**Burge, Tyler (1946–)**

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**Article summary:** Tyler Burge is an American philosopher whose body of work spans several areas of theoretical philosophy in the analytic tradition. While Burge has made important contributions to the philosophy of language and logic, he is most renowned for his work in philosophy of mind and epistemology. In particular, he is known for articulating and developing a view he labels ‘anti-individualism.’ In his later work, Burge connects his views with state-of-the-art scientific theory. Despite this emphasis on empirical considerations, Burge stands in an important relationship to the rationalist tradition in philosophy. This entry surveys Burge’s work and seeks to situate it in the larger philosophical landscape.

**Keywords:** American philosophers; philosophy of mind; epistemology; anti-individualism; epistemic externalism; self-knowledge; testimony; memory; Twin Earth; perception; reasoning.

**1. Biography and overview.**

Tyler Burge is an American philosopher born in 1946. He graduated with a B.A. from Wesleyan University in 1967 and with his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1971. He is currently the Flint Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles where he has taught his entire career. He is an elected fellow of the Institut International de Philosophie (1990), the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1993) and the American Philosophical Society (2007). Burge is moreover a corresponding Fellow of the British Academy (1999). Burge’s numerous prizes and honorary lectures include The Locke Lectures (1993), Whitehead Lectures (1994), Dewey Lectures (2007), Jean Nicod Prize and Lectures (2010).

Burge’s considerable body of work spans several areas of theoretical philosophy in the analytic tradition. Having made important contributions to the philosophy of language and logic, Burge is most renowned for his work in philosophy of mind and epistemology. In his account of how language and thought connect to the world and his theory of epistemic warrant, Burge stresses the importance of factors outside the individual’s psychology: namely, the individual’s relations to subject matters beyond herself. In his later work in particular, Burge connects his views with state-of-the-art scientific theory. Despite this emphasis on empirical considerations, Burge stands in an important relationship to the rationalist tradition in philosophy.

**2. 1970s: Logic and Semantics.**

Burge’s early articles chiefly concern formal theories of truth for natural languages. His treatment of the semantics of proper names (Burge 1973) and non-denoting singular terms (Burge 1974) has been particularly influential, as has his treatment of semantical paradox (Burge 1979b). Many of the early papers mark a central theme that runs throughout Burge’s corpus – namely, the philosophical analysis of the structure and content of basic types of reference. (On the early papers’ connection with the later work, see Burge 2003b).

**3. 1980s: Reference in Thought and Language.**

In ‘Belief De Re,’ the project of explaining how language connects to the world at the most elementary level is broadened to include thought (Burge 1977). Subsequent work provides a continuous broadening of this central theme. Burge is best known for his development of a in the philosophy of mind that is often labelled as externalist because it highlights the role of the external environment in individuating mental states. (Burge himself eschews the broad label ‘externalism’ but since we’re in the business of situating his theory in the broader landscape, we will occasionally use it (see also, Content: wide and narrow)). Burge’s theory primarily concerns representational mental states that are ascribed to an individual in everyday talk and within cognitive psychology. Burge argues that many of an individual’s mental states (and their contents) are partly but constitutively determined by patterns of relations to the external environment that the individual interacts with. Both the physical environment that the individual (or its species) interacts with as well as the social environment may play this state-individuating role. In later work, Burge argues that anti-individualism also applies to mathematical and logical thought/language. In these cases, interaction with a physical or social environment plays no central role although a subject matter beyond the individual does (Burge2003b).

Burge labels this version of externalism ‘anti-individualism.’ Burge coins this term because the theory implies that a specification of an individual’s physical, phenomenal as well as functional states is insufficient for a specification of its mental states. Here is an official statement of anti-individualism:

1. the natures of many mental states constitutively depend on relations between

a subject matter beyond the individual and the individual that has the mental

states, where relevant relations help determine specific natures of those states

(Burge 2010: 61).

Burge’s most famous arguments for anti-individualism invoke variations of Putnam’s Twin Earth thought experiment (Putnam 1975; see also, Thought experiments): Two internalist twins, Oscar and twin-Oscar, grow up on two different planets. The Earthling Oscar interacts with a certain liquid, water, whereas on Twin Earth twin-Oscar interacts with a look-alike liquid, twin-water, that is distinct from water. Burge extends Putnam’s argument in two directions. First, he argues, contra Putnam, that although Oscar and twin-Oscar do not know the relevant molecular differences, they are in *different mental state types* in virtue of interacting with two different liquids (see ‘Individualism and the Mental’ Burge 1979a). This involves, among other things, arguing against Putnam’s account according to which the term ‘water’ is an indexical because he takes it that the same term refers to one of the to two different liquids depending on where it is used (see ‘Other Bodies’Burge 1982). Secondly, by an ingenious series of variations of twin scenarios Burge argues that differences in the twin’s *social* environment also can lead to differences in their mental state types. For example, he conducts a thought experiment in which the medical experts on Earth and Twin Earth have subtly different stipulations about what constitutes certain ailments. Consequently, laypersons on Earth and Twin Earth will, according to Burge, possess correspondingly different concepts (Burge 1979a).

The initial reception of anti-individualism was critical (see Crane 1991; Boghossian 1992). In the subsequent debates, many erstwhile critics of anti-individualism came to accept it (cf. Putnam’s remarks in Pessin and Goldberg 1996; see also Fodor 1994 and Brown 2004). But while the view has gone from unorthodox to orthodox, critics remain (e.g., Segal 2000).

After launching anti-individualism, Burge explored how the theory relates to a number of issues within the philosophy of mind and cognitive psychology (Burge 1986). For example, in the psychology of perception Burge has developed anti-individualism to explain more primitive mental states than propositional attitudes – in particular, visual representations. In doing so, he was the first philosopher who prominently integrated Marr’s theory of visual representation in a philosophical framework. Burge has also examined how anti-individualism relates to long-standing issues about mental causation (Burge 1989). Many of Burge’s papers on anti-individualism are collected in *Foundations of Mind* (Burge 2007).

**4. 1990s and 2000s: Epistemic Norms**

Burge’s project expands by relating anti-individualism to epistemic norms. The starting point of Burge’s work in epistemology is thus deeply integrated with issues in philosophy of mind. ‘Individualism and Self-Knowledge’is one clear example of this (Burge 1988). In addition to self-knowledge, Burge has written influentially about such traditional epistemological topics as memory, testimony, a priori warrant, skepticism, perceptual warrant, reliability and transcendental arguments.

In several of these areas, Burge has developed an epistemically externalist type of epistemic warrant that he labels ‘entitlement’ (see also Graham 2012). In the case of self-knowledge, Burge has argued that some *cogito-like* thoughts (thoughts that refer to themselves in particular manner) are self-verifying – i.e., making themselves true (Burge 1988). Burge argues that such thoughts are supported by self-evident reasons (Burge 1988). Moreover, Burge has argued that a thinker has a distinctive entitlement to her own thoughts and memories (Burge 1996) (see also, Memory, epistemology of). Consequently, such thoughts are “immune to brute error” which is, roughly, the idea that they are infallible except by cognitive imperfections attributable to the thinker.

In an influential article ‘Content Preservation’ (Burge 1993), Burge develops the idea that hearers have a *default entitlement* to accept testimony. Burge articulates this idea as the following *Acceptance Principle:*

“A person is entitled to accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so.” (Burge 1993: 467)

Burge argues by way of a complex transcendental argument that the principle is a priori knowable. However, he does not require a hearer to know or even consider the principle in order to acquire testimonial entitlement. The paper and a series of successors on interlocution helped to increase interest in the epistemology of testimony (for an early response, see Fricker 1994) (see also, Testimony).

While incorporating traditional topics in epistemology, Burge’s work in this period also extends to additional issues in philosophy of mind, yielding an important paper on consciousness (Burge 1997) and a defense of a “modest dualism” (Burge 2009). In ‘Perceptual Entitlement’ (Burge 2003), Burge’s work on perception took an overtly epistemological turn, exemplifying the manner in which his work cuts across traditional disciplinary categories. Characteristically, one of the paper’s central ambitions is to integrate *epistemic* externalism with the aspects of anti-individualism that makes it an externalist theory of mental state individuation (see also Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology). In particular, Burge argues that the *epistemically normal environment*,in relation to which the reliability of perceptual processes is evaluated, is identical to the external environment that, according to anti-individualism, plays the state-individuating role (but see Gerken 2013). According to Burge, this *unified* mind-epistemology externalism helps to respond to the so-called New Evil Demon problem in which the subject is massively deceived. It has been argued that epistemically externalist theories, such as process reliabilism, cannot explain why the subject may remain warranted in cases of massive deception. But Burge argues that anti-individualism helps explain on epistemically externalist grounds why we can remain entitled to perceptual beliefs even in cases of local and massive deception.

**5. 2010s: Empirically Informed Rationalism**

The culmination of Burge’s work on the psychology of perception is a major (600-page) book *Origins of Objectivity* (Burge 2010, see also, Perception). Here Burge pursues an empirically informed trichotomy between sensing, perceptions and propositional attitudes. *Sensing* is, according to Burge, not representational. *Perceptions*, in turn, are representational as they centrally involve perceptual constancies, but not propositional. More specifically, Burge provides the following explication: “Perception is a type of objective sensory representation by the individual (Burge 2010: 368). Finally, *attitudes* such as belief are both representational and propositional in form. Burge’s work on perception also engages critically with contemporary positions, as when he attacks disjunctivist and naïve realist views that he argues to be incompatible with fundamental presuppositions of empirical psychology (Burge 2005b).

Burge’s most sustained treatment of personal identity and selfhood, building on his (2003c), are the Dewey Lectures of 2007 (published 2011). The lectures consider the development of the self-understanding that Burge takes to be constitutive of selves, and argue that it makes possible the application of moral and rational norms. The Dewey lectures and Burge’s earlier work on self-knowledge are included in *Cognition Through Understanding* (Burge 2013), together with important papers from the 1990s on warrant by reasoning. The volume demonstrates the encompassing breadth and rationalist orientation of Burge’s work in epistemology.

Burge’s scholarship in the history of philosophy also reflects his engagement with rationalism (see also Rationalism). He is well known for his work on Frege which has been collected in *Truth, Thought, Reason: Essays on Frege* (Burge 2005a). However, Burge has also written on other rationalists such as Descartes and Leibniz. Burge regularly teaches a course on Kant at UCLA and a monograph on Kant is in progress.

Burge’s explicit discussions of methodology, meanwhile, give place to empiricist considerations. In Burge’s articles he tends to address meta-philosophy primarily by example or in sparse passing remarks. But he has provided more sustained methodological considerations in a series of post-scripts in the volumes of the collected essays as well as in responses to critics in two *Festschriffts* (Hahn and Rambjerg 2003, Frapolli and Romero 2003. See also Burge 1992). On the one hand, he emphasizes important rationalist ideas by arguing – primarily by example – that philosophical thought experiments and a priori reasoning can provide genuine philosophical insights that could not have been achieved otherwise. On the other hand, Burge emphasizes significant empiricist ideas such as the importance of connecting philosophical assumptions and conclusions with common-sense judgments and state-of-the-art scientific theory (see also, Empiricism). Thus, Burge may be characterized as an empirically informed philosopher in the rationalist tradition.

**See also**

Content, wide and narrow

Empiricism

Internalism and externalism in epistemology

Memory, epistemology of

Perception

Rationalism

Testimony

Thought experiments

**Books**

2003. *Reflection and Replies: Essays on the Philosophy of Tyler Burge*. Martin Hahn & B. Ramberg (eds.), MIT

Press.

(Collection of papers on Burge’s work with extensive replies from Burge.)

2003. *Meaning, Basic Self-Knowledge, and Mind: Essays on Tyler Burge.* Maria J. Frapolli & E. Romero (eds.),

University of Chicago Press.

(Collection on papers on Burge’s work with extensive replies from Burge.)

2005a. *Truth, Thought, Reason: Essays on Frege*. Oxford University Press.

(Collection of Burge’s papers on Frege.)

2007. *Foundations of Mind*. Oxford University Press.

(Collection of Burge’s papers on the foundations of mind with special focus on anti-individualism.)

2010. *Origins of Objectivity*. Oxford University Press.

(Monograph on the philosophy of perception.)

2013. *Cognition Through Understanding: Self-Knowledge, Interlocution, Reasoning, Reflection*. Oxford University

Press.

(Collection of Burge’s papers on self-knowledge, testimony, reasoning and memory.)

**Articles**

1973. Reference and proper names. Journal of Philosophy 70 (14): 425-439.

(Paper on the semantics of proper names that sets forth a predicative theory.)

1974. Truth and singular terms. *Nous* 8 (4): 309-325.

(Paper on the semantics of non-denoting singular terms.)

1977. Belief de re. Journal of Philosophy 74 (6): 338-362.

(Paper concerning beliefs that refer *de re*.)

1979a. Individualism and the Mental. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4: 73-121.

(Burge’s most read paper that outlines the core of anti-individualism and the idea that the social environment may also partly determine a subject’s representational mental states.)

1979b. Semantical paradox. Journal of Philosophy 76 (4):169-198.

(A paper on semantical paradoxes such as the liar.)

1982. Other Bodies. In Woodfield, Andrew, ed., *Thought and Object*. New York: Oxford.

(A paper arguing for anti-individualism by critically reconsidering Putnam’s interpretation of the Twin Earth thought experiment.)

1986. Individualism and Psychology. *Philosophical Review* 45: 3-45.

(Paper that relates anti-individualism to empirical psychology by considering, among other things, Marr’s theory of vision.)

1988. Individualism and Self-Knowledge. *The Journal of Philosophy* 85: 649-663.

(Paper connecting the thesis of anti-individualism to the idea that self-knowledge is epistemically privileged.)

1989. Individuation and Causation in Psychology. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 70: 303-322.

(Paper on mental state individuation and mental causation.)

1992. Philosophy of Language and Mind: 1950-1990. Philosophical Review 101 (1): 3-51.

(Paper outlining the development of philosophy of language and mind in the history of analytical philosophy between 1950-1990.)

1993. Content Preservation. *The Philosophical Review*, 102 (4): 457–488.

(Paper on the epistemology of memory and testimony.)

1996. Our Entitlement to Self-Knowledge. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* New Series,

Vol. 96: 91–116.

(Paper on the relationship between anti-individualism and the epistemology of self-knowledge.)

1997. Two kinds of consciousness. In Ned Block, Owen Flanagan & Güven Güzeldere (eds.), The

Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates. MIT Press.

(Paper distinguishing between two kinds of consciousness: Phenomenal consciousness and access consciousness.)

2003a. Perceptual Entitlement. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 67, pp. 503–548.

(Paper on the epistemology of perceptual belief that develops the notion of epistemic entitlement.)

2003b. Logic and analyticity. Grazer Philosophische Studien 66 (1):199-249.

(Paper on the notion of analyticity and its relationship to logic and the philosophy of mind.)

2003c. Memory and Persons. *Philosophical Review* 112 (3): 289-337.

(Paper concerning the relationship between memory and personhood.)

2005. Disjunctivism and perceptual psychology. Philosophical Topics, 33 (1): 1-78.

(A criticism of disjunctionist theories of perception on the basis of both empirical and philosophical considerations.)

2011. The Dewey Lectures 2007: Self and Self-Understanding. Journal of Philosophy 108 (6).

(Three wide-ranging lectures concerning the self and its relationship to self-understanding, memory and other issues.)

**Further reading.**

Brown, Jessica (2004). *Anti-Individualism and Knowledge*. MIT Press.

(A monograph arguing, contra Brown’s earlier view, that anti-individualism and self-knowledge are compatible.)

Boghossian, Paul A. (1992). Externalism and inference. Philosophical Issues, 2: 11-28.

(A paper arguing that anti-individualism cannot account for the rationality of inference in certain (slow-switch) cases.)

Crane, Tim (1991). All the difference in the world. Philosophical Quarterly 41: 1-25.

(A paper providing some arguments against anti-individualism.)

Fodor, Jerry A. (1994). *The Elm and the Expert*. MIT Press.

(A monograph of reflections on reference. It marks Fodor’s transition from individualism to anti-individualism.)

Fricker, Elizabeth (1994). Against Gullibility. In A. Chakrabarti & B. K. Matilal (eds.), *Knowing from*

*Words*. Kluwer Academic Publishers.

(A paper setting forth influential epistemically internalist challenges to Burge’s theory of testimonial entitlement.)

Gerken, Mikkel (2013). *Epistemic Reasoning and the Mental*. Palgrave Macmillan.

(A monograph arguing that anti-individualism sheds light on the nature of warrant by reasoning. It also responds to Boghossion’s 1992 argument.)

Graham, Peter J. (2012). Epistemic Entitlement. Noûs 46 (3):449-482.

(A development of the notion of entitlement that emphasizes the role of etiological function.)

Pessin, Andrew & Goldberg, Sanford (eds.) (1996). *The Twin Earth Chronicles: Twenty Years of Reflection on*

*Hilary Putnam's "the Meaning of `Meaning" "*. M. E. Sharpe.

(An anthology of papers on the Twin Earth thought experiment.)

Putnam, Hilary (1975). The meaning of 'meaning'. Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science 7:131-193.

(Putnam’s paper that introduces the Twin Earth thought experiment and argues for externalism in the philosophy of language.)

Segal, Gabriel (2000). *A Slim Book About Narrow Content*. MIT Press.

(A brief monograph arguing for an individualist theory of mental state individuation.)