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## THE EXPLANATORY ROLE OF BELIEF ASCRIPTIONS

(Received 11 November, 1988)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Some recent studies of how the content of intentional mental states is individuated in ordinary discourse have sparked much debate. These studies are striking because they imply that the contents of a person's thoughts are not determined by (do not supervene on) his or her phenomenological, functional or physiological states. The contents of a person's thoughts, it is claimed, may be affected by features of the external environment of which he or she is entirely ignorant. The line of argument which is taken to lend support to this conclusion was first described by Putnam (1975) and has been developed by Burge in a series of papers (1979, 1982a, 1982b). The argumentative strategy is to test claims about the determinants of mental content by describing thought-experiments in which physically and functionally type-identical subjects occupy different environments. It is then argued that our practice of thought attribution dictates that such subjects have propositional attitudes with different contents, since different belief ascriptions are true of them.<sup>1</sup> The topic of this paper is the ingenious thought-experiment described by Burge (1979) and the conclusion he draws from it.<sup>2</sup> Burge's conclusion is that the linguistic practices of the community to which a person belongs partly determine the contents of his or her intentional mental states. The thought-experiment held to support it can be described as follows.

Burge invites us to consider an English-speaker — let us call her Jane — who misuses the word 'arthritis', applying it to rheumatoid diseases in the bones as well as in the joints. This, Burge argues, does not prevent us from reporting her beliefs using ascriptions in which the word 'arthritis' occurs in the content-clause. Suppose that Jane says to her doctor, 'I have arthritis in my thigh,' that the doctor replies 'You

can't have arthritis in the thigh; arthritis is a disease of the joints,' and that Jane accepts that her belief was false. It seems that the natural way for us to report the belief she expresses is with

- (1) Jane believes that she has arthritis in her thigh.

We then consider what belief Jane would have had if she had been a member of a different linguistic community in which the word 'arthritis' was standardly applied to rheumatoid diseases of the bones as well as the joints. The counterfactual condition differs only in that in it correct use of 'arthritis' encompasses Jane's actual misuse; Jane's physical and functional constitution remains the same. Let us call Jane in this counterfactual condition 'Jane2'. Jane2 also utters the words 'I have arthritis in my thigh'; but in so doing, Burge argues, she expresses a belief not about arthritis but about the more inclusive group of rheumatic conditions. This being so, we cannot report this belief using (1); Jane2 does not believe that she has arthritis in her thigh. Thus Jane has at least one belief which Jane2 lacks. Since Jane and Jane2 are physically and functionally identical and differ only in the linguistic communities to which they belong, the difference in their belief contents must be attributed to the difference in their linguistic environments. Burge concludes that 'propositional attitudes depend partly for their content on social factors independent of the individual asocially and non-intentionally construed' (1979, p. 85).

Burge's conclusion challenges what he calls the 'individualistic pre-suppositions' of many traditional views of the mind (1979, p. 94). According to such views, the contents of a person's thoughts are determined by intrinsic properties of that person — properties he or she has when considered in isolation from the external environment. Let us say that thoughts which thus supervene on individual constitution have *individualistic* content, and let us call the individuating practice which picks them out *individualistic individuation*. We may then say that Burge takes his thought-experiment to show that our everyday practice of propositional attitude ascription involves *non-individualistic individuation*, and that the thoughts we attribute to one another do not supervene on individual constitution; they have *non-individualistic* content.

This conclusion, if warranted, obviously casts doubt on any theory of

propositional attitudes which represents them as having individualistic content. In particular, it casts doubt on a claim which I shall call the Continuity Thesis — the claim that common sense explanations of behaviour in terms of beliefs, desires and other propositional attitudes will be vindicated by cognitive psychology, in that cognitive psychology will invoke explanatory states with properties substantially similar to those of common-sense mental states (cf. Fodor 1987). If we make the plausible and widely held assumption that the representational states of cognitive psychology are individualistically individuated, in that their content does not vary with linguistic environment, it is hard to see how the Continuity Thesis can be true. According to Burge, propositional attitudes are non-individualistically individuated; so his conclusion, if warranted, would show that the psychological states invoked by cognitive psychology and the intentional states ascribed in common sense discourse have different identity conditions. Two people with identical psychological states might yet have different propositional attitudes if they belonged to different linguistic communities; the prospects for the Continuity Thesis seem dim.

We should note that this is not a conclusion Burge would accept, since he holds that the representational states of cognitive psychology, like the intentional states of common sense, are individuated with respect to the environment. He has argued that Marr's theory of vision invokes representational states whose content is dependent on the nature of the subject's physical environment (Burge 1986a). But this claim, if justified, does not suggest that any part of cognitive psychology attributes states which are sensitive to subjects' linguistic environments. Nor does the argumentative strategy Burge there employs readily generalize to the linguistic case. He relies on the claim that the content of a psychological state of type *R* in an environment *E* depends on which features of *E* normally cause tokens of *R* (Burge 1986a, p. 32). He concludes from this that changes in environmental features can change the contents of representational states. But in the linguistic case, the norms of usage which supposedly affect the contents of a subject's beliefs are not the causes of those beliefs, so a causal theory of content is of no help. In any case, the question I shall be concerned with here is whether Burge's thought-experiment should lead someone who does believe that cognitive psychology is individualistic to abandon the

Continuity Thesis, so I shall assume that cognitive psychology does individuate representational states individualistically. The discussion may still have a hypothetical interest for those who disagree with this assumption.

Let us look a little more closely at exactly how the thought-experiment is supposed to challenge the Continuity Thesis. It seems that common-sense explanations of behaviour cannot be vindicated by science if the states which science and common sense attribute to explain behaviour are individuated differently. But this conclusion follows from the thought-experiment only if the thought-experiment shows that the mental states which we attribute when giving common-sense explanations of behaviour are non-individualistically individuated. If the thought-experiment is to undermine the Continuity Thesis, it must justify the claim that we attribute mental states with non-individualistic contents when our attitude ascriptions have an explanatory role. This has been generally assumed, but we should ask whether this assumption is warranted. We need to look more closely at our practice of attitude ascription to discover whether we individuate thoughts in a manner which is sensitive to social environment when giving common-sense explanations of people's actions.

The aim of this paper is to argue that belief ascription in common-sense discourse is not uniformly non-individualistic, as Burge's conclusion suggests. (In concentrating on belief ascriptions I follow the usual practice of treating belief as the paradigm propositional attitude.) I shall present some examples which suggest that when giving common-sense explanations of action we do not individuate thoughts with reference to agents' linguistic environment in the manner indicated by Burge's thought-experiment. The challenge supposedly presented to the Continuity Thesis by Burge's thought-experiment is thus removed. I then discuss whether the mode of individuation characteristic of our explanatory practice deserves to be called individualistic, and conclude with some remarks on the expressibility of thought contents.

## 2. B-INDIVIDUATION

Before moving to the examples of belief attribution, it will be useful to attempt to clarify the manner of ascribing thoughts emphasized by

Burge's thought-experiment. That thought-experiment presents a particular case in which our attribution of belief contents is influenced by the subject's linguistic environment. But how far can this result be generalized? For convenience, I will call the mode of content individuation to which Burge draws attention 'B-individuation.' What are the important features of B-individuation, and when and why do we B-individuate beliefs?

One of the most salient features of the thought-experiment is the fact that opaque belief ascriptions containing 'arthritis' can be truly applied to Jane despite her misapprehension of the term's extension.<sup>3</sup> In ascribing beliefs to her we employ the words she has uttered with their customary meaning; we do not reinterpret them to capture her idiosyncratic understanding. She is taken to have a grasp, imperfect though it is, of the concept of arthritis. Burge acknowledges that there are some circumstances in which we do not accord a subject's words their customary interpretation; the cases he mentions include those in which the speaker is a child, a foreigner, a speaker of a dialect, or the victim of a slip of the tongue. Here the subject either does not yet have full command of our standards of usage (the child or foreigner), is not bound by them (the dialect speaker), or has full command but fails to manifest it because of a performance error (the case of the slip of the tongue). In each case the subject is excused from being taken at his or her word; it is assumed that the speakers did not say what they meant, or did not mean what they said (except the case of the dialect speaker, who did not say what we thought he or she said). In the case of Jane, by contrast, we accord her words their customary interpretation, despite her misunderstanding, because she accepts that she said and believed something false. The critical point for the thought-experiment is thus not (as Burge sometimes suggests) that Jane is prepared to defer to communal usage by altering her use of 'arthritis'; the foreigner will do that too, yet we do not take his words literally in ascribing him beliefs. The crucial point is that she is prepared to have her words construed according to their socially established meaning, even though this puts her in the wrong.

This partial list of cases in which we take subjects at their word in attributing beliefs shows that there is still much that is unclear about our practice of B-individuation. How, for example, do we decide when

someone is a member of our linguistic community? If Jane were prepared to alter her linguistic usage (for, say, purely pragmatic reasons), but not to admit that her belief was false, should we still ascribe to her the belief that she has arthritis in her thigh? If we were attempting a thorough investigation of B-individuation, we would need to discover how radical a subject's misunderstanding must be for B-individuation to become inappropriate, how linguistic communities are differentiated and what the conditions for membership of them are, and so on. But our aim here is merely to get a rough grasp of what B-individuation consists in, and of when and why we do it, which will allow us to determine whether this is the mode of belief individuation we employ when giving common-sense explanations of actions. It seems that B-individuation consists in taking subjects to have the attitudes expressed by their utterances, when these are interpreted according to the standard usage of the linguistic community to which the subject belongs. And though it is unclear precisely what determines membership in a linguistic community, the type of considerations which are relevant indicate something about what our purposes are in B-individuating.

When we B-individuate we hold people responsible for the opinions their utterances express, even though they may not fully understand the meanings of the words they utter. The difficulty raised earlier is that it is not yet clear whether we hold people thus responsible even when they themselves maintain that this involves a misconstrual of their claims. Presumably our practice in such cases often depends on whether we see the speaker's response as a disingenuous attempt to avoid criticism, or as a claim made in good faith. But the fact that this is the sort of consideration which guides us suggests that our interest in B-individuating is primarily in intellectual responsibility; our purpose is to determine which beliefs a speaker is committed to defending in debate. If our interests in B-individuating have this specific focus, it would not be so surprising to find that we individuate mental states differently when our purpose is to explain a person's actions.

The sections which follow present some cases which illustrate how we individuate beliefs when giving common-sense psychological explanations of action. I argued in the previous section that the alternative mode of individuation here illustrated, which I shall call E-individuation, is the one which should command our attention if we are interested

in comparing the individuation of explanatory states in cognitive psychology and common-sense discourse. The examples show that when we give common-sense explanations we may attribute mental states which differ from those counselled by B-individuation. I shall begin with a case in which we B-individuate one belief but E-individuate two.

### 3. SOME CASES OF INCOMPLETE UNDERSTANDING

#### 3.1. *The Case of Paul*

The first case is an elaboration of thought-experiment described by Loar (1988). Suppose that Paul is an English speaker who is misinformed about arthritis in just the same way as Jane; and let us suppose that he says, 'Arthritis is spreading from my knees to my thigh.' Given this utterance, the principles of B-individuation dictate that we should describe him as believing that he has arthritis in his knees and in his thigh. He moves to France and learns French, hearing of an ailment called 'arthrite' which, he learns, occurs only in joints. No one tells him that 'arthrite' and 'arthritis' refer to the same disease, and not surprisingly (in view of his original misconception), this is not one of his beliefs. Then a French doctor tells him (in French) that he has arthritis in his knees, and he believes her; he asserts 'J'ai arthrite aux genoux.' Paul is a competent French speaker who use 'arthrite' correctly, so the obvious way for us to report the belief he thus asserts is with

- (2) Paul believes that he has arthritis in his knees.

As the principles of B-individuation dictate, we report the belief Paul asserted, interpreting his words according to their standard meaning.

The ascription (2) is thus counselled twice by the practice of B-individuation; we apply it on the basis of Paul's French assertion and on the basis of his English one. But suppose that a French friend tells Paul of a miracle heat treatment for arthritis, and that Paul applies the treatment to his knees and believes it has succeeded. He will continue to search for a cure for the other disease he believes afflicts his knees and thigh; if asked whether there is anything wrong with his knees, he will still say that there is. How are we to explain this behaviour? It seems to be intelligible only on the assumption that he has two different

beliefs about what is wrong with his knees, even though the B-ascription (2) fails to distinguish them. If we B-individuate beliefs, we do not have the resources to explain Paul's behaviour; but surely we can understand perfectly well why he behaves as he does.

On its most plausible interpretation, the story of Paul shows that in giving common-sense explanations of others' actions we may need to individuate beliefs more finely than we do when B-individuating. In explaining Paul's behaviour we invoke two beliefs differing in content, even though B-individuation delivers only one ascription to describe his mental situation. How might a theorist who regards B-individuation as adequate for common-sense psychological explanation — a person I shall describe as a Burgean — respond to this example?

### 3.2. *Burgeon Responses Considered*

3.2.1. *First response.* A Burgean might simply deny that the B-ascription is inadequate to explain Paul's behaviour. But this is very implausible; it means that Paul's failure to act as we would expect given the belief ascribed to him by (2) can only be explained by irrationality or carelessness. We would have to say, for example, that he continues to seek a cure for arthritis because he has forgotten that he applied the French treatment. Intuitively this is not the cause of his behaviour, and this move locates his problem in entirely the wrong place. His failure to act as expected is due rather to lack of information; he does not know that the disease called 'arthritis' and the disease called 'arthrite' are one and the same. As a result, he does not draw the apparently obvious conclusion that there is only one thing wrong with his knees.

3.2.2. *Second response.* The reply to the preceding objection suggests a different response. The idea would be to maintain that Paul has just one belief about what is wrong with his knees, as reported by (2), and to attribute his unusual behaviour to his failure to recognize that the words 'arthrite' and 'arthritis' have the same meaning. Paul is ignorant of this metalinguistic truth; but can this fact in conjunction with the B-ascription (2) suffice to explain his actions? We are assuming he acts as follows: he applies the French cure for arthritis to his knees, and believes that it has succeeded, yet still continues to search for a cure for



the ailment he believes affects his knees and thigh. This train of events would most naturally be explained by saying that Paul begins by believing that he has two ailments in his knees, comes to believe that one has been cured, and desires to find a cure for the one he believes still remains. According to this account, his initial and final mental states differ. According to the metalinguistic Burgean response, however, Paul's assertions at the beginning and end of the story support a single B-ascription. How can Paul's metalinguistic ignorance be used to remedy this?

The Burgean's most promising move appears to be to claim that although Paul has a single belief, its content being that he has arthritis in his knees, his metalinguistic ignorance leads him to think that he has two beliefs which differ in content. So he starts out thinking he has two beliefs and ends up thinking he has one. This accommodates our intuition that Paul's final and initial mental state are different; but does it explain why he acts as he does? To explain this the Burgean will have to say something along these lines: that Paul thinks he has a belief he formulates as 'I have arthritis in my knees,' he thinks he has a belief he formulates as 'J'ai arthrite aux genoux,' he thinks the two beliefs are different, and he thinks the application of the cure gives him reason to give up one but not the other.

But the Burgean who takes this line is effectively conceding that the B-ascription (2) is inadequate to account for Paul's behaviour, and is making all the distinctions among mental states that we are claiming are required for psychological explanation. The difference between the taxonomy of belief contents offered by B-individuation and the taxonomy required for explaining actions is being recognized; the distinctions required for explanation are simply being made at the level of second-order beliefs. But the claim that Paul is acting out of beliefs about what he believes is very implausible. There is no independent reason to suppose that the beliefs Paul acts on are beliefs about what his beliefs are, rather than ordinary object-level beliefs: In other words, the proposal is *ad hoc*.

3.2.3. *Third response.* A Burgean could deny that we would B-individuate beliefs as I have described, denying in particular that we would report the belief Paul expresses in French using (2). But given the

principles of B-individuation described above this seems implausible. A competent French speaker who says 'J'ai arthrite aux genoux' surely expresses the belief that he or she has arthritis in the knees, and Paul is a competent French speaker who use the word 'arthrite' perfectly. It would be more plausible to claim that (2) is not a correct report of the belief Paul acquired in England, in view of his misunderstanding of the English word. But to claim this is to abandon the fundamental principle of B-individuation — the principle that speakers' words are to be interpreted according to their standard use, and not according to how they understand them, when giving belief reports.

### 3.3. *Conclusions from the Case of Paul*

The implausibility of these attempts to reinterpret the example of Paul shows that we have here a strong case for the claim that E-individuation — the individuation of thoughts required by common-sense psychological explanation — sometimes compels us to discriminate belief contents more finely than does B-individuation. In the next section I shall argue that the converse is also true; that is, that the demands of psychological explanation sometimes lead us to discriminate belief contents more coarsely than they are picked out by B-individuation.

### 3.4. *The Case of Alfred*

The example I shall use is one employed by Burge in an earlier paper in which he himself draws attention to two sets of intuitions about how beliefs should be individuated. Burge (1978) introduces Alfred, who misunderstands the word 'fortnight', applying it to periods of ten rather than fourteen days. Alfred also believes that Bertrand will be gone for ten days; we may suppose that Bertrand has told him this, and that Alfred believes him. Alfred now utters the words, 'Bertrand will be gone for a fortnight.' It is plausible that Alfred thereby asserts that Bertrand will be gone for a fortnight; he is a generally competent speaker of English bound by its conventions. But does he believe that Bertrand will be gone for a fortnight?

The principles of B-individuation would of course dictate that Alfred

does believe this, since this is what he asserted. Indeed, Burge reports that many people, desiring 'to maintain a close relation between sincere assertion and belief' (1978 p. 132), hold that the following is true:

- (3) Alfred believes that Bertrand will be gone for a fortnight.

These informants were evidently attributing beliefs according to the principles of B-individuation. However, Burge also notes that there is a widespread intuition that Alfred does *not* believe that Bertrand will be gone for a fortnight, despite the fact that this is what he asserted. Holders of this view maintain that Alfred holds only the belief given by

- (4) Alfred believes that Bertrand will be gone for ten days

and not that given by (3). The attractions of this view are obvious if we are interested in explaining Alfred's actions. Let us suppose that Alfred has to meet Bertrand's train; we have no hesitation in predicting that he will go to the station in ten rather than fourteen days' time, his reason being that he believes that Bertrand will return in ten days. By contrast, describing Alfred as believing that Bertrand will return in a fortnight does nothing to explain why he goes to the station after ten days have elapsed. As Burge remarks, 'defenders of this view . . . tend to mention the fact that Alfred had in mind a period of ten days. . . . Alfred's actions will largely be based on his belief that Bertrand will be gone for ten days. His linguistic mistake is irrelevant for such purposes as meeting the train' (1978 p. 133). Holders of this view were evidently E-individuating, attributing beliefs with any eye to common-sense psychological explanation.

As before we must deal with objections from the Burgean, who in this case will want to deny that the demands of common-sense psychological explanation lead to the rejection of (3). But if the Burgean adheres to Burge's procedure, which is to attempt to accommodate as much as possible of our ordinary practice, the intuitions of the many speakers who withhold (3) because of its irrelevance to explaining Alfred's actions must be respected. However, the Burgean may attempt to argue that the practice of these speakers is inconsistent. The strategy here would be to take advantage of Burge's claim that both those who affirm and those who reject (3) agree to

(5) Alfred believes that a fortnight is ten days.

If proponents of E-individuation accept (4) and (5), it seems that they can hardly deny (3); for if Alfred believes that Bertrand will be gone for ten days, and that a fortnight is ten days, he is likely to conclude that Bertrand will be gone for a fortnight. Indeed, it seems that we will want to hypothesize just such a train of reasoning to explain why Alfred says, 'Bertrand will be gone for a fortnight.' Consistency thus forces proponents of E-individuation to accept (3) if they affirm (5).

The weak point in this argument is the premise that proponents of E-individuation are committed to accepting (5). It is true that one might well explain Alfred's utterance by saying, 'He believes that a fortnight is ten days'; but we are equally likely to say something like, 'He says "fortnight" when he means ten days.' In everyday discourse people are generally lax about the distinction between using and mentioning a word, so it is not surprising that they should be indifferent between those formulations which portray Alfred's mistake at the object level (as does (5)) and those which portray it as metalinguistic. Given the laxity of everyday speech, it does not seem that there is any great obstacle to regarding (5) as a loose rendering of

(6) Alfred believes that 'fortnight' means ten days.

This analysis affords us a way of accommodating a curious feature of E-individuative practice which is revealed by Alfred's case. Burge notes that 'on the negative [i.e. E-individuative] view, we withhold attribution of belief with terms . . . misunderstood by the believer, except in attributions like [(5)] which are the natural means of identifying his mistake' (1978 p. 134). On the present account, the attribution in question should be interpreted as crediting the speaker with a belief about a word (i.e. (6)), not with the concept the word expresses. Alfred's utterance is easily explained by citing (4) and (6); since Alfred believes that Bertrand will be gone for ten days, and that 'fortnight' means ten days, he will think that one way to convey his belief is to say, 'Bertrand will be gone for a fortnight.'

Here, though, the Burgean might complain that our metalinguistic rendering of (5) is 'an *ad hoc* piece of special pleading, undermined by the evidence we actually use for deciding whether a thought was meta-

linguistic' (Burge 1979 p. 97). The claim here is that when presented with our account, involving (4) and (6), of the reasoning leading to his utterance, Alfred may protest that his reasoning 'did not fix upon words' (ibid.). But given that on any reasonable common-sense theory, metalinguistic beliefs must surely be implicated in the production of utterances, whether we are aware of them or not, we have an independent reason not to view Alfred's response as decisive in this case.

The conclusion we have reached, then, is that a consistent explanation of Alfred's verbal and nonverbal actions can be given if we hold (4) and (6) rather than (3) and (5). Furthermore, this is the preferred method of attributing beliefs to Alfred to explain his actions; so the claim that one can also give a consistent explanation involving (3) and (5) is, though true, not really relevant. The question is how people do individuate attitudes when giving psychological explanations, not how they might consistently do so. The case of Alfred indicates that when explaining actions (i.e. when E-individuating), we may prefer belief ascriptions which capture subjects' idiosyncratic conceptions to ascriptions which credit subjects with the concepts standardly expressed by their words. But we have yet to show that E-individuation may be coarser than B-individuation; for that we need a case in which we B-individuate two beliefs but E-individuate one.

3.4.1. *A thought-experiment.* Let us imagine a counterfactual case in which Alfred remains exactly as before, insofar as he is nonintentionally described, but where he is a member of a linguistic community in which the word-form 'fortnight' is standardly used to refer to a period of ten days. In other words, the counterfactual condition differs only in that in it correct use is the same as Alfred's actual misuse. Let us call Alfred in this condition 'Alfred2'. Alfred2, like Alfred, is told that Bertrand will be gone ten days, utters the word-forms 'Bertrand will be gone for a fortnight,' and goes to the station after ten days have elapsed. We may agree with Burge that Alfred2 did not assert that Bertrand would be gone for a fortnight; since he belongs to a different linguistic community, we cannot interpret his words according to the meanings they would have in our dialect. But let us concentrate on Alfred2's action of going to the station. What is his reason for doing this? The most natural way for us to explain his action, it seems, is to say that he wants to meet

Bertrand and believes that he can do so by going to the station after ten days have passed; that is, Alfred2 believes Bertrand will be gone for ten days. Thus we give the same explanation for the actions of Alfred and Alfred2 despite the difference in their linguistic environments. If we were B-individuating, however, we would ascribe Alfred the belief that Bertrand would be gone for a fortnight but withhold that ascription from Alfred2.

In the case of Alfred2, attribution of belief by content expressed — B-individuation — will lead us to withhold the ascription ‘Alfred2 believes that Bertrand will be gone for a fortnight’ and will permit ‘Alfred2 believes that Bertrand will be gone for ten days.’ So in this case, B-individuation and E-individuation will counsel the same belief attributions. But this does not cast doubt on the reality of E-individuation as a distinctive practice. There are other cases, as we have seen, where the two individuating schemes yield different ascriptions; and furthermore, we can see why the two schemes, elsewhere divergent, would coincide in the case of Alfred2. They coincide because his usage of the word ‘fortnight’ matches its standard usage in his linguistic community. In fact, B-individuation and E-individuation will diverge only when agents’ unexpected behaviour reveals that their grasp of standard usage is imperfect, forcing us to differentiate between the actual meanings of the words they use and the meanings they attach to them. In the majority of cases, presumably, agents’ use of terms is close enough to standard use for B- and E-ascriptions to coincide.

#### 4. E-INDIVIDUATION AND EXPRESSIBILITY

It is one thing to suggest (as do the cases discussed above) that when we are giving common-sense explanations of actions, we may not individuate beliefs according to the non-individualistic scheme we have been calling B-individuation; it is another to show that the individuating scheme we do employ when giving explanations can properly be called ‘individualistic’. But the discussion of these cases gives reason to believe that E-individuation can be so described. When we E-individuate belief contents we are concerned not with the standard use of the words the subject utters, but with the way the subject uses them; we want to know the meaning the individual attaches to them, not the meaning the

community gives them. Thus the same E-ascriptions can be true of individuals who use a symbol in the same way, even though they belong to linguistic communities in which that symbol is used differently (e.g. Alfred and Alfred2); and where a subject uses two symbols differently, two beliefs will be E-individuated even though the symbols in question may be used in the same way in two linguistic communities to which the subject belongs (e.g. Paul). It is the way the individual uses a symbol, not the way the community uses it, that is important for E-individuation.<sup>4</sup> Beliefs thus individuated depend on features of the individual, rather than depending on norms in the communities to which individuals belong.

When we E-individuate thoughts, we may withhold that-clauses containing words the subject uses or understands in a nonstandard way, and instead employ terms, the standard meaning of which captures the meaning the subject attaches to the misunderstood word. Thus we use 'ten days' but not 'fortnight' in describing Alfred's beliefs individualistically. It follows that individualistic content is at least sometimes expressible; that is, that we can at least sometimes pick out individualistic beliefs by producing opaque ascriptions which directly display their content, as we do in the case of Alfred and Alfred2. In the case of Paul this is not so easy, as there is no readily available expression in English which captures the notion Paul first acquires (the notion of a rheumatoid disease of the bones and joints). But we can construct a case which is parallel to Paul's in that we E-individuate two beliefs and B-individuate one, but differs in that the contents of the two E-beliefs are expressible.

Let us suppose that Mary is an English speaker who mislearns the word 'fortnight' in America, applying it to periods of ten days. She then moves to France and learns French, acquiring the word 'quinzaine' which she correctly applies to fortnights. In America she read in an encyclopedia the sentence 'The period of the third moon of Saturn is a fortnight,' and believed it; now she reads in a French encyclopedia that the period of the same moon is "une quinzaine". She is puzzled and wonders which book is right. How are we to explain this sequence of events? It seems obvious that Mary entertains two thoughts about the period of this moon; she entertains the thought that it lasts a fortnight and the thought that it lasts ten days. She knows that these thoughts

cannot both be true, since they differ in content; so she wants to find out which is correct. Thus we E-individuate two attitudes:

- (7) Mary wonders whether the period of the third moon of Saturn is ten days,

and

- (8) Mary wonders whether the period of the third moon of Saturn is a fortnight.

By contrast, the principles of B-individuation would lead us to attribute only thoughts about fortnights to Mary. The two sentences Mary reads have the same socially established meaning; both sentences state that the period of the third moon of Saturn is a fortnight, and neither concerns periods of ten days. A competent French speaker who reads and speculates on the truth of the statement in the French encyclopedia would naturally be described as wondering whether the period in question is a fortnight; and when we are B-individuating Mary's beliefs, we use ascriptions with 'fortnight' in the content clause despite her misunderstanding of the word. But (8) alone does not provide a satisfactory explanation of Mary's puzzlement; if she acquired the same thought from each encyclopedia, why does she wonder which one is right?

The case of Mary differs from that of Paul in that there is a readily available expression (namely, 'ten days') which captures Mary's idiosyncratic understanding of the word she misuses, while there is no such readily available expression to characterize Paul's misconception. But what does 'readily available' mean here? It is extremely unlikely that a rational, competent speaker of English (as we are imagining Mary to be) would not be familiar with the words 'ten' and 'days'; and it is equally unlikely, given the frequency with which they are used, that she would misapply or misunderstand them. Our willingness to use 'ten days' in the content-clause of an E-ascription surely owes much to the fact that the expression is almost certainly one she uses, and one she uses correctly. Moreover, we have good reason to believe that it accurately captures the notion Mary has in mind, since she applies the word 'fortnight' exclusively to periods of ten days. By contrast, it is



quite possible that Paul would not be familiar with the expressions which are candidates for capturing his misconception; he may not know, for instance, what 'rheumatoid condition' means. We are also less confident, in his case, that our candidate expressions accurately capture his concept.

What does the comparison of the cases of Mary and Paul tell us about the constraints on the expressibility of E-individuated or individualistic content? It is important to note that the cases illuminate only a restricted aspect of our practice; in each case we are concerned with the expressibility of E-beliefs in English, and part of the evidence (in addition to nonverbal behaviour) for the attributions comes from English sentences read or uttered by the subject. The cases can thus only tell us about the expressibility in a language L of beliefs acquired from statements in L or attributed (at least partly) on the basis of utterances in L. The constraint appears to be that an E-individuated content is expressible in L under these conditions just in case the expressions of L used in the content clause of the E-ascription capture the subject's concept and are likely to be used and understood by the subject.

This rule is rough and imprecise, but if it provides at least a partial description of our ascriptive practice, it shows that there are limits to the expressibility of individualistic thought contents. But the fact that we can sometimes express the contents of such thoughts shows that it is not in principle impossible to capture a person's individualistic notions, even though it may on occasion be difficult to determine which of several related notions a person employs, or to know which expressions are available (in the sense discussed above) for characterizing them. The point to be stressed is that the contents of individualistically individuated thoughts do not seem to be essentially inexpressible, as some have maintained. Whether or not they are expressible depends on external facts such as the expressive resources of the ascriber's language and the likelihood of finding a paraphrase couched in terms with which the subject will be familiar. Since the expressibility of individualistic contents does depend on extraneous considerations, the fact that sometimes the contents of subjects' individualistically individuated thoughts are inexpressible is surely not good evidence for denying that they have such thoughts.

##### 5. EXPLANATORY STATES IN COMMON-SENSE AND COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Let us sum up the conclusions argued for so far. I would argue that the case of Paul, Alfred and Mary support four claims. These are the following:

(a) when we are giving common-sense psychological explanations in terms of mental states with propositional contents, our individuating practice may differ from the non-individualistic practice exemplified by Burge's thought-experiment;

(b) the mode of content individuation we there employ can be called individualistic, in that it depends not on communally established use of words but on individual use;

(c) where individual and communally accepted use coincide, the two modes of individuation pick out the same thoughts;

(d) the contents of individualistically individuated thoughts are sometimes expressible.

The question we must now ask is: what are the implications of these results for the issues raised in the Introduction? Recall that one of the motivations for investigating content individuation in common sense was to assess the status of the Continuity Thesis. This is the view that the explanatory states invoked by cognitive psychology share important properties of the attitudes attributed in explanations in common sense. Burge's claim that the contents of propositional attitudes are individuated with reference to linguistic environment, taken together with the widespread view that the explanatory states of cognitive psychology are not individuated in this way, appeared to cast doubt on the Thesis. But it is the individuation of explanatory states in common sense that is relevant to the truth of the Thesis, and the examples discussed in this paper indicate that Burge's thought-experiment is not representative of how we attribute thoughts when giving common-sense psychological explanations. The challenge supposedly presented to the Continuity Thesis by the thought-experiment is thus rebuffed (though the Thesis may of course remain questionable on other grounds). The picture we glean from the examples is that our common-sense practice of attitude ascription is complex; we individuate thoughts in one way when explaining others' actions, in another when identifying the opinions they

are committed to defending. In the context of explanation we attempt to capture as closely as possible the meanings individuals attach to their words, even though this may be difficult to express; in the context of debate, we hold them to the socially accepted meaning of their words, even though they themselves may not fully understand the words they use.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The content of a mental state or event is given by the that-clause of the ascription used to attribute the state or event to a thinker. For our purposes we may follow Burge in remaining neutral as to precisely what contents are: our interest is in patterns of propositional attitude ascription.

<sup>2</sup> My reason for focussing on Burge's thought-experiment is that the implications he draws from it are so wide-ranging. The usual interpretation of Putnam's thought-experiment is that it shows that the content of thoughts about natural kinds is partly determined by which natural kinds occur in the subject's physical environment. The impact of the linguistic environment appears to be much more extensive. Burge claims that the contents of thoughts about artefacts, natural kinds, colours, abstract entities, actions, and physical movements are all affected by linguistic environment (1979 p. 79).

<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, it is not the belief ascription which is opaque or transparent but the belief construction as it appears in a particular context. For convenience, I will call a belief ascription 'opaque' when terms in the that-clause are not open to substitution by co-referential expressions *salva veritate*.

<sup>4</sup> I should stress that these remarks are not intended to imply that meaning reduces to use, or that use is responsible for meaning. The claim is that the cases discussed earlier indicate that when individuating beliefs with an eye to action explanation, we treat subjects' use of words as important indicators of the content of their beliefs. It is one thing to say that use provides evidence for content, another to say that use determines content.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Ned Block, Ann Bumpus, Joshua Cohen, Jim Higginbotham, and Stephen White for helpful comments on various versions of this paper. Versions of it were presented to audiences at M.I.T., the University of Michigan, SUNY at Stony Brook, North Carolina State University, the College of the Holy Cross, and the University of New Hampshire. I would like to thank the members of these audiences for their comments.

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