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Burge on the individuation of intentional states

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Individualism about intentional states, for the purposes of this paper, is the doctrine that these states are individualistically individuated. That is to say, the fact that a person is in any given intentional state does not presuppose anything about his or her physical or social environment; moreover, what it is for an individual to be in this state can be explicated by reference to states of the individual which can be specified without using intentional terminology at all. According to individualism, all that is of relevance concerning the issue whether the individual person is in the state in question, concerns matters which can be addressed, in principle, by considering the person in non-intentional terms and in isolation from his or her environment. So if two individuals, with regard to everything that is within their body limits, were indistinguishable non-intentionally, they would be indistinguishable intentionally. It follows therefore from individualism about intentional states that any belief, for example, is either held by both of them or by neither of them.

According to Burge, individuation of intentional state types both in our ordinary discourse and in actual current psychology is non-individualistic. I shall leave aside the question whether Burge is right about what cognitive psychologists actually do and mean to be doing. Instead I shall concentrate on his account of the relationship between ordinary mentalistic discourse and individualism about intentional states. Burge holds that “intentional states as specified in ordinary mentalistic discourse are individuated non-individualistically” (Burge 1989, p. 304).

This claim is central for Burge’s anti-individualism, and I think it is mistaken. For intentional states as given in ordinary mentalistic discourse are not individuated sufficiently clearly to support Burge’s claim. Yet, this doesn’t mean that individualism is the right option. Both individualism and anti-individualism make claims about ordinary mentalistic discourse which are much too sweeping. Or so I shall try to argue. Specifically, I want to argue that the reasons Burge offers for his claim

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(“intentional states as specified in ordinary mentalistic discourse are individuated non-individualistically”) are not conclusive. That is my whole concern in this paper.

Burge supports this claim by presenting certain thought experiments. These thought experiments usually involve a speaker whose mastery of a given concept is seriously incomplete; and they draw on the principle that, in spite of his incomplete mastery, the speaker can literally be said to have beliefs the specification of which contains the concept in question. These thought experiments furthermore involve, in addition to the speaker, a *Doppelgänger* who, by the lights of individualism, is intentionally type-indistinguishable from the speaker. Now, the physical and social environment of the *Doppelgänger* is such that he can literally be said to have beliefs the specification of which contains a different concept. The speaker believes, let's say, that aluminum is a light metal; the *Doppelgänger* believes (under circumstances which are — according to individualism — intentionally indistinguishable) that twalum is a light metal.¹

Up to this point, it seems to me that Burge's observations are correct. But, as far as that goes, nothing much seems to follow. What Burge needs is an additional claim, namely: It's just plain commonsense — or an implicit tenet of our ordinary mentalistic discourse — that the two beliefs involved are different in type.

What does common sense, or common sense psychology (if there is such a thing), tell us about the identity or diversity of belief types? Not much. Indeed, I doubt that even the very distinction between intentional state tokens and intentional state types can be found in ordinary mentalistic discourse. Be that as it may, let us pretend that such a distinction is applicable and briefly turn to the question of how belief types are individuated in ordinary discourse. Does ordinary mentalistic discourse provide us with any sufficient conditions for belief type identity? I do not think so. For we do not have an answer, a fortiori we do not have a common answer, let alone a common sense answer to the question: What makes belief types identical?

But even if there are no sufficient conditions for belief identity, Burge's argument would go through if only there were sufficient conditions for belief diversity on which he could rely in order to show that the two beliefs in his thought-experiment belong to different types. So let us ask: how about necessary conditions for belief type identity? Maybe at least on this score common sense has something to offer.

I shall consider three principles which spring to mind — given that the mind in question is familiar with certain philosophical doctrines on thoughts (or pure contents) and identity. The first principle has to do with truth-conditions, the second has to do with compatibility, the third has to do with co-ascribability.

The first principle says that it is a necessary condition for the identity of belief types that they (or their respective tokens) have the same truthvalue. According to this principle, the belief that aluminum is a light metal would be different from the belief that twalum is a light metal simply because the first belief is true whereas the second (let's suppose) is false. Certainly, this principle looks feasible to anybody who has come in for his full share of Fregean doctrines on what thoughts are. But

¹ I have chosen this example, because, as far as I can see, it is the one that Burge uses in most of his papers. Cf. Burge (1982a,b, 1986, 1989).

what is at issue here is not the philosophical attractiveness of this principle but rather the question: Is this a principle of common sense, is it at least implicitly assumed or presupposed in ordinary mentalistic discourse?

Well, does common sense tell us that two beliefs must be (type-)different if they differ in truthvalue? I think it does not. Common sense is silent about that topic. Think of indexical belief types like the belief that the present president's wife is a catholic. This belief might be true today and false tomorrow. Let's assume it is true today. But tonight the president's wife changes her denomination; or tonight the president gets divorced from his wife and immediately marries a Muslim; or tonight the president is removed from office and replaced by someone whose wife is not a catholic. Now, given this, think of somebody who goes to bed tonight, believing that the present president's wife is a catholic; during his sleep things change in one of the ways just mentioned; tomorrow he gets up, still or once more believing that the president's wife is a catholic. Common sense neither forces us to say that the belief type has changed over night, nor does it force us to say the opposite. So our first envisaged principle of belief individuation ("difference in truth value entails a difference in belief type") cannot be passed off as an item of common sense.

Let's turn to the second principle that comes to mind. It says that two belief-types are different, if a normal person could be ascribed a belief of the one type and, at the same time, disbelief (i.e. belief-that-not) of the other type. That's a promising candidate for a common sense principle for belief-diversity. The sad fact is, it cannot be applied to Burge's thought-experiments because our speaker does not disbelieve that twalum is a light metal nor does his *Doppelgänger* disbelieve that aluminum is a light metal.

Burge seems to have some other principle in mind when he says, for example, that the *Doppelgänger* "clearly does not have any thoughts about aluminum. He does not, for example, think that aluminum is a light metal. He rather thinks that twalum is a light metal" (Burge, 1989, p. 304). So here is our third principle, it says: Two belief types are identical only if they are always ascribable in tandem; or, to put it differently: If somebody can be justifiably ascribed² a belief of type X but cannot be justifiably ascribed a belief of type Y, then the two belief types, X and Y, are different.³ — According to this principle, the belief that aluminum is a light metal and the belief that twalum is a light metal are different simply because only the first belief but not

² A belief is justifiably ascribed, if it is ascribed in accordance with a valid principle for the ascription of the very belief in question. An example of such a principle is: 'If a normal speaker, on reflection, explicitly commits himself to its being true that p, then, ceteris paribus, he believes that p'.

³ Not even this statement of an allegedly sufficient condition for belief diversity seems true. Justified ascription of belief is dramatically dependent on what exactly is expressed by the subject, and the best ways of specifying what exactly was expressed are dramatically dependent on the specific manner of expression. Now assume that the belief that p and the belief that q are the same belief. (Whatever this may mean.) Someone who — sincerely, on reflection, etc. — says that p, and therefore can be justifiably ascribed the belief that p, may nevertheless, for contingent reasons, be never in a position to say that q, and therefore cannot, by the same standards, be justifiably be ascribed the belief that q. With regard to principled ascribability, he can be said to believe that p, but he cannot be said to believe that q. Yet by assumption, the belief that p and the belief that q are the same belief. This speaks against co-ascribability as a necessary condition for belief-identity. But I don't want to argue against the third principle here. What I want to argue for is this: Even given this condition, Burge's point does not go through.

the second can be ascribed to our earthly speaker, or, correspondingly, because only the second but not the first can be ascribed to his *Doppelgänger*.

The first thing to grant is: Yes, indeed, when our speaker says ‘Aluminum is a light metal’, he should be ascribed the belief that aluminum is a light metal. He uses the word ‘aluminum’, he speaks our language, he is normal and competent. Therefore, by his utterance, we are justified in presuming that he expresses the belief that aluminum is a light metal. — That’s common sense.

The second thing to grant is: Yes, indeed, when our speaker asserts ‘Aluminum is a light metal’, he cannot be ascribed, in virtue of his assertion, the belief that twalum is a light metal. In our language the word ‘aluminum’ denotes aluminum and not twalum; our speaker speaks our language, he is normal and competent. (He does not mix up aluminum with twalum, because for us, including him, that’s an impossible mistake to make.) Therefore, by his utterance, he does not express the belief that twalum is a light metal. — Again, that’s common sense.

These two things granted, Burge’s conclusion might seem inevitable. Common sense has it that our speaker can be justifiably said to have the aluminum-belief but he cannot, not in virtue of the same utterance, be justifiably said to have the twalum-belief. How, in all the world, could his belief — the belief he expresses by saying ‘Aluminum is a light metal’ — then be of the same type as the belief his *Doppelgänger* expresses with the same sentence?

If this is what you’re asking yourself at this point, you’re already under the influence of Burge’s intuition pump. Now let’s have a look at some details of that machinery. It’s a neat little thing with some cute gadgets. And it is terrifically effective in making you believe that anti-individualism is right at least about our ordinary intentional concepts. So how does it work?

- Gadget #1 — The substances (and presumably the concepts) of aluminum and twalum are assumed to be similar, at least sufficiently similar to be mixed up by a normal person who has mastered the one concept and comes across the other substance.
- Gadget #2 — The languages involved in the belief-expressing utterances are assumed to be very particular languages: Our speaker’s language has no word for twalum, his *Doppelgänger’s* language has no word for aluminum. Let’s call our speaker’s language **Alumese** and his *Doppelgänger’s* language **Twalumese**. It is a remarkable trait of these languages that a normal speaker of either of them is not in a position to mix up the concepts of aluminum and twalum. These languages are simply not rich enough to allow for that confusion. So our Alumese speaker has the belief that aluminum is a light metal, but he does not have it *as opposed to* the belief that twalum is a light metal. He could, so to speak, do his personal best to mix up the concepts of aluminum and twalum, without any possibility of succeeding. Remember that this would be easy for him to do if he were a member of a linguistic community which had both concepts.
- Gadget #3 — We are invited to use a third language in considering all these matters. It is a language which has separate words for twalum and aluminum,

namely the ones I just mentioned (and used). Let's call this language **Burgese**, because it's the language Burge professes to be speaking in telling us the story. In using Burgese we are bound (or at least required) to make conceptual distinctions the absence of which is characteristic for Alumese and Twalumese.

Now let us bring in yet another possible language, let's call it **Simplese**. Speakers of Simplese are familiar with two kinds of what they call 'aluminum'. One kind is what is called 'twalum' in Burgese, the other kind is good old aluminum. No 'twalum'-talk in Simplese. Speakers of this language typically would not be impressed if it were pointed out to them that what they refer to as aluminum comprises items of two chemically distinct substances. A characteristic response might go like this: "Uhuh, that's interesting. So chemically speaking, not all aluminum is of the same composition. Does this have any bearings on practical matters outside the lab? No? Well, nevertheless, thank you very much for telling me". — Now let's speak Simplese for a moment and see what happens. What belief is expressed by our Alumese speaker when he says 'Aluminum is a light metal'? The belief expressed is a belief that aluminum is a light metal. And what belief is expressed by the Twalumese *Doppelgänger*, when he assertively utters the same sentence? Our Simplese answer again is: the belief that aluminum is a light metal.

This simplistic consideration shows that Burge's intuition pump is dependent on doing belief-ascription in Burgese. The pump doesn't work if Simplese is spoken. But common sense does not at all rule out Simplese as an acceptable language. (In fact, as Putnam has told us, with regard to jade, English is like Simplese and not like Burgese.⁴) So all that Burge has shown by his thought-experiment is this: If we happen to (or decide to) speak Burgese, then our belief-ascriptions yield results which make the belief our speaker expressed seem type-different from the belief his *Doppelgänger* expressed. If, on the other hand, we happen (or decide) not to speak Simplese, then the two beliefs do not seem to be different. And this is to say that the judgements about the diversity of the beliefs in question which Burge wants us to take for granted when we engage in the thought-experiments are not just the result of our common practice of belief ascription. Instead, they crucially depend on our having been lured into talking Burgese and having forgotten about the alternatives.

So this is my objection to Burge's line of argument. It contains the presumption that belief ascription, in the imagined cases under consideration, should be done in Burgese. But this presumption is not part and parcel of ordinary mentalistic discourse. As soon as it is recognized that belief ascription in Simplese is a live option and that it *prima facie* yields no evidence for belief diversity, it should be acknowledged that Burge's thought experiments do not show that the two beliefs in question are of different types.

Here's a more general way of putting this point. Questions concerning belief-identity sometimes just out-strip common sense. Common sense has nothing definitive to say about belief-identity if the relevant belief-ascriptions are of unusual and heterogeneous origin. Common sense judgements on intentional state-diversity are at

⁴ Cf. Putnam (1976, p. 241).

home only in down to earth cases where just one language is being spoken or where translation is unproblematic. Whereas Burge's intuition pump is fuelled by linguistic extravagance. It draws on essentially distinct languages, languages which are semantically non-congruent. (Remember gadget #2.) Translation between Alumese and Twalumese is highly problematic. If you were asked to check an Alumese/Twalumese-dictionary, what would you say if it has an 'aluminum'/'aluminum'-entry? Do you have any suggestion how to improve on that? Would your answer be different, if you were a Simplese speaker? (This is a homework problem.)

If I am right, ordinary intentional discourse has not been shown, by Burge, to entail anti-individualistic standards of individuation. In fact, I think nothing like this could be shown with these kinds of thought-experiments, not even the opposite. Individualism cannot be supported in this way either. (Common sense does not favour Simplese over Burges.) Ordinary mentalistic discourse is not instructive on the topic of individualism versus anti-individualism, as long as this topic is approached by thought experiments of this kind.

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