

## Content Externalism and Fregean Sense

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### 1. Introduction

Can externalist concepts really capture an individual's cognitive perspective? Ever since Putnam and Burge first presented their externalist thought experiments philosophers have worried whether externalism can capture the first-person point of view.<sup>1</sup> The issue has recently resurfaced, now in the context of how an externalist account of concepts relates to Frege's idea that there is a connection between thought content, sense, and cognitive role.

In this paper I address this issue by examining Tyler Burge's attempt to reconcile externalism with a Fregean account of content.<sup>2</sup> I argue that Burge's attempt is unsuccessful and that content externalism is indeed in conflict with a Fregean notion of sense. Moreover, I suggest that this provides us with a reason to reject content externalism. Jessica Brown, in her recent writings, draws the opposite conclusion: She too holds that there is a conflict between Burgean content externalism and Frege's conception of thought content, but she suggests that this does not ultimately pose a difficulty for the content externalist.<sup>3</sup> The externalist, she argues, should not be overly impressed by Frege's arguments, since the content externalist has available an alternative explanation of the kinds of phenomena that the Fregean wants to explain. I argue that Brown's

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Fodor 1980, Loar 1985 and Segal 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Burge 1979, 1986 and 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Brown 2003 and 2004.

alternative explanation fails. Instead, we face a choice: We must either reject content externalism, or reject the very idea that content should serve the function of capturing the individual's cognitive perspective.

## 2. Frege's principle and externalism

When people speak of a Fregean conception of content, they have a rather specific principle of content individuation in mind, what Gareth Evans calls 'the intuitive Criterion of Difference' and others have called 'the principle of differential dubitability'<sup>4</sup>: *If it is possible for S to believe that p while doubting q, p and q have a different content.* This principle is employed by Frege in arguing for the sense-reference distinction.<sup>5</sup> Since it is possible for someone to hold true 'The morning star is a body illuminated by the sun', while doubting 'The evening star is a body illuminated by the sun', the two sentences must have a different sense, express different thoughts.

Much, of course, hinges on how the relevant notion of 'possibility' is to be understood. Evans puts it in terms of the speaker's 'coherence', and Jessica Brown formulates the principle simply in terms of 'rationality': "If it is possible to rationally believe that p and not believe that q, then the contents of p and q are distinct."<sup>6</sup> Frege's principle therefore essentially involves an assumption of rationality. Of course, speakers may on occasion be less than rational. However, or so the intuition goes, if there is no reason to suspect any kind of irrationality, we should not endorse a theory of content that nonetheless requires us to describe the individual as being irrational. (For instance, few would accept that Oscar's believing that 'Hesperus is

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<sup>4</sup> Evans 1982, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Frege 1892, p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> Brown 2004, p. 197.

Hesperus' but not that 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' can be dismissed as a regrettable lapse of rationality.)

How does Frege's principle relate to content externalism? Given that content externalism has its roots in a certain theory of reference determination, one that was intended as a repudiation of Frege's claim that sense determines reference, one should expect there to be an obvious conflict.<sup>7</sup> However, several externalists explicitly endorse Frege's principle. Burge himself appeals to the principle, and he has even gone as far as to argue that it provides extra support for content externalism.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Evans and McDowell have defended a version of externalism in the case of singular thoughts that they claim to be compatible with Frege's principle.<sup>9</sup>

The relation between content externalism and Frege's principle is, in fact, less straightforward than one might at first assume. The content externalist holds that thought content is individuated by the individual's environment in such a way that two individuals may be internally identical and yet have different thoughts.<sup>10</sup> This thesis implies that there may be a *difference* in content that cannot be discerned from the first person point of view, but it does not imply that there may be *sameness* of content that is not discernible from a first person point of view.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the content externalist thesis does not in itself appear to be incompatible with the Fregean claim that if a subject judges two thoughts to have a different content, then they do. For

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance Putnam 1975.

<sup>8</sup> Burge 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Evans 1982; McDowell 1977 and 1986.

<sup>10</sup> There are many different formulations of the content externalist thesis. For a recent overview, see Nuccetelli 2003. One common formulation is the one given by Nuccetelli, p. 5:

"Indiscernability with respect to internal properties does not entail indiscernability with respect to mental properties with content."

<sup>11</sup> See Brown 2004, chapter 5, for an illuminating discussion of the relationship between content externalism and first person judgments concerning sameness and difference of content.

instance, it has been argued, although the content externalist is committed to saying that Oscar on Earth has different 'water'-thoughts than Toscar on Twin Earth, given the relevant difference in their respective environments, she is not thereby committed to saying that 'Water is water', as uttered by Oscar on Earth, has the same content as 'Water is H<sub>2</sub>O'.<sup>12</sup> Evans employs a similar line of reasoning in the case of singular terms. Since Frege's principle is silent on the case where a term fails to have a reference, Evans argues, the principle is perfectly compatible with the idea that the content of singular thoughts is object-dependent. That content is object-dependent means that the individual's way of thinking about the object depends on the existence of the object in such a way that if there is no object the individual is merely under the illusion of having a thought. Thus, according to Evans, singular thought externalism can be reconciled with a Fregean view of content.<sup>13</sup>

How content externalism relates to Fregeanism is also discussed in some detail by Brown. Brown likewise takes her starting point in the case of singular thoughts.<sup>14</sup> Frege's claim that we need to distinguish between sense and reference, between the way a subject thinks of an object and the object itself, she argues, does not necessarily implicate any form of descriptivism. Instead, Brown suggests, following Evans and McDowell, that senses should be understood in terms of 'object-dependence'. Thus, if S judges that 'Hesperus is visible in the evening' but rejects 'Phosphorus is visible in the evening' we should say that S thinks of a single object in two different ways, S has two distinct thoughts, although they both depend on the existence of the same object, planet Venus. Moreover, Brown suggests, a similar move can be made in the case of general terms. She considers Rudolf, who partially understands the terms 'coriander' and

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<sup>12</sup> See for instance Burge 1979, p. 76 and McLaughlin & Tye 1998, p. 294.

<sup>13</sup> Evans 1982, pp. 30-33.

<sup>14</sup> Brown 2004, pp 20-22.

'cilantro' and defers to the experts.<sup>15</sup> Although he knows that each term names an herb, he does not know that they name the same herb. He thinks of cilantro as a fresh herb used in Mexican cooking, and he thinks of coriander as a distinct, dried herb. As a result, Rudolf takes a different attitude to statements containing the two terms. For instance, Rudolf assents to 'Cilantro is an herb characteristic of Mexican cuisine' but dissents from 'Coriander is an herb characteristic of Mexican cuisine'. However, Brown argues, this does not mean that the content externalist is committed to attributing an inconsistency to Rudolf. On the contrary, the content externalist is free to hold that the difference in attitude shows that Rudolf associates different senses with the two terms despite the fact that they have the same referent.<sup>16</sup>

There is, I believe, some reason to be skeptical of the attempt to combine Frege's principle with object-dependence externalism. Even if Evans is right in suggesting that Frege's principle is silent on cases of reference failure, the question remains whether the thesis that there are illusions of thought really is compatible with Frege's principle. For instance, on Evans' view, if there is no planet Venus then both 'Hesperus is a body illuminated by the sun' and 'Phosphorus is a body illuminated by the sun' fail to express any thoughts and the subject suffers an 'illusion of thought.' In such a scenario, it would seem, Oscar will nonetheless judge that he has two distinct thoughts.<sup>17</sup> But it would lead us too far afield, in this paper, to address the very general question of whether there is some version of content externalism that can be made compatible with Frege's principle. I shall instead confine myself to the case of general terms, in particular to

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<sup>15</sup> Brown 2004, p. 165. The example, as Brown notes, is from Falvey and Owen 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Brown 2004, 165.

<sup>17</sup> Notice, also, that there is something odd about the motivations behind the attempt to combine Frege and object dependence. The appeal to Frege is motivated by the idea that we need to capture the speaker's cognitive perspective. At the same time, however, the proposal that there are illusions of thought poses serious difficulties when it comes to capturing this perspective. After all, it certainly seems to the speaker in an illusion scenario as if she has a thought (for instance, she will act and reason as if there was such a thought in place).

Burge's version of content externalism. However, I shall suggest that the problems pertaining to Burge's attempt to reconcile content externalism with Frege's principle generalize and apply to any such attempt in the case of general terms.

In 'Individualism and the Mental', before embarking on his famous thought experiment concerning the concept of *arthritis*, Burge makes some remarks about how he uses the notion of 'content'. Burge suggests, along standard lines, that 'that'-clauses provide the content of people's intentional states, and argues that although this notion of content is ontologically neutral it holds a certain place in a systematic theory of mentalistic language: "The question of when to count contents different, and when the same, is answerable to theoretical restrictions."<sup>18</sup> Burge proposes two such restrictions. The first is Frege's principle: If a person is capable of having different attitudes towards the thought that p, and the thought that q, the thoughts have different content. For instance, Burge says, Al's desire to climb Mt. McKinley and his desire to climb the highest mountain in the United States should count as two distinct desires. The second is the principle that differences in *extension* make for differences in content (in the case of non-indexical terms).

Burge takes the second principle to be essential to content externalism. This principle, he argues, underlies the conclusion that Toscar on Twin Earth must have thoughts with a different content than Oscar on Earth: Because there is a difference in the extension of Oscar's word 'water' and Toscar's word 'water', the words must also express a different concept on the two planets.<sup>19</sup> Since my focus is on Frege's principle, I shall not have much to say about Burge's

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<sup>18</sup> Burge 1979, 74.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Burge 1982, p. 101, and 1993, p. 318. It should be noted that the principle has to be formulated with some care since it cannot be that a mere difference in extension across possible worlds implies a difference in content (surely a world in which there is one less tiger than in our world, need not be a world in which 'tiger' has a different meaning and expresses a

second principle. However, it is worth noting that although the principle constitutes a necessary condition for content externalism, it is not sufficient. On the contrary, most theories of content accept some version of it.<sup>20</sup> Thus, although the principle is a presupposition of the externalist thought experiments, it is possible to accept the principle and at the same time reject content externalism (by denying that there can be a difference in extension and truth-conditions that derives solely from factors external to the individual.)<sup>21</sup> Frege's principle, by contrast, is much more controversial.

Why, then, does Burge endorse Frege's principle? Burge appeals to Frege's concern with the informativeness of identity statements, and to the idea that we need to make sense of the speaker's cognitive perspective, her reasoning and actions. Burge also suggests applying the principle across the board, to general terms as well as singular terms. Bertrand's thought that water is fit to drink, Burge suggests, is distinct from his thought that H<sub>2</sub>O is fit to drink. This, in fact, is something that many externalists wish to claim, and for obvious reasons. If one takes thought content to play a central role in the rationalization of an individual's reasoning and actions, 'water'-thoughts and 'H<sub>2</sub>O'-thoughts must be said to have a different content. As Brian McLaughlin and Michael Tye write in a discussion of content externalism and the first person point of view: "the mental state type *thinking that water is wet* can play a different role in rationalizing explanation from the role played by the mental state type *thinking that H<sub>2</sub>O is wet*. They are distinct mental state types. One can be in a state of the first type without being in a state

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different concept). In addition, it has to be argued that the difference in extension is such that it warrants the conclusion that there is a difference in content. (I discuss this at some length in Wikforss 2004.) What is plausible, of course, is the suggestion that a difference in *truth-conditions* imply a difference in content.

<sup>20</sup> There are some exceptions, however. For instance, some internalists reject the principle that a difference in truth-conditions implies a difference in content. See for example Segal 2000, 77.

<sup>21</sup> In Wikforss 2005 I argue that there are in fact reasons to reject externalism in the case of natural kind terms and reconsider the possibility of giving a descriptivist account of these terms.

of the second type.”<sup>22</sup> The reason for this, they suggest, is that while water = H<sub>2</sub>O, the concept of water is distinct from the concept of H<sub>2</sub>O. Similarly, applying Frege’s principle, Burge suggests that the concept of water and the concept of H<sub>2</sub>O are distinct. The question, then, is whether it is correct that Frege’s principle is compatible with content externalism. To determine this, let us take a closer look at Burge’s position.

### **3. Incomplete understanding and rationality**

In ‘Individualism and the Mental’ Burge argues for the thesis that because of their commitment to the community practice, individuals may be ascribed a concept despite the fact that they only incompletely understand that concept, and despite the fact that this implies attributing beliefs in conceptual falsehoods to these individuals. Thus, Bert (Burge’s famous arthritis-patient) believes that he has arthritis in his thigh, even though this is a conceptual impossibility (since, according to Burge, it is part of the concept of *arthritis* that arthritis afflicts the joints only). And, as Burge emphasizes, the assumption that individuals can be ascribed beliefs in a content that they only incompletely understand is a presupposition for the thought experiment. It is because ‘arthritis afflicts the joints only’ expresses a conceptual, definitional truth, that ‘arthritis’ must be said to express a different concept in the counterfactual community, where ‘arthritis’ applies to afflictions outside the joints as well.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, Burge insists that there is only a limited range of cases like this, and that rationality considerations must be taken into account: Even when an individual is

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<sup>22</sup> McLaughlin and Tye 1998, p. 294. Although they do suggest that the concept of water is distinct from the concept of H<sub>2</sub>O, it is not entirely clear whether McLaughlin and Tye, in the end, choose to endorse Frege’s principle.

<sup>23</sup> Burge 1979, p 83. The importance of the assumption of incomplete understanding to content externalism is discussed at some length in Wikforss 2001 and 2004.

committed to her community, he argues, there are cases where the individual's deviation from the community is such that we are required to give her words a non-standard interpretation. Burge mentions tongue slips, spoonerisms and malapropisms. However, Burge also moves beyond these categories, and suggests that there are "examples of quite radical misunderstandings that sometimes generate reinterpretation".<sup>24</sup> He mentions Davidson's example of the individual who thinks that 'orangutan' applies to a fruit drink. We would be reluctant, Burge says, "and it would unquestionably be misleading, to take his words as revealing that he thinks that he has been drinking orangutans for breakfast for the last few weeks."<sup>25</sup>

This raises the question of what motivates the different treatment of the two cases. Why is it acceptable to attribute to S the belief that he has a rheumatoid disease of the joints only in his thigh, but not the belief that he drinks orangutans for breakfast? Burge's strategy consists in appealing to the idea that Bert's error is explicable as the result of *linguistic misinformation*. Burge considers the objection that charitable interpretation requires that we don't attribute the belief that one may have arthritis in one's thigh to a rational person, and responds that this is not a good argument since: "There is nothing irrational or stupid about the linguistic or conceptual errors we attribute to our subjects. The errors are perfectly understandable as results of linguistic misinformation".<sup>26</sup>

The same strategy, more elaborated, can be found in Burge's paper 'Belief and Synonymy'.<sup>27</sup> In that paper Burge discusses the informativeness of definitions. He considers the following statement: "For years I believed that a fortnight was ten days, not fourteen, though of course I never believed that fourteen days were ten days." The terms 'fortnight' and 'fourteen

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<sup>24</sup> Burge 1979, p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 91.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 100

<sup>27</sup> Burge 1978.

days', Burge says, are synonyms. Even so, Burge argues, this statement about a past belief is not nonsensical but should be taken at face value, as being possibly true. A speaker can be said to entertain the belief that a fortnight is ten days, an analytic falsehood, without thereby being (as Burge puts it) "exceedingly stupid and irrational". To explain how this could be Burge appeals to the notion of *linguistic misinformation*. The speaker's false belief stems from linguistic misinformation, and this "deprives one of grounds for holding that such a belief would be irrational".<sup>28</sup>

However, there are some obvious difficulties with the strategy. First, it is quite clear that it does not support Burge's distinction between more and less radical errors. For instance, the same reasoning would seem to apply to the person who thinks that 'orangutan' applies to a kind of fruit drink. Why not attribute to him the belief that he has been drinking orangutans for breakfast and explain the oddness by saying that he simply misunderstands the meaning of 'orangutan'? Second, and more gravely, although the appeal to linguistic misinformation may explain why the speaker finds the definition of a certain word enlightening (she did not know the meaning of the word in the public language), it does not explain how she can hold the *belief* in question.

To explain this, Burge has one of two options: First, he can hold that the linguistic misunderstanding shows that there is a gap between meaning and content, such that the speaker cannot be said to literally believe that a fortnight is ten days (when these words are taken to have their standard meaning). Second, he can say that not only does the individual not know the meaning of the word 'fortnight', but she does not quite know the content of her beliefs. Some of Burge's remarks point in the direction of the first option. In a sense, Burge says, "the speaker

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 129.

took 'fortnight' to mean 'period of ten days' when he used it."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Burge grants that in one sense Bert's belief that one can have arthritis in one's thigh shows that he means something different by 'arthritis'.<sup>30</sup> The idea, then, would be that although 'arthritis' ('fortnight') and 'a rheumatoid disease of the joints only' ('period of fourteen days') are synonyms, they express different concepts when used by the individual who misunderstands the meaning of the word in question. The apparently irrational belief is not, after all, irrational. However, it is clear that this is not the option Burge chooses in the end, and it is clear that it is not one that would support his social externalism.<sup>31</sup> After all, if 'arthritis', as used by Bert, expresses a different concept than 'a rheumatoid disease of the joints only', then Bert does not have the community concept of arthritis. Instead, Burge goes on to argue that individuals typically do not understand the content of their own beliefs, and that this explains the irrationality of their utterances. In these examples, he argues, "the content of the belief has not been fully mastered by the believer" since "in these cases the content partly depends on linguistic conventions of a broader community".<sup>32</sup> Since Bert does not fully understand the content of his own beliefs, his mistakes are not in any sense inexplicable: "A belief that arthritis may occur in the thigh appears to be inexplicable or uncharitably attributed only if it is assumed that the subject must fully understand the notions in his attitude contents."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 130

<sup>30</sup> Burge 1979, p. 101.

<sup>31</sup> Brown discusses Burge's 1978 paper, and argues that it shows that synonymous terms may not express the same concept. (Brown 2004, p. 163 & 2003 p. 443). However, although some of Burge's initial remarks point in this direction, it is clear that it is not the view that he ends up defending. Thus, Burge summarizes his position as follows: "The believer's own construal of the words does not determine content. For if it did, the believer's belief, in the relevant cases would be true." (1978, p. 138)

<sup>32</sup> Burge 1978, p. 138.

<sup>33</sup> Burge 1979, p. 100.

The trouble with this move, however, is that it undermines Frege's principle. If S does not understand the content of her own thoughts, then the fact that she takes a different attitude towards p than towards q cannot in itself show that the contents are different.<sup>34</sup> That Bert takes a different attitude towards "Arthritis is arthritis" than to "Arthritis is a rheumatoid disease of the joints only" is explained by appealing to the idea that he fails to see that the two thoughts have the same content, not, as Frege's principle would have it, by appealing to the idea that the two thoughts *have* a different content. That is, Bert *is* irrational, on Burge's view, it is just that Bert himself does not know this. In short, Burge's commitment to the idea that someone can believe a content despite misunderstanding this content, is incompatible with Frege's principle.<sup>35</sup>

Burge's social externalism therefore fails to meet the restriction Burge himself lays down on acceptable theories of content: It is not compatible with Frege's principle of content individuation. Like Frege, Burge does bring rationality considerations to bear, but instead of allowing these to play an individuating function in accordance with Frege's principle, Burge falls back on the idea that people do not understand the content of their own thoughts. I believe this points to a general problem with trying to combine Frege's principle with content externalism (in the case of general terms): The content externalist thought experiments rely on the assumption that individuals can think with concepts that they understand only incompletely. Frege's

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<sup>34</sup> In 'Frege on Knowing and Individuating Senses' (unpublished MS) Fredrik Stjernberg suggests that this tension can actually be found in Frege's own writings. Thus, Stjernberg argues, Frege appeals to the idea that speakers sometimes do not have a clear grasp of the relevant senses, and this is in conflict with Frege's principle.

<sup>35</sup> It might be thought that there is a simple fix to this problem: Just add to the principle that the individual must have a *complete* grasp of the content in question, and there is no longer any conflict between Burge's externalism and Frege's principle. However, this move 'saves' the principle only by depriving it of any value as a restriction on content individuation, given the content externalist assumption of incomplete understanding.

principle, however, presupposes that the assumption of incomplete understanding is false. Hence, the two cannot be combined.<sup>36</sup>

Consider the example discussed by Brown, concerning Rudolf who partially understands the terms ‘coriander’ and ‘cilantro’ and as a result takes a different attitude towards ‘Cilantro is an herb characteristic of Mexican cuisine’ than to ‘Coriander is an herb characteristic of Mexican cuisine’. Brown’s suggestion, again, is that the externalist may endorse Frege’s principle and argue that the difference in Rudolf’s attitudes shows that the two thoughts have a different content. However, this leads to the same dilemma as the one outlined above in the case of Burge. Either Frege’s principle of content individuation is taken seriously, and Rudolf is said to have two concepts whereas the community has one, or Rudolf’s apparent inconsistency is explained by appealing to the fact that he has an incomplete grasp of the community concept. Endorsing the first strategy implies that the content externalism is abandoned. It is no longer the case that Rudolf has an incomplete grasp of the community concept *cilantro/coriander*; rather, he has a complete grasp of two distinct concepts (that happen to have the same extension in this world), the concept of *schmilantro* and *schmoliander* (say). If one opts for the second strategy, however, it follows that what is doing the work is not Frege’s principle, but the assumption that Rudolf does not quite grasp the content of his own thoughts. Moreover, the inconsistency is not removed - it is just that Rudolf does not see it.

Now, Burge has presented a second thought experiment concerning the concept ‘sofa’, where Burge insists that the thought experiment does not rest on the assumption that the individual has an incomplete understanding of the meaning of the term and where, indeed, Burge

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<sup>36</sup> See Kimbrough (1998) for a related argument to the effect that Burge's externalism is incompatible with Frege's principle.

explicitly appeals to Frege's principle in support of content externalism.<sup>37</sup> It might therefore be thought that perhaps there is a version of content externalism in the case of general terms that does not rely on the assumption of incomplete understanding and that is, after all, perfectly compatible with Frege's principle. Let us therefore take a brief look at Burge's 'sofa'-thought experiment.

Burge imagines a subject, A, who doubts a conventional definition, such as "Sofas are pieces of furniture [of such and such construction] meant for sitting". In the community practice 'sofa' and 'piece of furniture [of such and such a construction] meant for sitting' are treated as synonyms. Nonetheless, Burge argues, A's doubts are not based on linguistic misunderstanding since A is fully aware of the community conventions. Rather, A has developed a non-standard theory – A theorizes that sofas, in fact, are religious objects that would break if one sat on them. Since A is perfectly rational and his doubt coherent, Burge argues, it follows that "Sofas are pieces of furniture...meant for sitting" has a different cognitive value (different 'unit of potential information') than the corresponding identity statement "Sofas are sofas". This, in turn, shows that 'sofa' and 'piece of furniture...meant for sitting' in fact express different concepts. Burge goes on to suggest that this argument for distinguishing concepts and conventional meaning is essentially Fregean in character: "The argument, of course, is a variant of Frege's argument for distinguishing senses from one another and from denotation..."<sup>38</sup>

This line of reasoning, quite clearly, is not compatible with Burge's earlier social externalism since it divorces thought content from conventional meaning. However, according to Burge, the upshot is nonetheless a form of externalism, although a 'physical' one, according to which concepts are determined by the real nature of the objects referred to. Now, it would stray

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<sup>37</sup> Burge 1986.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 715, note 15.

too far from the central point to discuss Burge's version of physical externalism in any detail here. However, it is important to notice that although Burge does indeed suggest that A has a complete grasp of the conventional meaning of 'sofa', it does not follow that A has a complete grasp of the *concept* of sofa. On the contrary, the very point of Burge's reasoning is that concepts are tied to real definitions, to the real nature of the objects referred to, rather than to conventional definitions. Speakers may therefore have a complete grasp of the conventional meaning of a word without having a complete grasp of the concept expressed. And, I submit, this is indeed the case with A, since Burge assumes that it is, after all, a conceptual truth (in A's world) that sofas are broad, overstuffed pieces of furniture... meant for sitting (since this is in the nature of sofas).<sup>39</sup> Thus, the real reason A can, rationally, doubt the truth of 'Sofas are overstuffed, broad pieces of furniture...' is that he does not fully grasp the concept of *sofa*. Despite assurances to the contrary, Burge does not employ Frege's principle to account for the speaker's cognitive perspective, but falls back on the idea that someone can doubt two statements that express the same content because they do not have a full grasp of this content.

Now, as mentioned above, Brown too argues that Burge's social externalism is in conflict with a Fregean conception of thought content.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, although she proposes that there is room for a Fregean version of content externalism (in the case of general terms as well as singular terms), she suggests that there is nonetheless a basic tension between content externalism and Fregeanism. This is so, she argues, since even if the content externalist can defend the Fregean idea that the subject knows a priori if two thoughts have the same content ('transparency of sameness of content'), content externalism is not compatible with the idea that a subject

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<sup>39</sup> I discuss this further in Wikforss 2003 and 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Brown 2003. Brown does not, however, address the question of how Burge's later, physical externalism relates to Fregeanism.

always knows a priori if two thoughts have different contents ('transparency of difference of content'). Although Fregeanism strictly speaking only requires transparency of sameness of content, Brown argues, it seems odd to insist on such transparency while accepting that transparency of difference of content fails. After all, both failures of transparency will lead to difficulties accounting for the individual's perspective, her reasoning and actions.<sup>41</sup> If this is so, Brown concludes, if content externalism cannot be combined with the Fregean approach to psychological explanation, "then we face a stark choice between anti-individualism and the Fregean explanation of key psychological data; those who are persuaded by the Fregean arguments for sense should reject anti-individualism."<sup>42</sup>

I agree with Brown that we face a stark choice. However, I believe the choice is starker still than Brown makes it out to be. Her proposal is that the content externalist can meet Frege's arguments by providing an alternative explanation of the very phenomena that Frege wanted to explain by appealing to sense. On her view, thus, the content externalist and Frege are both involved in the same enterprise, that of explaining the individual's perspective. I believe that the proposed alternative explanation fails and that we face a choice, not between two alternative explanations, but between accepting and rejecting the very idea that a theory of content should be able to provide such explanations. Those who believe that a theory of content should have this feature, have reason to reject content externalism.

#### **4. Brown's alternative explanation**

Discussing Burge, Brown proposes that he is committed to what she calls the principle of 'opaqueness of sameness of content', (OSC): "*A subject may have two thoughts, or thought-*

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<sup>41</sup> Brown 2004, p. 229-230.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 231.

*constituents, with the same content at a single time, although she supposes that they have different contents, and is unable to realize that they have the same content without using empirical information.*”<sup>43</sup> This principle, Brown proposes, undermines the classic Fregean arguments for sense. Celeste supposes mistakenly, Brown writes for instance, “that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ express thought constituents that have different referents and contents.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, she finds ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ informative, but not ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’. For the same reason, she fails to put her Hesperus and Phosphorus thoughts together in an inference. For instance, Celeste believes (i) and (ii), but fails to draw the conclusion (iii):

(i) *Hesperus is clearly visible in the evening.*

(ii) *It is crucially important to make as many observations as possible of Phosphorus.*

(iii) *It is crucially important to make as many observations as possible of Hesperus in the evening.*

Celeste fails to make the simple valid inference, Brown suggests, “since she does not realize that the relevant thought constituents have the same content and thus that the inference is valid.”<sup>45</sup>

Hence, there is no longer any reason to accept Frege’s principle. Similarly, Rudolf’s apparent irrationalities can be explained by appealing to the fact that he believes mistakenly that ‘cilantro’ and ‘coriander’ refer to different herbs and express different concepts. Instead of saying with the Fregeans that Rudolf associates different senses with the two terms, the content externalist can

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<sup>43</sup> Brown 2003, p. 442. See also Brown 2004, chapter 5. Boghossian (1994) argues that content externalism undermines the transparency of content, and shows how this leads to difficulties in accounting for the speaker’s perspective. Boghossian also ties the discussion of transparency to that of Frege, suggesting that people have failed to notice that the assumption that content is transparent underlies Frege’s arguments.

<sup>44</sup> Brown 2004, p. 201. See also Brown 2003, p. 444.

<sup>45</sup> Brown 2004, p. 200.

explain Rudolf's reasoning by appealing to the mistaken belief that his 'coriander'-thoughts have a different content than his 'cilantro'-thoughts.<sup>46</sup>

Now, as we have seen above, Brown is quite right to suggest that Burge's externalism is committed to the principle of opacity, and she is also quite right to suggest that this principle undermines the motivations behind Frege's principle. Although Burge professes to be a Fregean, his real strategy is to fall back on the principle of opacity. Brown, however, goes beyond noticing that these principles are in conflict. She also proposes that precisely because there is such a conflict, the externalist can employ OSC in order to provide an alternative explanation of the individual's perspective. However, this proposal is riddled with difficulties.

Brown's strategy, again, is that we simply add a belief to S, thereby making her come out perfectly rational:

(ii\*) *'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' express thought constituents that have different referents and contents.*

How could adding this belief help explaining Celeste's perspective? One idea would be that the added belief *blocks* the inference in question. That is, by adding (ii\*) the inference from (i) and (ii) to (iii) is blocked. However, it is quite clear that this does not work. The added belief is a meta-belief (the terms 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are mentioned not used), and can therefore not block the inference from (i) and (ii) to (iii) since these are all object-level beliefs.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the meta-belief can be said to engage the object-level beliefs if we add the following belief:

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<sup>46</sup> Although Brown primarily applies her alternative explanation to examples involving singular terms, it is clear that she considers the explanation to apply also in the case of general terms since she proposes that it can be employed in the types of cases discussed by Burge, such as the 'arthritis'-case. (Brown 2003, p. 443)

<sup>47</sup> Thanks to Kathrin Glüer for very helpful comments on this issue.

(ii\*\*) '*Hesperus*' refers to *Hesperus* and '*Phosphorus*' refers to *Phosphorus* and *Hesperus* is not identical to *Phosphorus*.

However, it should be clear, this just gets the content externalist back to where she started, by attributing a contradictory belief to Celeste (the belief that *Hesperus* is not *Phosphorus*). We now need to explain how she can hold such a belief, and no appeal to metabeliefs will help.<sup>48</sup> In order to explain Celeste's cognitive perspective it has to be added that because Celeste thinks that *Hesperus* and *Phosphorus* are distinct, '*Hesperus*' and '*Phosphorus*' do not express the same concepts to her. That is, to explain Celeste's perspective we have to fall back on a Fregean notion of content. Similarly, to explain Rudolf's apparent irrationalities it is of no help to appeal to his meta-belief that '*cilantro*' and '*coriander*' express different concepts. Instead, it has to be added that because Rudolf thinks of *cilantro* and *coriander* differently, the terms '*cilantro*' and '*coriander*' express different concepts to him. But then, again, what is doing the work is not OSC but a Fregean notion of content.

Indeed, Brown's strategy runs into the same kind of difficulties as did Burge's strategy of appealing to the notion of a linguistic mistake: We cannot explain the individual's perspective (her asserting '*A fortnight is ten days*', for instance) by appealing to such '*mistakes*' unless we adjust the content attribution accordingly, unless her *object-level beliefs* are affected, and this requires attributing non-externalist, Fregean concepts to her.

It might be said that all of this could be avoided, if the principle of opacity is properly understood. What Brown should have said is not that we add meta-beliefs to explain the

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<sup>48</sup> In addition, it should be pointed out that it is very implausible to attribute meta-beliefs of this sort to ordinary speakers. Indeed, discussing a different problem concerning anti-individualism and reasoning Brown rejects the appeal to such meta-beliefs. She considers the idea that the individual's inference contains a premise concerning the identity of the concepts in her inference, but rejects it on the grounds that it seems implausible that the individual's inference "must contain any premise that involves the concept of a concept". (2004, p. 181)

individual's perspective but, rather, that the very idea that content is opaque suffices to explain her perspective. Celeste fails to draw the above inferences simply because she does not know what she is thinking. Similarly, Rudolf's apparent irrationalities can be explained by saying that he just does not know what he is thinking. This is not to say that Celeste and Rudolf have any *beliefs* about the content of their beliefs, but merely to say that they are in the dark with respect to the content of their thoughts. This, it might be argued, is the real significance of OSC.

It should be immediately clear, however, that if this is the idea then content no longer serves to rationalize the individual's perspective. The individual reasons in ways unknown to her and there is no hope of explaining her perspective by appealing to the notion of thought content. It might be thought that the real worry concerning this proposal is that it appears to acknowledge that content externalism undermines self-knowledge.<sup>49</sup> However, happily, we can leave the much-debated issue of whether content externalism is compatible with a self-knowledge aside.<sup>50</sup> Even if we grant the compatibilist externalist that, in a sense, Celeste has self-knowledge despite OSC, we are left with the task of accounting for her perspective.<sup>51</sup> To appeal to OSC in the way proposed is not to rationalize the individual's reasoning and actions, but to give up on the very idea that content should serve such a rationalizing function. What we are told is not that Celeste, after all, is rational, but that she fails to know that she is irrational. This may provide her

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<sup>49</sup> See for instance Bilgrami (2003) who suggests that the content externalist faces a 'trilemma'. Discussing Burt, a chemical ignoramus, uttering 'I judge that water is not H<sub>2</sub>O', Bilgrami argues that the content externalist is either forced to describe Burt as a 'logical idiot', or appeal to a notion of narrow content, or give up on the idea that Pierre knows what he believes and thus seriously compromise self-knowledge (pp. 25-26).

<sup>50</sup> The compatibility of OSC and self-knowledge has been much debated. For instance, compatibilists have endorsed Burge's strategy of appealing to the self-verifying nature of cogito-thoughts (Burge 1988), arguing that even if OSC implies that Rudolf cannot discriminate among his thoughts, he does know what he is thinking when he judges 'I am thinking, with this very thought, that cilantro is an herb used in Mexican cooking'. See Brown 2004, chapter 2, for a good overview of this debate.

<sup>51</sup> I argue for this at some length in 'Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of Content' (submitted MS).

with an excuse (if what we are interested in is culpability) but it does not provide us with a notion of content that captures her cognitive perspective.

This, in the end, is the real alternative to Frege. The idea that we can somehow reconcile the need to make sense of the individual with content externalism fails. Instead, we face a stark choice between a view according to which content should account for the speaker's perspective, and a view according to which there is no such constraint at all: The notion of content is simply disconnected from the role of making the individual's reasoning and actions reasonable.<sup>52</sup> Content externalists (such as Burge and Brown) are trying to have it both ways but, I submit, this attempt fails.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> This for instance is Ruth Millikan's line. By rejecting what she calls 'meaning rationalism', the view that we can know a priori whether two thoughts are the same or distinct, she argues that we should no longer resist attributing contradictory beliefs, etc. to individuals. Being psychologically rational is just to be 'in good mechanical order', and this is distinct from being semantically rational, 'a person whose thoughts follow logical patterns' (1993, pp. 289-290).

<sup>53</sup> Thanks to Kathrin Glüer-Pagin, Peter Pagin and Sören Häggqvist for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Thanks also to the audience at the 5th Prague Interpretation Colloquium, 2005.

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