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## Social Externalism and Linguistic Communication

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### 1 Introduction

Many philosophers and linguists would characterize the process of linguistic communication as follows: When a speaker has a belief with a certain content and intends a hearer to recognize that he or she has a belief with that content, the speaker searches for words that, in light of semantic conventions and the context of utterance, will enable the hearer to recognize that speaker has that belief. Upon finding words that the speaker thinks will have that result, the speaker speaks those words and, if communication is successful, the hearer infers that the speaker has a belief with the content in question. Call this conception of communication the *expressive theory of communication*.

The viability of the expressive theory of communication will depend on whether we can make good sense of the pertinent concept of *content*. One way to refute the expressive theory would be to show that we couldn't understand the pertinent notion of content apart from an independent understanding of linguistic communication. My purpose in this paper is to argue that Tyler Burge's social externalism leads to just such a refutation of the expressive theory of communication. Roughly, if the very content of a person's thought is relative to the way words are used in his or her linguistic community, then we cannot turn around and ex-

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plain the way words are used by saying that the function of words is to convey the contents of thoughts.

Here I will not undertake a defense of Burge's social externalism, although I will explain what I think it means. (For my defense of it, see my 1987, 1991 and 1994, ch. 3.) My purpose is just to explain why social externalism really does require the rejection of the expressive theory of communication. For various reasons, one might imagine that the incompatibility is merely apparent—that it will disappear if only we are careful to draw certain distinctions. I will argue that no, the incompatibility is very real. I will close with a question for Prof. Burge, who does not seem to agree that his most famous idea has this important consequence.

## 2 The expressive theory

To begin, I should explain in more detail what I mean by *the expressive theory of communication* and the role that the concept of content is supposed to play in it. In brief, the expressive theory states that the primary function of language is to enable speakers to convey the contents of their beliefs to hearers. An expressivist would think that the exercise of this primary function may be illustrated by examples such as this: If I believe that there is poison ivy in the backyard and I believe that you do not know that, and I believe it would be useful for you to know that, then I might say "There is poison ivy in the backyard", intending that you will at least infer that I believe there is poison ivy in the backyard and expecting perhaps also that you will go on to infer that there is poison ivy in the backyard from the fact that I believe it.

An expressivist does not have to hold that speakers intend to convey the content of their thoughts to hearers every time they speak, or even that this is the case more often than not. Of course there are also commands, requests, questions, lies, jokes and poems. The point is only that the semantic rules of language are primarily designed to allow this conveying of content to happen. (Here I use the term *semantic rule* in a broad sense to include what some would call *pragmatic rules*.) I am content to define expressivism as the thesis that the primary function of language is to convey the contents of beliefs, because this is how many philosophers and linguists would explain specifically the *informative uses* of language, and I think that these philosophers and linguists would also maintain that the informative uses are those that above all give shape to language. However, I could just as well define expressivism as merely the thesis that the *informative uses* of language are those in which the speaker intends to convey the content of his or her thought to

a hearer, because I think that Burge's social externalism entails the rejection of even this much. The most dubious aspect of the expressive theory is not its claim that the informative use is primary but the claim that intentions to convey a content normally underlie the informative uses.

Expressivism, as I propose to define it, holds that the end result of successfully conveying the content of a belief is that the hearer recognizes that the speaker has a belief having that content. Alternatively, the end result of successfully conveying a content might be taken to be that the hearer actually forms a belief with the content in question. The former definition is intended to capture those episodes of speech in which the speaker does not succeed in actually persuading the hearer and also those episodes in which the content the speaker intends to convey is the content of a belief that the hearer already possesses. Whichever way the expressivist defines the end result of successfully conveying a content, the expressivist must allow that speakers often fail to achieve this result.

The process by which this end result is achieved is supposed to be one in which the speaker chooses words on the basis of the semantic rules of the language in light of the situation that the interlocutors are actually in and in which the hearer recognizes the content of the speaker's belief on the basis of the words spoken, the situation and the semantic rules. These semantic rules are rules that in some way guide the speaker's choice of words, and thus they go beyond a mere assignment of literal meaning to the sentences of the language. They may make reference not only to the content the speaker wishes to convey and the conventional meanings of words but also to certain parameters constituting the context of utterance. For instance, in choosing to speak sentences containing quantifiers, such as "all" or "some", and in interpreting such sentences, we must take into account the *domain of discourse*. The values of these other parameters, constituting the context of utterance, may be constrained by further semantic rules in light of the character of the situation in which the conversation takes place. (It is these rules that are sometimes dubbed *pragmatic*.) The rules that constrain their values will often fail to pick out a definite value, and to this extent speaker and hearer may be left to their own creative devices.

Given that the speaker intends the hearer to recognize that the speaker has a thought with a certain content, the speaker's objective has to be to choose words in such a way that in light of the conventional meanings of the words spoken, the external situation and the presumption that the speaker is conforming to the semantic rules of the lan-

guage, the hearer can recognize that the speaker has a thought with that content. If the speaker chooses well, then insofar as the hearer shares with the speaker an understanding of the semantic rules and an acquaintance with the external situation, the hearer may indeed be able to do this. If the speaker makes a poor choice, there will be a disparity (or only an accidental congruence) between the content that the speaker intended the hearer to recognize as the content he or she intended to convey and the content that the hearer comes to think of as the content the speaker intended to convey.

The concept of content is crucial to the expressive theory of communication. Without it the expressive theory would come to little more than this: Something happens in the mind of the speaker, which causes the speaker to make some sounds; the hearer hears these sounds and then something happens in the mind of the hearer. Such a vacuous theory would not be worth mentioning except that those who would defend the expressive theory against my refutation often wind up defending nothing more than this. If we want to explain linguistic communication in terms of what happens in the minds of interlocutors, then we have to specify the relation between what happens in the mind of the speaker and what is supposed to happen (when the primary function of language is successfully exercised) in the mind of the hearer. The expressivist describes that relation in terms of *content*. The content of the belief that the speaker intends the hearer to attribute to him or her has to be *the same* as the content of the belief that the hearer attributes to the speaker as a result of the speaker's act of speech.

Likewise, the expressive theory of communication is distorted if we lose track of the fact that the pertinent notion of content is supposed to be one that plays specifically this role as what speaker and hearer share when the primary function of language is successfully exercised. This is easy to do since in fact there are several other notions of content at play in the philosophical literature. One of these is the *epistemological* notion of content. Here the content of a belief is identified in terms of the contents of the beliefs, perceptions and circumstances that justify it and the beliefs and actions that it in turn justifies. Another, closely related notion is the *folk psychological* notion of content. Here the content of a thought is supposed to be identified in terms of its causal/explanatory relations to perceptions, actions and other thoughts. Beyond these, there are various *semantic* notions of content. For instance, there is the notion of content as what intertranslatable sentences from different languages have in common. This concept of content, in the guise of *literal meaning*, may play a role in the expressive theory of communication, but it is

not the same as the concept of content as that which is conveyed. Also, if we want to explain how the truth value of a sentence is a function of the reference of its several components, we might want to introduce a notion of content such that we can say that the referents of "that"-clauses, such as "that Orcutt is a spy" in "Ralph believes that Orcutt is a spy", are the normal contents of the sentences that follow the word "that". For each of these notions of content there will be a corresponding notion of *concepts*. Basically, a concept is a component, or aspect, of a content, which stands to the whole content as a word or phrase stands to a sentence.

The confusion of the expressivist's proprietary notion of content with these others can have the result that essentially vacuous claims are put forward as if they actually meant something. It sometimes happens that a theorist displays in various ways commitment to the expressivist framework (for instance, in the conception of semantic rules that he or she espouses) but then declares that it is not to be expected, even in cases of successful communication, that the content of the belief that speaker intends to convey will match the content of the belief that the hearer ends up attributing to the speaker (e. g., Bezuidenhout 1997). Such theories are not contradictory, because the concept of content thus employed can derive content from its engagement in issues other than the nature of linguistic communication. While not contradictory, such a theory of communication is liable to be vacuous unless the theorist can explain what relation has to obtain between the content that the speaker intends to convey and the content that the hearer attributes to the speaker other than to say that they must be similar in some way. But if the theorist can tell us what relation has to obtain between the content that the speaker intends to convey and the content that the hearer attributes to the speaker in order for communication to be successful, then we can use that relation to define a kind of content that must be the *same* between speaker and hearer when communication is successful: Two thoughts will have *the very same content* in the proprietary sense if and only if their contents in the nonproprietary sense bear that relation to one another. (This sameness will be an equivalence relation provided the theory provides for the assumption that if *A* communicates something to *B* then *B* can communicate the same back to *A* and can communicate the same to a third party *C*.)

It should be evident, then, that the expressive theory of communication requires a serious theory of the nature of thought content. That does not mean that one is not justified in adopting an expressivist theory of communication without first developing a viable theory of content. It

does mean that if we can show that something stands in the way of developing such a theory of content, then that is a good reason to reject the expressive theory.

### 3 The content of social externalism

What I get out of Burge's 1979 paper, "Individualism and the Mental", is the following conclusion, which I call *social externalism*: The very content of a person's thought is relative to the way words are used in the surrounding linguistic community. In Burge's own formulation it is the claim that the content of a person's thought is attributable in part to the character of the person's social environment quite apart from the ways in which that social environment might have affected the person's internal physical states (1979, 79). In this section, I want to say just enough about the reasons to believe this to bring out the fact that the notion of content at issue is the notion of content in terms of which the expressivist would explain linguistic communication, and to show that the pertinent variable really is the way words are used.

First, I should point out in advance that the upshot of my argument in this paper will be that social externalism, formulated as a thesis about mental content, is strictly speaking false, because the mental content it posits does not exist. This is not to say that there is nothing right about it. The commitment to mental content could be removed by reformulating social externalism as a thesis about the proper interpretation of a person's words. For two reasons I formulate it here as a thesis about mental content. First, my *reductio* on expressivism will require the assumption that if there were such a thing as content in the expressivist's proprietary sense, then social externalism would be true of it. Second, the arguments for social externalism formulated as anything other than a thesis about content (e.g., as a thesis about the proper interpretation of words) would inevitably have to pass through the formulation as a thesis about content, because the opponent we have to argue against is inevitably someone who believes in content in the expressivist's sense. So for the remainder of this section I will play along with the expressive theory of communication with respect to its postulation of mental content.

What persuades me that Burge's social externalism is true (under the assumption that there is such a thing as content in the pertinent sense) is that we must suppose it to be true in order to understand the possibility of linguistic communication in a community exhibiting a division of epistemic labor. In such a community, every member stands ready to acknowledge that he or she may be mistaken in judging that a

given object, event, or state of affairs is an instance of a given type if that type is a type regarding which other members of the community qualify as experts. Still, in such a community, those who are nonexperts in a certain area have to be permitted to use the vocabulary of the experts. For instance, they have to be able to use it in taking instruction from the experts and in collaborating with the experts. Moreover, when they use it, it will normally have to be understood as meaning the same thing that it means when the experts use it. If we adopt the expressive theory of communication, this means that those who use it will normally have to be understood as intending to convey the same content that the experts would intend to convey by means of it.

For instance, imagine Gus, who has a problem with his car. Sometimes when he presses on the accelerator the car feels a little bit sluggish, especially when going up hills. He takes his car to his auto mechanic, suspecting this might be a symptom of something more serious. The laconic mechanic simply tells him that he should try using "high octane gasoline". Gus asks no questions, but the next time he needs gas, he drives up to the full service island at the filling station and says to the attendant, "My car needs high octane gasoline; so fill 'er up with that". As a matter of fact, Gus suffers from misconceptions about high-octane gasoline. He does not know that the octane rating is a measure of the degree to which the gasoline resists engine knocking. He thinks high-octane gasoline is more powerful gasoline that will make any car accelerate faster. Still, what he is asking for is high-octane gasoline, and that is exactly what the attendant should put in his fuel tank. In other words, the content of Gus's belief about his car (considered as what he intends to convey in words) literally contains the concept *high-octane gasoline*. It would be a mistake to say that the concept that his belief contains is really just *extra powerful gasoline*. If that is what he has in mind and the attendant is not ignorant of this, then the attendant's reply to his request should be simply, "We don't have any". Typically the attendant would not have such insight into Gus's mind, but we should not have to suppose that the beneficial effects of the division of epistemic labor depend on such ignorance.

Thus, we find that in order to render intelligible the division of epistemic labor within the context of the expressive theory of communication, we have to suppose that the contents of the thoughts that people intend to convey by means of words stemming from regions of discourse in which they are not experts are determined not only by what they themselves know but also by the discourse of the experts. There are various places to try to wriggle out of this conclusion. Elsewhere (1991;

1994, ch. 3), I have put my foot down on all of those that I am aware of. It might be said that Gus, in saying “My car needs high octane gasoline”, is merely paraphrasing his mechanic’s words; but that is not right, since the division of epistemic labor must allow for a certain amount of creativity in the nonexpert’s use of a term. Or one might try to define various concepts of content in such a way that which content a person has in mind will depend only what is going on within that person’s own head; but then it will turn out that those kinds of content cannot plausibly be what is conveyed in linguistic communication. I will not take up these issues here. Again, the reason I am going this far into the argument for social externalism is just that I want to emphasize that the notion of content at issue is precisely that which the expressivist supposes is conveyed in linguistic communication. That is evident from the fact that the question has been what the content of people’s thoughts must be if the conveying of thoughts by means of language is to support a division of epistemic labor.

The way in which content is relative to the way words are used in the surrounding community can be dramatized by imagining alternative possible worlds. Imagine a world much like our world but in which what fuel experts call “high octane gasoline” is not (or not just) gasoline that resists knocking, but is actually gasoline that makes cars (in general) accelerate faster. We do not have a word in English for that kind of gasoline, but we can make one up. Call it “high schmooctane gasoline”. Imagine that such a world contains a person who, with respect to his internal physical structure, is exactly like Gus. We will call him “Russ”, although people in his world call him “Gus”. If we confine our attention to things going on at and beneath the surfaces of their bodies, then we will find no physical difference between Gus and Russ at all. So the differences between their worlds have not *made* any difference to what has gone on inside their bodies. Just as we should interpret Gus as literally asking for high-octane gasoline, we should interpret Russ as literally asking for high schmooctane gasoline. More precisely, the content of Gus’s thought contains the concept *high-octane gasoline*, while the content of Russ’s thought contains the concept *high schmooctane gasoline*. But the relevant difference between their worlds is just that the relevant experts in Gus’s community use the expression “high octane gasoline” in one way, and the relevant experts in Russ’s community use the expression “high octane gasoline” in a different way. So we should conclude that thought content is relative to the way words are used in the surrounding linguistic community.

In view of present purposes, it is important to make sure that the source of the difference between the contents of Gus’s and Russ’s thoughts really is the way words are used and not something else. There are indeed several differences between Gus’s and Russ’s worlds. The thoughts of the manufacturers of gasoline in Gus’s world differ in content from the thoughts of the manufacturers of gasoline in Russ’s world. Further, there are different substances in the gas tanks beneath the asphalt at the filling stations. Nonetheless, as I will now explain, the contents of Gus’s and Russ’s thoughts are relative to the *way words are used* and not to these other things.

As for the differences between the contents of the thoughts of the relevant experts, we cannot attribute the difference between the contents of Gus’s and Russ’s thought to these, because the content of these experts’ thoughts is likewise relative. It is an oversimplification to suppose that in a society exhibiting a division of epistemic labor there will be for each kind of thing an expert who knows all of the essential properties of that kind. Just as the content of the thought that a nonexpert expresses by means of a word depends on the uses that the experts make of that word, so too the content that a given expert expresses by means of a word depends on the uses that the other experts make of it. (For present purposes “expert” does not mean someone empowered to semantically legislate, but only someone who *knows better*.) There may be thought contents the possession of which is not relative to anything in the social constitution of a thinker’s environment (I doubt it, but for present purposes I need not deny it), but those thought contents that depend on the experts’ uses of terms are not of that kind, not even when they are the contents of the thoughts of an expert. So if we said that the content of the thought that a nonexpert conveys by means of a term is relative to the experts’ thought contents, then we would have to say that the experts’ thought contents were relative to other experts’ thought contents in the same way. We would not have identified anything that can be characterized independently that we could say thought content is relative to. For purposes of developing a fundamental theory of thought content, then, it is necessary to formulate the relativization as a relativization to the way the local experts use the term.

As for the differences in distribution of chemical kinds, that cannot be not what Gus’s and Russ’s thought contents are relative to, because we could tell the story differently, so that there were no such differences. (Suppose that in both worlds both high octane and high schmooctane gasoline are available at normal gas stations. A virtue of Burge’s original “arthritis” example was that the pertinent counterfactual did not

suggest a different distribution of the pertinent pathologies between the actual and counterfactual situations.) However the objection might be deepened in a manner that meets this response by drawing on a certain common conception of the meaning of natural kind terms. Many philosophers, following Kripke and Putnam, suppose that the history of a term is relevant to its meaning. A term is introduced into the language via some kind of effect that the thing denoted has on those speakers who introduce it, and this process of introduction, as well as subsequent history, differentiates the meaning of the term from the meanings of other terms that have different histories. (In the simplest case, we might imagine that a speaker baptizes a substance with a term, declaring, "I hereby dub thee 'high octane gasoline'!") It might be argued that if the content of the thought that Gus expresses with "high octane gasoline" is different from the content of the thought that Russ expresses with those words, then what makes the difference is not the difference in expert usage between their worlds but the different histories of the expression in their worlds. (Steven Davis (1997) has made precisely this proposal in connection with a different example.)

There are indeed some reasons to be persuaded by this. First, it is tempting to think of a natural kind term as the proper name for a stuff or a condition (such as a disease), and it does seem that history plays a part in the reference of proper names. Thus, if in world 1 the name "Gödel" derives from the name of a man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic and in world 2 it derives from someone else (not Gödel in fact) who is falsely credited with proving the incompleteness of arithmetic, then even if current dispositions with respect to the name "Gödel" are the same in the two worlds, we might wish to say that the name "Gödel" has a different meaning in the two worlds. Second, we wish to allow that formally contrary opinions about natural kinds may have a common subject matter. Thus Newton and Einstein were both talking about *mass*, though Newton said it was conserved and Einstein denied it. Only thus is it possible to construe changes in opinion as discoveries concerning kinds that people were previously acquainted with. Nonetheless, I do not think that in the cases that concern us the difference in content between two thinkers can be entirely traced to a difference in the histories of their terms in such a way as to exclude the relevance of difference in current usage.

The way for me to show this is to clarify what I mean by *the way words are used*. We want to define this broadly enough to include much more than the actual course of events in the world (including all of the linguistic events). We do not need to include all that might be said in

world histories that are essentially impossible. However, we will wish to include those possible world histories in which people rather like ourselves, speaking a language that we would recognize as the language in question, react to events that are plausible eventualities in the world as we know it. If the way words are used is defined in this way, and not more narrowly, then I think no one will suggest that the history of a natural kind term makes a difference to its meaning without making a difference to the way words are used.

Imagine two worlds that contain exactly the same natural kinds. Suppose also that the two worlds have arrived at exactly the same arrangements of matter, albeit as a result of different histories. The people in world 1 use the word "gold" in just the way the people in world 2 use it. Moreover, there is no discovery that the people in world 1 might make that the people in world 2 might not make as well; and hence there is no usage contingent upon such a discovery in world 1 that is not equally a prospect in world 2. However at an earlier stage in the histories of these worlds, the usage of the word "gold" in world 1 differed from the usage of "gold" in world 2 in such a way that the actual extension of "gold" in world 1 was broader than the actual extension of "gold" in world 2. I do not think this difference entails that at the later stage the word "gold" means anything different in world 1 from what it means in world 2. For instance, I do not think that it would be true to say in the language of the people in world 1 at the later stage that their forebears would have been mistaken in calling, say, platinum "gold" unless it is likewise true to say in the language of the people of world 2 that their forebears would have been mistaken to call platinum "gold". What leads people to think that the actual constitution of the local environment is a component of meaning above and beyond actual usage is that they define current usage narrowly, in such a way that it does not incorporate the ways words will be used as a result of the discoveries that might ultimately be made about the actual constitution of the local environment.

#### 4 Concessions on both sides

The objection to expressivism must not be formulated as simply the claim that content *depends* on language. The expressivist can certainly allow that in many ways the contents to be conveyed in language in turn *depend* on language. Nor can the antithesis to expressivism be formulated as simply the claim that words do not express thoughts. The antiexpressivist can certainly allow that in some sense words express thoughts.

#### 4.1 What the expressivist can allow

The expressivist can allow that thought content depends on language in at least all of the following ways:

- What we think is largely what other people tell us.
- Some of the things that there are to think about are themselves linguistic entities. For example, thoughts about words depend on language. So do thoughts about books.
- Some of the things that there are to think about, though not themselves linguistic entities, have a nature intimately bound up with language. An example would be Wednesdays. So a thought about a Wednesday appointment would be a thought that depended on language. Another example might be civil laws.
- There may be some thoughts that it would be very difficult for a person to hold in mind without the help of a linguistic image (a visual image of writing or an auditory image of sounds). An example might be thoughts of differential equations. Likewise, certain inferences might be difficult if we could not use linguistic expressions as representatives for the thoughts that they express.
- Children, and even adults, may acquire certain concepts only as a result of trying to understand the contents of the beliefs that others intend to convey in words. For instance, the only reason a child acquires the concept *chair*, as opposed to other similar concepts, such as *seat* or *furniture-that-people-sit-on*, may be that this is the concept that others apparently intend to convey by means of the word "chair".
- Another aspect of the process of concept acquisition may be experimentation in the use of words. For instance, a person who is uncertain what concept pertaining to people is supposed to be conveyed by the term "geek" might try using it in a sentence or two and seeing if hearers act as though they understand.
- Insofar as language facilitates science as a collective activity and science invents concepts corresponding to the natural kinds that it discovers, language facilitates the conceptualization of natural kinds.

The expressivist may maintain that people use words in the way they do because the primary function of language is to enable speakers to convey the content of their beliefs to hearers and yet, without introducing any circularity, may allow that in all of these ways the contents of people's thoughts depend on language. In each case, language is cited as a factor in explaining how thoughts with a certain content are formed or how there can be a certain sort of thing to think about. In none of these cases, is language cited as a factor in our account of what the thought's having a certain content actually consists in. In each

case, we can allow that what thoughts a person thinks depends on language in the manner described while denying that a thought's having a certain content is in part a matter of words being used in a certain way in the surrounding linguistic community.

The threat to expressivism is only that we will have to appeal to the way words are used in explaining what it is for a person's thought to have the sort of content that the expressivist wishes to appeal to in explaining how words are used. Some of the dependencies listed above may ultimately be problematic for the expressivist insofar as contemplation of them may lead us to recognize the dependency of the very nature of content on the way words are used in the surrounding linguistic community. For instance, we might realize that whether a person is really thinking about Wednesdays or Schmednesdays depends on how words are used in the surrounding linguistic community. But then the problem is that we cannot explain what it is for a thought to have a certain content apart from the way words are used in the surrounding linguistic community; it is not that Wednesdays are entities in some sense constituted by language.

#### 4.2 What the antiexpressivist can allow

The antiexpressivist need not deny that people sometimes choose their words with the specific intent of instilling a certain mental state in another. What the antiexpressivist denies is only that the primary function of informative uses of language is to enable speakers to convey the content of their thoughts to hearers. This is not the same thing because an act of instilling a mental state may not be conceived as a matter of the speaker's choosing words in order to enable the hearer to recognize the content of his or her thought and, more importantly, because the intention to instill a specific mental state may not at all be the normal case. Further, the antiexpressivist need not deny that people usually speak *on purpose*, although the antiexpressivist may doubt whether their usual purposes have much in common. For instance, a typical reason for speaking would be that the hearer needs to know what to do in case the motor will not start. Once they have a reason to speak, their reasons for saying the things they say may be little more than that those are the things that are relevant to the task at hand.

Moreover, the antiexpressivist need not deny the utility of talk of meaning. Certainly we sometimes have to ask people what they *mean*. We might even ask them to try to *express their thoughts* more clearly. If we overhear a bit of conversation, we may report that we are uncertain whether the speaker was *expressing* his or her own *thought* or was merely paraphrasing someone else. When communication between two

people is ineffective, we may explain that the one party did not understand what the other one *meant*. In all these ways, our ordinary talk about language seems to endorse the expressive theory of communication. In view of this, to argue that the expressive theory is simply mistaken may seem to be a perverse contradiction of plainest common sense. On the contrary, one may very well reject the expressive theory of communication, considered as a fundamental theory of the nature of linguistic communication, without advocating a reform in our ordinary ways of talking about language. No doubt these ways of talking about language serve an important function in the conduct of conversations, and a theory of language must explain how they do their work. But it is not necessary to view them as offering key insights into the nature of language, insights that we can develop into a viable theory of how language really works.

Asking a person to explain what he or she means is a useful way to try to make progress in discussions where otherwise progress would come to a halt. In effect we are asking the person to try a different verbal strategy. If we report uncertainty over whether a speaker was expressing his or her own thought or instead merely paraphrasing someone else, we are in effect expressing uncertainty whether we should hold the speaker accountable for an assertion. When we explain that one person failed to do as another person intended because the first one did not understand what the second one meant, or what thought the second was trying to convey, we in effect identify the ways in which the conversation departed from the norms of discourse that ought to be followed if communication is to be successful.

Such glosses on “what we really mean” in talking of meaning will not suffice, of course, as an alternative to the expressivist’s way of locating meaning in a substantive theory of communication. The way in which talk of meaning and expression plays a role in the conduct of conversations is something we have to try to comprehend in a precise theory of language. To do this, we will need to know what it means to adopt a verbal strategy. We will need to know what it amounts to hold a person accountable for an assertion. We will need to be able to specify the norms of discourse and the ways in which they affect interlocutors. We will need to have a definite conception of successful communication. But it is not just obvious that the expressive theory is the proper framework for explaining these things. (For some of the elements of an alternative, see my 1994 and 1998.)

When tossing about for the rudiments of a theory, it is a good idea to start with concepts one already understands. In a sense, as masters of

ordinary language, we do understand the concepts of meaning and expression. We understand how to employ those concepts in the conduct of conversation. So the expressivist’s idea that by concentrating on those concepts we might develop a viable theory of language is a very reasonable hunch. What social externalism shows, as we will see, is that this reasonable hunch does not pan out. It is a platitude that there is no sharp distinction between common sense and scientific theory. In the case of the theory of language, however, this platitude is misleading, for in the case of explaining the nature of language, common sense fails to yield a viable starting point for science.

## 5 The reductio

Suppose, for a reductio ad absurdum, that there is such a thing as content in the expressivist’s proprietary sense. The expressivist holds that people use words the way they do because the primary function of language is to enable speakers to convey the contents of their beliefs to hearers. Burge’s social externalism states that what<sup>if</sup> is for a person’s thought to have the content it has is explicable only in terms of the way words are used in the linguistic community. But that means that the expressivist’s explanation of the way words are used leads in circles. So it is not a good explanation.

Let us trace one of these circles in detail. Why do people use the term “high octane gasoline” in the way they do? For instance, why does Gus say “high octane gasoline” when he drives up to the full service island after his brief discussion with his mechanic? According to the expressivist, the proximal explanation is that Gus has a belief containing the concept *high octane gasoline*, namely, his belief that his car needs high octane gasoline, and the words he speaks are the words that, in light of their meaning and the context, he thinks will enable the gas station attendant to recognize that he has a belief with such a content. But now, what is it for a belief to have such a content—to contain the concept *high-octane gasoline*? Well, there may be various things that have to be said in answer to this, but one thing that has to be said, assuming the truth of Burge’s social externalism, is that other people in Gus’s linguistic community use the term “high octane gasoline” in a certain way. Thus we find that in explaining why people use the term “high octane gasoline” in the way they do, we have to cite the fact that people use the term “high octane gasoline” in the way they do. That is circular.

I should emphasize that this is a reductio on the expressivist’s explanation of language and not a straight refutation. A straight refutation



would be a defense of some thesis that simply contradicted the expressivist theory of communication without acquiescing in any way in the expressivist's point of view. That is not the kind of argument we have here. Burge's externalism, as I have formulated it, is a thesis about thought content in just the expressivist's sense. Already in supposing that there is such a thing as content in this sense we are buying into the expressivist conception of linguistic communication. What we find is that, having assumed in this way that expressivism is true, we cannot maintain the expressivist's sort of explanation of the way words are used. If we reject expressivism, then of course we reject the expressivist's propriety notion of content. Since this is integral also to the thesis of social externalism, we must reject that as well, which, again, is not to say that there is nothing right about it, for instance, as a thesis about the proper interpretation of people's words.

I acknowledge that this argument is liable to seem unpersuasive to committed expressivists just because it involves so many slippery concepts, such as *explanation* and the *nature* of a thing, not to mention *content* and *the way words are used*. So now I want to address a variety of considerations to which someone might appeal in order to show that the *prima facie* reductio really is not sound.

### 5.1 Reformulation in terms of rules of use

If we simply say that words are used as they are because speakers intend to convey the contents of their thought and that speakers' thoughts have the contents they have because words are used in the way they are, then that does seem to be a circle. But maybe the circle could be broken if we differentiated more sharply between the uses of words. We might find that the uses of words to which a given content is relative never include the uses we wish to explain in terms of that content. In that case, there would be no circle, just a series of one-way dependencies.

Toward rebutting this, let me emphasize again that according to the expressivist there will be certain principles governing the use of words for purposes of conveying the contents of beliefs. These will be the rules of semantics as the expressivist conceives of them. Only by virtue of their sharing such rules will the speaker reasonably be able to expect that the hearer will be able to recognize the content of the speaker's belief on the basis of the speaker's choice of words. Precisely how such rules should be formulated would depend on how the structure of a sentence uttered should depend on the structure of the content to be conveyed. It would also depend on how the context of utterance is sup-

posed to be exploited. However, for illustration we may suppose that one such rule would be just this:

*The high-octane rule:* If the content to be conveyed contains the concept *high-octane gasoline*, then the speaker shall use the term "high octane gasoline".

This is really only a caricature of the sort of rule that the expressivist would wish to cite, but it captures the expressivist's main idea that the rules of semantics relate linguistic expressions to features of the content to be conveyed. The expressivist will have to suppose that the speaker and hearer in some sense have *knowledge* of such rules, but expressivists may differ amongst themselves over the kind of knowledge this has to be. When an expressivist sets out to explain in detail an act of speech that exhibits what the expressivist considers to be the primary function of language (an informative use), the expressivist will explain it as a result of the speaker's applying rules such as these.

When we say that the expressivist proposes to explain *the use of words*, we do not, in so saying, have to presuppose any particular classification of actual and potential utterances into *uses*. But relative to the explanations that the expressivist actually gives, there will be certain natural classifications. A *use* of a word will be the type of utterance governed by a semantic rule of the sort that, as I have just explained, the expressivist would cite in explanation of speech behavior. For each semantic rule mentioning a specific expression there is a corresponding use of that expression such that two utterances of the expression, whether actual or merely potential, will count as the same use if and only if that semantic rule governed both utterances. In arguing that the expressivist's theory of the use of words is circular, we may employ specifically this notion of the *use* of an expression. Burge's social externalism may be understood by the expressivist as the claim that the content of a speaker's thought is relative to the semantic rules governing the rest of that speaker's linguistic community. For example, the concept that Gus expresses by means of the expression "high octane gasoline" is *high-octane gasoline* just because in his community the use of the expression "high octane gasoline" is governed by the high-octane rule.

In light of this explanation of what is meant by the *use* of a word, the charge of circularity can be reformulated in terms of the expressivist's semantic rules, thus: The expressivist proposes to formulate certain rules of semantics adherence to which makes it possible for speakers to convey the contents of their beliefs to hearers. These rules are formulated in terms of the contents of the beliefs to be conveyed. But Burge's

social externalism, as seen from the perspective of expressivism, shows that we cannot understand what it is for a person's thought to have a given content apart from the fact that the speech of members of the surrounding linguistic community is governed by just such rules. So the expressivist's semantic rules cannot be formulated in a manner that does not beg the question of what these rules really say.

Again, let us trace one of these circles in detail. In explaining why Gus speaks as he does, the expressivist proposes to cite Gus's adherence to something like the high-octane rule, which refers to the concept *high-octane gasoline*. But now, what are we to understand the high-octane rule to mean? That depends on what sort of thing a *concept* is (within the scope of the assumption that it is an aspect or a component of a content). Assuming that the high octane rule really is one of those that the expressivist would cite in identifying the uses of the expression "high octane gasoline" in Gus's community, the conclusion we may draw from Burge's social externalism is that in explaining what it is to have the concept *high octane gasoline* (again, an aspect or component of a content) we must have recourse to the fact that the high octane rule is a rule governing the speech of members of Gus's linguistic community. But this means we cannot get any grip at all on the meaning of the high-octane rule.

Suppose, for an analogy, that we wished to explain people's behavior by citing their knowledge of the rule "One should not commit fernombury". If we could explicate fernombury by saying that it is an act of preventing another person from using something that is that other's rightful possession, then we might be able to cite the rule in explaining why people refrain from certain actions. But suppose that what we can say is only that fernombury is the act of preventing a person from using his or her possessions in a community of people who adhere to a rule according to which one should not commit fernombury (so that where no such rule is in force an act of preventing someone from using his or her possessions is not fernombury). In that case we could have no grip at all on what the meaning of the rule really is.

In sum, the charge of circularity cannot be evaded by tracing more carefully the dependency of uses. That it cannot be can be demonstrated by reformulating the circularity charge as the charge that the expressivist cannot give a non-question-begging account of the principles by which speakers' choice of words is governed.

### 5.2 Particular vs. general explanations

I have acknowledged above that there is a legitimate place for talk of the expression of thought in words. That Gus used the term "high octane

gasoline" to express a thought about high octane gasoline is something we might indeed wish to say. For example, if there were a question about whether Gus misspoke or was lying or was making a joke or was paraphrasing someone else, then we might want to say this as a way of affirming that he was speaking sincerely for himself. Accordingly, I ought not to object if someone wants to say the same thing in a somewhat more elaborate way by saying that Gus intended the gas station attendant to believe that he had a belief with a content containing the concept *high octane gasoline*. So likewise, it might be said, I ought not to object to generalizing from this particular explanation and concluding that people use words the way they do because they intend their hearers to recognize that they have beliefs having certain contents.

My answer to this is that there are kinds of explanation that we may legitimately offer in particular cases that cannot be generalized and that explanation in terms of expression of thought is one of these. For instance, we might explain why John bought a new stereo amplifier by saying that John is an audiophile. John's buying a certain new stereo amplifier is an instance of the following type: actions that express an interest in high-end audio equipment. We may explain the particular act by citing John's disposition toward the type. But the explanation we offer of this particular instance does not generalize to the whole type. It is not explanatory to say that John tends to do things that express an interest in high-end stereo equipment because he is an audiophile. My claim is that similarly our explanation that Gus spoke as he did because he intended to convey the content of a belief does not generalize to allow us to conclude that in general people speak as they do because they intend to convey the contents of their beliefs.

There is little more to being an audiophile than having a tendency to do things that express an interest in high-end audio equipment. Nonetheless, we can cite John's being an audiophile to explain his purchase of a new amplifier, because there may be occasions on which his interest in high-end audio equipment is not an expression of his audiophilia. For instance, he might want to buy an amplifier to replace the one that he smashed that belonged to a friend. By explaining that it was because of his audiophilia, we indicate that this occasion is not one of those. Similarly, there is little more to verbally conveying the content of a thought than using language in the assertive sort of way. Nonetheless, we can cite the conveying of thought content in explanation of why Gus said "My car needs high octane gasoline" because there may be occasions on which a person speaks in other than the ordinary assertive sort

of way. For instance, he might have misspoken or been lying or telling a joke or paraphrasing someone else.

Precisely because there is little more to the claim that a person is an audiophile than the claim that he or she tends to do things that express an interest in high end audio equipment, it is not explanatory to say that in general John tends to do things that express an interest in high end audio equipment because he is an audiophile. Likewise, there is little more to the claim that a person used certain words to convey the content of his or her belief than the claim that he or she used words in the ordinary assertive sort of way, and so it is not explanatory to say that in general when a person uses words in the ordinary assertive sort of way it is because he or she wishes to convey the content of a belief that he or she has.

Two paragraphs back I said without qualification, “there is little more to verbally conveying the content of a thought than using language in the assertive sort of way”. Since this is supposed to express an analytic connection, the point is that there is little more to *the claim* that words have been used to convey the content of a thought than *the claim* that words were used in the ordinary assertive sort of way. Obviously, this is not something I can expect the expressivist to agree with. For the expressivist, the theory of how words express the contents of thoughts is supposed to be a substantive theory of what is involved in using words in the ordinary assertive sort of way. But the objection I am answering does not purport to find a specific flaw in the *reductio* on expressivism but only to persuade us that it must be mistaken somewhere. So to answer it, it suffices to show that from the point of view of the proponent of the *reductio* there is reason to deny that the expressivist’s reasoning here is sound.

Even so, it may not be obvious that even an opponent of expressivism ought to agree with what I have said about claims to the effect that words have been used to convey the content of a thought. In fact, I think that what I said is not exactly right. As I explained in section 4.2 above, the antiexpressivist will need an alternative framework for explaining the function of the whole panoply of ordinary ways of talking about language and meaning. From the point of view of such an alternative framework it will probably seem too simple just to say that claims to the effect that words express beliefs are claims to the effect that words are used in the ordinary assertive sort of way. But from the point of view of that alternative framework we will still want to deny that particular explanations in terms of the conveying of thought content can be

generalized, and what I have said here illustrates the sort of basis we will have for that denial.

### 5.3 Descriptions vs. the thing described

Suppose someone asserts, “The cause of his death caused his death”. Is that a vacuous assertion? Not necessarily. “The cause of his death” refers to some event *c*, “his death” refers to some event *e*, and what is asserted may be that *c* caused *e*. Since *c* might not have caused *e*, that assertion is not vacuous. It is not vacuous even though the concept *the cause of his death* cannot be understood apart from the concept *causes death*. Or suppose someone says, “He went for a walk because he decided to”. Is that a vacuous explanation? Certainly it is not very helpful, but, again, the decision is one thing, the walking another; so the assertion that a causal relation obtains between them is not vacuous. It is not vacuous even though the concept of deciding to go for a walk cannot be understood apart from the concept of going for a walk.

In a similar manner one might hope to rescue explanations of speech in terms of content. Consider: “Gus said ‘high octane gasoline’ because the content of the thought that he wished to convey contained the concept *high octane gasoline*”. Someone might think that what I am saying is that such explanations are vacuous because the concept of content (and, hence, the concept of concepts in the pertinent sense) cannot be analyzed apart from the concept of using words. In response, it might be said, the decision to convey a content is distinct from the act of speech, and so it is not vacuous to assert that the former caused the latter.

Recall that I do not dispute the legitimacy of particular explanations in terms of content. Saying on a particular occasion that Gus used the term “high octane gasoline” because the content of the thought he wished to convey contained the concept high-octane gasoline might distinguish this case from various others. What I question is the legitimacy of generalizing and saying that in general, or whenever people engage in informative uses of language, they aim to convey the contents of their thoughts. With this in mind, I think it should be clear that the analogy to “The cause of his death caused his death” does not help the expressivist. It would not be legitimate to try to generalize from such an explanation and to say that in general it is the causes of death that cause death.

The other example is more challenging. Would there be anything wrong, besides oversimplification, in generalizing and saying that in general people go for a walk because they have decided to go for a walk? That depends on what we can say about decisions to go for a

walk as a general type. If decisions to go for a walk can be characterized as a distinctive type of neurological event, then I think the generalization is substantive. For in that case, decisions to go for a walk form a type that can in principle be grasped apart from the fact that decisions to go for a walk tend to lead to walks. In that case, the explanation is substantive even if we cannot already specify the pertinent neurological type and may perhaps be substantive even if we do not yet suspect that there is such a neurological type. But if decisions to go for a walk have nothing in common that distinguishes them from other things apart from being decisions to go for a walk, then I think the generalization is vacuous, for in that case we cannot grasp what it is for something to be a decision to go for a walk other than as something that tends to result in a person's going for a walk.

The expressivist's explanation of linguistic behavior is analogous to the claim that people go for walks because they have decided to in the case in which we cannot grasp what it is for something to be a decision to go for a walk other than as something that tends to result in a person's going for a walk. What Burge's social externalism shows is that we cannot grasp what it is for a thought to have a certain content apart from the uses of those words that are supposed to convey it. If we cannot grasp what it is for a thought to have a certain content apart from its being something that certain words have the function of conveying, then it is vacuous to say that people use those words to convey thoughts having that content. So Burge's social externalism entails that the expressivist's general explanations are vacuous.

#### 5.4 Intention-based semantics

Expressivists may be divided into two camps. All agree that there must be something about the linguistic expressions that a speaker uses that enables the hearer to recognize the content of the speaker's belief. Speaker and hearer must share a semantic theory of some kind. But expressivists differ over the nature of this semantic theory. In one camp are those expressivists who believe in *intention-based semantics*. These expressivists explicate not only individual acts of speech but also general semantic rules in terms of speakers' intentions. In the other camp are those who think the semantic rules that speakers exploit in conveying the contents of their beliefs are grounded in something else.

The proponents of intention-based semantics include Grice (1968), Bennett (1975) and early Schiffer (1972). These expressivists believe that the semantic properties of words derive what from what speakers normally intend to do with them. Thus, they might say that what speakers know about the term "high octane gasoline" is that speakers will use

it when the content that they intend the hearer to recognize their beliefs to have contains the concept *high-octane gasoline*. This sort of generalization about what speakers tend, or ought or "have it in their repertoire" to do, might be the only sort of semantic rule that interlocutors need.

Among those who take a different approach are David Lewis and Donald Davidson. Lewis (1975) defines a language as an abstract entity assigning meanings to sentences. Interlocutors conform to conventions whereby they speak only sentences whose meanings they believe and whereby they take others to believe what their sentences mean. Davidson (1990) explains the provenance of the semantics for a language in terms of a theory of radical interpretation rather than in terms of what speakers tend to intend. On his conception of radical interpretation, attribution of belief and desire go hand in hand with interpretation of the language, but the assignment of truth conditions to sentences is a force that independently shapes the overall interpretive project. Lewis and Davidson agree with Grice that interlocutors' primary use for their knowledge of semantics is to enable hearers to infer what the speakers intend and to enable speakers to predict what hearers will infer. But on their theories, at the heart of the method by which speakers do this is a semantic theory that does not have speakers' intentions as its subject matter.

One might suppose that what Burge's social externalism conflicts with is only intention-based semantics and not the expressive theory of communication generally. That is the charge that Ausonio Marras made against me in his review of my 1994 (Marras 1996). Burge himself may have encouraged this idea by targeting specifically intention-based semantics in his "Individualism and the Mental" (1979, 109). Again, in Burge's review of Grice 1989, it is only Grice's "reductive analysis" that Burge mentions as seeming to conflict with the fact that the content of a thought expressed in words depends on the public meaning of those words (Burge 1992b). My claim is that social expressivism conflicts with expressivism generally.

Recent history suggests a way of reconciling expressivism with Burge's social externalism provided only that our expressivism does not incorporate intention-based semantics. A familiar position, due above all to Wilfrid Sellars (1963/1956), is that language is conceptually prior to thought while thought is ontologically prior to language. Language is conceptually prior to thought in that overt speech is our conceptual model for thought. We think of thinking as like inner talking. Just as words are meaningful inasmuch as they play a certain role in our think-

ing and in our interactions with the world, so too thought is meaningful by virtue of its functional role. But thought is ontologically prior to language in that thought is the inner cause of overt speech. Indeed, we should think of thoughts as theoretical entities postulated for the sake of explaining speech and other behaviors.

This distinction between two kinds of priority suggests a strategy for reconciling social externalism with expressivism inasmuch as social externalism might be treated as a statement of conceptual priorities while expressivism is treated as a statement of causal priorities. What Burge's social externalism shows, it might be said, is just that the conceptual dependence of thought on language is very strong. The concepts that we take words to express are inextricably bound up with their overt use. Indeed, the meaningfulness of words is our model for the meaningfulness of thought in a manner that would render intention-based semantics circular. Nonetheless, it might be said, the conceptual dependence of thought on language is nothing against the causal dependence of language on thought.

Actually, this strategy for reconciling social externalism with expressivism is very contrary to Sellars's own philosophy. Sellars very explicitly rejected the expressivist's conception of the etiology of speech. He wrote:

Although the theory postulates that overt discourse is the culmination of a process, which begins with 'inner discourse', this should not be taken to mean that overt discourse stands to 'inner discourse' as *voluntary movements stand to intentions and motives*. True, overt linguistic events can be produced as means to ends. But serious errors creep into the interpretation of both language and thought if one interprets the idea that overt linguistic episodes *express* thoughts, on the model of the use of an instrument. (1963/1956, 188, §58, italics in the original)

For Sellars, overt acts of speech can be said to *express* thoughts, but only in the sense that overt acts of speech offer glimpses of a larger *train* of thought the rest of which is hidden from view.

Furthermore, the strategy described does not make much sense. I do not see how language can be our model for thought if speaking is supposed to be the product of intendings such as the expressivist postulates. If we think of acts of speech as fundamentally actions performed for reasons and tightly model thinking on those actions, then we will have to think of thoughts as actions performed for reasons, which makes no sense. Perhaps while thinking of acts of speech as actions performed for reasons we might think of speech episodes as having other aspects and suppose that thought is modeled on speech only under these other guises (e.g., with respect to syntactic structure). But even then, if the

meaningfulness of words is to be our model for the contentfulness of thoughts, we will require that words have a certain meaningfulness apart from their being actions performed for reasons, and in that case I do not know why we should have to think of them as fundamentally actions performed for reasons at all.

In any case, the target of my *reductio* is certainly not only intention-based semantics. My claim is that the expressivist cannot explain the uses of words without going in circles. These uses of words are the types of utterance identified by the semantic rules that will justify a speaker's choice of words. The *reductio* proceeds in the same fashion whether we think of those semantic rules as intention-based or not.

## 6 Language without expression

So pervasive is the expressive theory of communication that many will prefer to suppose that I have posed some kind of paradox rather than accede to my refutation of the expressive theory of communication. So now I will briefly address some of the primary motives for expressivism and indicate how they can be resisted. (For further exposition of the ideas in this section, see my 1994 and 1997.)

One of the most persistent sources for expressivist intuitions is the observation that animals and prelinguistic infants *think*. Thus even Burge thinks that he is conceding something to Grice when he writes, "Mental states do appear to predate language" (Burge 1992a, 22). Even I once wrote:

One clearly unacceptable alternative [to the "instrumental" conception of language] is that a thought is itself a formula of the speaker's public language and speaking is just the *unveiling* of this formula. One problem is that on this account no creature that does not speak a language could be properly said to think. To attribute thoughts to animals and young children, we would have to suppose that they were prevented from speaking only by their inability to form articulate sounds, which is absurd. (Gauker 1987, pp. 48-49)

This idea, that Grice's expressive theory of communication is supported by the fact that thought is prior to language, exhibits the common assumption that thought is just one kind of thing. If we distinguish between different kinds of thinking, then we may see that the fact that one kind of thinking is independent of language is no support for the idea that language emerges as the expression of thought. In particular, we need to distinguish between *conceptual thought* and other kinds.

Say that a *basic* conceptual thought is a representation of a particular thing as belonging to a general category. I will suppose that it is

clear enough what it means to say that two thoughts bear *inferential relations* to one another (although in fact this is in a lot of ways not clear). Then I define a *conceptual* thought recursively as either a basic conceptual thought or a thought that bears inferential relations to other conceptual thoughts. For instance, if someone thinks that *that* is a chair, then that is an episode of conceptual thinking. Such a thought represents an individual object as belonging to a general category, namely, chairs. If someone thinks that people can sit in chairs, then that is a conceptual thought by virtue of its inferential relations to thoughts such as the thought that *that* is a chair. If we imagine that a rich capacity for conceptual thought exists in children prior to their acquisition of language and that it existed in early hominids prior to the emergence of language, then it will indeed be hard to resist the idea that language is learned, and was originally invented, to facilitate the conveying of conceptual thought. Inevitably we will suppose that language originates in the attempt to find external signs of inner conceptualizations.

In fact, it is not obvious that conceptual thought is possible in creatures that possess no language. No doubt some kind of thinking underlies and leads to language, but it is not obvious that it has to be conceptual thought. Besides conceptual thought, there may be many other kinds of mental process that deserve to be called thought and that can be cited in explanation of problem solving. To take just one example, consider *imagistic* thinking. If I need to replace a washer in a faucet that I have never taken apart before, I can do it. I can take it apart, remember how the pieces went together, replace the old washer with a new one, and put it back together. It is not obvious that this requires me to represent the individual parts as belonging to general categories, although I may incidentally do so. In addition to such imagistic thinking there may be other mental processes that deserve to be called thinking that we cannot begin to get a grasp on by means of analogies to publicly observable things such as words and images but which we will be able to understand only in neurophysiological terms. The thinking that underlies the use of language may not be conceptual thought but one of these other kinds.

From this point of view, we might say the same sort of thing about our ordinary talk of beliefs and desires as I said above about our ordinary talk of meanings. As I explained, talk about meanings plays a useful role in the conduct of conversations, and our theory of language has to comprehend this kind of talk. Likewise, talk about what people believe and what they desire plays an important role in the conduct of conversa-

tions. Along with explaining how every other aspect of language does some work for us, our theory of language has to explain how that kind of talk does some work for us. But we do not have to take our ordinary talk of people's beliefs and desires as pointing to the basic entities in terms of which we should expect to construct a fundamental theory of human behavior.

Another persistent source of expressivist intuitions is the idea that only in terms of content can we formulate the norms of discourse. Sometimes, perhaps, we can read the content to be conveyed more or less directly off the form of words and the external circumstances of utterance. But in other cases, utterances may be ambiguous or incomplete in various ways, or the literal meaning of a speaker's words may not be directly pertinent to the aims of the conversation. In these cases, a hearer may need to consider what content the speaker may have intended to convey. The conception of linguistic communication as the conveying of content seems to demonstrate its theoretical utility in such cases.

In my opinion, this apparent virtue of expressivism is entirely illusory. The most articulate indication of what a person has in mind is what he or she says. When what a person says is not articulate enough for exact understanding, we will not often get a more exact understanding by inferring his or her thoughts from his or her nonverbal behavior on the basis of a general theory of human thought or a general theory of the thinking of that person in particular. Rather, we may make use of our own grasp of what it is appropriate to say in light of the external situation and the goals of the conversation. The way in which we make use of this is not to interpret, in the sense of ascribing a content, but rather to respond in a variety of other ways. The response that indicates understanding may be nonverbal, taking the form of compliance with a request, or it may be verbal, taking the form of a paraphrase or an answer or a pertinent objection. There is knowledge that we make use of in responding, but this is not knowledge of psychology but knowledge how to respond appropriately. Our knowledge of what is appropriate is not ineffable, though there may be few generalizations, and an explicit formulation of what is appropriate is seldom any part of the cause of the response that indicates understanding.

## 7. The content of Burge's thought

If we abandon the expressive theory of communication, then we will abandon along with it the expressivist's proprietary notion of content. Strangely, Tyler Burge himself shows no reluctance to theorize in terms

of content. As I pointed out in section 2, there are many apparently different notions of content at play in the philosophical literature. Burge has employed many of these different concepts of content in his various writings. Sometimes the differences have been acknowledged, sometimes not. (For instance, in "Individualism and the Mental" (1979), he failed to distinguish clearly between content considered as the reference of "that"-clauses and content considered as what is conveyed in communication, and this failure became the source of much criticism of him; whereas in "Intellectual Norms and the Foundations of Mind" (1986b), his main objective was to distinguish between content as cognitive value and content as linguistic meaning.) It is not obvious that one could not have a legitimate use for some notion of content while altogether repudiating the expressive theory of communication. However I cannot in fact disentangle Burge's own conception of content from its roots in the expressive theory of communication. So it seems to me that Burge occupies an unstable position.

Initially, in 1979, I think Burge thought of his thesis concerning content as an explication of an item of ordinary understanding. His objective was "to better understand our common mentalistic notions" (1979, 87). Everyone who talks about people's thoughts, he might have said, must be acquainted with the concept of content, even if they do not call it that. In my opinion, his topic was never an item of ordinary understanding. Everybody understands that words have meaning and that it is often a problem to figure out what a person means. But as soon as we say such things as that in general thoughts have content or that to attribute a thought is to say that the person stands in a certain attitude toward a certain content, we have left the ordinary understanding behind and have introduced a theoretical framework that we must not simply take for granted. I think it is clear in Burge's attempt to identify a nonindividualistic conception of content in psychological theories of vision (Burge 1986a) that his topic is not merely an item of ordinary understanding. It is even clearer, as I will now explain, in his more recent investigation into a topic in epistemology, where a commitment to some form of expressivism seems especially strong.

In his 1993 paper, "Content Preservation", Burge elaborates a conception of people's epistemic entitlement to accept other people's verbal testimony. Empiricists have often supposed that people are entitled to accept other people's testimony only insofar as they have evidence, from within their own perceptual experience, that those other people are reliable sources. Against this, Burge defends what he calls the *acceptance principle*, which states that if an intelligible message is presented

as true, then we have an apriori entitlement to accept it as true unless a reason not to do so presents itself. It is not the case that we are warranted in accepting other people's testimony as true only when we can make a good inference from a perception of words and collateral assumptions about the reliability of the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed.

Throughout his discussion, Burge characterizes linguistic communication as a process in which a propositional content passes from one mind to another. "In interlocution", he writes, "perception of utterances makes possible the passage of propositional content from one mind to another" (481). Moreover, the concept of content plays a special role in his account of our entitlement to accept people's testimony. "It is not just the rationality of a source that marks an apriori prima facie connection to truth", he writes. "The very content of an intelligible message presented as true does so as well" (471). Thus Burge proposes to use the notion of propositional content in a theoretical context in a way that I would have thought was precluded by his own social externalism.

I can think of several things Burge might say to this. First, he might point out that he has not committed himself to specifically the expressivist theory of linguistic communication. Expressivism, as I have defined it, says that speakers speak with intentions regarding the contents of their own thoughts. It is true that Burge has not posited any such intentions. At the same time, it is not very easy to see how to treat communication as the transmission of content without ultimately positing such intentions. (We do not have to suppose that those intentions are conscious or the products of deliberation.) In any case, I have characterized expressivism as positing such intentions only to give it a definite shape, one that is recognizable in the literature. The idea that runs contrary to Burge's social externalism is really only the basic idea that we may explain the way words are used as a process in which speakers convey the content of their thoughts to hearers. I do not understand how Burge can deploy the notion of propositional content as he does in "Content Preservation" without assuming at least that much of the expressivist's theory and in that way putting himself into a position that I have argued is inconsistent.

Second, Burge might claim that his apparent reference to content is only a manner of speaking. Wherever he writes of content, he might say, we can reformulate his claims in terms of intelligibility and understanding, which is the language that he himself uses in places. He does not say that we are apriori prima facie entitled to accept a *propositional*



*content* as true if it is presented to us by another as true. He says, "We are apriori prima facie entitled to accept *something* that is prima facie *intelligible* and presented as true" (472, my emphasis). Or we might take his references to content as just a way of talking about interpretation (which is what he asks us to do in his 1986b, note 15). But at one crucial juncture I do not see how to make the substitutions. Burge explains as follows why the intelligibility of a message, as having a certain content, indicates "an apriori prima facie connection to truth":

For content is constitutively dependent, in the first instance, on patterned connections to a subject matter, connections that insure in normal circumstances a baseline of true thought presentations. So presentations' having content must have an origin in getting things right. (471)

According to Burge, this is the principle of charity in reverse (487-88). The principle of charity, as made familiar by Davidson, says that in order to interpret a person's words or state of mind, we must presume the person to be largely a thinker of truths. Burge's observation is that an interpretation is often taken for granted and not a result of applying any such methodological principles at all. Nonetheless, the connection between interpretability and truth remains, so that interpretability may itself be construed as an indicator of truth. The trouble is, I do not see how to formulate the point without characterizing interpretation as the attribution of content. We cannot say merely that "intelligibility" or "interpretability" is an indicator of truth, because there are too many kinds of intelligibility. Automobiles and ecosystems are "intelligible" and "interpretable", but we do not consider them to be sources of testimony that we are entitled to accept. The pertinent notions of intelligibility and interpretability seem to be specifically those that involve the attribution of content.

Finally, Burge might take refuge in my concession that there is a legitimate place for talk of meaning and expression in the conduct of conversations. One of the primary uses for talk of meaning will be in setting discourse back on track when it has become unproductive. When two people have explained their ideas and shared their data, and have answered one another's objections to their views, then if they still cannot reach agreement, they might turn their attention to their language and ask one another what they "mean" by their terms and check to make sure they have understood what thoughts the other was trying to "express". More generally, the place for talk of meaning and content might be to establish or enforce the norms of productive discourse. Burge's own enterprise in "Content Preservation", he might say, is a normative enterprise of this kind. It is not his intention to stand outside

the practice of language in order to explain how it works but, while participating in it, to improve it, by removing certain obstacles to understanding.

This response is implausible to me because I do not see that there are any serious obstacles that might be removed through the kind of epistemological discourse in which Burge is engaged. Solipsism might be a genuine mental disorder in some cases, but in those cases it will not be removed through Burge's defense of our a priori entitlement to testimony. If our discursive practices contained rhetorical vortices that sucked people in and trapped them in the assumption that they cannot believe what others say just because they have no reliable evidence that their testimony is reliable, then Burge's epistemological discourse within the practice might offer something to grab onto. But again I do not see that there is any real danger of this kind. The fact is, Burge is examining our epistemological practices from the outside with the intention of justifying the role that testimony seems to play in people's lives. From that point of view, Burge's thesis commits him to the expressivism that is inconsistent with his social externalism.

This is not the place to examine Burge's theory of testimony in detail, but in case anyone thinks that the ends justify the means, I would like to add that in my opinion his use of the notion of content has not yielded a viable theory of testimony. At crucial junctures Burge offers no more than a "conceptual connection" as justification for his claims. We are entitled to accept testimony because "prima facie intelligible propositional contents prima facie presented as true bear an apriori prima facie conceptual relation to a rational source of true presentations-as-true" (472). We are entitled to assume that speech in the declarative mood has assertive force because "the connection between declarative mood and presentations-as-true is conceptual" (482). In my opinion, this appeal to conceptual analysis is an unfair rhetorical strategy. In effect, Burge claims for himself an insight into the nature of things without telling us how this insight might be achieved. According to Burge's acceptance principle we are entitled to believe what we are told "unless there are stronger reasons not to do so" (467). The rub is, this will not entitle us to believe anything until we know what counts as a stronger reason not to do so. If we once discover that someone has spoken falsely, is that not reason enough to doubt everything everyone says forever after? Presumably not, but why not? Burge offers no answers to such questions. In practice such questions do not arise, but how is that an answer?



## 8 Conclusion

I have argued that Burge's social externalism together with the expressive theory of communication lead to absurdity. From this we might conclude that, strictly speaking, social externalism is false, since it too rests on the existence of the expressivist's proprietary concept of content. But the fault lies not with the arguments for social externalism, which are correct on the assumption that content exists. The more immediate and important conclusion is that the expressive theory of communication is mistaken. From the way Burge persists in using the expressivist's proprietary concept of content in theoretical work, I infer that he does not accept this conclusion. The question I would like him to answer is: Why not?

## 9 Acknowledgments

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