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## BURGEONING SKEPTICISM

ABSTRACT. This paper shows that the resources mobilized by recent arguments against individualism in the philosophy of mind also suffice to construct a good argument against a Humean-style skepticism about our knowledge of extra-mental reality. The argument constructed, however, will not suffice to lay to rest the attacks of a truly global skeptic who rejects the idea that we usually know what our occurrent mental states are.

### 1.

In a number of papers Tyler Burge has argued against a position in the philosophy of mind he has called 'individualism'.<sup>1</sup> Individualism is the doctrine that for every thinking individual there is a non-intentional description of it that mentions nothing external to that individual, whether physical, social, or psychological, and is sufficiently detailed to determine fully its intentional states. Burge's papers have attracted a great deal of attention, but the exact consequences of the anti-individualist program he is developing are not yet entirely clear. In one of his papers Burge suggests that an anti-skeptical argument could be developed from anti-individualist resources.<sup>2</sup> Whether Burge's claim is justified, however, depends, as we shall see, upon one's construal of skepticism. Not all versions of skepticism are equally vulnerable to anti-individualist rebuttals.

I shall argue that the resources of anti-individualism do allow a cogent reply to one long popular form of skepticism, namely a Humean skepticism which questions our knowledge of anything beyond our immediate mental state. This form of skepticism, however potent it has been historically, is not the most virulent form of the infection. I shall argue further that the argument against skepticism generated by anti-individualism will not be able to rebuff the stronger skepticism which is unwilling even to grant us knowledge of our immediate mental states. The conclusion, therefore, is that if we know what we think, then we know extra-mental reality as well. The only coherent form of general skepticism left, therefore, is one which denies that we even know what we think.

I shall first set out the argument against Humean skepticism; examining it in greater detail will lead us to see why it cannot meet the problem posed by absolutely global skepticism.<sup>3</sup>

There are decided historical reverberations in the strategy of the argument we will investigate. Kant's reply to Hume, in its barest outline, is that in order to have the knowledge of our current mental state that Hume grants we do have, we must know ourselves as participants in a coherent, causally connected, spatio-temporal ordering of entities external to us. The basic strategy of argumentation we employ is the same, though the actual arguments differ greatly. But we should also note that Kant does not seem to give us enough to regain knowledge of external mental entities: other minds. Whether Burge's resources allow us to advance beyond Kant in this regard will remain a problem that this paper will not attempt to answer.

## 2.

We start, then, with the premise that I know what I am thinking now. It seems evident that in order for me to know what I am thinking I must be able to identify my present mental state.<sup>4</sup> If I could not identify my mental state, how could I possibly know what it is?

So my knowing what my present mental state is implies that I can identify mental states. How is that done? By attributing *content* to those states. We will focus on thought contents.<sup>5</sup> It is a commonplace that we think *that p*: thinking and other mentalistic verbs commonly (though not always) take that-clauses as complements. We identify thoughts by locating them on a two dimensional grid, by specifying the *content* of the thought with a that-clause and the attitude directed upon that content with a mentalistic verb.

I can hope that my wife will return shortly, or fear that my wife will return shortly - same content, different attitude. But I can hope that my wife will return shortly and hope that my son cleans his room in time - same attitude, different content. It is clear that the ability to identify thought contents is crucial to the ability to know what one thinks.

Burge's arguments show that the identification of thought contents involves the existence of things outside the thinker. Thus, if I know what I am thinking, I must be identifying my mental state correctly,

and if the identification of mental states involves the existence of extra-mental objects, then my knowledge of my mental state must entail or presuppose the existence of other things, and my knowledge of them. That is the argument in a nutshell, but we still have a lot of filling to do.

## 3.

In order to make sure that the argument begs no questions about our knowledge of extra-mental reality, we will have to exclude certain kinds of propositional attitudes. Factive verbs like 'know' presuppose in an obvious way facts beyond the mental state attributed.<sup>6</sup> To claim that I know that my current mental state is a case of *knowledge* (of my desk, say), and therefore the Humean skeptic must be wrong, is clear, direct, and question-begging. And of course, the Humean skeptic will not admit that we generally know our factive mental states.

There is another easy move we must be careful to ignore. It is common, though controversial, to distinguish between relational or *de re* and non-relational or *de dicto* propositional attitudes. What the distinction itself distinguishes is already part of the controversy: according to some the *de re/de dicto* distinction is a distinction between kinds of beliefs, according to others it is a distinction between kinds of belief-*attributions*. On the first view, the 'ontological' interpretation of the distinction, every belief falls into one or the other class, and it is a matter of the structure of the belief itself, independently of any report, description, or attribution of the belief.

On the second view, the attributive interpretation of the distinction, it is not an objective fact about a belief whether it is *de re* or *de dicto*; intrinsically, beliefs are neither; the *de re/de dicto* distinction pertains to belief reports or attributions. One and the same belief state can be picked out by either a *de re* or a *de dicto* attribution. The difference lies in whether the attribution uses the concepts and referring expressions (or close intentional isomorphs of them) by which the subject of belief would pick out or formulate the contents of the belief, or uses concepts and referring expressions which pick out the content for the attributor (or 'objectively').

Linguistically, philosophers have adopted the somewhat artificial convention of distinguishing the *de re* and the *de dicto* by moving the *de*

*re* referent out of the complement clause and into a position where it is fairly clearly open to quantification. Thus, my son may have the belief *that Cookie Rojas was a great ballplayer*, but if my son has no more direct relation to Cookie Rojas than he has to Roy Hobbs, his belief is not relational or *de re*.<sup>7</sup> But let's say I've met Rojas, or at least seen him well enough to spot him and recognize him, and have established some direct relation to the man himself. We may then describe me by saying that I believe *of Cookie Rojas that he was a great ballplayer*, thus signaling that regardless of how one chooses to refer to Rojas, I ascribe a certain property to him, the thing itself.

According to the ontological interpretation, in a *de dicto* belief or desire the propositional complement as a whole occurs obliquely (which means that such operations as existential generalization and substitution of co-referring terms *salva veritate* are not legitimate). In a *de re* attitude, however, a referring expression or concept occurs non-obliquely, and the thought content is taken to relate directly to that referent regardless of mode of reference to it.

On the attributive interpretation of the distinction a *de dicto* attribution describes the belief "from the subject's point of view," using the terms, concepts, or referring expressions available to the subject.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, a purely *de dicto* belief attribution does not endorse the ontology of the subject's conceptual framework. In a *de re* attribution the attributor employs his or her own conceptual scheme to pick out the content of the belief. So in a *de re* attribution the ontology implicit in the attribution is endorsed and the belief content located with respect to the actual world (or what the attributor takes to be the actual world). According to this interpretation of the *de re/de dicto* distinction the significance of pulling the *de re* referring expression out of the belief complement and putting it in an easily quantifiable position is to signal that the expression is not necessarily available to the subject of belief, but does carry an ontological commitment on the part of the attributor.

On either view, *de re* beliefs or belief attributions carry ontological commitments. They therefore seem to provide an easy path to establishing the existence of something extra-mental. Given the ontological interpretation of *de re* beliefs all one need do is perform an existential generalization upon one's *de re* beliefs and voilà, there you have it. Given the attributional interpretation, we are not able to infer directly to the existence of the alleged *de re* object, but our dialectical situation is just as good. Once our interlocutor has attributed himself or someone

else beliefs *de re*, we know his ontological commitments. The good Humean skeptic will painstakingly avoid attributing to anyone any beliefs about the external world *de re*. Given either interpretation the skeptic wants to know whether I have any *de re* attitudes that are *de* any extra-mental *re*, and to assume that I do is to beg the question again. The straightforward way to deal with this problem in a non-question-begging manner is to exclude *de re* propositional attitudes from consideration. If we can answer the Humean skeptic without utilizing ontologically loaded *de re* beliefs, so much the more powerful will the answer be.

We've now made our job as difficult as we can, putting out of consideration all characterizations of our mental states that would allow us a cheap and sleazy reply to Humean skepticism. We will confine our attention to non-factive *de dicto* attitudes, attitudes which seem maximally capable of existing entirely apart from any extra-mental *res* whatsoever.

## 4.

To show that even *de dicto* attitudes involve the existence of the extra-mental I will employ a set of thought experiments used by Tyler Burge to show that "the intentional content of ordinary [*de dicto*] propositional attitudes, as indicated by obliquely occurring expressions in that-clauses, cannot be accounted for in terms of physical, phenomenal, causal-functional, computational, or syntactical states or processes that are specified non-intentionally and are defined purely on the individual in isolation from his physical and social environment".<sup>9</sup>

Here's the first thought experiment:<sup>10</sup> Suppose we have a fairly normal, everyday kind of guy, you can call him Al, who believes that aluminum is a lightweight, relatively strong metal, that boy scout cooking sets are made of aluminum, who wishes he had some aluminum foil now, and is afraid that he made a mistake by ordering aluminum gutters rather than vinyl ones for his new house. Al is not overly interested in aluminum *per se*; his involvement with it is about average.

Next, imagine a second person, just like Al (we'll call him Sal), who lives in an aluminumless world. In Sal's world there is a naturally occurring alloy which appears in that world wherever aluminum occurs in Al's, and shares most (though perhaps not all) macro-properties with aluminum. We can well imagine that Sal's life history itself is

indistinguishable from Al's in all macro-aspects. In Sal's world the language is, of course, virtually homophonous with English, and someone who quizzed Sal would discover that he apparently says that he believes that aluminum is a lightweight, relatively strong metal, that he wishes he had some aluminum foil, and that he's afraid he shouldn't have ordered aluminum gutters for the new house.

Despite this striking homophony, Sal doesn't speak English, and he doesn't have any beliefs about aluminum, Burge argues. There are two fundamental interpretive principles which would be violated if we attributed the same concepts and beliefs to Al and Sal. First, in their respective worlds we seem pushed to grant that Al's and Sal's beliefs about what they call aluminum are *true*. But if the belief that both Al and Sal would express in writing by a sign design like "The grocery store has aluminum foil" is true in each case, it cannot express the same proposition, for by hypothesis, Sal's world is aluminumless. Since there might be any number of things in Sal's world that mock the things of our world, an insistence that Al and Sal (and their comrades) have the same propositional attitudes might quickly force us to be most uncharitable to at least one group.

Second, it would seem to be impossible to explain how Sal and Al could have acquired the same propositional attitudes about aluminum, given that Sal (and everyone else in his world) has never encountered any aluminum. Concept and belief acquisition would become very mysterious enterprises on this account.

The point is that in order to figure out adequately what the mental state of Al or Sal really is, we cannot confine ourselves solely to facts, of whatever kind, defined only on them individually. We must look at their environments as well. And this is clearly not a merely epistemological constraint on what an interpreter can justifiably believe, given the evidence: Al and Sal are in different (type-different, if you will) mental states, and it is because of their relations to their wider environment.

Burge's second example has much the same point, but focuses instead on the subject's *social* rather than *physical* environment.<sup>11</sup> We will sketch it briefly. Ian has arthritis in his ankle and his wrist. He awakes one morning with a peculiar pain in his thigh and believes that his arthritis has spread to his thigh. (Only later does Ian learn that arthritis affects only joints.) Next, imagine a second situation, in which Ian's life history (for convenience we will call our counterfactual Ian 'Sian')

is again held constant, but 'arthritis', in this counterfactual situation in fact does, in the society, apply to rheumatoid ailments outside the joints as well as to those to which we apply it. Again, it is claimed, Ian and Sian do not share propositional attitudes about arthritis. This is primarily because the linguistic communities Ian and Sian belong to provide the ultimate standard for what their words mean, and therefore for what language-dependent concepts and propositional attitudes they possess.<sup>12</sup> If there is no word in Sian's linguistic community that is even extensionally equivalent to 'arthritis', it would be hard to explain how Sian, who is not trying to be creative, can have thoughts about arthritis. Again, considerations of truth and concept acquisition legislate against saying that Ian and Sian have type-identical mental states.

A major lesson of these thought experiments and their numerous relatives is that the content of one's propositional attitudes - even one's *de dicto* attitudes - is often dependent in part upon the existence and the nature of extra-mental reality. Stories like Burge's can, as far as I can tell, be told concerning virtually anything; therefore it seems fair to conclude that any expression not adequately definable in purely mental terms will depend for at least part of its semantic value upon extra-mental reality. The argument we can offer against the Humean skeptic thus runs like this:

- (1) With the Humean skeptic, we grant that we usually know what our mental state is.
- (2) Thus, we usually identify the content of our mental states correctly.
- (3) Burge's thought experiments show that the content of our mental states is determined in part by the nature of extra-mental reality and our relation to it.
- (4) Identifying the content of our mental states therefore involves determining the nature of extra-mental reality and our relation to it.
- (5) Our knowledge of our mental states presupposes our knowledge of extra-mental reality.

This is really just the skeleton of an argument; we now need to consider various objections to it and refinements that are called for.

## 5.

Just what the Humean skeptic is agreeing to in admitting that we usually know our own mental state has to be clarified. Surely it would be at best naive, and in any case hardly a piece of hard-nosed skepticism, if this meant that we had infallible knowledge of all our propositional attitudes. The Humean does not grant that we are generally right about what our dispositional states of mind are. His acknowledgement that we generally know our own state of mind is confined to our occurrent states of mind. If Harry is presently thinking about the Red Sox and thinking (in the believing sort of way) that they are the best team in baseball, then he will generally be aware of that fact.

A skeptic might try to escape the anti-Humean argument we are developing by claiming that Burge's arguments only apply to a certain set of concepts and that those concepts are not essential to specifying the contents of our propositional attitudes. Thus, suppose it turned out that an entirely phenomenal specification of our mental states were possible. In that case Burge's arguments would fail to counter Humean skepticism, for the knowledge of his own states the Humean claims would be in purely phenomenal terms. Anything not reducible to phenomenal terms would be unknowable, including the external world.

To counter such a reply and to show that Burge's arguments apply to an indispensable set of concepts we need show only that our concepts of extra-mental reality are indispensable.

It shouldn't take much to convince us that we could not abandon all concepts of extra-mental reality and still retain a usable conceptual framework. Phenomenalism attempts to show that we can reconstruct our concepts of extra-mental reality on the basis of concepts confined strictly to the mental. But phenomenalism fails, for reasons too well known to rehearse here.<sup>13</sup> Hume certainly makes no concerted attempt to abandon the concepts we normally apply to extra-mental reality. Without them, we would not be able to say (or know) what we think (or worse, we would not be able to have such thoughts at all).

## 6.

But, one might object, these thought experiments can't be right, for they prove far too much. Phlogiston doesn't exist, but surely it *might* have. We can therefore imagine two different worlds, one of which is

ours, pre-Lavoisier, and the other of which is just like the first in most macro-aspects, only the phlogiston hypothesis pans out. Burge, it would seem, would have to conclude that counterpart chemists in these two worlds (call them Cavendish and Scavendish) in fact had different concepts of phlogiston: this would be another case of a striking homophony, but no coincidence of concept. But then, it seems, phlogiston *could not* have been discovered to exist. For any researcher who genuinely discovered existent phlogiston would have a different concept of it from us, and would really have discovered something else. That is, while we can grant that phlogiston might have existed (since there is nothing conceptually incoherent about positing a world in which something exists which corresponds to our concept of phlogiston) Burge seems to be committed to the idea that phlogiston could not have been discovered to exist, since there is something conceptually incoherent in the supposition that there is a possible world in which someone possesses our concept of phlogiston, and in which that concept does properly apply to a kind of stuff in that world.

Similarly, we have discovered that electrons are one of the kinds of micro-constituents of matter, but it seems possible for that not to be the case. Burge's thought experiments applied to such a case seem to indicate that in a non-electron world, scientists would be operating with a different conception of electron. Thus we could not have discovered that electrons do not exist.

Burge seems to propose a simple explanation of how it is we can say that we might have discovered phlogiston.<sup>14</sup> First we need to distinguish those things to which we stand in an "appropriately direct epistemic relation" from those to which our epistemic relation is indirect. Then, as long as our thoughts or statements retain sufficient contact with the world through direct epistemic relations, we can still understand how apparent reference to or concepts of non-existent things can occur among the terms or concepts which bear an only indirect relation to the world.

Burge says little to unpack the notion of an appropriately direct epistemic relation, so we will have to do some of that work for him. Clearly, many of our terms are introduced or used on the basis of their relations to other terms. Most particularly, theoretical terms like 'phlogiston' first acquire a use through such relations. Presumably what Burge has in mind is that a term like 'phlogiston' is introduced as a

theoretical term with connections to other, non-theoretical terms, and is applied to the world in a derivative manner. When using the non-theoretical terms (in phlogiston's case, terms like 'burning', 'ash', 'air', etc.) we presumably stand in an "appropriately direct epistemic relation" to the world. Then, I assume the story must run, we fix the reference of our theoretical, indirect terms by means of the non-theoretical, directly applied terms. And sometimes it turns out that the attempted reference fixing in fact secures no reference.

What must the characteristics of an epistemic relation be in order for it to be appropriately direct? It is tempting to think that such a relation must be quite strong, providing the epistemic state of the subject with all the properties traditionally attributed to the foundation of our knowledge. After all, if Burge can use the indirectness of our epistemic relation to phlogiston or electrons to escape the conclusion that we could not/had to discover their existence, he will not be similarly freed from such a conclusion about those entities to which we stand in epistemically direct relations. If we stand in an epistemically direct relation to fire, then fire does exist, and most of the time our reports of its presence would have to be accurate, I assume, although we may be capable of any number of mistakes in our characterization of fire.

But I don't believe Burge intends to make epistemic directness a pillar of a foundationalist epistemology. In order to make epistemic directness the ground for a strong foundationalism, Burge would have to make a strong distinction between theoretical and observation terms, and that has been shown to be at best a very difficult enterprise. It would also mean that certain sentences or beliefs would always have to be saved in the confrontation of theory and experience, another formerly popular but currently discredited belief. Epistemic directness need ground no epistemic state stronger than a defeasible, corrigible non-inferential observation report. I stand in an "appropriately direct epistemic relation" to those entities upon which I can directly report.<sup>15</sup> It certainly need not be maintained that my reports must always be true, nor even that the terms of my reports be immune to revision or even rejection.

There is no need to insist that direct reports must have a certain kind of content either; no particular set of entities must be reserved as those about which we can make direct reports. What our direct reports or non-inferential perceptual beliefs are about will be determined to an important extent by what there is out there around us. It is necessary

that at any time some beliefs or reports can be treated as direct, observation reports or perceptual beliefs, (otherwise it would be hard to attribute empirical knowledge at all), but there is no antecedently privileged set of such reports or terms to be used in them. If interpretation is to be constrained by the requirements that concept acquisition be (empirically) explainable and that the conceptual scheme attributed be useful (and these seem minimal to me), then the best explanation of what set of concepts an organism has acquired will almost certainly end up stipulating that some of those concepts are what they are because of their context of acquisition and employment.

Still, it could well be objected that a die-hard phlogiston-believer could well train himself to report 'phlogiston' non-inferentially whenever confronted with combustion. Wouldn't that be enough, given this construal of epistemic directness, to legislate phlogiston into existence? The solution to this puzzle lies, not in tightening the *epistemic standards* for direct reports and insisting that they be incorrigible or indefeasible, but in understanding the *role* the expressions used in direct reports play in our epistemic economy.

If we elaborate the story of Cavendish's making 'phlogiston' a term of direct report, we can see that no major threat can be derived from such a case. For, as the empirical understanding of the phenomenon reported by the term 'phlogiston' progresses, poor Cavendish would find out that he cannot maintain his prior conception of phlogiston as a kind of fluid matter, etc. Cavendish then faces two alternatives. Either 'phlogiston' is semantically determined by its place in the theory, and empirical work shows the theory not to be very fruitful, which means that he has discovered that phlogiston doesn't exist; or Cavendish retains the word 'phlogiston' to denote whatever it is that accounts for the phenomenon of combustion, and develops a new theory of phlogiston, allowing the empirical enterprise to determine the ultimate semantic value of the term. In the first case 'phlogiston' is not something in an epistemically direct relation to Cavendish; in the second it is - and what that means is that Cavendish and his comrades are willing to let some of the semantic value of the term depend on the world the term is to apply to.<sup>16</sup> Directness of epistemic relation goes along with letting the world determine part of the semantic value of the expression.<sup>17</sup>

The notion of a direct epistemic relation need not, therefore, commit us to a foundationalist epistemology. Indeed, it is clear that Burge's

"direct epistemic relation" does not carry a heavy epistemic status along with it; its major job seems rather to be semantic.<sup>18</sup>

This constitutes a partial answer to what it is possible for us to discover. We cannot discover the non-existence of those things to which we stand in some direct epistemic relation.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, it is still undetermined by the above story whether we could discover the existence or non-existence of all the many things to which we have no such 'direct' relation. Does the lack of a direct epistemic relation to something mean that its existence is indifferent for the semantics of the relevant propositional attitudes?

One of the principle points to emerge from Burge's arguments is that even the content of our non-*de re* beliefs is affected by our environment. Though there is no direct entailment between, say, our *de dicto* beliefs about aluminum and aluminum's existence, or between our beliefs about mermaids and their existence, it would be very misleading to think that they are simply independent of each other. And this result also shows that on one way of characterizing the *de re/de dicto* distinction, a way Burge himself has used, the distinction is more a matter of degree than of kind. In an earlier paper Burge himself characterized *de re* belief as follows: "A *de re* belief is a belief whose correct ascription places the believer in an appropriate nonconceptual, contextual relation to objects the belief is about".<sup>20</sup> If Burge's anti-individualist arguments are correct, it is hard to find any attitude which is not sensitive in some way to the bearer's non-conceptual, contextual relation to the world. Paradigmatic *de re* attitudes would be only the limiting case in which the appropriate non-conceptual, contextual relation is quite direct. *De dicto* attitudes totally lacking in contextual relations to the world, even if indirect, would also be shorn of relations to the paradigmatic *de re* attitudes, leaving their content radically indeterminate, too indeterminate to be able to make anything out of.<sup>21</sup>

As an example Burge explicitly considers the case of a solipsistic subject and asks "how [the solipsist] Adam *could* have propositional attitudes involving the notion of water. How are they distinguished from attitudes involving the notion of twater, or any of an indefinitely large number of other notions?"<sup>22</sup> There's no reason to think that Adam the solipsist acquired the concept of *water*, rather than the concept of some twin-earthian substance. Furthermore, why should we say that if Adam existed in our world his beliefs would be true about water, whereas if he existed on twin earth his beliefs would be false,

rather than vice-versa? The point is that all the individualistic facts about a subject do not suffice to determine his or her propositional attitudes sufficiently, at least not sufficiently to allow clear coincidence with the attitudes we possess.

One might reply that our concepts and propositional attitudes are not fully determinate and cannot be: there will always be undetermined or further determinable aspects to any concept of a finite mind. But the point remains: one of the ways in which our concepts and propositional attitudes are determined - indeed, now we see what an important factor in their determination this is - is through whatever relations to extra-mental reality they have. Lacking such an extra-mental reality, a subject's concepts or propositional attitudes would lack a crucial dimension in which they could be compared with ours. The constraints upon sensible interpretation we (almost instinctively) recognize - charity, humanity, explainability of acquisition, utility - would none of them make much sense applied to a solipsist. And such an unconstrained interpretation could only lead us to wonder whether there were anything to interpret in the first place.

Still, Burge's answer to how it is possible for someone to have concepts of non-existent entities does not itself afford an entirely satisfactory answer to what would be meant by saying that it is possible for someone to have discovered something that in fact is non-existent. Burge's treatment deals solely with the epistemic modalities involved, and there is an important metaphysical aspect of the story as well.

First, we have to distinguish between epistemic modalities and true metaphysical modalities. In the eighteenth century, for all we then knew, it was possible that phlogiston existed: this is an epistemic modality, related to what is consistent with the state of knowledge at a certain time. But at any time there will be metaphysical possibilities that are inconsistent with what we then know and metaphysical impossibilities consistent with our knowledge. If we consider these metaphysical modalities, we have to draw some subtle distinctions in the phlogiston case.

Given that we can identify ourselves with other beings in other possible worlds (including phlogiston worlds), we can say that it is (metaphysically) possible for us to have discovered phlogiston - but then one of the compensating changes we would have to take into account in identifying ourselves with the phlogiston-discoverers is a corresponding change in our concepts. In other words, if we hold

ourselves constant across possible worlds, we have to make a compensating change in our concepts in order to identify with phlogiston-worlders; but if we hold our *concepts* constant, then we can't identify ourselves metaphysically with phlogiston-worlders at all, though we can identify with them epistemically. To identify with them epistemically is to say that, whatever the metaphysical situation is, the evidential situation between us is parallel.<sup>23</sup> The state of knowledge at any time is entirely irrelevant to the metaphysical modalities, but not to epistemic modalities. The epistemic situations of Cavendish and Scavendish start out identical; their metaphysical situations do not.<sup>24</sup>

So we have to conclude that we might have discovered phlogiston in the sense that we - although possessed of different concepts - might have lived in a world in which there is phlogiston and its existence becomes known to us. But we, thinking what we do think about the world, could not have discovered phlogiston. It is a commonplace that any way in which another possible world differs from ours will entail innumerable compensatory changes in that world, but I do not think it is as widely acknowledged that among the changes required will very likely be numerous changes in the concepts our counterparts employ and in the semantics of the language they speak.

## 7.

We've so far addressed some possible objections to the first three premises of the anti-skeptical argument we've given. The fourth premise raises two different kinds of problems: first, another challenge to the notion of content we have employed, and second, problems of a more distinctively epistemological kind.

The challenge to the conception of content that has been utilized here is not, in fact, specifically a challenge to the fourth premise, for it tries to undercut the basis of the whole argument. Perhaps, the objection runs, the content of a propositional attitude is constituted by two distinct elements, one of which (narrow content) depends entirely upon the internal (purely psychological) facts about the subject, and the other of which depends upon the environment in all the ways we have been stressing (broad content).<sup>25</sup> The Humean could then claim that he grants us knowledge only of the narrow content of our mental states. Since no knowledge of broad content is assumed, the connections

to extra-mental reality that go along with broad content are not available and cannot be used to break out of the Humean solipsism.

I do not intend to get involved in the highly technical debate that has grown up around the proposed distinction between broad and narrow content. But in order to preserve a skepticism about the extra-mental - a really Humean skepticism - by making the move to narrow content, it will have to be the case that the narrow content of our attitudes can be described without mentioning anything extra-mental. For the instant a concept or name of something extra-mental is used to individuate a narrow content, it will also be possible to construct some twin-world thought experiment to demonstrate that having *that* narrow content does indeed involve the existence of something extra-mental somewhere. Only if all reference to the extra-mental is ultimately dispensable will such a consequence be avoidable.<sup>26</sup> We have noted this consequence briefly before (see above, p. 148), and that phenomenalism seems the only serious attempt at eliminating all reference to the extra-mental. But, as we also noted, phenomenalism is not acceptable.

There are two major epistemological objections the Humean skeptic would be prone to raise to the fourth premise. The Humean, or any standard empiricist, might object that we are implicitly committing ourselves to an impossible and circular epistemology in this premise, since we could know the nature of external reality and our relation to it only on the basis of inference from our knowledge of our mental states. Correlatively, on the positive side the skeptic can also object that however we know our own mental states, we do so in some direct manner that does not involve any knowledge of anything else.

The first objection stated, that premise four commits us to a viciously circular epistemology, need not detain us for terribly long. In order to make this objection stick, it has to be shown that the way in which a knowledge of the nature of extra-mental reality is involved in our knowledge of our own mental state is by serving as a premise in an argument by which we first acquire the latter belief. There are many things wrong with this empiricist picture of knowledge acquisition: it assumes a faulty (enumerative) notion of induction, it confuses the (causal) order of belief acquisition with the (logical or normative) order of belief justification, it assumes the necessity of something *given* as an epistemological foundation. The work of Sellars, Harman, Bonjour and

others has become sufficiently familiar that this charge of circularity does not have to be responded to in detail. There is simply nothing incoherent about the idea that our abilities to identify our mental states and conceptualize extra-mental reality are intrinsically correlated, developing simultaneously as we grow.

In order to make the second objection stick, the skeptic needs to give us some account of our ability to know our mental states and contents independently of any knowledge of extra-mental reality. Curiously, just such an account has been proposed by Burge himself in an effort to show that his anti-individualist arguments do not impugn the special authority of basic self-knowledge, knowledge of what one is thinking had "simply by thinking it while exercising second-order, self-ascriptive powers."<sup>27</sup>

Burge's account rests upon two fundamental premises: (1) Having knowledge that *p* does not require antecedent knowledge that the necessary conditions for that knowledge obtain. (2) In basic self-knowledge the directly reflexive relation of the knowledge of one's thought to the thought - the fact that the first-order thought is literally contained within the second-order thought - allows no possibility of error.

It is a necessary condition of thinking that aluminum is available at the store that one's aluminum-thoughts be connected with the world in certain ways. These connections with the world are therefore also necessary conditions of having knowledge that one is thinking that aluminum is available at the store, but it is not necessary that one *know* that these conditions obtain in order to have that piece of self-knowledge. The subject of self-knowledge does not have to pick out his own mental states by reference to their connections with any other things, he can pick (at least some of) them out directly by having them in a reflexively aware way.

While Burge's first principle is surely unexceptional, it is not as strong as Burge seems to think. He defends this principle in part through an analogy between self-knowledge and perceptual knowledge.

It is a fundamental mistake to think that perceptual knowledge of physical entities requires, as a precondition, knowledge of the conditions that make such knowledge possible. Our epistemic right to our perceptual judgments does not rest on some prior justified belief that certain enabling conditions are satisfied. In saying that a person knows, by looking, that there is food there, we are not required to assume that the person knows the causal conditions that make his perception possible. We certainly do not, in general, require that the person has first checked that the light coming from the food is not bent through mirrors, or that there is no counterfeit food in the vicinity.<sup>28</sup>

And it is surely right that we do not require detailed knowledge of exhaustive, specific preconditions in acknowledging someone's perceptual knowledge. We do, however, require that the perceiver have a good general appreciation of the warning signs of bad perceptual conditions. Someone who formed perceptual beliefs willy-nilly without regard to the general state of the lighting, or the noise level, or the level of hallucinogens in his blood, etc., would not be a responsible epistemic subject and would have no perceptual knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, someone who formed beliefs about her mental states without regard to the public meanings of the terms used and without regard to those interpretive principles which constrain all content assignments would be epistemically irresponsible and without any knowledge.

Burge might well reply that "one should not assimilate 'knowing what one's thoughts are' in the sense of basic self-knowledge to 'knowing what one's thoughts are' in the sense of being able to explicate them correctly",<sup>30</sup> but this is not quite what is proposed. My claim is that only someone who has at least some rudimentary knowledge of how to begin and carry on the task of explicating her thoughts can be said to 'know what her thoughts are'. And, as Burge notes, "conceptual explication ...typically requires ... reasoning from empirical observation or reflection on general principles".<sup>31</sup> Knowing one's own thoughts will require knowing at least some empirical truths, perhaps not *first* knowing those empirical truths, but at least at the same time.

Burge's thoroughly correct insistence that we need not *first* ascertain that the conditions for perceptual or self-knowledge have been satisfied in order to have perceptual or self-knowledge misleads him into thinking that perceptual and self-knowledge might be possible in the complete absence of knowledge about such conditions.

As for Burge's second principle - that there is no possibility of my being wrong about the thought I judge myself to have because it is directly contained in the judgment itself - this seems to be as strong as the principle that I could not be wrong about the thing in my hand because I can demonstrate it directly as I speak or think. But being able to hold up and point out something in my hand does not count as knowing *what* it is; similarly, exhibiting my thought to myself is not yet itself a knowledge of what that thought is. For me to know what I am saying it is not yet sufficient that I be able to exhibit the sentence I am saying, I must also be a competent speaker of the language and a competent user of those words in particular. Burge agrees: "I know

that my word 'mercury' applies to mercury (if to anything), not by being able to provide an explication that distinguishes mercury from every conceivable twin mercury, but by being a competent user of the word, whose meaning and reference are grounded in this environment rather than in some environment where the meaning of the word form would be different".<sup>32</sup> My point is that being a competent user involves at least some rudimentary explicatory powers and an understanding of the general connections between world and words. A competent language user can be *told* and not merely *trained* how to use words. Being able to isolate and exhibit an example of a sentence one has uttered is not enough to know *what one has said*; one must be able to tie that utterance into a complex pattern of behavior, including justificatory and explicative behavior, to be able to know what one has said. And *mutatis mutandis* for knowing what one thinks.

## 8.

The anti-skeptical argument presented does have one significant limitation: it is not a general argument against skepticism. An obviously crucial role is played in the argument by the first premise, the admission that we usually do know what our occurrent, non-factive, *de dicto*, mental states are. The really radical skeptic, who doubts or denies this, will find our argument unconvincing. The radical skeptic takes a stronger position than Hume ever took, but it is not a position without some motivation. Most particularly, someone beginning, à la Descartes, with the wish to ground all knowledge on some immediate and indubitable basis could go in either of two directions when confronted with our argument. The Cartesian supposes that her own knowledge of her propositional attitudes provides a sufficient foundation on which to erect the rest of knowledge, especially the otherwise dubious knowledge we have of external reality. But if such a Cartesian accepts the argument that mental state contents are in part determined by the extra-mental reality to which the subject is related, she need not maintain the original assumption that knowledge of one's mental state is privileged. On the contrary, there is just as much reason to let the doubt about the external world infect our attitude towards our own states. If we can't know for sure what's 'out there', then we won't know our own propositional attitude contents either. Descartes' First Meditation descent into the coal pit of skepticism, one could decide, didn't go far enough: he should

have realized that he could not even assume that he knew what he was thinking.

That neither Descartes nor any of his early modern successors took this route is probably due to their acceptance of a belief in natural representation, that is, their belief that the representational character of our mental states is an intrinsic, non-relational property of those states (or, if it is relational, the relation in question is taken to be a natural, non-conventional relation). This prevented them from taking the possibility of non-standard interpretations of our propositional attitude sets seriously. Some of us are no longer under the illusion that representational character is a natural property of our states, much less an intrinsic property, and we must therefore take this possibility very seriously.<sup>33</sup>

Anti-individualism seems, then, to clear a path for arguments directed against the crucial Cartesian-Humean thesis that one generally knows one's mental state. But given that there will always be numerous alternatives that I cannot distinguish from my present situation and that these could make a difference to the content of my thought, how could I ever hope to know my thoughts? If I cannot tell whether water is H<sub>2</sub>O, XYZ, or some other arcane substance, how can I know what my belief about water really is? If knowing what x is entails being able to distinguish x from all other alternatives, then I will never know what I believe until I can distinguish my world from all other alternatives.

We must reject the principle that knowing x entails being able to distinguish x from all other alternatives - we must at least put some condition of relevance on those alternatives<sup>34</sup> - but this train of thought does point to the ultimate self-destruction of Cartesian epistemology and the philosophy of mind it presupposes. There are no privileged beginning points, knowledge of which is unproblematic and prior to all other knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

The belief that psychology is just another area of natural knowledge and not a special area with an entirely idiosyncratic status re-unites mind and world, sapping questions about our knowledge of the 'external' world of their force. It does not rule out skepticism altogether by any means.<sup>36</sup> But a position that rules out all skepticism would almost certainly be too strong.

Our argument does fail against the radical skeptic, but we should remember how radical that skepticism is. The argument does answer skeptics of Humean stripe; and it is well to remember that it accounts

for how it is that we can apparently communicate so effectively with each other (since we share a common context).

Another salutary corollary to the argument presented in this paper is that it seems natural to extend the conclusion by claiming that our knowledge of our own mental states is not only conditioned by our knowledge of extra-mental reality, but coordinate with it. As we learn more about the world, we also learn more about ourselves. I do not have the time here to unfold a full argument for this position, however.

One who accepts our anti-skeptical argument can cite one's knowledge as a (partial) explanation of apparent success in maneuvering around in the environment. If we accept the fact that our beliefs constitute part of the explanation of our actions, it seems probable that very few believe a strong skepticism, for very few act on such a belief. We probably couldn't act on such a belief, for the whole intentional structure of action itself is thrown into question by such a skepticism. Reject the argument we have given, adopt a skeptical attitude towards our knowledge of our own mental states, and one has to admit that one is not even sure one is a skeptic, since one's beliefs and assertions might not be at all what one takes them to be. Of course, to make a claim that entails that one's claim might be very different from what it seems, might not even be a claim at all, is not yet self-defeating - but the victory would not only be Pyrrhonist, but Pyrrhic.<sup>37</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Burge (1979, 1982, 1983); Others who have contributed to this debate include Hilary Putnam (1975); Lynne R. Baker (1986, 1987).

2. More recently, however, Burge disclaims this idea, saying, "there is no easy argument against skepticism for anti-individualism and authoritative self-knowledge" Burge (1988, p. 655n). This paper aims to show in part that Burge disavows the possibility of such an argument because he retains the essentially Cartesian idea that first person knowledge has a more basic authority than other kinds of knowledge.

3. See Pappas (1978), whose useful taxonomy of forms of skepticism I employ here.

4. Presumably what I am now thinking is but one aspect of my more complex total mental state, which will include perceptual and unconscious aspects as well. Knowledge of my total mental state at any time is probably rare, and not what the Humean skeptic grants. The Humean, I take, grants only that we tend to know what our current and occurrent, conscious thought and sensory state is. I shall use 'mental state' therefore in a restricted way to single out just those aspects of my total mental state.

5. One could also say that we describe our sensory states by attributing them contents - sense contents - but I think there are good reasons for believing that this usage promotes confusion between sensory states and intentional states. There are some parallels, namely that the vocabulary in which we describe both sense and thought contents is essentially the same as the vocabulary with which we describe the external world. But there are

numerous other disanalogies, such as the fact that sense contents are normally described by mentioning their standard cause, but we cannot claim that thought contents bear this relation to their purported objects. These disanalogies have been made sufficiently familiar to us by the work of Chisholm and Sellars.

6. Other factive verbs include 'foresee', 'regret', 'remember', 'realize'.

7. Why some beliefs and not others are *de re* is not clear. A common story is that *de re* beliefs involve some direct causal relation between the subject of the belief and the *res de* which it is. But a case could also be built for the idea that *de re*ness depends upon the role the belief plays in the subject's mental economy: how immune to which kinds of revision, etc. The causal connection story seems most popular right now, and I will assume that something like it is correct. However, which causal relations might be direct enough or strong enough to ground a *de re* belief rather than a *de dicto* belief is terribly unclear. There seems to be widespread agreement that being able (or having been at one time able) to single out the referent indexically suffices to make the beliefs thereby acquired (or the subsequent beliefs strongly connected to them) *de re*. But I don't know of any argument to show conclusively that indexical reference is either necessary or sufficient to establish *de re*ness, or even that it is the causal connection via perception that supports the *de re*ness. Presumably there would be some devious (highly convoluted but still natural or causal) relation between my son and Cookie Rojas, whereas there is no non-intentional relation between him and Roy Hobbs, the fictional hero of *The Natural*.

8. We have to be a bit careful here, for we don't want to require strict duplication of the subject's language in order to attribute beliefs *de dicto*. I can attribute a belief *de dicto* to someone who knows no English. In this sense *de dicto* attributions are not strictly *de* some *dictum*. To treat this matter technically, we might employ Sellarsian dot quotes to make this clearer. To attribute Irmgard the belief *de dicto* that London is a large city is to say she believes a · London is a large city., even though Irmgard might not be familiar with the English word 'London'.

9. Burge (1983, p. 296).

10. This form of the thought experiment is the one emphasized in Burge (1982).

11. This is the thought experiment that gets spelled out most fully in Burge (1979).

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12. I am not sure there are really any language independent concepts or propositional attitudes, but it is difficult to know what to say about animals. It does seem pretty clear that a huge number (probably most - but how could we count?) of the concepts and propositional attitudes we humans have essentially involve the kind of cognitive sophistication which can be developed only by a language-using being.

13. Though there are a few scattered phenomenologists still fighting, most have succumbed to the attacks of Roderick Chisholm (1957), Wilfrid Sellars, (1963b), and others.

14. Burge's very compressed arguments appear on pp 114-116 of Burge (1982). Burge seems concerned with explaining briefly our ability to make apparent reference to nonexistent things, which is not quite the same problem as that raised by the peculiarities of possibly discovering something that is in fact non-existent.

15. If talking of the ability to report directly seems overly linguistically oriented, substitute for it the ability to acquire a (non-inferential) perceptual belief.

16. Whether an expression's role carries a direct epistemic relation to the world with it is almost certainly not something that any one person can decide.

17. This helps explain why indexicality tends to be the first kind of epistemic directness that normally springs to mind. Burge argues at length, however, that the phenomena he is concerned with are not, or at least not solely indexical.

18. Letting the semantic value of an expression depend upon the world in this way, it is interesting to note, can have the appearance of tightening epistemic standards. Since we let the world determine the complete semantic value of the expression, our conception of the entity or property in question can be fairly far off base without making our report of its presence false. Making error more difficult looks much the same, superficially, as making success mandatory.

19. It becomes clear how weak an 'epistemic' relation this is when one reflects that we could discover virtually anything else about such things, including major misunderstandings and miscategorizations of their natures.

20. Burge (1977, p. 346). This is not the only characterization of *de re* attitudes that Burge gives, but it is important for his claim that *de re*

attitudes are fundamental.

21. The reflections of the last few paragraphs seem to indicate that, contrary to his apparent practice, Burge ought to adopt the attributive, rather than the ontological, interpretation of the *de re/de dicto* distinction. On the ontological interpretation the distinction, as far as I can see, ought to be all-or-nothing, with no room for any more-or-less, for it is supposed to mark a distinction in the very kind of belief.

22. Burge (1982, p. 115).

23. This seems to presuppose that there is a metaphysically neutral description of our epistemic situations, and I have to admit that this seems problematic to me. One apparently wants to say something like: I wouldn't recognize any difference in my situation if I were transported to that other world. But can we make sense of the notion of being transported to another possible world? And is the modality used here epistemic or metaphysical?

24. One might try to answer this problem by distinguishing two assertions which differ in

the scope of the possibility operator. We might try to capture "Even though we discovered that phlogiston doesn't exist, it still might have" either (incorrectly) as:

(1) Possibly (Dw -p & p)

or (correctly) as:

(2) Dw-p & Possibly (p)

(1) is clearly false, since discovering that q implies that q. But in the case envisioned we need to go beyond distinguishing these two very different modal claims, because we are not just worried about the possibility of phlogiston's existence, we are concerned with the implications of the possibility of *discovering* that phlogiston does exist, since one of the implications of that possibility, according to the argument in question, is that a different concept of phlogiston must be employed in that world.

25. Colin McGinn (1982) defends this kind of picture. So does Jerry Fodor (1982, unpub.).

26. One could try to restrict mention of the extra-mental in our *de dicto* belief attributions: (1) Taking our cue from the Humeans and the phenomenologists, we claim that the narrow content of our propositional attitudes can be expressed completely in a vocabulary that mentions only phenomenologically accessible properties of external objects. This interpretation of narrow content has been defended by Jerry Fodor (1987).

(2) In a more naturalistic vein, we can claim that the only extra-mental items we need to mention to specify our narrow contents are those that exist at the boundary of the mental (narrow) realm and the extra-mental

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(wide) realm, namely, our sensory transducers and their states. This view has been defended by Michael McDermott (1986, pp. 277-88).

Fodor's strategy fails, as McDermott (1986) and Lynn Baker (1987) have shown.

McDermott's claim that narrow contents are about the states of our bodies is clearly not the kind of position a Humean skeptic wants, and it would also fall to Ken Taylor's (unpub.) argument that narrow contents and folk psychology are incompatible.

27. Burge (1988, p. 656).

28. Burge (1988, p. 654).

29. The full argument for this position on the structure of perceptual knowledge is obviously a long one - but it has been worked out fairly thoroughly in the works of Wilfrid Sellars and Laurence Bonjour. See Sellars (1963a) and Bonjour (1985).

30. Burge (1988, p. 662).

31. Burge (1988, p. 662).

32. Burge (1988, p. 661n).

33. The possibility of natural representation is in fact one of the Great Divides in philosophy of mind. Numerous people, such as John Searle, Fred Dretske, and Jerry Fodor (a not otherwise homogeneous group) still believe in some form of natural representation. Others, such as Quine, Dan Dennett, and Ruth Millikan, have abandoned the notion altogether. For an interesting account of this dispute see Dennett (1987).

34. Cf. Alvin Goldman (1976).

35. Thus I find it odd that Burge is still defending a basically Cartesian epistemology.

36. Anthony Brueckner (1986, p. 166), in criticizing an anti-skeptical argument of Hilary Putnam's related to the one we have proposed, concludes that it "fails in the end because it engenders a sort of skepticism about meaning or propositional content". In a footnote in his article Brueckner reports that, "Burge has indicated (in conversation) that he regarded a straightforward anti-individualist argument against skepticism as no more than a tantalizing possibility when he was writing 'Other Bodies' and is now dubious about the success of such reasoning".

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