in the same behaviour and have the same things come before their mind, where these things are non-intentionally characterised, have for the 2-min period the same non-intentionally characterised disposition—the disposition to utter "I mean currency" when asked what they mean by the term "money." But let us suppose that these subjects are situated in relevantly dissimilar socio-linguistic contexts. Subject A is situated within a social context in which "currency" means money. Subject A is a competent participant in this practice, and so forth. Subject B, meanwhile, is situated in a social context in which "currency" means works of art of such-and-such an appearance, is a competent participant in that practice, and so on.

Plausibly, the thing to say in the case of Subject A is that the target disposition is correctly intentionally characterised as a disposition to *say that one means currency*. The thing to say in the case of Subject B, in comparison, is that the target disposition is correctly characterised as a disposition to *say that one means works of art of such-and-such an appearance*. But the only relevant difference concerns the socio-linguistic context in which they are respectively situated. So it is this difference to which we should attribute the difference between the intentional characterisations the target disposition receives in the two cases.

4.2.3 | Defence of *Third claim*

The final claim to consider is that the difference in Ed and Twin Ed's mental content is not ultimately attributable to differences in their non-intentionally characterised intrinsic histories. Considerations analogous to those to which appeal was made in defending the first claim can be utilised in a defence of this third claim. First, non-intentionally characterised facts about a subject's history are not usually considerations which warrant us in ascribing to that subject particular beliefs in the present. To take an example, the fact that when I was originally taught the meaning of the word "red," a red image came before my mind is typically not a criterion on the basis of which one is warranted in ascribing to me beliefs in the present involving the concept red. Compare the intentionally characterised fact that when taught the meaning of the word "red," *I understood "red" to mean red*.

Second, suppose that there is some difference between the non-intentionally characterised histories of Ed and Twin Ed, respectively. Suppose, for instance, that when taught the meaning of the word "money," Ed uttered the words: "Now I understand! 'Money' means currency." Suppose, in comparison, that when taught the meaning of the word "money," Twin Ed uttered the words: "Now I understand! 'Money' means work of art of such-and-such an appearance." It can't be this difference in virtue of which Ed and Twin Ed have beliefs about money and twin money, respectively, in the present. After all, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for one to have beliefs in the present involving the concept money or the concept twin money, respectively, that one uttered these words in the past. It is not necessary, because clearly one can have beliefs in the present involving, for example, the concept money even if one didn't happen to utter these words when taught the meaning of the word "money." It is not sufficient, because someone can have responded in this way and yet not have beliefs in the present involving the concept money. (Perhaps they meant something idiosyncratic by "currency." Or perhaps in the present, they have misremembered what the word "money" means.)

These considerations may not block all the possible objections to the three claims delineated above. But they do show those claims to be plausible.

5 | CONCLUSION

Burge and Wittgenstein's views about intentional content have rarely been discussed in relation to one another.[18] This is unfortunate, given the prima facie similarities between them.[19] One of the aims of this paper has been to bring these views into dialogue. A further aim has been to demonstrate that, contrary to what some philosophers have suggested, social externalism does not rely on *Misunderstanding* (or any comparable principle). Strands of thought in Wittgenstein's later work provide the basis for a form of social externalism which does not presuppose that speakers can have thoughts involving concepts which they misunderstand. This is a welcome result, for *Misunderstanding* is a contested principle and arguments for social externalism which rely on it have tended to have limited scope.

Further work might involve testing the Wittgensteinian view against the sort of objections which have been thought to cause problems for Burge's externalism—for example, objections from slow-switching and self-knowledge.

ENDNOTES

[1] One can endorse internalism without thereby committing oneself to any particular account of what it is for a property to be intrinsic. For two such accounts, see David Lewis (1983) and Rae Langton and David Lewis (1998).

[2] To be clear, I am not defending the view that Wittgenstein is an externalist. Asking about the relevance of components of Wittgenstein's thought for contemporary debates is not the same as asking about the application which Wittgenstein himself would have made of those components within the context of those debates. I acknowledge that there are prominent deflationary or anti-explanatory strands in Wittgenstein's later work which would have stood in the way of his endorsing externalism. But when thinking about the relevance of particular components of that work for contemporary philosophical debates, it is a perfectly legitimate approach to put these strands to one side.

[3] This is how Burge (1979) himself puts it: "The second step of the thought experiment consists of a counterfactual supposition. We are to conceive of a situation in which the patient proceeds from birth through the same course of physical events that he actually does, right to and including the time at which he first reports his fear to his doctor. Precisely the same things (non-intentionally described) happen to him" (pp. 77–78).

[4] It falls beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive account of what it is to misunderstand a concept. But I take paradigmatic cases of misunderstanding to involve two sorts of errors. The first sort are errors about what is necessarily true or necessarily false of those things which come under the extension of the concept. I've made an error of this sort if, for instance, I believe that the sentence "Pencils are made from wood" expresses a necessary truth about pencils. The second sort are errors about what the experts or fully competent subjects hold to be necessarily true or false of those things which fall under the concept's extension. If I believe that most competent speakers believe that "Pencils are made from wood" expresses a necessary truth about pencils, then I've made an error of this sort. I take these two errors to be individually necessary and jointly sufficient for misunderstanding.

[5] The *locus classicus* for the idea that deferring to the experts might play an individuating role with respect to the meaning of one's words is, of course, Putnam (1975).

[6] To get a sense of those reasons, see Georgalis (1999) and Crane (1991).

[7] *Deference* is also contested, although to a lesser extent. According to Akeel Bilgrami (2012), for instance, "All that deference amounts to … is that [the subject] will change his linguistic behaviour and adopt [the behaviour of the experts]. He will start speaking as they do" (p. 108). On a view of this sort, *Deference* is false; deferring to the experts *cannot* bring it about that one uses a word to express that concept which the experts standardly use it to express. What it can do is bring it about that a subject adjusts his use of a word so that it is in closer accord with expert usage.

[8] See, for instance, PI §§ 139, 663.

[9] "… 'Understanding' is not the name of a single process accompanying reading or hearing, but of more or less interrelated processes against a background, or in a context, of facts of a particular kind, viz. the actual use of learnt language or languages." (PG 74)

[10] See, for instance, Kripke (1982), Stroud (2002), McDowell (1992, 1984), Brandom (1994), and Malcolm (1995).

[11] For discussions of Wittgenstein's views which similarly stress this positive aspect, see Child (2011) and Glock and Preston, (1995).

[12] See also RFM VI, §35.

[13] I say that neither thought experiment is addressed *primarily* to the content of a speaker's mental states. The final line of the second passage is clearly meant to encourage the reader towards a conclusion about the content of the 1-min extract of Wittgenstein's state. The conclusion is that if the context within which we are situating this extract is one within which the institution of money does not exist, then, regardless of whether the state would be correctly described as a state of hoping, the content of the state would not be *that N.N. would come and give me some money*.

[14] Note that the thought experiment does not rely on the claim that there is no extant practice, in Twin Ed's community, of using the word "money" to express the concept money because that community fails to satisfy a necessary condition for having the concept, namely, its having the institution of money. I imagine Twin Ed's community without the institution of money, and with an institution of trading goods and services, simply to *motivate* the claim that they use the term "money" to express some concept besides money. But our imagining his community in this way is not essential for the thought experiment.

[15] Note that it doesn't rely on *Deference* either. The thought experiment would go through even if we assume that Ed and Twin Ed are expert speakers.

[16] A referee asks how forceful these considerations might be against a dispositionalist like Horwich. I think the basic objection holds, although demonstrating that it does requires more space than I can devote to it here. In outline, the objection might be developed as follows. A key component of Horwich's (1998) view is that a word means what it does—the word "blue" means blue, for instance—in virtue of the fact that uses of the word are regulated by, and explained in terms of, a basic semantic acceptance property—a property that "designates the circumstances in which certain specified sentences containing the word are accepted" (p. 45). The basic semantic acceptance property associated with the term "blue," for instance, is, roughly, the disposition to apply "blue" to an observed surface when and only when it is clearly blue (1998, p. 45). On Horwich's view, then, our meaning blue by "blue" is constituted by our having a certain non-intentionally characterised disposition. But is the possession of this disposition really sufficient for our words having the meaning which they do? It seems not. Suppose that a surface is *bleen* if and only if it is blue at or before t or green after t, for some time in the very remote future t (Kripke, 1982, p. 20, fn. 15; Miller, 2003, p. 167, fn. 7). One might, it seems, be disposed to apply the term "blue" to an observed surface when and only when it is clearly blue, and yet mean bleen by "blue." (If t is sufficiently far in the future, one lacks the disposition to apply "blue" to surfaces which appear green after t—one will be long since dead by the time t comes around.) But then, having this disposition cannot be sufficient for using "blue" to mean blue.For a more thoroughgoing presentation of this style of objection to Horwich's account, see Miller (2003). See also Kripke (1982, pp. 22–37) and Horwich (1995).

[17] Because the defence of this claim involves imagining a case structurally similar to the money case, it is vulnerable to the same objections. Hence, my defence of this claim relies on my defence of *First claim* and *Third claim*.

[18] For exceptions, see Glock and Preston, (1995) and Pettit (1983).

[19] Burge himself has noted these similarities. See, for example, Burge (2007, p. 6).

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