

An A Posteriori Conception of Analyticity?

Grazer Philosophische Studien 66, 2003, pp. 119-139

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1. Introduction

Quine's attack on analyticity in "Two Dogmas" was widely considered, both by Quine and by his contemporaries, to be a simultaneous attack on the very idea of necessary truth (Quine 1951). There is, of course, a good reason for this: Quine's main target was Carnap, and Carnap had joined analyticity and necessity precisely by suggesting that the necessary, as well as the a priori, could be explained in terms of our linguistic conventions or rules. However, if there is one aspect of "Two Dogmas" that appears dated today, it is this assumption that skepticism about analyticity entails skepticism about necessity. This, of course, is due to Kripke and his well-known appeal to a non-linguistic, non-epistemic, notion of necessity (Kripke 1972). By reviving *de re* necessity, it seems, Kripke inoculated necessity from Quine's objections to the positivist notion of analyticity: Kripkean necessities are not true in virtue of meaning alone, and being a posteriori they do not seem to be at odds with Quine's holistic picture of belief revision and his skepticism about the a priori. Once Kripke freed necessity from its epistemic ties, therefore, it suddenly appeared possible to agree with everything Quine says about the positivist conception of analyticity, and yet hold on to the idea that there is an important distinction between contingent and necessary truths.

This raises an interesting question. If necessity can be freed from its epistemic ties, and the assumption that all necessary truths must be a priori is rejected, could not a similar move be made with respect to analyticity? Perhaps we can take Kripke a step

further and free *analyticity* from its ties with the a priori, thereby reinstating a notion of analyticity that is immune to Quine's attack, and compatible with his holism. That there is logical space for such a position is quite clear. Kripke follows the positivists when it comes to analyticity, and stipulates that analytic truths are a priori: "I am presupposing that an analytic truth is one which depends on *meanings* in the strict sense and therefore is necessary as well as a priori" (Kripke 1972, 122). However, in and of itself the notion of analyticity does not seem to be an epistemic notion. Or, at any rate, there are notions of the analytic that are not intrinsically epistemic.¹ Thus, while it is clear that necessity is not an epistemic notion, and equally clear that the a priori is, the analytic is up for grabs. Historically the analytic has been connected with the a priori, of course, but it seems perfectly possible to argue that this connection is just an historical accident.

Moreover, even if analyticity should be given an epistemic construal, it does not follow that there is an intrinsic link between the analytic and the *a priori*. For instance, Paul Boghossian has argued that the most interesting notion of analyticity is an overtly epistemological notion: "a statement is 'true by virtue of its meaning' provided that grasp of its meaning alone suffices for justified belief in its truth" (Boghossian 1996, 363). However, Boghossian points out that this formulation is neutral as to the question whether such knowledge need be a priori, since it does not follow from this construal of analyticity that the meaning of our terms is knowable a priori. For instance, Boghossian says, most externalist views have the implication that facts about sameness and difference of meaning are not a priori (Boghossian 1996, 367).

¹ Putnam, for instance, makes this point and argues that "Quine *confused* analyticity and a prioricity because of positivist assumptions" (Putnam 1983, p. 92). A similar point is made by Paul O'Grady, in "Analyticity and the A-priori" (unpublished MS).

In this paper I shall examine the prospects of a posteriori analyticity by taking a closer look at how it is developed by one of the foremost contemporary externalists, Tyler Burge. Burge is of particular interest since he explicitly endorses Quine's rejection of the positivist conception of analyticity, as well as Quine's epistemic holism, while at the same time subscribing to the idea that there are truths of meaning that play a philosophically important role. The reason he does not take this to be incompatible with Quine's rejection of analyticity is precisely that truths of meaning, on Burge's construal, are dependent on facts about the external world and therefore a posteriori. Although my discussion will be largely critical, I think it is clear that if there is to be an account of a posteriori analyticity, it has to be developed along the lines suggested by Burge.²

I begin, in section 2, with an account of Burge's position on analyticity, and of the connection between this and his externalism. In section 3 I examine the motivations behind Burge's account of truths of meaning, and in section 4 I spell out the implications of making such truths a posteriori. Burge's account of analyticity relies on a problematic form of essentialism, I argue, and leads to difficulties in accounting for the cognitive role of meaning and concepts. I end by suggesting that this demonstrates a broader problem with the analytic a posteriori, and that, therefore, Kripke's strategy with respect to necessity is not easily transferable to analyticity.

2. Burge on Quine and Analyticity

2.1 The Positivist Conception of Analyticity

Throughout his writings, Burge expresses a great deal of sympathy with Quine's attack on the positivist notion of analyticity. Thus, Burge wholeheartedly endorses

² It should be noted at the outset that Burge himself does not really use the phrase 'a posteriori

Quine's rejection of the idea that there are truths that are true 'purely' in virtue of meaning, independently of facts. In 1986, for instance, Burge writes: "I take it that Quine's challenge to justify a disjoint distinction between 'truths of fact'... and mere 'truths purely by virtue of meaning' – has gone unmet"(Burge 1986, 700, fn 5). And again, in 1992: "There is no ground for claiming that certain sentences are vacuously true, with no dependence on the way the world is" (Burge 1992, 6). The conception of analyticity that Burge rejects here is what Boghossian has labeled 'the metaphysical conception' (Boghossian 1996, 363). Burge and Boghossian both claim that the idea of something being true in virtue of meaning alone, independently of the way the world is, makes little sense. No support can be given, Burge argues, for a distinction between truths that depend for their truth on meaning alone, and "truths that depend for their truth on their meaning together with (perhaps necessary) features of their subject matter" (Burge 1992, 9).

However, Burge goes further than Boghossian in his endorsement of Quine. Burge also expresses sympathy for Quine's skepticism about the a priori, and subscribes to Quine's holistic picture of belief revision. Discussing the Quine-Duhem thesis that belief revision is holistic and that there is no set formula for saying which sentences within the theory might be revised, and which should be held on to, Burge continues:

In fact, the practice of empirical science suggests that virtually any scientific claim, including one that serves as a definition, is subject to possible revision in the interest of accounting for new findings...

Subsequent discussion has made it seem hopeless to claim that in every one of these cases the old definition remains true (because it is a

analyticity'. However, since he speaks of truths of meaning that can only be known a posteriori, it is

definition!) and a new theoretical notion (e.g. a new notion of atom or momentum) is introduced with the new definition. Rather, it is often the case that the old definitions are false...(Burge 1993, 313).

Burge is therefore in substantial agreement with Quine: He rejects the idea that a statement can be true in virtue of meaning alone, and he grants that belief revision is holistic in character and that purported definitions can turn out to be false. However, Burge does not take any of this to imply that there is no philosophically interesting notion of analyticity. We must, Burge suggests, distinguish between two notions of analyticity, both attacked by Quine:

Analyticity 1 = Statement S is analytic if it is true in virtue of meaning alone.

Analyticity 2 = Statement S is analytic if it is derivable from logic together with definitions.

The first notion, again, is that of metaphysical analyticity, endorsed by the positivist, and is traditionally connected with the a priori. The second notion of analyticity, however, does not imply that the truth of an analytic statement depends on meaning alone, and, Burge says, “is completely neutral on the metaphysical and epistemological status of logical truth and definitions”(Burge 1992, 10). The two notions are often run together, Burge suggests, since it is assumed that definitions are vacuously true. But there is a tradition stemming from Aristotle that rejects this assumption. On this view, Burge says, definitions state essences and so are not vacuously true, nor are they knowable a priori. Consequently, once the positivist construal of definitions is rejected, it is possible to agree with everything Quine says about the metaphysical notion of analyticity without therefore rejecting analyticity altogether.

clear that he is committed to the analytic a posteriori.

Indeed, not only does Burge suggest that Analyticity 2 can be salvaged from Quine's attack, he also suggests that it *thrives* on it. By getting rid of the idea that there are truths in virtue of meaning alone, and emphasizing the holistic character of belief revision, Burge suggests, Quine paves the way for a notion of analyticity freed from the positivist baggage. What Quine's discussion shows, by emphasizing that no statement is immune from revision, is not that there are no truths of meaning, but that truths of meaning are simultaneously truths of fact and need not be knowable a priori. Contra the positivist, truths of meaning are dubitable, even by someone who possesses the relevant concepts:

In stating a truth of meaning (however one construes the notion), one is not stating a degenerate truth. To put this crudely: in explicating one's 'meanings', one is equally stating nondegenerate truths – 'facts'. So giving a true explication is not separable from getting the facts right. It is a short step from this point to the observation that truths of meaning are dubitable (Burge 1986, 714).

2.2 Truths of Meaning and Externalism

How are we to understand the claim that stating truths of meaning involves stating 'non-degenerate' truths, genuine facts? To answer this question, we have to take a closer look at Burge's later externalism. Burge's first, and most familiar, defense of externalism occurs in 'Individualism and the Mental', where Burge argues that the meaning of an individual's words, and the contents of her thoughts, depends on the social environment, more specifically, on the linguistic conventions of her community (Burge 1979). In Burge's more recent writings, however, his focus has shifted from the social environment to the physical one. Burge now emphasizes the role physical

examples play in our linguistic practices. He discusses a central set of linguistic expressions, what he calls ‘empirically applicable terms’ – terms that apply to empirically observable objects and events, such as ‘house’, ‘chair’, and ‘knife’ (Burge 1986, 1989, and 1993). When we try to give characterizations that capture the meaning of these terms, Burge suggests, we consider examples of what we take to be archetypical applications of the term, and try to arrive at “factually correct characterizations” of these empirically accessible entities (Burge 1989, 705). The use of examples ensures that our explications are dependent on empirical facts and can be doubted, even by the most competent speakers; it ensures that there is a potential gap between our conventional or practice-based definitions, our attempts to explicate the meaning of our terms, and the real definition of the term. In this sense, thus, truths of meaning are not knowable a priori.

This shows, according to Burge, that we need to distinguish between two notions of meaning: On the one hand a practice-based notion of meaning, ‘conventional meaning’; on the other hand a notion of meaning tied to the nature of the external phenomenon in question, what Burge calls ‘translational meaning’ (Burge 1986, 714-715; Burge 1989, 181, Burge 1993, 317). Conventional meaning, Burge suggests, is determined by the use of the most competent speakers, and it provides a norm for ideal competence: We *should* use our words in accordance with the use of the most competent speakers. Translational meaning, by contrast, transcends use, and determines the correctness of the conventional meaning characterizations. It can be articulated through exact translation and through such trivial thoughts as “my word ‘tiger’ applies to tigers”, but the speaker need not be able to give any further articulation or explication of it. Corresponding to this distinction, Burge suggests, is a distinction between conceptions and concepts: My *conception* of a given object, a

knife say, is determined by the explications I would give; my *concept* of a knife, by contrast, depends on the actual nature of the object in question. Concepts, therefore, correspond to translational meaning, not to conventional meaning, and this allows for the possibility that conceptual truths are dependent on external facts and empirically discoverable.

To illustrate this Burge offers a thought-experiment concerning an empirically applicable term, 'sofa' (Burge 1986, 707-708). In this experiment we are invited to imagine the following. A in the actual world, and B in a counterfactual world, use the word 'sofa' competently. However, both proceed to develop non-standard theories about the objects in their environment called 'sofas', and start to doubt the truth of the statement "Sofas are furnishings to be sat upon". A's doubt, as it turns out, proves unfounded: It is indeed part of the nature of sofas, in the actual world, that they are furnishings to be sat upon. B's doubts, however, prove to be correct: The objects that B is confronted with look like sofas but are, in fact, works of art and would collapse under a person's weight. This implies, according to Burge, that "there are no sofas in B's situation, and the word form 'sofa' does not mean sofa"(Burge 1986, 708). A and B, despite being physically identical ('for all intents and purposes'), mean different things by 'sofa' and have different 'sofa'-concepts.

The important difference between this thought-experiment and the 'arthritis'-one, as Burge himself emphasizes, is that in this experiment there is no appeal to linguistic conventions and the speaker is not said to have an incomplete grasp of the conventional meaning of the term in question. In "Individualism and the Mental", recall, the claim that 'arthritis' has a different meaning in the counterfactual community than in the actual one, depends on the idea that there is a difference in conventions between the two communities: In the actual community it is a definitional

truth that arthritis afflicts the joints only, whereas in the counterfactual community, the word is used more widely to apply to rheumatoid ailments of the joints as well as of the ligaments. The individual in the actual community uttering ‘I have arthritis in my thigh’ is therefore exhibiting an incomplete understanding of the conventional meaning of ‘arthritis’. By contrast, in the ‘sofa’-experiment the difference in meaning derives not from a difference in conventions, but from a difference in the underlying nature of the objects referred to. A has not misunderstood the conventional meaning of ‘sofa’, Burge argues, but has simply developed a nonstandard theory about sofas. Burge suggests that this makes the argument “extremely comprehensive in its application”, since nearly anything can be the topic of non-standard theorizing: “Similar thought experiments apply to knives, clothing, rope, pottery, wheels, boats, tables, watches, houses” (Burge 1986, 709).

According to Burge, therefore, the upshot of Quine’s attack on analyticity is not that there are no truths of meaning, but that truths of meaning depend on the empirical features of the objects referred to. This dependence on the external objects implies that empirical discoveries may lead us to revise our meaning explications – even those given by the most competent speakers. Burge suggests a parallel with traditional rationalism. The characteristic tenet of rationalism, Burge says, is that by understanding conceptual relations one can gain deep and fundamental knowledge of the world. (Burge 1992, 10). Endorsing an externalist account of meaning and concepts allows us to honor this idea, Burge suggests, since it frees us from the idea that truths of meaning are a mere reflection of our conventions.

Given this sketch of Burge’s position on analyticity, let us turn to a closer examination of his neo-rationalist construal of truths of meaning. I shall focus on two

questions: What are the motivations behind Burge's neo-rationalism, and what implications does it have for meaning and concepts?

3. A Posteriori Analyticity: Motivations

Burge's principal argument in favor of his "neo-rationalist" position derives from the possibility of rationally doubting conventional definitions. In A's community it is part of the conventional characterization of the meaning of 'sofa' that sofas are furnishings to be sat upon. Nonetheless, Burge says, when A comes to doubt the truth of this characterization, his doubts are not irrational: He is not linguistically confused, nor is he ignorant of expert opinion concerning sofas. Rather, A's doubts concern empirical facts and he has simply developed a testable, non-standard theory (Burge 1986, 711). This shows, Burge suggests, that the conventional meaning characterization 'Sofas are pieces of furniture meant for sitting' cannot be vacuously true, but must be informative. Otherwise, A's doubts would indeed be irrational (Burge 1986, 715).

Burge puts this point by saying that 'thought corrects meaning', and he draws a parallel with traditional rationalism: "Our cases develop a theme from the Socratic dialogues: Thought can correct meaning. ... If new empirical facts or new insights are imported into the discussion, the background assumptions of normative characterizations may be undermined, and the characterizations themselves may be shown to be mistaken"(Burge 1986, 714). When we attempt to characterize the meaning of our words, Burge argues, we typically engage in rational argumentation of the sort displayed in Plato's dialogues: Purported definitions are examined and criticized, and better ones emerge until some form of reflective agreement is reached. To account for this dialectic, Burge argues, the positivist conception of truths of

meaning must be rejected in favor of a conception according to which truths of meaning are simultaneously truths of fact and can be subject to rational debate.

Now, it is of course correct that the positivist conception of analyticity does not, in this sense, allow for the rational dubitability of definitions. However, the question is why Burge believes there is any need to go beyond Quine in this respect. After all, Quine has no difficulties explaining the rational dubitability of conventional definitions: We can rationally doubt purported definitions since meaning is not determined by isolated definitions but holistically, by overall 'theory'. In short, conventional definitions can be doubted since they are not in any sense definitional truths, but empirical truths, albeit very central and entrenched ones.

It is clear that one reason Burge considers it important to move beyond Quine is that he worries that Quine's points about the dubitability of definitions mainly applies to scientific discourse. The lessons drawn from holism, Burge writes, depends on the possibility of fundamental changes in scientific outlook, but such changes are not common in ordinary discourse: "We use definitions for many artifact terms, for example, that are not at all likely to be overturned. So it is less clear that the Duhem-Quine points about the falsifiability of definitions extend to ordinary discourse" (Burge 1993, 323). To explain how such definitions nonetheless may be dubitable, Burge suggests, we need to appeal to externalist aspects of meaning. Purported definitions are dubitable because their truth depends on the nature of the objects referred to. For instance, Burge says, someone can think that chairs must have legs, and come to realize that this meaning characterization is incorrect, through exposure to examples (such as ski-lift chairs). It is this dependence on examples, and not just the epistemic holism, that allows for the possibility of doubting a definition.

Again, however, it is unclear why there is any need to move beyond Quine. After all, if indeed “All chairs have legs” is merely a deeply entrenched empirical claim, and not a definitional truth in the positivist sense, then it is as rationally dubitable as any scientific claim, and can be overthrown by future empirical discoveries. It may be that ordinary claims of this sort are less likely to be overturned than scientific claims, but that does not impinge on their rational dubitability. Moreover, the thesis that meaning is determined holistically applies equally to ordinary terms, and this allows for the possibility of revising ordinary claims, even those that are taken to be central.³ In addition, although ordinary terms are less theory-dependent than scientific ones, it is simply not the case that the use of ordinary terms is isolated from scientific theories and discoveries, nor is it at all clear how the two types of discourses are to be demarcated. Consider the familiar example of the discovery that whales are mammals -- a discovery that led to a revision in a widespread everyday belief, i.e. the belief that whales are fish.

If, therefore, the goal is to explain the possibility of rationally doubting the truth of a conventional definition then, again, it seems that the simplest solution is simply to endorse something like Quine’s view. There is no need to add Burge’s rationalist element. It might be thought, however, that in a deeper sense Quine simply cannot make sense of the dialectic Burge appeals to. After all, if Quine is right and there are no truths of meaning, one might wonder how there could *be* such a thing as a rational dialogue concerning meaning characterizations.

However, it is not clear that this worry is well grounded either. Even if it is granted that there are no analytic truths, it might be useful for certain purposes to

³ Of course, it is controversial, to say the least, exactly how the distinction between theory change and meaning change is to be drawn on a holistic picture of meaning. I cannot enter this debate here, but suffice it to say that if one takes meaning to be determined holistically, one can allow for the possibility

attempt to characterize the central aspects of the use of our terms. The result of such efforts will not be truths of meaning in any sense, but empirical statements that we cannot today, in our current epistemic position, conceive of giving up without a change in meaning. Nonetheless, such ‘meaning characterizations’ can serve a function similar to that of analytic statements. Thus, if a person rejects these statements, without providing any further justification, we have reason to conclude that she has failed to grasp the meaning of our words. But new discoveries may emerge, showing that what we took to be an immutable truth in fact is not. Consider again the discovery that whales are mammals. Prior to that discovery, presumably, a person who rejected this belief would not be considered a competent speaker. In this sense, the statement ‘Whales are fish’, could usefully be employed as a characterization of the meaning of ‘whale’.⁴ Once the discovery was made this statement was rejected, and one way to describe this would be to say that the empirical discovery led to a change in ‘meaning characterizations’ (although not, therefore, in meaning).

It is therefore not correct that accounting for the type of rational ‘meaning discourse’ that Burge emphasizes requires appealing to his neo-rationalist truths of meaning. Central empirical claims will serve just as well. Next, I want to argue that not only is the notion of a posteriori truths of meaning poorly motivated philosophically, but that its implications are very problematic as well.

that even a very central belief can be revised without a change in meaning. For an illuminating

4. A Posteriori Analyticity: Implications

4.1 Essentialism

As we have seen above, Burge holds that the correctness of a purported meaning characterization depends not on our conventions but on facts about the physical environment. This is the reason truths of meaning are not vacuous and can be rationally doubted. The question, however, is how empirical facts of this sort can generate truths of *meaning*, as opposed to purely empirical truths. That is, assuming that Burge is right and we need to move beyond Quine, what sense are we to make of the suggestion that empirical features of the objects referred to generate truths of meaning? The question can be put in terms of the thought-experiment: Why should it be concluded that ‘sofa’ has a different meaning in B’s world? Of course, the sofas around here are such that they do not break when we sit upon them, but why can’t we simply say that they make lousy sofas in B’s world?

Burge, at points, suggests that there is a perfectly innocuous reply to this question: The reason ‘sofa’ should be said to have different meanings in B’s world and in ours, is simply that ‘sofa’ has a different extension in the two worlds. Indeed, the principle that a difference in extension makes for a difference in meaning is made the cornerstone of Burge’s externalism. Thus, Burge writes that modern externalism has its roots in the theory of reference, since this work (by Kripke, Putnam and others) bears on the meaning of terms and on the identity of concepts: “For the meaning of a wide range of non-indexical terms and the nature of a wide range of concepts are dependent on the referent or range of application in the sense that if the referent were

discussion of meaning holism see Pagin 1997.

⁴ Putnam expresses a similar idea when he appeals to the notion of stereotypes (Putnam 1975, 250).

different, the meaning of the term, and the associated concept, would be different....”
(Burge 1993, 318)⁵

However, the reasoning here is less innocuous than it might at first seem. First, in one sense, Burge’s principle is simply not true. After all, our word ‘sofa’ does have a different extension in several “synonymy worlds”. For instance, there is a possible world in which all sofas happen to be made of leather but this may still be a world in which ‘sofa’ has the same meaning as in the actual world. Consequently, the fact that ‘sofa’ has a different extension in the counterfactual world, does not yield the externalist conclusion that the word has a different meaning and expresses a different concept in that world.⁶ To get this conclusion, the claim must be, not that ‘sofa’ has a different extension in the two worlds, but rather that the objects in B’s world are not even within the extension of our term ‘sofa’ – *these objects are simply not sofas*. If this is so, then it does seem to follow that ‘sofa’ in B’s world must have a different meaning, and express a different concept, than ‘sofa’ in our world. However, this means that our original question, why it should be concluded that ‘sofa’ has a different meaning in B’s world than in A’s, simply has been transformed into a new question: Why should it be concluded that there are no sofas in B’s world?

This shows clearly that there is no innocuous reply to our initial question. The empirical facts that meaning characterizations depend upon cannot be ‘mere’ empirical facts, but need be facts concerning the essential properties of the objects in question. The reason that there are no sofas in B’s world, on Burge’s view, must be that the objects in B’s world do not share the properties essential to our sofas – i.e. they cannot be sat upon. Again, the essential quality of this property does not derive

⁵ For this principle, see also Burge 1979, 75; and Burge 1989, 181.

⁶ For a discussion of this see S. Häggqvist, *Thought Experiments in Philosophy*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1996, p.177. See also my paper, “A Unifying Principle of Externalism?”, submitted MS.

from our conventions, according to Burge, but from the nature of our sofas.

Underlying Burge's later externalism is therefore a form of Aristotelian essentialism.⁷

This commitment to essentialism, of course, is hinted at when Burge speaks of reviving the Aristotelian notion of real definitions. However, at the same time Burge seems to shun the talk of essences and necessary properties. For instance, in "Intellectual Norms and the Foundations of Mind" Burge suggests that the key animating idea behind the paper is that some necessarily true thoughts can be doubted, but adds in a footnote that the argument need not rest on an assumption about necessity. He continues: "What we need are general thoughts or statements so central to the correct identification of a type of thing, property, or event, that, under ordinary conditions, if the thought failed to apply to some given entity *x*, we would correctly and almost automatically refuse to count *x* as an instance of the type" (Burge 1986, 698). But this cannot be right. If it is not a necessary truth that sofas are furnishings to be sat upon then, again, we have not been given any reason to believe that the objects in *B*'s world are not sofas. That we would 'almost automatically refuse' to count these objects as sofa, does not suffice to show that these objects are not sofas -- in particular, it does not do so if one holds, as Burge does, that our speech community may be mistaken in its meaning characterizations.

Burge's later meaning externalism, therefore, depends on a form of essentialism. Of course, it is a familiar enough claim that the belief in a posteriori necessity brings with it a commitment to a non-trivial form of essentialism,⁸ and it

⁷ It is not obvious, of course, exactly how Aristotle's essentialism is to be construed. But leaving details aside, it is generally agreed that Aristotle held that the definitional features of a kind depend not on our practices, but on the essential, underlying features of the kind in question. See David Charles (2000) for an interesting discussion of Aristotle's views on definitions, meaning and essences. Charles emphasizes that Aristotle's essentialism differs from contemporary essentialism in that it does not rely on any a priori assumptions about the essential properties of a given kind (Charles 2000, chapters 2 and 3). In this respect Burge can fairly be said to be an heir of Aristotle.

⁸ See for instance Salmon 1982.

would be surprising if the belief in a posteriori analyticity did not, in the same way, rest on essentialism. However, leaving general concerns about essentialism aside, there are reasons to worry about the very radical expansion in the scope of essentialism that Burge's position implies.

Kripke's thesis concerning a posteriori necessity, recall, is limited to two types of terms: names and natural kinds. Consider, however, some of the examples Burge gives of terms whose meanings depend on the physical environment: 'sofa', 'baby', 'chair', 'knife', 'house', 'bread', 'mud', 'stone', 'tree', 'edge', 'shadow', 'walk', 'fight', 'eat', etc. If Burge's externalism depends on essentialism, it follows that on his view not only natural kinds have underlying essences, but almost everything – artifacts, events, natural phenomena that do not constitute natural kinds, etc. The question is whether we can make sense of this. In the case of natural kinds, the externalism is driven by the widely shared view that what characterizes natural kinds is that they possess a certain underlying, microstructural property that unites and explains a set of superficial properties that we associate with the kind in question.⁹ Because the underlying property is essential to a natural kind, the reasoning goes, there is a potential gap between our conceptions of the kind in question and its real, underlying nature. However, it is very difficult to apply a similar form of reasoning in the case of Burge's examples. What sense are we to make of the idea that sofas, knives, clothing, rope, pottery, tables, watches, etc. have an essence given by 'nature itself', independently of our classificatory practices? Even an essentialist about natural kinds will presumably hesitate to endorse an essentialism of this promiscuous sort.

⁹ I discuss this further in my paper 'Naming Natural Kinds', forthcoming in *Synthese*.

It is therefore clear that Burge's neo-rationalism rests on unusually strong essentialist assumptions. This, I think, is not an accident. If one rejects analyticity in the positivist sense, and tries to replace it with an a posteriori notion of analyticity, one needs to endorse a form of generalized Aristotelian essentialism. The essentialism simply replaces the conventionalism. We have, as it were, come full circle. In "Two Dogmas", recall, Quine starts out with a discussion of Aristotle, and he suggests that the Aristotelian notion of essence was the forerunner of the modern notion of meaning. As Quine famously puts it: "Meaning is what essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word" (Quine 1951, 22). What Burge illustrates, one might say, is Quine's point once more, only this time 'in reverse'; i.e. that "essence is what meaning becomes when it is divorced from the word and wedded to the object of reference".

It is not necessary to pursue the topic of essentialism further here. Instead, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that this type of essentialism can be defended, and that it provides a solid ground for Burge's a posteriori analyticities. This takes me to the final question of this paper: What are the consequences of making facts about synonymy and conceptual connections a posteriori?

4.2 A posteriori truths of meaning and cognitive role

An important motivation behind Burge's neo-rationalism, as we have seen above, is the idea that we need to account for the rational dubitability of definitions. The emphasis on rational dubitability is reminiscent of Frege, and Burge employs Frege's assumption that a difference in dubitability implies a difference in belief content. For instance, he says, "force is mass times acceleration" is informative and hence dubitable, whereas "force is force" is not – one can believe the latter, without

believing the former. Consequently, the contents of the two beliefs are different and there is a sense in which the defined terms do not have the same meaning, do not express the same concepts, i.e. the sense of 'cognitive value' (Burge 1993, 317). In fact, Burge suggests an explicit parallel with Frege's reasoning. The argument for distinguishing conventional meaning from cognitive value, he says, "is a variant of Frege's for distinguishing senses from one another and from denotation"(Burge 1986, 715).

Despite this reference to Frege, it is a serious question whether Burge's externalist rationalism is compatible with Frege's appeal to cognitive role. Frege's assumption that differential dubitability implies a difference in thought content, I want to suggest, conflicts with Burge's externalist claim that concepts and belief-content are individuated in terms of the nature of the object referred to, rather than by the speaker's conceptions of things.

Consider the individual who believes that all chairs must have legs. Assume that she takes 'chair' to be synonymous with something like 'piece of furniture with legs, meant for sitting', and that she would judge 'chairs are pieces of furniture with legs...' as no more dubitable than 'chairs are chairs'. Thus, from her perspective 'chair' and 'piece of furniture with legs...' play the same cognitive role. On Burge's view, however, the fact that the terms play the same cognitive role does not show that they express the same concept, since what concept 'chair' really expresses depends not on the individual's conceptual explications, but on empirical features of the objects called 'chair'. Thus, it is quite possible that her definition is false, and if this is the case it follows that there is a difference in the contents of the two beliefs despite the fact that the individual takes them to be equally dubitable. Conversely, an individual may consider two statements to have a different dubitability, although, on

Burge's view, they express the same belief. This is the case in Burge's original thought experiment, where the individual doubts the truth of 'Arthritis is a rheumatoid disease of the joints only' but not, presumably, of 'Arthritis is arthritis'. On Burge's view, 'arthritis' is synonymous with 'rheumatoid disease of the joints only', and so the two statements express the same belief, despite the fact that the individual doubts one but believes the other. In general, this difficulty arises whenever an individual doubts what turns out to be a conceptual truth, a very common phenomenon on Burge's view: The conceptual equivalence suggests there is a sameness in belief content, whereas Frege's test suggests that there is not.

There is therefore a real tension between Burge's externalist account of concepts and his appeal to rational dubitability as a test for difference and sameness in belief content.¹⁰ The problem is that it is the speaker's *conceptions* of things that account for cognitive role, and correspond to Fregean Sinn, not the externalistically individuated concepts. This implies that despite what Burge says, he cannot employ Fregean considerations to motivate the distinction between conventional meaning and translational meaning. Of course, Burge is quite right in suggesting that if one combines Frege's test with the assumption that conventional definitions are dubitable, then it follows that conventional definitions do not, after all, spell out synonymy relations. However, as argued above, this point can be granted without taking the further step of appealing to the idea that truths of meaning are a posteriori, and Fregean considerations can never be used to motivate that further step. Applied to Burge's example of 'Sofas are furnishings meant for sitting', what Frege's test shows is merely that 'sofa' and 'furnishings meant for sitting' express different concepts, not that we need to introduce a further, *de re* notion of a concept.

This also brings out the fact that Burge is closer to the positivist outlook than he would like to recognize. What makes for the rational dubitability of definitions, on Burge's view, is not really the idea that definiens expresses a different concept than definiendum, but, rather, the idea that an individual can think with a concept that she only incompletely understands. When A doubts the truth of 'Sofas are furnishings...' he doubts a conceptual truth, which is to say that he expresses an incomplete understanding of the concept of 'sofa'.¹¹ His non-standard theory about sofas, in fact, expresses a non-standard or incomplete grasp of the concept of *sofa*. If this were not the case, if A fully grasped the concept of 'sofa', his doubts would indeed be irrational. Since, therefore, the rational dubitability of a definition, on Burge's view, depends on the assumption that the individual has an incomplete grasp of the concept in question, his view is rather similar to that of the positivist. After all, the positivist too can grant that an individual may doubt a definition without irrationality, assuming that the individual does not have a full grasp of the concepts in question. Of course, *if* one holds there are conceptual truths, then it is rather plausible to say that an individual who doubts such a truth thereby expresses an incomplete understanding of the relevant concepts. However, the fact that Burge has to fall back on this idea makes his position less interesting since, in effect, it means that he has not succeeded in presenting an alternative account of how it can be possible rationally to doubt definitional truths.

¹⁰ Scott Kimbrough makes this point in a discussion of Burge and Frege. The anti-individualist, Kimbrough argues, is committed to 'the possibility that equivalences of content may be discovered', and this possibility is denied by the 'differential dubitability test' (Kimbrough, 1998, 478).

¹¹ The assumption of incomplete understanding plays a central role throughout Burge's writings. For instance, in "Belief and Synonymy", Burge suggests that the possibility of incomplete understanding allows for the rational dubitability of traditional analyticities such as 'A vixen is a female fox' (Burge 1978). Similarly, the assumption of incomplete understanding plays a crucial role in "Individualism and the Mental" (I discuss this at some length in Wikforss 2001). The only difference between 'early' and 'late' Burge is that in his earlier writings the possibility of incomplete understanding depends on the idea that individuals may have an incomplete grasp of their own conventions, whereas in his later writings, it depends on the idea that concepts are individuated in terms of the external objects.

It is clear that Burge could simply give up his commitment to Frege and grant that externalist concepts cannot account for cognitive role. I shall not speculate why Burge insists on appealing to Frege. However, the conflict between Fregeanism and Burge's externalism, I think, points to a general difficulty with trying to apply Kripke's strategy to analyticity and divorce analytic truths from their traditional epistemic connection.

For an illustration of this, recall Quine's criticisms of modal logic and how the Kripkean strategy fits into that story. Quine's main complaint is that modal contexts are referentially opaque, and that this causes difficulties for the interpretation of the variables employed in quantification in modal contexts. For instance, the following argument appears invalid, since although (i) and (ii) are true, (iii) is, intuitively, false:

- (i) Necessarily Phosphorus = Phosphorus
- (ii) Phosphorus = Hesperus
- (iii) Necessarily Phosphorus = Hesperus¹²

Now, these problems spotted by Quine presuppose, as do Quine's arguments in "Two Dogmas", that the relevant notion of necessity is that of analyticity, in the positivist sense. This, again, was not an arbitrary assumption on Quine's part, since the defenders of modal logic that Quine was after made the same presupposition.

However, if modal logic abandons the analytic construal of necessity an efficient strategy for dismissing Quine's worries presents itself: Make the necessity reside in the objects themselves, rather than in their descriptions, and the charge of opacity can

¹² Quine's original example used a definite description, 'the number of planets'. However, as Stephen Neale has recently argued, Quine's point can equally well be made in terms of names, thereby circumventing the effort to meet his objection by appealing to the idea that sentences containing definite descriptions and a modal operator are ambiguous, depending on whether the description is construed as having a wide or a narrow scope (Neale 2000, 293).

be met. The arguments cited above will then be perfectly valid, and the impression that they are not can be dismissed as a mere epistemic issue.¹³

This, of course, is precisely the move Kripke makes in his “Naming and Necessity” (Kripke 1972). On Kripke’s view, (iii) only *appears* false, since the necessity in question has nothing to do with meaning in the traditional sense and is therefore not knowable a priori. The appearance of contingency, Kripke suggests, is due to the fact that we associate certain reference-fixing descriptions with the name in question, ‘the star that appears in the morning’ and ‘the star that appears in the evening’, and that the contents of these descriptions are only contingently related.¹⁴ Kripke puts this point, as is well-known, by distinguishing conceivability from possibility. It is conceivable, Kripke says, that the Morning star is not identical with the Evening star, in the sense that it is conceivable that the first star in the morning is not identical with the first star in the evening, but it does not follow that it is possible that the Morning Star is not identical to the Evening Star (Kripke 1972, 142-143).

The problem with making the same move in the case of analyticity should now be apparent: The epistemic aspect is not so easily dismissed. Kripke’s strategy presupposes that the necessity in question is not one of meaning, does not reside in our descriptions. This allows him to explain modal mistakes by appealing to associated concepts and the cognitive roles these play. Once analyticity is made a posteriori as well, however, this explanatory strategy is blocked. That is, once conceptual necessities themselves are such that we can be ignorant of them, the appearance of contingency cannot be explained the way Kripke does. I think this is a

¹³ It should be pointed out that Quine anticipates this move, but dismisses it on the grounds that it presupposes essentialism: “the invidious distinction between some traits of an object as essential to it (by whatever name) and other traits of it as accidental” (Quine 1962, 184).

¹⁴ As Michael Della Rocca puts it: “the objector is mistaking a contingent relation between the properties of being the morning star and being the evening star for a contingent identity between the things that do in fact have these properties” (Della Rocca 1996, 8).

perfectly general problem, one that applies not only to Burge's position, but that faces anybody who wishes to defend an a posteriori conception of analyticity. Kripke's strategy with respect to necessity cannot be repeated in the case of analyticity without encountering serious difficulties concerning the epistemic perspective. A posteriori analyticity, I surmise, will therefore not meet with the success that a posteriori necessity has.

In conclusion, a posteriori analyticity is not well-motivated philosophically, the way a posteriori necessity arguably is. Moreover, a posteriori analyticity relies on a problematic form of essentialism, and leads to difficulties in accounting for the connection between concepts and cognitive role, a connection that Burge himself wishes to respect. To the extent one agrees with Quine and is wary of the traditional, a priori conception of analyticity, therefore, one is better off giving up on analyticity altogether than trying to reconstrue a non-epistemic, a posteriori conception of it.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Thanks to Adam Green, Sören Häggqvist, Kathrin Glueer-Pagin, and Peter Pagin for very helpful comments on various versions of this paper. Special thanks to Tyler Burge for a very interesting and rewarding discussion in response to the presentation of an earlier version of this paper at Humboldt University, Berlin, September 2001.

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